

Driving a Model T

Written by Stan Paddock
Edited by John Walker
Both Members of the
Santa Clara Valley Model T Ford Club

Since 1910 to the present, all cars have the same basic components: An engine, a transmission, a differential and brakes. Today the cars fall into a category of “stick” or “automatic” referring to the type of transmission. The “stick” cars have a three to 7 speeds forward and one in reverse with a clutch between the engine and the transmission.

The Model T Ford does not fall into either category. To drive away is simple enough, once the unconventional control system is clearly understood. Experience with other types of car is apt to produce instinctive reactions, which need to be un-learned before the Model T is handled with proper dexterity. The Model T Ford has two speeds forward and one in reverse. There is no gearshift lever and no clutch between the engine and transmission. To think of the Model T Ford as a “stick” shift will only serve to confuse you. While the transmission has “bands” and a clutch, it is best to not worry about what is inside the transmission and rather how to drive the car using the controls provided. The following sections on the controls will make it clear what functions the various controls are designed to perform.

Steering Wheel

The Model T Ford steering wheel has a gear reduction built right at the wheel. Always keep a tight grip on the steering wheel while the car is in motion.

The engine is controlled, by the driver, through the medium of a pair of levers which move with pleasing smoothness over notched quadrants below the wooden-rimmed steering wheel, the right-hand lever regulating throttle opening and the left-hand lever ignition timing. With both levers set at their “top” position, the spark advance is fully retarded and the throttle is at its minimum position. There is no corresponding foot pedal for the throttle. The throttle lever alone controls the speed of the engine. The levers are positioned such that you can control both levers with your fingertips while maintaining a firm grip on the steering wheel. When you start the car, you will want both levers up like a bird ready to take to the air.

Pedals

There are three pedals on the Model T Ford floorboard.

There are two terms used in Model T Ford documentation (clutch and neutral) that have a different meaning than when you are talking about a standard stick shift car.

The Model T Ford has a clutch but it is a part of the transmission and is used to engage “high”. If it is not engaged, you are not in “high”. If the left pedal is all the way out, the

clutch is engaged and you are in “high”. With none of the pedals depressed, the car is in “high” and, if the engine is running, the car is moving.

If you push the left pedal all the way in, you have engaged the “low” band and are in “low”.

If the pedal is at the halfway point, you are not in “high” or “low” and, for the Model T Ford, this position is defined as “neutral”.

The middle pedal is the reverse pedal. Since you cannot go backwards and forward at the same time, it is necessary to have the car in “neutral” before pressing the reverse pedal.

The right pedal is the brake pedal. This is the one pedal that is like most other cars with the exception that a Model T Ford is not able to stop very well in the best of conditions.

Hand Control Lever

In most cars, this would be called an “emergency” or “parking” brake lever. While it performs these functions in a Model T Ford, it also has a link to the “high/neutral/low” left pedal. The hand control lever has a ratchet release at the top that must be squeezed before pushing the lever forward.

If the hand control lever is all the way forward, the car is under control of the pedals.

If the hand control lever is moved halfway back, it will cause the left pedal to move to the halfway in or “neutral” position. This is also the best way to use the reverse pedal. With the hand control lever in this position, the car will go backward when the reverse pedal is pressed and coast to a stop when it is released. If the “high/neutral/low” left pedal is depressed, the car will move forward in “low” and again coast to a stop when the pedal is released.

If the hand control lever is pulled all the way back, the brakes will be applied in addition to having the car in “neutral”. This is very important if you want to get out and crank your car or prevent it from rolling away.

Starting the Car

1. Insure the car is safe to drive
 - a. Tires inflated and good condition
 - b. Water in the radiator
 - c. Oil in the engine
 - d. Gas in the tank
2. Pull the left spark advance lever all the way to the “up” position
3. Pull the right throttle lever almost to the top
4. Turn on the ignition (battery position if you have a choice)

5. Pull the choke handle
6. Step on the starter or turn the crank.
7. When the engine starts, adjust the spark advance lever down
8. Adjust the throttle lever to a good idle position

Driving the Car

For the first time Model T Driver, it is best to move the hand control to the halfway position. In this way, you can practice with the “low” and “reverse” pedals and get a “feel” for the “neutral” position of the left pedal..

Use the throttle lever as you would the gas pedal on a stick shift. Depress the left “low” pedal, and with your fingertips, pull the throttle lever down. When you want to stop, raise the throttle lever, release the left pedal, and step on the brake pedal. Use the same technique for the reverse pedal. Shoes with narrow toes are convenient for depressing the pedals.

When you are comfortable with the use of “low” and “reverse”, put your foot on the “high/neutral/low” left pedal and hold it in the halfway position. Release the hand control by squeezing the ratchet handle and move the hand control all the way forward. You are now ready to drive.

To start the car going forward, pull the throttle lever down as you depress the left “low/high” pedal. When it is time to go to “high”, pull the throttle lever up, release the left “low/high” pedal and pull the throttle lever down as required.

To bring the car to a stop, close the throttle with your finger tips, depress the brake pedal, and just before the car comes to a complete stop, depress the left pedal and hold it in the halfway or “neutral” position.

When you want to exit the car, pull the spark advance and throttle levers all the way up, move the hand control lever to the full back position to set the parking brake and turn off the ignition.