

## The Man Behind the People's Car: Ferdinand Porsche

*Ferdinand Porsche is a name synonymous with the automotive industry. From Porsche to Mercedes and of course the Volkswagen, Porsche left his mark on vehicles used for military, racing and everyday. Mid America Motorworks takes a look at the man who developed the people's car.*

### Early Life

Ferdinand Porsche was born one of three children to German parents in Maffersford, Austria in 1875. His father was a master panel-beater, a person who repaired body panels on carriages, giving Ferdinand early exposure to vehicles. He showed an interest and aptitude in technology at a young age, especially electricity, and attended classes at the Imperial Technical School in Reichenberg at night while working in his father's shop during the day.

When he was 18, Ferdinand came into a job at the Béla Egger Electrical Company in Vienna. He impressed his supervisors with his technical skills and was soon promoted to management. It was while he worked at Béla Egger that he developed the electric wheel-hub motor.

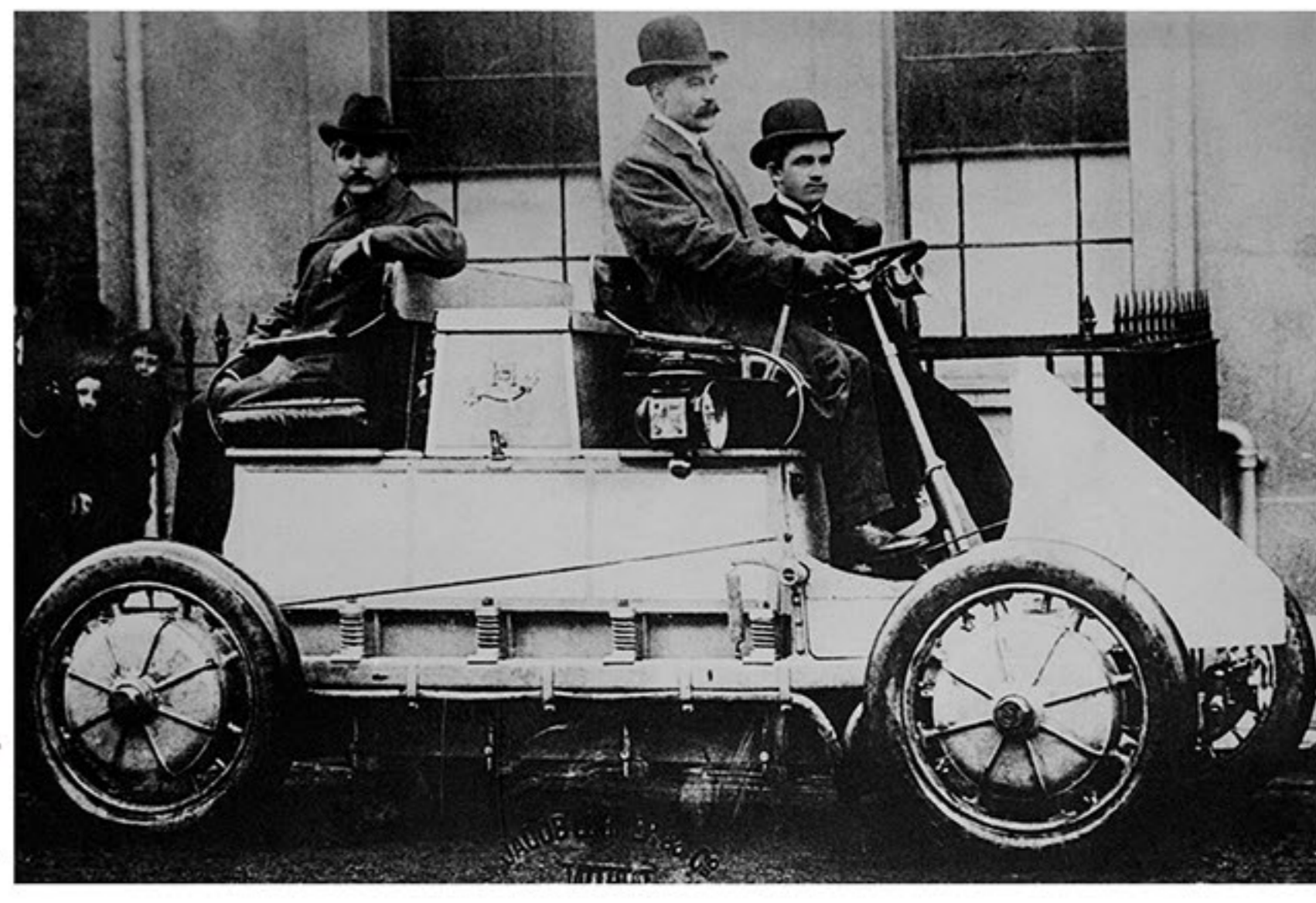
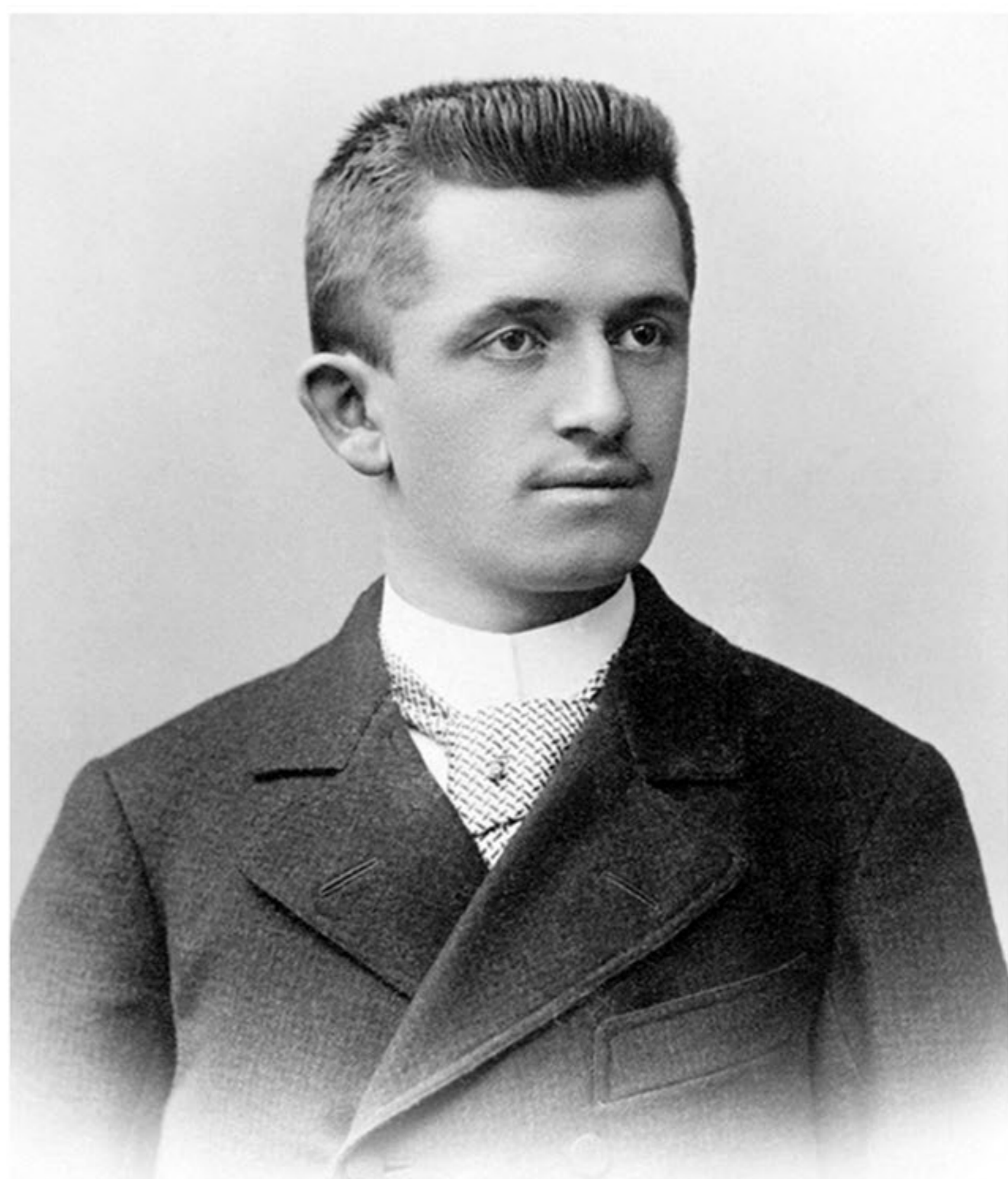
### Porsche's Wheel-Hub Motor

The wheel-hub motor is an electric motor that fits to the hub of a wheel and drives it directly. It was first patented in St. Louis in 1884, but not put into use until Ferdinand built and raced it in 1897. That same year he began working for Jakob Lohner & Company, a coach producer for the Emperor of Austria and kings in England, Sweden and Romania.

His first design with Jakob Lohner was the Lohner-Porsche vehicle, known as the C.2 Phaeton. It was one of the first electric cars, and utilized two electric motors within the front wheel hubs to drive the carriage forward. Another two motors were added to the back wheels, creating four wheel drive.

In 1900, the wheel-hub motor was showcased at the Paris World's Fair in the Lohner-Porsche, a vehicle designed for racing. However, the weight of the batteries made it difficult for the Lohner-Porsche to drive anywhere other than level surfaces. It still received wide acclaim and led to the creation of the Lohner-Porsche Mixte Hybrid. A German company Daimler supplied an internal combustion engine to power a generator, which in turn powered the electric wheel-hub motors. This was the first hybrid vehicle of record.

The vehicles broke Austrian speed records and won the Exelberg Rally in 1901 with Porsche driving the hybrid. In 1902, Porsche was drafted into military service and again got to drive his creation. He was assigned to be the chauffeur to Archduke Franz Ferdinand.



### Porsche Joins Daimler

In 1906, Ferdinand became the Chief Designer of Austro-Daimler. His best-known design for Daimler was created for the 1910 Prince Henry Trial, a race that preceded the German Grand Prix. Ferdinand won, taking home a model car made of silver.

In 1917, he received an honorary doctorate degree from the Vienna University of Technology, along with the title Doctor of Engineering, Honoris Causa. He continued building racing cars, winning 43 of 53 races with a 1922 design. In 1923 he moved to Stuttgart to become the Technical Director of Daimler Motoren Gesellschaft. The next year he was given an honorary doctorate from the Stuttgart Technical University and was made an honorary Professor.

In 1926, Daimler Motoren Gesellschaft and Benz & Cie merged into Daimler-Benz, calling their creations Mercedes-Benz. Ferdinand had ideas for a small, light-weight car, but Mercedes-Benz's board did not agree. A few years later he left Daimler-Benz and, due to the Great Depression, Ferdinand found himself without a job.

### Porsche Is Founded

In April 1931, Ferdinand formed a consulting and design firm for engines and vehicles, which he called: Dr. Ing. h. c. F. Porsche GmbH, Konstruktionen und Beratungen für Motoren und Fahrzeugbau. He recruited several of his former co-workers, including his son Ferry Porsche.

As commissioned work came in, Ferdinand directed some of his attention toward a design of his own, a small concept car that he had started at Daimler in Stuttgart. The Depression took hold and Ferdinand founded a subsidiary company that focused on the development of racing cars. In 1932 the German auto makers union was formed and Ferdinand was approached to create a showpiece car for the Berlin Motor Show.

### The People's Car

It was at the Berlin Motor Show that German Chancellor Adolf Hitler announced his intentions for the "people's car," a vehicle that was affordable for the masses and could transport a family of five. He also planned a state-sponsored racing program. Ferdinand and his son Ferry worked together in 1934 to develop the first designs for the Volkswagen.

By 1935, two prototypes were completed, with several more to follow through 1939. Ferdinand's involvement to build the "Volkswagen" quickly earned him praise as the Great German Engineer, even though he was Czechoslovakian. Hitler saw Czechs as subhuman and encouraged Ferdinand to renounce his Czech citizenship. In 1937, he joined the National Socialist German Worker's Party, although he was known for being apolitical.

The Volkswagen design featured certain restraints from Hitler, including an air-cooled engine to ensure that nothing would freeze. The car was called the "KdF-Wagen" (Kraft durch Freude, which means strength through joy) and a factory was built in the new town of KdF-Stadt (today Wolfsburg). However, only a few KdF-Wagens were built before the onset of World War II and only Hitler received a Type 1 VW.

Production quickly changed to military vehicles, with Ferdinand and his team requested to create the Tiger tank and the Elefant tank destroyer. A complex drive system turned the Tiger from a tank to a self-propelled anti-tank gun nicknamed Ferdinand.



### After the War

Ferdinand was initially arrested as a war criminal because of his affiliation with the Nazi Party and membership with the Schutzstaffel (SS). Ferry determined that he himself had been made an honorary member of the SS and deducted that the same was true for his father. While Ferdinand was jailed, Ferry kept the business alive by repairing cars, water pumps and winches.

Ferry also completed a contract for a Grand Prix racecar, which gave him the necessary funds to free Ferdinand from prison. It was around this time that the company began working on a new design, known as the Porsche 356. They made 49 cars entirely by hand in their new location in Gmünd, Carinthia before returning to Stuttgart in 1949.

In order to restart their business in Stuttgart, Ferry took one model of the Porsche 356 to Volkswagen dealers in an attempt to get orders. His stipulation was that dealers pay in advance for the cars. Ferry estimated a series production of 1,500 for the 356. Over the next 17 years, more than 78,000 were built.

Ferdinand Porsche later began consulting work for Volkswagen and received royalty for every Beetle produced. In 1950 he visited Wolfsburg to discuss the future of VW with its President, Heinrich Nordhoff. A few weeks later he suffered a stroke and passed away in January 1951.

Ferdinand was inducted into the International Motorsports Hall of Fame in 1996 and was posthumously named the 1999 Car Engineer of the Century.

While Ferdinand Porsche is a legend in the automotive world, some have questioned whether the design for the Volkswagen Beetle was really his. Several other engineers were working on designs for the people's car, with Ferdinand receiving the necessary funding from the state to move forward. The origins of the Beetle design are discussed [here](#).

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