

## How the utility vehicle, once dismissed by Henry Ford as a 'kangaroo chaser', became an Australian classic

Landline / By [Tim Lee](#)

Posted Sun 27 Feb 2022 at 7:13am



The ute is a fundamental, instantly recognisable, part of the Australian landscape. (ABC News: Peter Healy)

In the early 1930s, a handwritten letter landed on the desk of Hubert French, Ford Australia's general manager.

It came from a farmer's wife from Gippsland, with an idea and a plea for a new type of vehicle — something to take her to church in comfort on a Sunday, but still be able to carry the pigs to market on a Monday.

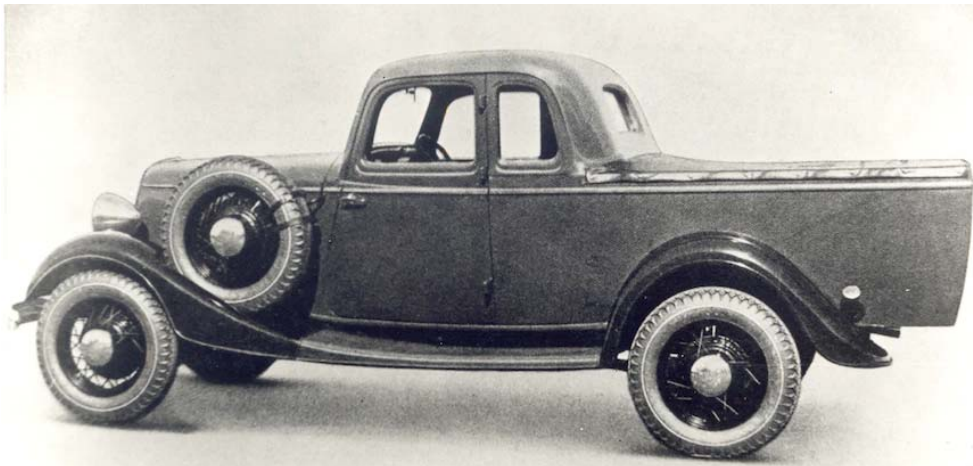
In an interview with the ABC in 1987, Lewis Bandt, credited as the inventor of the Australian "ute" or utility vehicle, confirmed the often-told story and the letter's contents.

"Could not your designer give us a two-in-one vehicle?"

"Why was the ute created?" asked Mr Bandt rhetorically. "In answer to a great need to farming communities of Australia and lots of other tradespeople."

### Key points:

- 22-year-old Lew Bandt designed the first coupe ute, which hit the market in 1934
- Henry Ford was initially dismissive of Bandt's design
- Only a handful of Ford utes from the initial production run have survived the passage of time



THE NEW FORD COUPE UTILITY 302  
FEATURES OF THIS SMART NEW COMMERCIAL VEHICLE  
ARE COMFORTABLE PASSENGER ACCOMMODATION  
AND LARGE CARRYING SPACE IN REAR COMPARTMENT

The Ford Coupe Ute promised the comfort of a sedan with the utility of a truck. *(Supplied)*

### **The birth of the Australian ute**

Ford's car-making plant had opened in Geelong in 1925 and for the first few years enjoyed strong sales.

When the Great Depression hit in 1929 every sector of the economy felt the impact.

For farmers, banks would only extend credit for one car. For many, the family "car" became a rough tray truck.

And that was the letter writer's main complaint, that their truck's leaking side-curtains let in the rain.

Seeing merit in the idea, Hubert French gave the task of designing a new vehicle to a brilliant, young designer, Lew Bandt.



Lewis T Bandt with his 1934 V8 Coupe Ute. *(Supplied)*

The 22-year-old adapted a Ford coupe sedan, shortening the cabin and moulding a tray to the rear.

"What Lew designed was the first coupe ute, and that's what's gone into the lexicon as the good old Aussie ute," said automotive historian and publisher Larry O'Toole.

"But it was really a development along the way of an existing vehicle, into something really special."

Crucially, a ute is different from a truck or a pick-up in that the tray back is made from one sheet of metal attached to the cabin.

But when Lew Bandt took two early prototypes to America to show Henry Ford his innovation, the great industrialist was dismissive.

"He described it as a 'kangaroo chaser,'" said Robert Ryan of Sydney, the proud owner of a rare 1934 Ford ute.

"The concept was totally new, it was unproven."

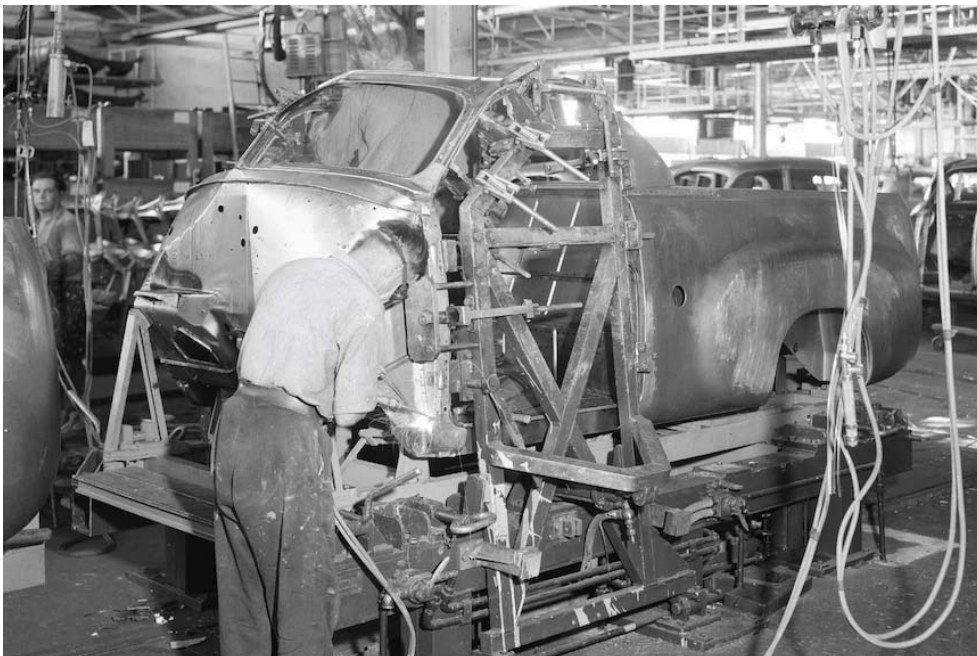


This is the only known surviving factory prototype of the 1934 Ford Coupe Ute. (*Landline: Tim Lee*)

## **An instant success**

The ute never took off in the United States, but in Australia, the Ford V8 side-valve, 75 horsepower, coupe ute, launched that year, was an instant success. General Motors produced its version of the ute soon after.

The ute soon became an everyday sight in rural Australia. Over time it has spread around the globe.



Ford opened a car-making plant in Geelong in 1925. (*Supplied*)

"It's iconically Australian," said Vicki Lowry, general manager of the Deniliquin Ute Muster, Australia's most prominent public celebration of the ute.

"It's a vehicle that you can throw your camp gear in the back of or throw your farming, work gear in the back of or take it to town and put your groceries in the back of it," Ms Lowry said.

The muster began in 1999 with the aim of bringing some revenue to the then drought-stricken district and the hope of putting the town on the map.



Vicki Lowry says people flock to Deniliquin each year to show off their prize utes. (ABC: Peter Healy)

It has been a monstrous success — some years more than 10,000 utes and their owners converge from all over Australia. These days there is a wider range of makes and models, but regrettably, no new utes are made in Australia.

Ford ceased making cars and utes here in 2016 and Holden a year later.

### **A rare sight**

Australian-made utes, especially the early Fords, are especially treasured by enthusiasts. Only a handful of the initial production run have survived the passage of time.

Robert Ryan has spent years trying to track them all down.



The Ford ute is distinguished by its front passenger cabin and rear tray back boot. (Supplied)

"Out of 528 vehicles, there are only 61 remaining on the register. Of those 61, there are only eight known with full or club registration on the roads today," he said.

And as for the letter from the farmer's wife that inspired a fleet of utes, just as Helen of Troy was said to have launched a thousand ships?

It has never been found.

Former archivist at Ford Australia Michele Cook has trawled through much of the car company's extensive archive spanning nine decades with no luck, as did her predecessor, Adrian Ryan.



Lew Bandt's restored 1934 model ute is an invaluable treasure of history. (*Landline: Tim Lee*)

"It could be hidden there and someone will come across it one day," Ms Cook said.

"You never know. Things get misfiled."

When Lew Bandt retired from Ford in 1975 he found a Ford Coupe and spent four years converting and restoring it into that first model Ford Coupe ute.

Tragically in March 1987, on the very day he was interviewed about the origins of the ute, Mr Bandt was killed in a car crash while driving home.

His smashed ute, subsequently restored by the Ford Club of Australia, is now on show at Chewton, Central Victoria.

Fittingly, the brilliant designer is commemorated on a motorway. A modern, concrete bridge spanning the Barwon River at Geelong, Victoria is named in his honour.

