

# What Ignition System is Best for My Model T?



Many Model T owners ask this question. Recently there was a lot of discussion on the MTFCA Forum about this subject. Several contributors to the Forum suggested that some scientific tests be run to determine the best system but others suggested that we wouldn't get reliable results because everybody seemed to have their own biases and whoever did the testing might get the results they wanted or expected. I think we could get an unbiased test, but not necessarily a relevant test. All of the options for a Model T ignition system are quite suitable for the car - but the real question is which system is best for the owner of the car. None of the ignition systems are suitable for all of the owners.

The original system is perfectly satisfactory for the experienced Model T owner. Many of the experienced old guys even have a hand crank coil tester and can really fine tune the coils. Any of us can afford the more modern electric coil testers, but we have to learn how to use them and then we have to use what we learned. It is nearly impossible to properly "tune" a Model T coil without some sort of tester. Many of the new owners don't care to learn to be a mechanic. Some do and that is good, but some don't and that is a fact of life.

Unfortunately, many of the experienced Model T'ers are OLD and some are dying. Their grandsons and son-in-laws may or may not have the knowledge to maintain the ignition systems. Many inexperienced new Model T owners will even start adjusting the coils when the engine starts to misfire because of an unrelated problem like fuel starvation from a clogged fuel line. Then, as the car sits there but unrelated to their adjustment, gasoline seeps past the clog and the car starts up and runs better. The next time the fuel clogs, another coil gets "adjusted" and the car is restarted and it runs better again. Before you know it, the whole ignition system can be fouled up and the car still has a clogged fuel line. Eventually, the fuel line will totally stop up and it will be fixed. The car still won't run well because the ignition system is now out of adjustment and some of the owners will get fed up and not drive it for months or years. Then the fuel is stale and the carburetor float is stuck. The car gets left for an additional time and deteriorates and then sold to a doctor or dentist or lawyer who has the money to pay more than it is worth but no mechanical ability whatsoever. What is the best ignition system for that Model T owner?

If this owner is inexperienced and buying an ignition system to install himself, I think the distributor is best. It is a little more difficult to install, but works well, does not depend on the original coil box to be in good working order and the car will be back on the road and enjoyed. Additionally, all modern mechanics are familiar with the workings of a distributor and it can be serviced almost anywhere. The replaceable parts are available from your local NAPA store. A distributor worked well for me on our 12,000 mile 2001 Texas to Alaska trip without even being oiled. (It wore out the bushing in the Bosch distributor head after 15,000 miles because I hadn't oiled it.)

If the owner is more experienced with a Model T, or is having me install his ignition system, OR has an interest in original appearance, I think a True-Fire is a great system. It depends on the contacts in the coil box being in good condition, the coil box wood being good, and the commutator wires being in good working order, but once those issues are addressed, it performs extremely well and does not require much attention. It does not change the appearance of the engine and that is certainly a plus for many owners. I compliment Ed Bittner on his ingenuity in the development of the True-Fire. I know full-well what effort goes into the development and introduction of a new product.

If the owner of the car is experienced with Model T's, capable and willing to maintain his own car, the original ignition system is excellent. As a matter of fact, this owner is probably not going to be satisfied with a distributor or the True-Fire because "it's not like Henry made it." It is nice to have the old historic system and show how such an unusual ignition system (by today's standards) works. It is gratifying to the owner to be able to maintain it and show it off. The pride shown by the experienced Model Ter's in keeping the original system tuned is well deserved. But the fact that they take such pride in keeping the system in good working order does say something about what it takes. Experience and patience. There is no doubt, if the owner understands the original system and how to maintain it, he will find it to be an excellent system that will serve him well. My son-in-law (who is a better Model T mechanic than I) made the 12,000 mile Alaska trip with original Ford coils and had no trouble with them.

Many of my customers do not desire to take care of their own cars or do not have the ability to take care of them. I don't like to have to bill them for the work required on their cars when they bring it in for a simple adjustment to the ignition system. I have to drive the car and test it for myself before I can isolate the problem and fix it. That adds to the cost.

So the real question is not which ignition system is best for the Model T, but which ignition system is best for the OWNER of the Model T. The best system for our hobby is the system that keeps the Model T on the road and in use. It doesn't matter if the system is original if the car sits in the barn. Most of the Model T owners are not regular contributors to the Forum nor even members of the MTFCA. They are not interested in the fastest speed they can attain. Some are interested in originality and some are not. But all of them would like to get in their car and have it run without trouble to take them on a Sunday afternoon drive.

The great thing about the Model T as a hobby is that parts are available and there is a choice in many cases. Many other makes of vintage cars do not have the luxury of any parts being available. Enjoy the options. Don't criticize or ridicule those options you don't like because they may be a great solution to your fellow enthusiasts.

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**4 - T5007-W + T3221-TSA**  
Original Type Ignition System  
with Anderson Timer  
(About \$348 with wiring.)



**T3161**  
Distributor Ignition System  
(About \$363 with wiring.)



**T5007-TF**  
True-Fire Ignition System  
(About \$389 with wiring.)