

“THE BIRTH of a HAT
The ART and MYSTERY of MAKING FUR FELT HATS”
Video circa 1920, John B. Stetson Company
UCLA Film and Television Archive

- * We know certain census records indicate occupations of family members. The 1880's US Census records indicated my Irish laborer ancestors' occupations in Hopkinton Massachusetts were “Working in a Boot Shop” and “Working at a Straw Shop.” The boot shop operation seemed obvious, but what was made at a Straw Shop during that era? Hats?
- * I discovered that factories throughout central Massachusetts were involved in hat making, with Union Straw Works in Foxborough becoming the world's largest straw hat manufacturer. Artist design studios and workshops (called ateliers) were also established. And Foxborough is only about 26 miles down the road from Hopkinton.
- * While wondering what tasks my ancestor might have performed in a straw shop, I unexpectedly came across a film at Turner Classic Movies by the John B. Stetson Company documenting how their factory in Philadelphia manufactured fur felt hats.

Summary of the Process

Fur felt is made from beaver, nutria (large rodent), and hare skins. Leather trims are made from sheep, calf, and goat skins.

Furs are chemically treated to make the fibers knit together.

Fur is dried in ovens, brushed, cleaned before cutting.

Cutting and sorting by color and quality are next.

Then picked and blown, blended and cleaned.

A specific amount of fur is sorted and pressed for each individual hat.

The first step in formation is blowing the tiny fur fibers into a compartment with a perforated copper cone 3 feet high, to which they adhere. It creates a delicate covering.

The fiber is dipped into hot water vat to shrink it enough for the first handling. Then by hand peeled from cone, folded, and rolled into a cloth to allow it to firm up.

Using hot water, two hours of manipulation is required to shrink the fiber to the initial shape and size.

The crown is then pulled out and re-shaped over a form.

The brim is formed with help of a machine.

Then the fiber is blocked to the desired shape and size.

The rough surface is removed by hand with fine emery paper, finishing soft hats.

“THE BIRTH of a HAT
The ART and MYSTERY of MAKING FUR FELT HATS”
Video circa 1920, John B. Stetson Company
UCLA Film and Television Archive

The fibers brim is steamed again, smoothed, re-blocked and band attached.
The fibers are again smoothed and broom dusted, the brim ironed and shaped.
The brim edge is turned and pressed.
Hat bands are cut in another area.
Finishing trim attachment and shape styling are the final step.

** Did anyone note the amount of work done by hand, the types of machines used and the laborers' working conditions? How about the American flags hanging in their work area? **

Resources

From Ancient Egyptian to 1940's for care, how to determine hat size, hair and hat styles, including videos and short films:

www.stetsonhat.com

www.villagehatshop.com

www.foxboroughhc.com/history.html

www.fashion-era.com

www.historymuseum.ca (Canadian Museum of History)

www.thelandmark.com

“THE BIRTH of a HAT
The ART and MYSTERY of MAKING FUR FELT HATS”
Video circa 1920, John B. Stetson Company
UCLA Film and Television Archive

Notes from filming at the Stetson Hat Company’s Philadelphia plant. Film stock printed in 1920, but may have been filmed earlier.

This video is part of a collection of early American movies found at the New Zealand Film Archive and preserved with the American archival community. The film was preserved by UCLA Film and Television Archive from a 35mm nitrate print received by the New Zealand Film Archive from Jack Murtagh and Tony Osborne. It was copied at 24 frames per second (opening hat sequence) and 18 frames per second. The source material was scanned at 2K resolution and output to 35mm film at Colorlab Corp., thanks to a Save America’s Treasures grant secured by the National Film Preservation Foundation.

In the 1920’s hats were an essential item of everyday dress, with few Americans venturing outside without one. The largest hat making operation in the world was Stetson’s Philadelphia plant, with more than 5,000 employees spread across 32 acres of factory floors, and it turned out more than 3 million hats annually.

Founder Stetson (1830-1906) was famed as the inventor of the cowboy hat, the wide-brimmed, waterproof “Boss of the Plains” introduced in 1865. As the legend goes, he went to Colorado as a young man for his health and there developed the prototype from beaver pelts collected on a hunting trip. He later set up shop in Philadelphia, embossing his name on every sweatband, and soon expanded manufacturing into bowlers, derbies, top hats, and others.

This film would have been provided free to theaters and circulated to merchants for marketing purposes. It follows the pattern of perhaps the most common type of silent educational short in depicting a manufacturing process.

The hat making process, which one might presume to be relatively simple, appears near miraculous in the initial stages. The manufacturing trick behind fur felt hats is making cloth out of animal pelts without tanning the hides, indeed without using hide at all, except for trimming and hat bands. (Fur hats were made from beaver, nutria [otter], and hare. Leather trims from sheep, calve and goat skins.) The result is a lighter hat that maintains shape and withstands rain. In these years the Philadelphia plant went through some 16 million pelts annually. The worldwide popularity of Stetsons is

“THE BIRTH of a HAT
The ART and MYSTERY of MAKING FUR FELT HATS”
Video circa 1920, John B. Stetson Company
UCLA Film and Television Archive

underscored by this film print turning up in New Zealand, and the firm had its largest international markets in Argentina, Mexico, Canada, and South Africa.

Stetson himself claimed, “there’s no advertisement equal to a well-pleased customer.” but *Birth of a Hat* comes close. It opens with a schoolbook history of hats before showcasing the modern methods that the Stetson company brought to their making. The assembly-line efficiency also relied on a good deal of handwork to deliver a consistently high-quality product. Stetson hats were relatively expensive, but by tracing the complex steps through which felt is made, shaped, styled, and finished, the film makes a case for their price as quite reasonable. In 1920, Stetsons could be bought for between \$10 and \$30 (when bread was about 10 cents a loaf, dress shoes about \$4, and Ford automobiles \$260). The difference in Stetson prices was partly determined by the percentages of fur from the different animals shown in the film’s first moving images - with the costlier hats having a higher percentage of beaver and nutria, the lower much more rabbit. Each felt hat, although carefully styled, also could be steamed and reshaped by its owner. Among their more famous customizers was Buster Keaton, who restyled Stetson’s fedora into his trademark porkpie hat.

This film captures the Stetson company at its production peak. The plant maintained a strict gender division, with men manipulating the felt and shaping hats and women sorting fur, finishing hats, and (in a step not shown in the film) making hatboxes. To command worker loyalty, and fight off unionization, the company offered a hospital, a school, and housing as well as a panoply of employee services, from paid vacations, life insurance, and pension plans, to holiday turkeys and baseball leagues. With the Depression of the 1930s, demand for hats began to fade, accelerated by post-World War II fashion changes. Hat aficionados lay final blame to President John F. Kennedy, who completed his 1961 inauguration bareheaded. The massive Stetson plant in Philadelphia shuttered in 1971 and the company now manufactures in Texas.

Over the years, the company sponsored various versions of *Birth of a Hat*, including longer two-reelers with additional background about raw materials and distribution. An early version screened at the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco; a current one is viewable on the firm’s website (www.stetsonhat.com) and makes a fascinating comparison: The mass of employees has vanished, but the process looks remarkably similar. There is no date on our version, but its film stock was printed in 1920, and the many American flags on view in the workrooms suggest

**“THE BIRTH of a HAT
The ART and MYSTERY of MAKING FUR FELT HATS”
Video circa 1920, John B. Stetson Company
UCLA Film and Television Archive**

the heightened patriotism of World War I and that the film may have been shot as early as 1917 or 1918. The company also at this time promoted its “Americanization” classes for immigrant employees, and it long took pride in making its products stateside. At the top of the border in several of the film’s intertitles is the Stetson coat-of-arms trademark with a beaver and an eagle supporting a crested hat below which reads “American Manufacture.”

Researched by Jessica Getman