

CATTLE CULTURE

by Lindsay King, assistant editor

Mad Hatter

It's an iconic symbol, one of function and fashion. The felt cowboy hat is much more than the material it's made of; for some, it's part of their identity.

John B. Stetson, a hatmaker from Philadelphia, gets the credit for inventing what has evolved into the modern-day cowboy hat. The primitive notion of the cowboy hat presumably came from the vaqueros in Mexico.

"Felt hats go back to the beginning of time practically," jokes Greeley Hat Works' Master Hatter Trent Johnson. "John B. was situated at the base of Pike's Peak [Colorado] in about 1853 when he told his friends if they trap beavers he can teach them to make hats out of them."

John B. worked over a boiling pot of water hoisted above an open fire. He formed the pelts into the recognizable wide brim with a pinched crown cowboy hat.

"As the story goes," Johnson

continues, "a cowboy rides by and offers him \$10 for it. That was a crazy amount of money for a cowboy back then."

The rest is essentially history. John B.'s entrepreneurial mind started churning and it wasn't long before cowboys everywhere had their own John B. Stetson original.

Things change

Those first hats, and for many years after, were built out of beaver pelts "graded" according to quality. The bigger, more beautiful, and softer, pelts graded higher.

"There are very few industry standards or government regulations in the hat world," Johnson explains of what he refers to as the "x-factor." It's a system from the 1800s.

For many years, trappers sent their catches to the old world for processing into furs, hats, etc., making the x-factor system necessary.

"Fast forward to 1940 when a hat marked with a 10x was easily identified as 100% beaver,"



Johnson says. "Each x represented 10% beaver and cost \$10. So, a 10x hat was \$100."

As hatters caught on to this, the numbers beside the x's took off. Today, hats go as high as 1,000x.

"Nothing is made out of 1,000% of anything," Johnson says with a chuckle, adding that though hats with more x's are indeed higher quality, the old system is mostly irrelevant for hats today.

Some hatters have abandoned the x-factor system entirely — Greeley Hat Works being one of them. Though it may be less useful now than it was previously, there is still a significant difference in the texture of a 5x hat and one labeled 1,000x.



Essentially stay the same

Though the hats have changed; oddly enough, the steps to making one have stayed very much the same in the last 150 years.

“Before I ever get a hat, it goes through about 200 steps with the felt maker,” Johnson says. He explains how it starts with the processed fur sprayed into a centrifuge similar to a cotton candy machine.

When Johnson receives the hats, he says they look like a fuzzy ball, with a “one-size-fits nobody” shape to them. Color dye is added in the middle of the felting process so the excess dye can bleed out before getting shipped to the hatter.

“As a custom hatmaker, we start with antique wooden blocks of various shapes and sizes, then we steam the hat on those,” Johnson says



A feed-sack stitch is used to sew the sweat band into the hat so if it gets ripped out the hat won't be ruined.

Heat: Hat enemy number one

Thick steam billows over the racks of pearl snaps and Wranglers as you enter the western store. At first, you're unsure of its source, until you see the tall counter where a store clerk holds a felt cowboy hat in the steam's path.

Heat plays a major role in the life of a felt hat, good and bad. It's how the hat makes its way from the felt maker to the hatter and into the wearer's hands. However, heat can be detrimental to a hat.

Both moisture and heat can make a hat, felt or straw, melt out of its sharp shape. Many hat lives are lost sitting in a sweltering horse trailer or pickup truck under the heat of a summer sun. The high and tight brim droops into a sad frown, and the inside band rarely fits the same ever again. This makes it essential to keep your hat out of the heat and sun when it is not being worn.

The American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA) recommends storing both felt and straw hats in a hat can. It prevents moisture and dust from settling on the fine material and keeps the hat from being crushed.

They also recommend refraining from storing hats in a plastic bag as it can retain moisture. However, if a hat does get wet it should be left to dry outside of a hat can and away from the sun. Only once the hat is dry should any dust be swept off with a soft-bristle brush or hat-cleaning sponge.

as he shows the unique shapes among several finger blocks. “Each custom order includes the customer's head shape cut out of cedar. This piece is known as a cedar and holds the hat's shape when it is not on a head.”

The next step involves sanding and pounding the crowns and brims before sending them through the sandbag press to compress the fibers and make the brim flat.

“After that, we use a rounding jack to trim the outer edge and that makes the hat band,” Johnson says. “After the sweat band is sewn in with a feed-sack stitch on our 1927 Singer, it gets pressed, shaped and trimmed one more time.”

Sure, the process sounds simple, but it can take anywhere from four to eight man-hours over the course of a week. The frequent heating requires the hats get rested between stages of the process.

“Big companies can make 15-dozen hats a day, but we only build maybe 20 hats between stock and custom orders,” Johnson says, adding that all of their equipment used today was built between 1850 and 1950.

The next time you find yourself in need of a new head cover, think about John B. bending over an open fire, shaping your hat. **AJ**