

Whatever Happened To Men's Hats?

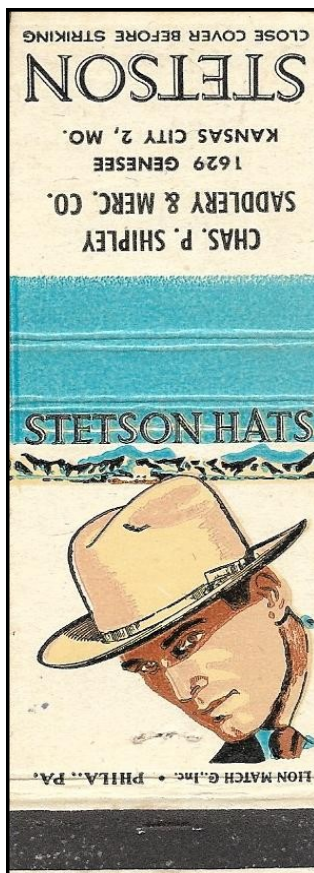
If you're a fan of old movies...or if you're old enough...you now that there was a time when men always wore hats outside. Remember the old gangster movies with Bogart, Cagney and Robinson, for example. Prior to the mid-1960s, most middle-class adults in the Western world didn't go outside without some kind of cover, whether it was a Panama, cloche, fedora, beret, or silk scarf. Hats were also the single biggest protector from the sun. The sweatband could catch beads of perspiration before they got into your eyes. And at a time when showering regularly wasn't especially feasible, hats could also keep environmental dirt and grime away from the hair. Well, what happened?

Some say that the turning point, most people say, was John F. Kennedy's inauguration. Before Kennedy, all presidents wore top hats on their first day at work. Kennedy brought one, but hardly ever put it on. But, it was the popularity of the automobile that actually started things off. Imagine a man, sitting in the driver's seat of his car. The head-to-roof distance is so narrow that to stay comfortable, a man would have to remove his hat. A man's hat was used primarily as a means of protection against rain, dust, cold, and the sun. Not necessary in the car.

The second reason the hat lost its popularity is because of the emphasis on hygiene that developed in the late 20th century. In the 1950's, hair washes were weekly instead of the daily ones that we do today. Because hair washes were done infrequently, a hat was necessary to keep the dust and dirt away.

The modernization of the Western lifestyle also brought with it new protections. The first pair of sunglasses, introduced in 1929, helped eliminate the need for a brim to shade the eyes. Sunglasses were further developed for soldiers during World War II, and by the mid-1940s, they had become popular among regular folks. Additionally, the first sunscreens were introduced to the public in the late 1940s.

Lifestyle changes also contributed to the hat's obsolescence. Industrialization and modernization meant, for much of the population in Western Europe and North America, spending less time spent in the fields, doing laundry outdoors, or walking long stretches at a time. As such, a hatless



head wasn't a liability, but instead a mark of liberation.

Finally, the hair fashions of the 1960's and 70's meant that men cared more about their hair and how it looked. In the golden age of hats, men typically had trimmed hair in order to ensure that extraneous strands of hair over their forehead would not stick out from underneath their hat. As men started to care more for how their hair looked, the less reason there was to wear a hat that might crush or mess up their 'do.

It is interesting to note that back when men wore hats, it was considered subversive to not wear hats. Now, it's the people that wear hats that give the impression that they're going against the grain. *[and don't even get me started on adults wearing baseball caps backwards!]*

Hat wearing did not, however, go gentle into that good night. Before the fall of the fedora was complete, there was one big push to save it. In the early 1940s, a group of "136 manufacturers and more than 3,500 associate retail members started the first industry-wide sales effort in hat history" for the sole purpose of keeping the hat in style — and, specifically, encouraging men to purchase their hats not from a chain store, but from a recognized hatter.

Under the moniker "the Hat Research Foundation," the group pooled its resources to take out ads in prominent publications. That was not to be, though; the foundation's efforts fell short. Despite heaping cash into its campaign to keep hats cool and chic, the industry couldn't manage to get ahead of the day's new styles. While older gentlemen continued to don their high-crowned hats whenever they left the house, younger people simply weren't moved by the marketing.

[https://medium.com/s/pulling-at-threads/how-cars-and-hygiene-killed-the-middle-class-hat-2f382b4a35ec] [Special thanks to Loren Moore, CA, for cover scans]

