Two centuries of hat making

Danbury's famous trade

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Two centuries of hat making

Danbury's famous trade

By Stephen A. Collins

A Danbury native and son of a hatter, Stephen A. Collins has been a reporter and editor with The News-Times of Danbury for 51 years. He covered a variety of hatting stories in the 1930s and early 1940s and later directed coverage of and editorialized on Danbury's continuing shift from hat making to other business and industrial pursuits.

Ralph DeSantis, a veteran Danbury hatter who has found a home since 1968 at the Danbury Hat Company, blocks a hat body in the second-to-last stage of back shop operations. He had changed the cone of felted fur through tip and brim stretching to the point where he is blocking the individual hat to its final shape before it goes to a finishing shop. (News-Times file photo)

Skilled craftsmen are a tradition in Danbury, going back to pre-Revolutionary War days. Crafting fur felt hats was one of the many home industries that developed in this then small but flourishing colonial center of trade and commerce.

For much of two centuries, Danbury was known as a and finally as **the** hat center of the nation.

The decline of hat making began early in this century — and for two years in the 1960s hat making was gone until the Rosenthal Brothers of St. Joseph, Mo., moved their Bieber-Goodman Associates operation from Bethel back to Danbury.

Renamed the Danbury Hat Compny, this one factory remaining today in what was widely known for many decades as the Hat City today is large and busy enough to make Danbury still the largest source in the nation for production of fur felt hat bodies.

At the same time, the spirit of craftsmanship that goes back to the earliest hat makers and is so evident today in the city's many and varied industries provides another link to colonial times.

No record exists to establish the identity of Danbury's first hatter. Nor is it known if he was one of those colonial hat makers who stirred the ire of London hatters and caused King George II to issue a decree in 1731 banning the exportation of hats from "His Majesty's plantations or colonies in America" and limiting the number of apprentices that colonial hatters could train.

W. H. Francis, who wrote a history of hat making in Danbury in 1860, lists Zadoc Benedict first in his booklet, which may explain why a number of accounts written since then claim Benedict was Danbury's first hatter.

The town's records were destroyed in the British raid on Danbury in April, 1777. By establishing his business three years later on Main Street, where the first railroad depot and then the main postoffice later stood, Benedict escaped anonymity.

He was a descendant of one of Danbury's founding families and probably learned the hatting trade from an older relative, perhaps his father, an uncle or even his grandfather.

Benedict had a journeyman and two apprentices working for him when he opened his shop.

To have become a master hatter, he had to have spent some years developing his skills around the same type of kettle and bench which hatters had long used in Europe and which colonists had adapted in meeting their headgear needs.

All the ingredients were here

One fact is clear. From its earliest years, Danbury was well supplied with the four ingredients necessary for hat making --fur, water, fuel to heat the water, and mânpower to apply the pressure to felt the fur.

Felting is the oldest textile process known to man, having been developed in Central Asia long before the Christian era. It is believed to have preceded spinning, weaving and knitting.

Once he learned that hair (or fur) fibres that had been wet and subject to heat and pressure would become a mass almost impervious to

rainwater, man was quick to develop felt headgear that served early civilizations.

The basic tools that Zadoc Benedict and his predecessors used had been developed over a period of centuries.

A table or "hurdle" was placed next to or around a large tub or kettle in which water was heated. A handful of soft fur from a beaver, muskrat or another animal was placed on the table, half of it set aside and the remainder vibrated with a bow. It might have been a rather fancy bow, looking like a giant violon bow, or home made of a sapling and catgut.

The vibrations set up by plucking the bow caused the barbs on each hair (they can be seen only under a microscope) to begin to intertwine, starting the felting process.

The vibrations gradually turned the loose fur into a flat bat, roughly triangular in shape. Then the remaining fur was turned into a second bat, paper was placed between the two to separate all but the edges, which were then worked together into the shape of a rough cone.

A wooden pin was used to compress the wetted fur after it had been rolled in a cloth. Then it went into the tub, to be shrunk and thickened by repeated rollings and immersions in the hot water.

Making hats in this fashion was a slow process, with Benedict and his three assistants turning out three hats a day.

Many more shops are started

Benedict's shop was soon followed by many other small shops, all taking advantage of the plentiful water, as well as the convwnient supplies of wood for fuel. Old time hatters used to insist that Danbury's attractiveness for hat manufacturing was the soft quality of its water.

Some shops began to grow in size. By 1787, the firm of Burr & White was employing 30 journeymen and apprentices. By Jan. 1, 1801, the day that the Rev. Thomas Robbins delivered his famous "Century Sermon," he was able to say that "in the manufacture of hats, this town much exceeds any one in the United States. More than 20,000 hats, mostly of fur, are made annually for exportation"

Yankee entrepeneursship was chiefly responsible. Sons, sons-in-law and other relatives of Danbury hatters went off to other states, principally in the South, to establish their own stores or otherwise open up markets for Danbury-made hats. Charleston, S. C., was a favorite locale for Danbury outlets. Savannah, Ga., was another.

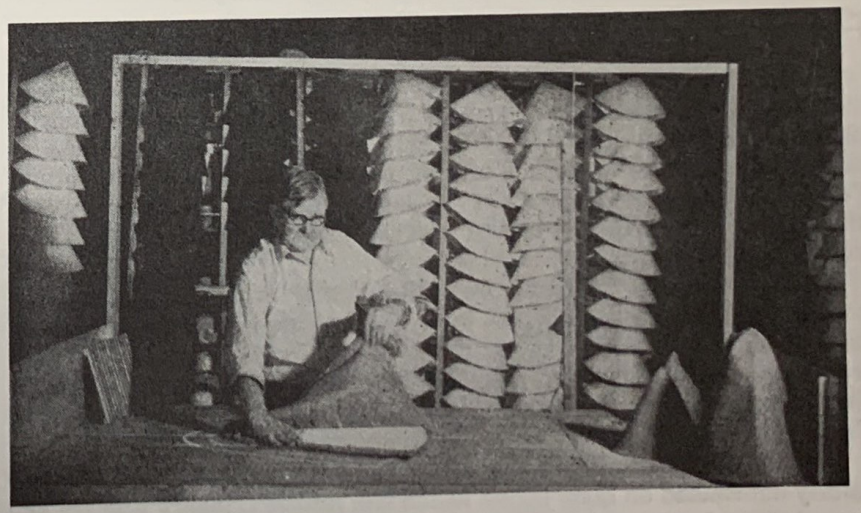
In 1808-09, according to Francis, there were 56 hat shops in Danbury, averaging three to five men each. He also reported that "many farmers were interested in the trade, setting up a kettle and hiring journeymen."

Journeymen hatters inDanbury were among the first to set up their own association, the Journeymen and True Assistants Association, to protect their economic and social interests.

Some shops were in cellars, others in back yards, still more along Main Street and in areas that today are exclusively residential. Most of them located close to the Still River or one of its branches, employing the stream to carry off waste water.

That approach was to pose a problem in the 20th century but was of no concern in the early 19th. Most towns in Connecticut and the other new

Reenacting the way fur felt hats were made by hand, the worker above uses a bow to vibrate half of the fur into the rough shape of a triangle. Below, he holds the two flat bats of fur which he has separated with paper to work on the edges and form a cone like the ones to the right. (From the Ernest Hubbard collection, Danbury Scott-Fanton Museum and Historical Society)



states that were developing early industries handled waste products in similar manner.

Many shops were operated by partnerships, some involving families and in-laws, and they formed, split, re-formed and merged with considerable frequency. All of them bore the name of Danbury's early Yankee stock, many of whom could trace their ancestry on the maternal if not the paternal side back to one or more of the eight founding families of 1684.

Among their names were Babcock, Benedict, Boughton, Brewer, Dibble, Gregory, Hoyt, Mallory, Meeker, Merritt, Rickles, Rockwell, Seely, Stire, Taylor, Tweedy, Wildman and White.

Ezra Mallory began what was to become one of Danbury's best known hatting dynasties in 1823 in a small shop on Great Plain Road. His son, grandsons and great-grandsons developed Mallory Hats into what was the largest plant in Danbury producing completed hats ready for shipment to retailers. It remained in family control until sold to the John B. Stetson Company in 1946. The Danbury Hat Company occupies what was long the Mallory backshop off Rose Hill Avenue, producing hat bodies ready for shipment to finishing shops.

Samuel Tweedy and members of his family were involved in a number of hat businesses under the Tweedy name and in association with partners all through the 19th century.

When Abijah E. Tweedy died in February, 1864, the weekly Danbury Times described him as one who "was more thoroughly than anyone else now living identified with the hatting interests of this town." The Tweedy family eventually concentrated its manufacturing interests on the Tweedy Silk Mill, East Franklin Street, producing the silk tips (linings), bands and other accoutrements for finished hats. Early in World War II, the plant was acquired for the newly-formed Barden Corporation, to produce precision bearings for the Norden bombsight. In more recent years, it has housed Amphenol operations of Allied Corporation.

Families had impact on community

The White family had an impact on Danbury that extended far beyond the hat industry. Judson and Russell White employed some 50 hands in their hat factory on Crosby Street in 1814. Among the many partnerships in succeeding years was that of Tweedy and White. By mid-century, Tweedy, White & Co. was one of the larger factories in Danbury. W.A. and A.M. White formed a company which concentrated on fur cutting and blowing, employing 70.

White Street took its name from this family, which had substantial holdings on the street and which later donated the land that became the nucleus for the downtown campus of Western Connecticut State University. Francis in his history described the Whites as "the most extensive furriers since the time of Astor," with a large warehouse in New York City.

William Alexander White and others in his family donated an earlier family homestead on Main Street as the site for the Danbury Library and provided the funding for its construction in 1873.

White Hall on the downtown campus honors W. A. White. It was Danbury High School from 1927 until the mid-1960s. Moss Avenue and Granville Avenue honor other members of the White family.

The Taylors were another family who expanded from hat making to allied industries, in this instance machinery. It was around 1822 that Joel Taylor developed the dye wheel for coloring hat bodies. It replaced a block-and-tackle system which was slow and laborious, although it was an improvement over the earlier system of placing hat bodies by hand in a dye tank, stirring them with a wooden paddle and removing them every half hour for inspection until some 20 hours had passed.

As the century reached its mid-point, development and then improvements of forming and sizing machines was about to give Danbury's hatting industry a new spurt in growth. James S. Taylor was to patent his Taylor sizing machine, which dominated sizing operations for the next seven decades and longer and to provide the income which led to construction of the Taylor Opera House, a Danbury landmark until it was destroyed by fire in 1922, and of its replacement, the Capitol Theater on Elm Street, at Wooster Square.

But before the new spurt in fur felt hat making took place, there were two periods when other type of hats put fur felt into a temporary eclipse.

Silk and wool hat production

Silk hats were in vogue by the 1830s. Their production was introduced by Alvin Hurd through the firm of Swift & Nichols. According to Francis' history, "this branch of the trade increased so that in fact it became the most popular one of the day, and in the years intervening between 1840 and 1850 was carried on almost exclusively,"

There were also flurries of wool hat production. When napped hats (providing a plush finish) became popular, they were made of cloth or wool bodies with fine fur napped on the outside to create the finish. A particularly fine type of napped hat had top quality beaver fur napped on the outside of a the basic body.

The panics (depressions) that struck the national economy usually had severe effects on the hat makers and their workers. Of the 1836-37 panic, Francis said those days were remembered "by none more clearly than by the mechanics employed in hatting."

A decade later, in 1846-47, many hatters were again out of work and had to take jobs with local farmers during haying and harvest seasons.

The 1840s closed with the arrival in Danbury of the first forming machine, put to experimental use under the auspices of A. E. Tweedy & Co.

In 1850, the cash system came into general use, with workers no longer having to rely on "orders" to local merchants, who in turn were paid by maufacturers in hat bodies they could sell in New York or some other market. Francis found abandonment of barter to be a historic step, not only for hatting but for Danbury. He declared that the cash system "made an entire revolution in the moneyed interests and financial operations of our village, and opened a wider avenue for all kinds of business and a more extensive field for the hitherto crippled energies of the whole community."

Allied industries join in boom

That change set the stage for a new boom with the introduction of the railroad, coal, steam power and rapid advances in hat making ma-

chinery. The forming machines, as crude as they were at first, the Taylor sizer and other machines increased productivity many times over, for the individual hatter and for every hat shop, and also led to rapid development of allied industries, such as fur cutting, box making and machine shops.

Coal was a scarce commodity until the Danbury-Norwalk Railroad went into operation in 1852. By four years later, according to Francis, the hat making industry consumed 1,870 tons of coal a year. He gave this breakdown: Tweedy & White, 700 tons; Tweedy Brothers, 150 tons; E. A. Mallory & Co., 115 tons, Sutton & Wildman, 60 tons; Crofut, Bates & Wildman, 225 tons; Benedict & Montgomery, 500 tons; Wildman & Crosby, 120 tons. The latter two manufactured wool hats.

The hat industry continued to do well, in spite of another panic in 1857, particularly with sales of hats in the expanding West. Even though Bethel, which had many factories, was set off as a separate town in 1855, Danbury had a 22 percent increase in population in the decade. Had Bethel not been set off, the population increase would have been 50 percent.

Then, in 1861, the nation was wracked by the Civil War, and the southern markets on which many Danbury factories heavily depended disappeared overnight.

Once combat had ceased, hat manufacturing returned to full vigor in Danbury. At the end of the decade, population had moved up another 21 percent. Irish and then German immigrants were taking their places in hat shops alongside the native sons.

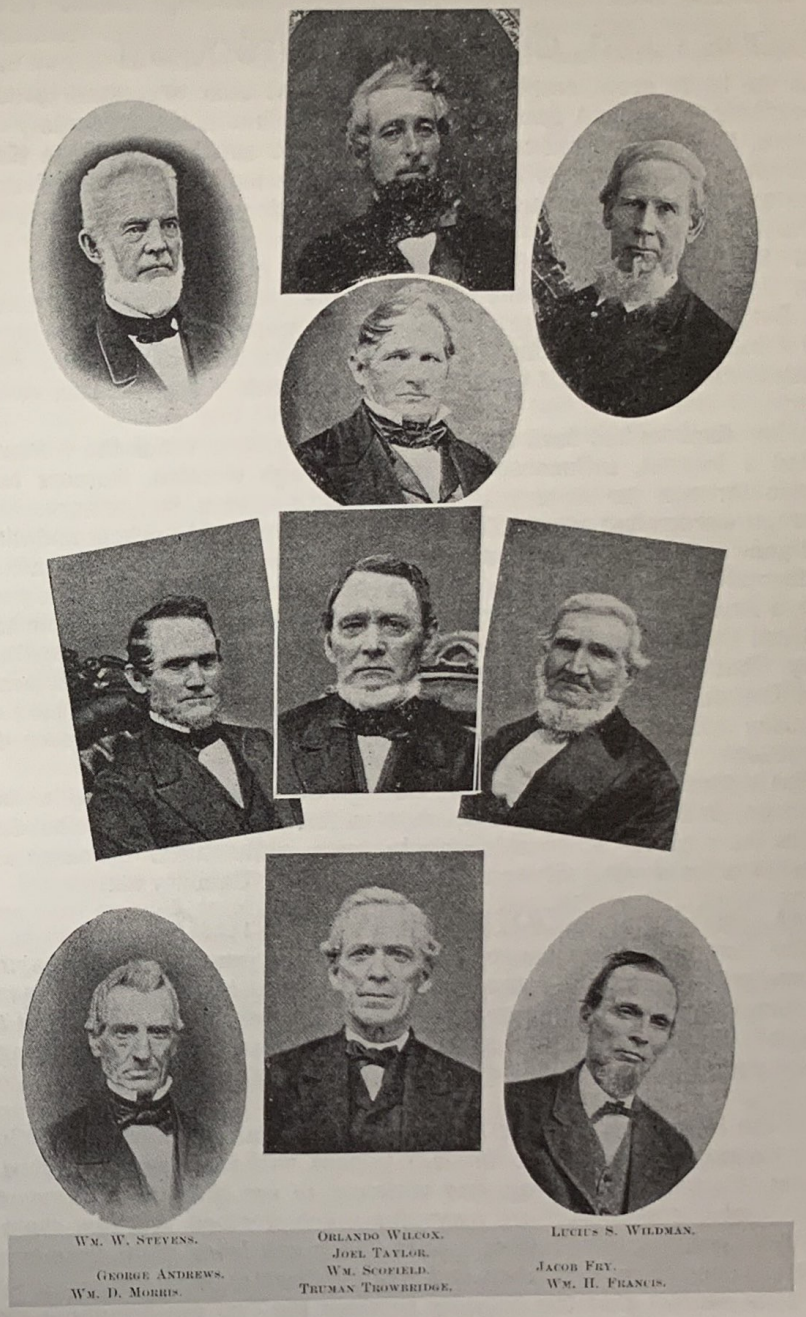
Plants expand, add machinery

Factories grew larger. Brothers and cousins shared the management of firms their fathers and grandfathers had founded. A writer for the Danbury Times reported late in 1865 that "the Messrs. Mallory are erecting a large addition to the eastern wing of their factory, which adds much to the 'trim' and 'finished' appearance of their building as well as to the 'trimming' and 'finishing' departments of their hats."

New developments in machines to make hat bodies, including pouncing machines, were quickly followed by improvements in finishing shop machines. Charles Reid invented a brim-rounding machine in his Balmforth Avenue shop soon after he started his business in 1868. Two nephews, John C. and James F. Doran, joined him, and later changed the company name to Doran Brothers. Sons of the former continued the business, with emphasis on special machinery as well as hat finishing machines, as a family operation into its 116th year.

E. Moss White founded fur cutting business in 1825, a business later taken over by his sons, William Augustus White and Alexander M. White. With soft fur in demand for napping hats, the White firm developed a treadle operated machine to cut fur from muskrat skins. Water power from the dam at White's Pond, just nnorth of the West Street bridge, and later steam power spurred the development of new machines for the fur cutting industry.

W.A. and A.M. White's fur cutting operation grew to be the largest of its kind in the country. Smaller fur cutting operations also flourished with the continuing growth of hat production. Danbury produced a mil-



This photo page, from the 1895 Bailey's History of Danbury, shows prominent citizens of the mid-1800s who made hats, invented machines to speed production or wrote about Danbury's famous industry.

lion and a half hats in 1850, four and a half million annually by 1880 and five million by 1890.

Unions form, disputes are frequent

As the trade grew, employers and employees alike organized to advance their interests. A group like the United & True Assistant Society of Hatters, founded in Danbury in 1800, no longer sufficed. Separate Hat Makers and Hat Finishers Associations also formed, then the Hat Trimmers Association, all to become local unions under the United Hatters of North America.

In 1885 Edmund Tweedy called a convention of hat manufacturers in New York. Danbury accounted for 22 of the 63 manufacturers present and Bethel nine. New Jersey manufacturers were not sold on the idea, and it was not until 1887 that the Fur Hat Manufacturers Association was formed with C. H. Merritt of Danbury as president. It dissolved six years later.

Labor disputes had been shaking the industry. One, which the workers called a lockout, influenced the 1882 borough election. Rumors had spread through the state that a riot was imminent in Danbury. The borough warden had asked the Fairfield County sheriff for help and then had gone to Hartford to consult with the governor and to say that a few uniformed men with authority could preserve order in Danbury. The next day, a Friday, he said he was surprised by reports that the governor had ordered the First regiment of the state militia to prepare to go to Danbury. That night union hatters nominated their own candidate for warden. Democrats developed a split but endorsed him. He was elected on Tuesday and immediately replaced the warden who had gone to see the governor.

Hat shipments dropped sharply during "the Danbury trouble," as one state paper described it. A Newark, N. J., newspaper reported that factories there picked up considerable business, while unions in Orange and Newark were sending substantial sums to aid the Danbury hatters.

An 'almost continual war' cited

The Connecticut Bureau of Labor Statistics issued a report saying, *"Previous to 1885 there was almost continual war between the hat manufacturers and the hat makers and finishers of Danbury. . . . The rise of the Knights of Labor put a new aspect on industrial affairs to control wages more widely than they had ever been controlled by labor organizations . . ."*

At the New York meeting he had called, Edmund Tweedy said, *"It is only necessary to glance at the daily papers, with their lengthy record of srikes, lockouts, boycotting, and violence, to see that the relations between labor and capital are becoming much strained, and that there is likely to result a condition of affairs which will bring great trouble and distress upon those who labor, and loss and disaster to capital.*

"It is evident that the contests between the two are becoming more frquent, of greater magnitude, and are productive of more bitterness of feeling than at any previous period in the history of the country."

With their national association in trouble, Danbury members formed the Fur Hat Manufacturers' Association of Danbury but little easing of labor-management turbulence resulted. In 1887, the manufacturers finally reached agreements with makers and finishers associations but the trimmers refused to agree to terms the manufacturers wanted. A two-day lockout in May, 1887, led to Hat Trimmers Association acceptance of the agreement the manufacturers wanted.

The pattern of lockouts and strikes continued, for five weeks in late 1890 and then for 10 weeks in 1993.

Another lockout was declared against the finishers association by Danbury manufacturers in July, 1895. Again at issue was the bill of prices, the rates to be paid hatters who worked on a piece rate basis. Again this dispute ended but it set the stage for new labor troubles in the early years of the 20th century.

New faces among manufacturers

The establishment of new businesses, along with mergers and splits, continued as they had earlier in the century but with a new twist. No longer was hat manufacturing the sole province of old-line Yankee families.

Casper Ziegler, a native of Germany (Casper Street bears his name today) took over the former Union Hat Company factory in the mid-1870s, and in 1876 the operation passed to William Beckerle, another native of Germany. He took in C. H. Piex, T. F. Fay and Joseph H. Shuldice as partners and began expanding his plant in the area of Chestnut Street and Pahquioque Avenue. Fire destroyed the factory in 1879 and Beckerle rebuilt. He sponsored formation of a volunteer fire company among his workers, still known today as the Beckerle & Co. Hose Company.

Dietrich E. Loewe, another German immigrant, and two partners in 1879 started the D. E. Loewe & Co., slated to become more than a household name in manufacturing and union circles all around the country in the first two decades of the next century.

Before the 19th century was out, Frank H. Lee, the Brookfield-born son of Irish immigrants, and Harry McLachlan Sr., a native of Scotland, were to start their own businesses and become major figures in the industry during the first four decades of the 20th Century.

Danbury's thriving small shops produced some 20,000 hats annually in 1800. By 1900, the busy factories, large and small, were producing more than 6,000,000 hats and hat bodies each year.

An 1895 listing showed these companies in Danbury manufacturing stiff hats (derbies) soft hats (fedoras) and bonnets (bodies for women's hats):

Holley, Beltaire & Co.
William Beckerle & Co.
Byron Dexter
T.C. Millard & Co.
C. H. Merritt & Son
Rundle & White
E. A. Mallory & Sons
Meeker Brothers
White, Tweedy & Smyth
Beltaire, Lurch & Co.
D. E. Loewe & Co.
Lee & Hawley
Davenpot & Von Gal
T. Meath & Co.
T. Brothwell & Co.
E. Griffin
Crofut & White
Higson & Collings Co.
Michael Delohery
C. M. Horch
W. H. Burns
J. B. Murphy & Co.
H. Zuerva & Co.
Sellick & Smith
American Hat Co.
James Higgins
Mackensie & Sons
E. F. Davis & Co.
Dunleavy & Co.
A. Sovets & Co.
Lynch Hat Co.
Seaman & Mabie

Just ahead, some big troubles

New troubles were ahead when, at the stroke of midnight on Dec. 31, 1900, the 20th Century was ushered in.

Few involved in hatting, whether manufacturers, workers or suppliers, recognized the threat to their industry that the mechanization of America would pose. The culprit, not recognized at the time, was the automobile.

The other major development in the early years of the 20th Century, arising from the continuing controversies between the unions and the manufacturers, was to lead to one of the most famous legal cases in the history of American management-labor relations.

But these clouds were not evident as the 20th century began. The shops were turning out completed hat and hat bodies at a pace that would have startled earlier generations of hatters, shipping the bodies in the rough to be finished in a New York and other major markets. The local finishing shops were concentrating on trade names that would give Danbury hatters their special reputation for quality.

Hatting had busy seasons in the spring for the fall trade and in autumn for the spring trade, but workers kept themselves busy the year around, with gardening, chicken-raising or similar home pursuits or doing odd jobs, such as painting and paperhanging.

Because they were paid by piece work, hatters felt free to "call shop" after a few hours work on a hot day and decide to take the rest of the day off. They thought nothing of picking up their tools, usually rubber aprons and boots, after a dispute with a foreman or superintendent in one shop and go seek work in another where they were sure they had one or more journeymen friends ready to sponsor them.

How men and machines made hats

While each shop might be different in the number of formers operated and in some other details, the basic operations were similar.

The key to production was the forming machine. The exact amount of loose fur needed for each hat was fed into the machine and drawn down by suction onto a perforated, revolving copper cone. Controlled cross-currents of air deposited a heavier coating of the loose fur on the lower part of the cone, the area that eventually becomes the brim.

When all the fur had been deposited, the door of the machine was opened and the cone and fur wrapped in wet burlap. A metal cover was placed over the burlap before the cone was removed from the machine and immersed in hot water. The hot water bath began the felting process and in less than a minute the cover and burlap were removed and the fragile body of fur taken from the cone.

The hardener took the fragile fur cone, about three feet high and two feet across, and rolled it with five other cones in a cloth, to be inserted in the hardening machine and rolled with light pressure. He inspected the bodies in between each of several processes until the cone had been shrunk to about 28 inches in heighth.

Wetting down, a similar process with somewhat heavier pressure, followed. Then came sizing, done for many years on the Taylor sizing machines and later on what are still called the A and B machines.

Each of the latter replaced 26 hatters using the Taylor sizers. A. Homer Genest, who developed the two machines under auspices of the U. S. Hat Machinery Company of Danbury (essentially a partnership of Harry McLachlan Sr. and Frank H. Lee Sr.), was successful where others had failed because he utilized a special belting which could impart to the hat bodies the delicate touch earlier hatters had been able to give them on their individual machines.

In between the A and B machine sizing processes, hat bodies were dyed to the colors required to meet the needs of the trade

The tip and brim stretching and blocking out processes followed final sizing, which brought the hat body down to about 14 inches for the fedora trade. A shellac solution was applied to stiffen brims (to the whole hat body when derbies were made).

The backshop completed the rough hat body with pouncing of crown and brim. Pouncing, an English word corrupted from the French word for "to shave," involved putting the hat body on a revolving wooden block, against which was held a sheet of sandpaper to cut the longer hairs without injuring the fine texture of the felt.

The finishing and trimming operations

Finishing operations followed, either in another department of the same factory or in local and out-of-town shops that specialized in what was called front shop work.

Hand blocking, giving the hat its final size, was the first finishing shop step. The hat, still on its block, next went to crown and brim ironing machines and then came another pouncing operation using a fine emery paper.finally to a finisher who applied a light coating of a petroleum product to add sheen and increase the life of the hat.

In the trimming department, workers applied the band, the sweat leather cut to the size needed, and the lining or tip. Brim rounding and curling, if required, preceded the next to last step, flanging. This involved ironing over a brim block, each designed to make the hat roll and snap at exactly the point required by its style.

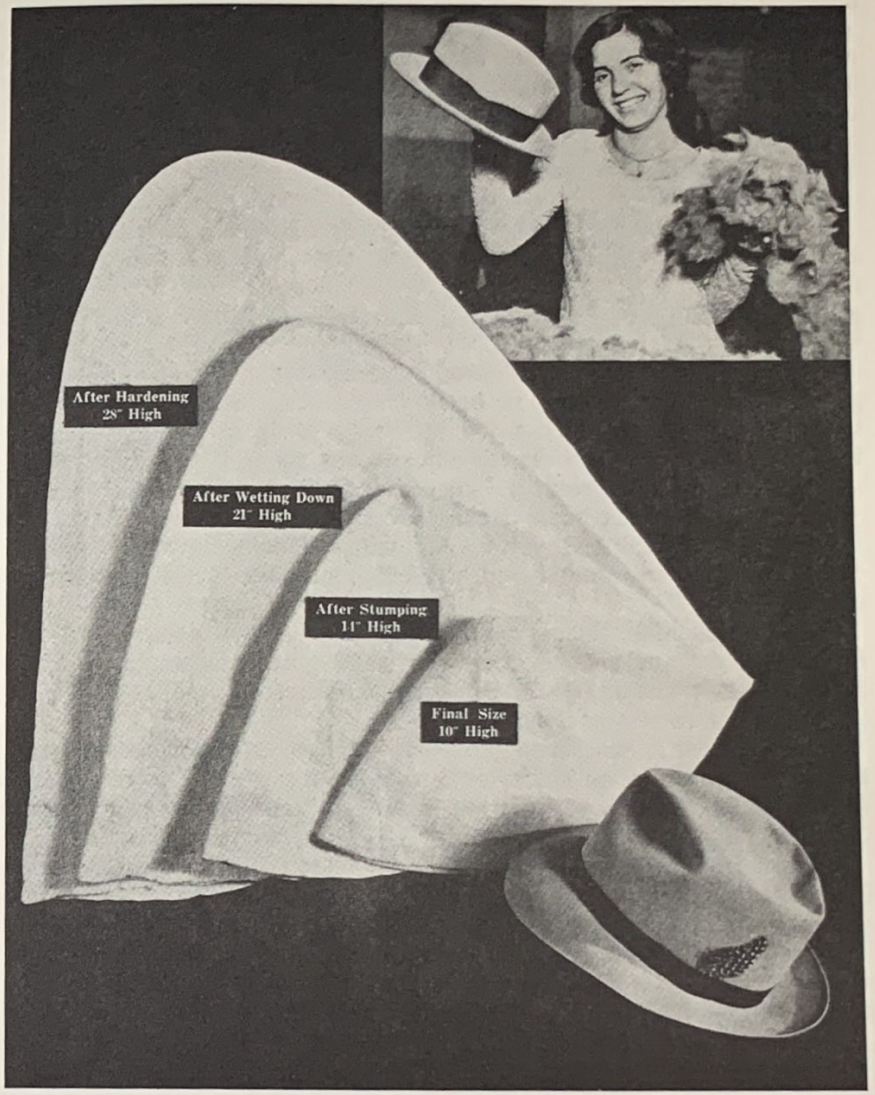
Then the finished hat was placed under a heated bag of sand, called an "elephant's foot," to dry the hat and set its style line.

At one time there were dozens of small finishing shops in Danbury, in addition to the big shops turning out Lee, Disney, Mallory hats. Hat finishing was to disappear from Danbury in 1964 when the John B. Stetson Company closed down the Lee shop which it had acquired a few years earlier.

But there were no fears about the eventual demise of hat finishing and a drastic reduction in hat making generally when an increasing number of automobiles began to appear on city streets. At first, only those of better than average means could afford the new cars. Most automobiles were of the open touring type and headgear was a must for drivers and passen-gers alike. But then came the enclosed car — and Henry Ford. Men's hat production in the United States reached its peak in 1909, the year after Henry Ford had introduced the Model T. His workingman's car not only revolutionized transportation, it also made hats inconvenient, if not superfluous, to millions of Americans.

The derby, called the hard or stiff hat — and the mainstay of Dan-

After forming the hat body in the machine behind him, the worker stripped the large but thin body from the cone. Burlap and covering cone which he removed after taking the just-formed body from a hot water bath are at the right.



Girl holds the loose fur and the finished hat, with sizes indicated for the various stages of back shop processing before the hat body is sent to a finishing shop. (Both photos from museum's Hubbard collection)

bury hat production during the latter decades of the 19th century — was the first to suffer a sharp drop in popularity. The soft hat retained favor as long as cars were built with the high profile common until the late 1920s. As car roofs lowered, the negative impact on hat sales grew apace.

Style changes, also induced by the shift to the automobile as the primary means of transportation, had a continuing effects. More comfortable and then informal wear gradually replaced the starched collars and other badges of an earlier respectability. Cloth hats and caps became popular, especially with the advent of man-made fibers and materials. Hatlessness came into vogue in many parts of the country, not just on college campuses.

None of this could be known to or dampen the optimism of those who enjoyed the boom in hat making in the first nine years of the 20th Century.

New, large plants constructed

Some manufacturers were more successful than others — Mallory grew and prospered during the early years of the 20th century, the last link to those who had started hat businesses early in the 19th century. Finishing, trimming and shipping operations, as well as offices, were moved into the tall concrete, steel and glass structure on Rose Hill Avenue that is now the home of Fairfield Processing Co.

Frank Lee in 1909 built his big sprawling plant along what was then called Power Street, later Leemac Avenue, and then expanded it considerably.

Harry McLachlan, after a partnership with Lee (providing the "mac" for Leemac Avenue) concentrated on producing hat bodies in the rough in an expanding plant on Rowan Street, near Balmforth Avenue. It continues today in a variety of industrial uses.

John W. Green & Sons, with another large plant on Pahquioque Avenue, also became a major producer of hat bodies in the rough, as did George A. McLahclan, brother of Harry Sr., who had plants at 427 Main St. and to the rear of 191 White St.

But much of the attention, inside and outside Danbury, went to the D. E. Loewe Company, which had reopened as an open shop, hiring both union and non-union hatters, after the 1893 strike/lockout.

Three types of hat shops were recognized in union terminology — fair, open and foul. A fair shop was one in which the union was recognized and had a contract. The owner could put the union label in his finished hats or send out bodies in the rough with a different (blue) label indicating it had been produced by union hatters.

An open shop, on the other hand, had no contract with the union and could not use the label. But union hatters were not barred from working in it.

A foul shop was one from which union members were barred by their union and sometimes by management as well. A shop which opened after a union dispute without settling with the union was usually labeled a foul shop.

Union calls strike against Loewe

In 1901 the United Hatters of North America was engaged in a campaign to force a number of open shops to recognize the union, sign a contract and gain the right to use the union label. In March of that year, union leaders served notice on Loewe they intended to organize his shop. But they did not follow through until July, 1902, being engaged in the meantime with a boycott against a New Jersey manufacturer who resisted unionization attempts.

The union called its members who worked for Loewe to a meeting and told them they were on strike to force Loewe to reach an agreement with the union. If he did not agree, the union said it would engage in both a primary and secondary boycott of Loewe-made hats.

The primary boycott was aimed at discouraging members of all unions from purchasing hats without the union label. The secondary boycott was aimed at wholesalers, in an attempt to force them to stop handling Loewe hats.

On Aug. 23, 1902, Loewe published a notice in the Danbury Evening News, informing all union members that if they supported the boycott, they would be held personally responsible.

Then Loewe went to the U. S. District Court for Connecticut, charging the union had violated the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, claiming he had suffered heavy financial losses and asking triple damages.

Thus began the famous Danbury Hatters Case, sometimes better known under its textbook name of Loewe vs. Lawler. Martin Lawler, the secretary of the national union, was a popular figure among hatters in Danbury and in Bethel, where he had first become involved in union affairs.

Suit posed two major questions

The suit raised two questions never before decided: Was the Sherman Act applicable to unions? Were individual members responsible for the actions of their union and its officers?

Management interests around the country rallied to Loewe's support through the American Anti-Boycott Association. Its president was C. H. Merritt, a Danbury hat manufacturer whose plant was on upper Main Street, where Interstate 84 now crosses overhead.

The American Federation of Labor gave full support to the United Hatters and its members.

Merritt's son, Walter Gordon Merritt, a lawyer, became active in the plaintiff's case along with Daniel Davenport, Loewe's chief counsel.

Loewe filed pre-trial attachments against the homes and bank accounts of 240 members of the Hatters Union in Danbury, Bethel and Norwalk. Only three of the 240 had worked for Loewe and had gone out on strike.

The union response was to pay its members the face value of their accounts and to take title to them for the duration of the litigation. But the cloud over the hatters' homes was to remain for the next 15 years.

Trial at the District Court level began on Labor Day, 1903, before Judge James Platt. He dismissed the case on the ground that the Su-

preme Court had not yet ruled that unions could be held liable under the Sherman Act.

Loewe appealed to the Second Circuit Court of Appeals in New York, which referred the case to the Supreme Court. It was not until February, 1908, that the Supreme Court handed down its ruling that an action could be maintained against the individual union members.

Back went the case to Judge Platt and a jury. Platt himself ruled that the Sherman Anti-Trust Act had been violated and left only the question of damages to the jury. The jury set damages at $232,240. That would be the equivalent of more than $1.6 million in today's dollars.

The union appealed and the Second Circuit reversed Platt, saying that it was up to the jury to decide if the Sherman Act had been violated. Loewe took the case to the Supreme Court a second time but it declined to hear it.

A new district court trial began in August, 1912. In October, the jury found for Loewe, increasing the treble damages to $252,130. The Circuit Court affirmed on appeal and on Jan. 5, 1915, the Supreme Court upheld Loewe.

The bitter dispute continued. Was Loewe or the union entitled to the interest that had built up on the attached bank accounts since 1903 when the union acquired title to them? In January, 1916, the trial court said the interest belonged to the union but the Circuit Court reversed the finding and the Supreme Court in 1917 upheld Loewe's claim.

Fate of hatters' homes in balance

Weeks of uncertainty followed over what would happen to the homes of the 240 hatters. The United Hatters was all but broke because of the heavy legal expenses. Some union activists favored letting Loewe execute the judgment against the homes of individual hatters, figuring that the sale of so many homes would seriously depress the real estate market in Danbury and Bethel and Loewe's return would be much less than the homes were worth. Others thought Loewe might be persuaded through negotiations to accept a settlement of approximately $80,000. He would not budge.

Pleas by the United Hatters to the American Federation of Labor for help were answered with the establishment of a hatters relief fund. Each union worker throughout the country was asked to donate to the fund the equivalent of an hour's pay on the birthday of Samuel Gompers, founder and first president of the AFL, or on another day of the worker's choosing.

On July 1, 1917, AFL leaders turned over to the United Hatters the sum of $215,000. By that date, Loewe had run legal advertisements for the auction sale of the hatters' home.

On July 14, 1917, Martin Lawlor came to Danbury to deliver to Loewe the final check for $175,000, $80,000 having been paid earlier. He handed it over with the comment, "Here's your blood money."

Neither the union or Loewe ever fully recovered from the struggle. Loewe declared bankruptcy in the mid-1920s. The union suffered a severe setback in 1917 when after a long strike several of the largest plants in town resumed operations as open shops.

The Danbury Hatters Case became an issue in the 1916 election against Charles Evans Hughes, who had left his post as associate justice of the Supreme Court to accept the Republican presidential nomination against President Woodrow Wilson. Tradition holds that Hughes went to bed election night convinced he had won, but awoke in the morning to learn that California had voted for Wilson,, giving him the electoral votes needed for reelection.

Congress had enacted in 1914 the Clayton amendments to the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, spelling out congressional intent to spare other unions and their members from the threats the Loewe decision posed. Later the Norris-LaGuardia Act and then New Deal legislation wiped out the remaining threats unions feared from the Loewe case.

Old names go, new ones arrive

Some old names in hatting disappeared durimg the 1920s and, as in the previous 140 years, some new ones appeared. In 1931, the city directory listed these firms, ranging from the giants like Lee and Mallory to small family operations:

Bieber-Goodman Corp., foot of Liberty St.
Byron Hat Corp., 13-17 Rowan St.
Cuff Hat Co., Taylor St.
Emerson Hat Co., 2 Tooley Lane.
Fine Rough Hat Co., 19 Delay St.
C. M. Horch & Sons, rear 18 McDermott St.
Hoyt-Messinger Corp., 18 Rose St.
Hugh W. Hunter, 20 Bridge St.
Ideal Hat Co., 54 Elm St.
Frank H. Lee Co., Leemac Avenue with branch at Chestnut St.
Lemme Hat Co., Taylor St.
Mallory Hat Co., Rose Hill Ave.
George T. Manion, Manion's Lane at lower South St.
Paul Martin Hat Co., 67 Grand St.
George McLachlan Hat Co., 427 Main St. and rear 190 White St.
H. McLachlan & Co., Inc., 1-13 Rowan St.
Meeker Bros. & Co., Meeker Place, off Crosby St.
Short-Gilleaudeau Co., Inc., 47 River St.
W.F. Trimpert Hat Co., rear of 45 River St.
United States Hat Co., Leemac Ave.
Herman Walther, Inc., 45-49 Austin St.
Wolthausen Rough Hat Co., 22 North St.

Byron was a subsidiary of H. McLachlan & Co., Emerson a subsidiary of Mallory and United States Hat a subsidiary of Lee.

Hat making was not the only feature of Danbury life to disappear as the Depression set in and as Danbury's economy began a series of changes that last until today. The 1931 directory listed 77 active farms in town, with dairies, produce farms and orchards predominating. And local auto dealers (most of them no longer in business) listed such cars as the DeSoto, Essex, Franklin, Graham, Hudson, Marmon, Nash, Paige, Reo, Whippet and Willys-Knight.

Getting rid of the 'hatters' shakes'

The 1920s had found rising concerns both in the industry and in public health circles about mercury poisoning that affected both fur workers and hatters, especially those who worked in the hot, steamy atmosphere of the back shop.

Mercury salts in solution were long used in fur processing to improve its felting quality. Because of its color, the solution took the name carrot and the process was called carroting.

Severe cases of mercury poisoning had long been known as "the hatters' shakes."

The terms "mad hatter" and "mad as a hatter" were believed by many in the trade to have originated from cases of mercury poisoning.

Public health officials who became involved in studies of the problem regarded mercury poisoning as probably the oldest industrial hazard. It existed in classical times and was mentioned by Hippocrates and Pliny. In 1700 Bernardo Ramazini, father of industrial medicine, described the "dismal calamities" inflicted on those who had "sucked in mercury smoake."

In addition to the tremors, workers affected by mercury-tinged vapors developed extreme irritability, digestive disturbances, insomnia, loss of appetite, loss of weight and sore mouths.

While management and labor fought over individual cases, there was general agreement among them and among federal and state public health interests that ways had to be found to replace the mercury carrot solution.

Workmen's compensation insurance carriers also became insistent that the problem be ended.

Frank H. Lee invited Dr. Constantin Fabian, a Russian emigre chemist, to his Danbury plant to work on the problem, setting up a laboratory for that purpose.

American Hatters and Furriers Co., which had a major fur processing plant on Beaver Street, sponsored its own research, eventually developing what was known as the Bealmac non-mercuric solution.

Dr. Fabian obtained a series of patents as he worked out increasingly improved non-mercuric carroting solutions. They were put into general use even before the patents were issued and the mercury problem began to decline as the 1930s progressed.

The U. S. Public Health Service, through the Division of Industrial Hygiene, National Institute of Health, conducted its first major study of mercury poisoning in 1934-35 at the request of the Hatters' Fur Cutters Association.

Then the Public Health Service joined the Bureau of Occupational Diseases, Connecticut State Department of Health, in a second investigation in 1937. Dr. Thomas Parran, the surgeon general, reported this study had the full support of the hat industry and the United Hatters, Cap and Millinery Workers International Union.

Both studies showed that elimination of mercury in the carroting compound was preferable to attempts to control exposures to the mercury hazard through improved engineering and ventilation.

The advances in the compounding and use of non-mercuric solutions was such that early in 1941 the Hat Institute, the umbrella organization of hat manufacturers, and the Hatters' Fur Cutters Association asked Parran to call a conference at which the U. S. Public Health Service and health departments of participating states could adopt rules and regulations prohibiting the use of mercury solutions in the carroting of hatters fur.

Industry and labor representatives took part in the conference in May with the public health officials from Connecticut, New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Massachusetts and adopted an agreement on model regulations which Parran said was "one of the most heartening victories of modern industrial hygiene."

The state of Connecticut took an additional step, adoping a law banning the use of mercury in addition to the health regulation.

The progress in overcoming this age-old problem was one of the few positive steps the industry could chalk up during the depression-ridden 1930s.

Short-lived Empress Eugenie boom

The first blows that the Great Depression struck at the hatting industry were softened for a year or so by the boom in the production of fur felt bonnets for the women's hat trade. Called the Empress Eugenie hat, it honored the wife of the 19th century French emperor, Louis Napoleon.

Milliners required thousands of dozens of the small, soft felt bodies to fill orders for the popular and comparatively inexpensive off-the-face hat.

Disputes over the bills of prices were intensified by the severe economic slump and led to several strikes during this period, usually against individual plants. Advent of the "Blue Eagle" and other federal legislation encouraged local and national union officials to attempt to organize open shops, sometimes with bitterness that lasted for years, and to a concerted effort to unionize the fur cutting trade, then an active part of the Danbury industrial scene.

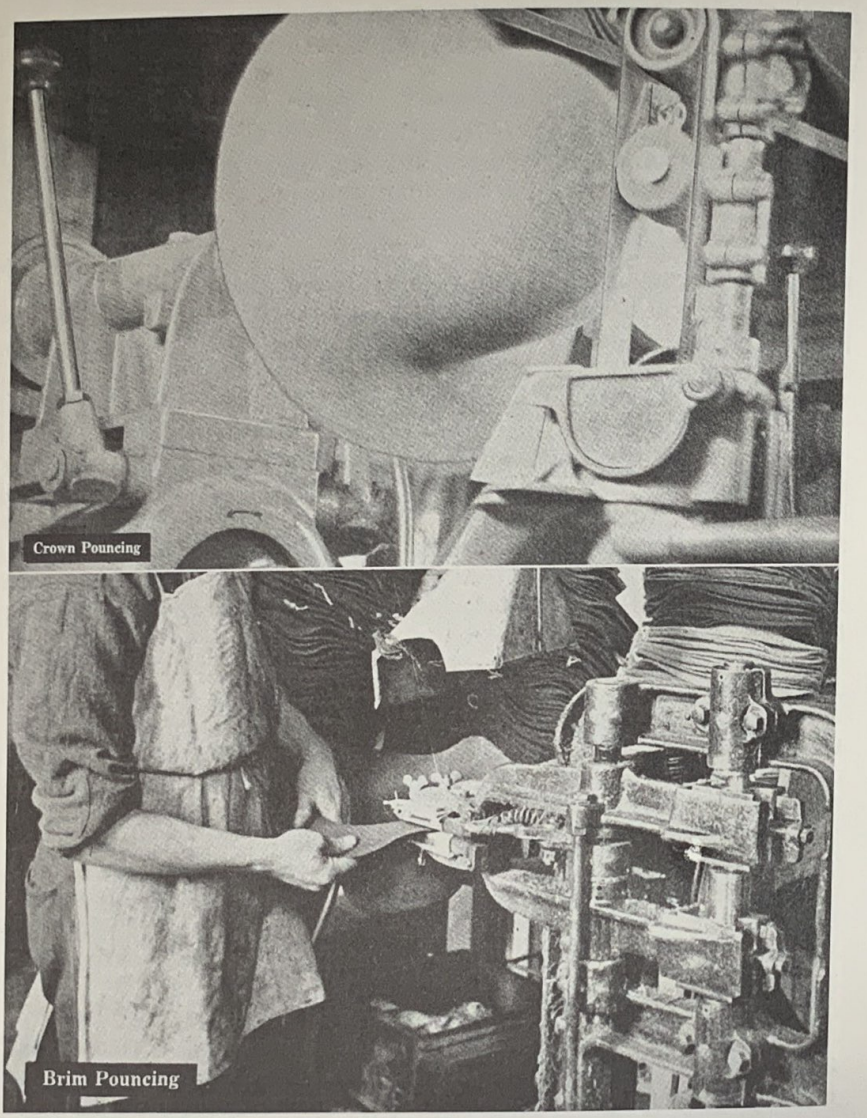
The strife continued into the 1940s but with few successes for the union until the shrinking of the hatwear industry generally made it imperative for the larger holdouts to be able to sell their hats or hat bodies with the union label.

Promoting industrial diversification

The trend to hatlessness among young men had set in before the Great Depression struck and was in full swing during the 1930s, in spite of industry sponsored campaigns against hatlessness. Up until World War II and even afterward, no commercial salesman would try selling to a Danbury industry or store unless he wore a hat.

Some of the hatting families foresaw the continuing decline in total hat production and invested in business activities unrelated to hatting. Others kept their concentration on hat making but became involved in family disputes that pitted brother against brother, nephew against uncle, etc.

There was a time when local manufacturers had a reputation for discouraging other industries from gaining a hold in town. But that was



Pouncing operations in the front shop here, as earlier in the back shop, removed loose hairs from the felt and improved its quality on the way to becoming a finished hat. (From the Hubbard collection)

not true of Frank H. Lee Sr., who became concerned that so many workers had left Danbury during World War I for such war production centers as Bridgeport and Waterbury. His concern was buttressed by the fact that Danbury's population of 23,502 in 1910 was to decline to 22,325 in 1920.

Lee called together other manufacturers and business leaders to discuss ways to diversify Danbury's industrial base. Harry McLachlan Sr. took a prominent role. The group decided to form the Danbury Industrial Corporation, to sponsor new industrial activity in town and to build plants for lease and eventual sale to new manufacturing concerns.

Lee opened space in his factory to some of the early firms, including Lansden Electric Truck Company and Danbury Electric Company. Factories for others were built on the west side of Leemac Avenue, across from the Lee plant, and on Shelter Rock Road. An instant food company and an insulator company were among early occupants. For various reasons, all but one failed to find success. At least one of them, instant food, was ahead of its time.

Knud Knudsen's Danbury Electric became better known under his own name and was the forerunner of today's Amphenol (Allied) operations.

There were a few successes in the 1930s but it was not until after World War II that major progress in industrial diversification was made as Danbury Industrial developed other plants in the South End industrial area.

As hat production declined, these and other efforts at promoting new industries took up much of the slack so that Danbury escaped the severity of dislocations and job losses that marked the departure of the textile industry from so many other Connecticut and New England communities.

Danbury was a textile town — felting after all is a textile operation — but the unpleasant aspects (crowded factory housing, class distinctions, strong ethnic prejudices, chronic unemployment and the like) found in some other New England towns were mostly absent here.

Not that it was easy during the Depression. Hatters laid off when plants closed or took extended shutdowns found a steady if smaller income with the Works Progress Administration (WPA), digging the ditches that drained the swamp off the south end of Main Street to create what is now Rogers Park, building stone walls around reservoirs and otherwise improving public assets.

Others left hatting for new trades, some of them apprenticing with contractors who successfully bid for Public Works Administration (PWA) projects such as the Beaver Brook School, the first brick unit of the South Street School and the city's two water filtration plants.

World War II affected hatting to a greater degree than had World War I. The Army no longer issued the wide-brimmed felt campaign hat of the earlier period. Cloth predominated in military headgear. Until the war, much of the fur had been imported as rabbit skins from Australia, a smaller amount from Europe. These supplies were cut off.

Post-World War II surge short lived

There were great hopes among some hatters that the return of peace in 1945 would result in a hatting boom. But the surge was short-lived. Young men returning from service looked upon hatlessness as another

expression of their freedom from military regulations and restrictions.

Hat industry leaders, individually and collectively, fought what was to be a losing battle against the trend of the times. Lee became the sponsor of the radio broadcasts by Drew Pearson, then the best known news columnist and commentator on the Washington scene, making the Lee and Disney lines competitive on the national scene with Mallory and Stetson.

The Mallory family by then had sold the Rose Hill Avenue plant to the John B. Stetson Company, long based in Philadelphia. A succession of Stetson managers directed local operations.

Competition from abroad became a factor, not only in hats but in processed hatters fur. The first successful attempt to invoke the escape clause under the post-war Geneva Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) came in 1949-50, covering processed hatters fur, followed by another in two years to shut off the flood of imported fur felt bonnets for the millinery trade.

The Hat Research Foundation was set up to work with the Hat Institute in improving production steps, making hats more stylish and combatting hatlessness.

The highlight of the promotional efforts occurred in 1953, when a big hat parade was staged in Danbury, designed to capture wide attention through that new medium, television.

The exposure the event received on New York television lasted a half minute or so. No one had the heart to repeat the parade effort the following year.

Small factories shut down just as industrial diversification was picking up in Danbury. Then the larger ones, including H. McLachlan & Co., John W. Green & Sons, and George McLachlan & Sons went out of business.

Stetson closed the Mallory front shop in 1957 and transferred all finishing and trimming operations to Philadelphia. Members of the Lee family became involved in disputes which went to court and resulted in the naming of an outside board of directors to operate the company in 1956. John P. Previdi, who had just completed two terms as mayor of Danbury, was named president.

Three trustees, including Previdi, acted for the directors and battled to keep Danbury's last complete hat shop operating under family ownership. But conditions in the industry deemed otherwise.

On July 14, 1960, Lee employees were notified the company had been purchased by the Stetson company. The Stetson president, David Harshaw, said Lee would continue to operate as a separate unit.

But that was not to be. In 1961, Stetson shut down the Lee back shop, leaving its Mallory back shop operating. In 1964, the Lee front shop, the last in Danbury to turn out a finished hat, was shut down. Early in July, 1965, Mallory closed for what was supposed to be a two-week vacation for the 125 hatters still employed there. On July 15, Stetson announced the cosing of the plant "becaue of the decline in the hat industry." The 148-year-old Mallory saga had come to a close.

One shop remained in Danbury to make hats. It was the small Danbury Rough Hat Company on Delay Street, and it had long been slated for removal to make way for the Midtown East redevelopment project.

But hatting was to make its return to Danbury via Danbury's daughter town, Bethel. The Bieber-Goodman Company had leased its factory at the foot of East Liberty Street in the 1950s to an electronics firm and ceased hat making there. One of the partners, William W. Goodman, continued production in Bethel, selling hat bodies to the Stevens Hat Company, in St. Joseph, Mo.

Danbury still the leading producer

Stevens, which was operated by Benjamin, Morris and Harry Rosenthal, purchased Bieber-Goodman Associates in the late 1950s and put George Rafferty, who had been superintendent of the Mallory front shop and later at the Lee company, in charge of the operation. The three-former shop continued selling hat bodies to other customers in addition to Stevens. In 1966 Stetson began placing orders with Bieber-Goodman for thousands of dozens of hats in the rough.

Then came a major development. Stetson decided to abandon all hat production in what had been a huge plant in Philadelphia and franchised the rights to its Stetson and other lines to the Rosenthals, who then set up a subsidiary corporation under the name of Stetson Hats, Inc.

As part of the deal, Stevens Hat Company acquired the Mallory back shop, with its 10 formers, transferred Bieber-Goodman operations there from Bethel and renamed the facility the Danbury Hat Company. After weeks of preparation, the Rose Hill avenue plant resumed production in February, 1968. Shortly thereafter, the last shop in Bethel, Barton Rough Hat Company, transferred operations to Tennessee and many of its employees quickly switched to working at the Danbury Hat plant.

The factory outlet store was reactivated, in line with the stores formerly operated at the Lee and Mallory plants. It has since been moved to the intersection of Beaver and West Street.

A boom in western style hats soon followed the reopening of the Rose Hill plant, with George Rafferty crediting it to the movie, "Urban Cowboy." Some of the Rose Hill operations had to be put on a two-shift basis. The western business has been a staple in production there since, although not at the "Urban Cowboy" pace.

The standard or dress hat has also kept Danbury's remaining hatters busy, although sales have declined from what they were a decade ago. "Indiana Jones" hats have fostered a new spurt in standard hat body production in the past year and a half.

The Danbury Hat-Stevens Hat combination was so successful that the John B. Stetson Corporation, which had diversified into several lines, decided in 1984 to purchase the Danbury and St. Joseph operations. Gary Rosenthal, a third-generation member of the Stevens Hat family, remains in charge as chief operating officer of the Stetson Hat division. George Rafferty, who remains as a consultant to the firm, has been succeeded as vice president and general manager of the Danbury plant by his son, Donald.

The firm is so confident of the future outlook that it began an extensive modernization of its plant in 1985. New automatic formers, that simplify

the operation and do away with the need for the burlap and the covering cone, are being installed. Several new multi-roller machines, representing improvements over the A and B machines, have already been installed.

Stetson Hat division is one of two major fur felt hat producing operations left in the United States. The other is Resistol in Longview, Tex. A much smaller shop is operating in Missouri. Production has ceased in New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and other states where hat bodies were formerly produced.

While no figures have been given publicly, it is the general understanding in the trade that the Danbury Hat on an annual basis produces hat bodies in excess of those produced elsewhere.

"The hat business has been good to me and good to the people I worked with in my time. It's still good for the people we have working for us," George Rafferty remarked in the summer of 1985.

In similar fashion, the hat business was good for Danbury for some 200 years, having made possible much of the basic progress the city has made.

Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the assistance of William E. Devlin, who made available research materials he had gathered in preparation for writing his book, *We Crown Them All* (1984, Woodland Hills, Calif., Windsor Publications, Inc.)

A particularly valuable source of material on hatting is the Ernest F. Hubbard collection in the hatting archives of the Danbury Scott-Fanton Museum and Historical Society. The late Ernest Hubbard was the last editor and publisher of Hat Life magazine. Prior to his death he arranged with the author to have his files transferred to the Scott-Fanton Museum. Included in his gift is an original print of the 1732 rescript of King George II barring export of hats from the colonies.

An announcement

This is the fifth and final booklet in a series sponsored by the history subcommittee of the Danbury Tricentennial Committee. While the Tricentennial celebration is near a close, the Tricentennial Committee has arranged that the work initiated by this subcommittee will be carried on.

Funds accrued from the sale of these booklets and other Tricentennial souvenirs will be devoted to the underwriting of what the committee expects to be its major gift to the people of Danbury, a detailed history of their 300-year-old community. Among the individuals cooperating in this project will be those who have written or have contributed materials for the booklet series.

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