There was a Girl who had a Curl ...

Do you remember when there were no beauty parlors in town and the girls curled their hair with those old curling irons that they heated by hanging the irons upside down inside the chimney of a kerosene lamp?

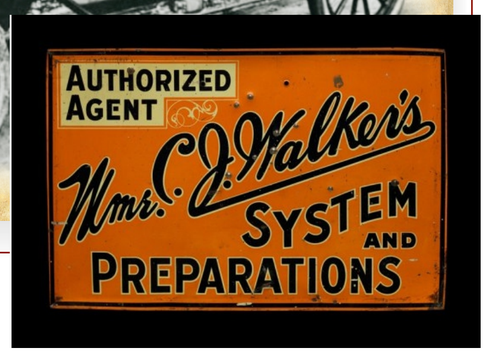
Claud Hanna Memories, Grove, Oklahoma

Prior to the 20th Century, beauty was something most women took care of on their own. Wealthy women had servants, but most women tended to their own hair. In the late 1800s, women began to enter the workforce in record numbers, working in factories alongside their male counterparts—although at less pay. Beauty emerged as one of the few skilled occupations that provided women an opportunity to become entrepreneurs.

By the early 1900s it had become fashionable for women to go to a Beauty Shop. When wearing makeup became acceptable, women clamored for the latest styles and fads. With the invention of the permanent wave machine, straight hair could be turned into luxurious curls or curly hair made straight. Fancy glass bottles held perfumes and colognes as well as the latest developments in the cosmetic market. Curling irons, hair combs and vanity sets were available to help with a woman's beauty regimen.

Martha Matilda Harper, an early example of entrepreneurial female beauticians, came from humble beginnings. She working as a servant from the age of 7. One of her employers, a physician, taught her about hair health. His teachings made Harper suspicious of chemicals used in hair products, leading her to develop her own hair tonic. She eventually saved enough of her earnings to open a salon, the Harper Method Shop, in 1888. She invented the first reclining shampoo chair, and was the first to develop the idea of clients visiting a hair salon. Prior to the Harper Method Shop, beauticians made house calls. Harper used photos of her own floor-length hair as her primary advertising method and was one of the forerunners of the modern franchise system. In their heyday, there were more than 500 Harper salons and multiple training schools. Harper pioneered the salon as we know it now.

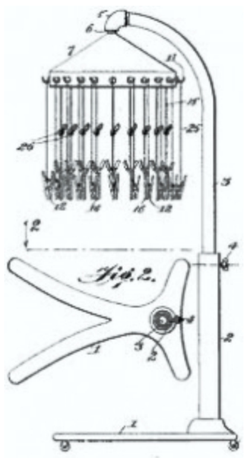
Sarah Breedlove Walker was another example of a successful self-made beautician. Born in 1867 to recently freed slaves, Walker worked for years as a washerwoman in St. Louis. At the 1904 World's Fair, Walker met Annie Turnbo Malone, a Black woman who sold her own shampoos and hair irons. Malone took Walker under her wing, hiring her as a commission agent. After gaining experience under Malone, Walker split off and began selling her own hair products. Walker (driver, below) adopted the brand name Mme. C. J. Walker and soon became one of the largest employers of Black women in the U.S. At that time, most professional hairstylists were Black women who served wealthy White clients.



Marjorie Joyner(below), a prominent Chicago-based beautician of the 1900s, was one of very few Black women who attended a White beauty school and went on to serve both Black and White clients. Despite the role she would play in the development of 20th Century Black beauty culture, Joyner's initial training had only taught her how to cut and style White women's hair. After a disastrous attempt to apply her beauty school techniques on her mother-in-law's hair, Joyner paid $17.50 to enroll in Madam C. J. Walker's beauty school in Chicago, where she learned how to style Black women's hair.

A dilemma existed for Black women in the 1920s. In order to straighten tightly-curled hair, they could do so only by using a stove-heated curling iron. This was very time-consuming and frustrating as only one iron could be used at a time. In 1926, Joyner set out to make this process faster, easier and more efficient. She imagined that if a number of curling irons could be arranged above a women's head, they could work at the same time to straighten her hair all at once. According to the Smithsonian Institute, Joyner recalled,

> *It all came to me in the kitchen when I was making a pot roast one day, looking at these long, thin rods that held the pot roast together and heated it up from the inside. I figured you could use them like hair rollers, then heat them up to cook a permanent curl into the hair.*"



Joyner developed her concept by connecting 16 rods to a single electric cord inside of a standard drying hood. A women would wear the hood for the prescribed period of time and her hair would be straightened or curled. Joyner patented her "Permanent Waving Machine" in 1928 (below), becoming the first Black woman to receive a patent. Her device performed even better than anticipated as the curl that it added would often stay in place for several days instead of a one-day curl from standard curling irons.

The device was popular in White salons, allowing patrons to enjoy the beauty of their "permanent curl" or "perm" for days. Marjorie went on to patent a scalp protector to make the experience more pleasant.

Black beauticians played a central role in the **Civil Rights Movement.** Salons became "centers of communication and influence" in the struggle for justice in the South. Beauticians were trained in civil disobedience and voter registration. With a source of income that came largely from the Black community itself, Black beauticians were financially independent. Black beauty parlors were black-controlled spaces free from the surveillance. Finally, it was the profits from these shops that paid the rental on the buses that sent marchers to Washington, D.C., printed T-shirts and protest signs, supported movement leaders who lost their jobs and homes, and bailed protesters out of jail.

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