



STETSON

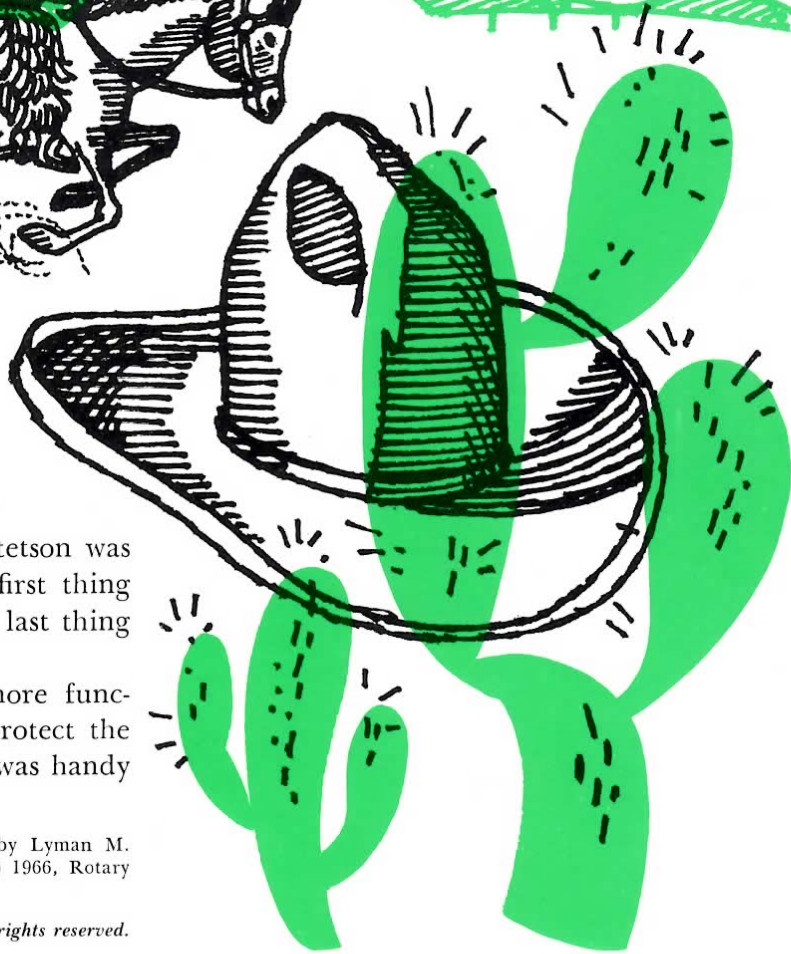
by Lyman M. Nash

For the working cowhand a Stetson was the trademark of his calling, the first thing he put on in the morning and the last thing he took off at night.

Few articles of attire were more functional. Not only did the Stetson protect the cowboy from the elements, but it was handy

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in directing broncs and corralling spooky cattle. A wave of the big hat would usually be enough to drive a stray back into the herd, saving the cowboy a hard ride. While he was aboard a bucking bronco, the big hat held in one hand gave him an extra measure of balance, much like the tightrope walker's pole.

He could use it to fan a campfire, beat out a grassfire, carry water, pillow his head at night, or stuff a broken window. He could do just about anything with his Stetson except wear it out. Whether it was used as pail, pillow, or plug, all it needed was a little re-shaping and brushing and it was ready to be worn again.

The West might never have known this useful headpiece had it not been for John Batterson Stetson—the man who made and gave his name to the world's most famous hat.

Stetson was born in New Jersey in 1830. His father had a hat factory, and as soon as John was old enough he went to work there. He never went to school, but learned to read and write after working hours.

After his father's death John carried on the business. He bought the materials, made the felt, fashioned the hats, and went out to peddle them to hat stores.

Then one day he went to a doctor's office for a checkup. Never a particularly healthy man, he was losing weight and growing steadily weaker. The doctor listened to his chest and quickly diagnosed tuberculosis. He advised Stetson to head west if he hoped to prolong his life.

Stetson struck out for Illinois and then moved to Missouri, where he tried brick-

making for a while, until a Mississippi flood swept away his brickyard. In the summer of 1863 he and twelve companions set out on foot for the Colorado gold fields.

One cloudy afternoon they were making camp beneath a threatening sky. "Too bad there isn't some way of making cloth without having to weave it," grumbled one of his companions. "We could make ourselves a tent."

"There is a way," said Stetson. He decided to give a demonstration of felting, the art he'd been practicing since the age of seven. Sharpening his knife on a rock, he shaved the fur from several rabbit skins and piled it in front of him. Then he made a bow out of a hickory sapling and a leather thong. He began agitating the fur with the bow, keeping it in the air and clearing away the long hairs and dirt as they drifted to the ground. At last he let the fur settle, then sprayed it with water. In a few minutes he had a sheet of fur that could be lifted. He dipped this sheet in boiling water and deftly manipulated it until it shrank into a fair-sized piece of felt.

His astonished companions were so impressed by the demonstration that they immediately went on a felting binge. Under his guidance they began turning out masses of felt, making it into shirts or trousers as the need arose.

For his own amusement Stetson made himself a hat—a hat such as had never been seen before, east or west of the Mississippi. It was a sensible hat—high of crown and broad of brim, keeping the sun out of his eyes and the rain off his neck. But many

Westerners of that era considered any hat other than a coonskin as dude gear, fit only for womenfolk. Despite the hat's obvious advantages, Stetson's companions nearly broke up laughing. But Stetson paid no attention, considering it a definite improvement over the coonskin, which might be warm enough in winter, but was apt to be flea-ravaged in summer and carried off by dogs in any season. At least one other person agreed with him, for when they reached Colorado he sold the hat for a five-dollar gold piece—a handsome sum in those days—and his companions' laughter changed to amazement.

Stetson didn't realize it then, but he had stumbled onto a fortune—a far greater fortune than he was to find in the Colorado mountains. The hike to the West and the clear mountain air cured his tuberculosis, but did precious little toward filling his pockets. He returned East—to Philadelphia—and began making hats in the popular styles of the day. Unfortunately, a lot of other hat-

makers were doing the same thing, and prices were at rock bottom. Then finally he remembered the big hat he had once made. If that man in Colorado had bought it so eagerly, wouldn't other Westerners take a liking to it?

He got the name and address of every hat dealer in the Southwest and began sending out samples of "The Boss of the Plains," as he called it. In no time orders began coming in so rapidly that he had to expand his one-room shop and hire help. The Stetson, as his hat was soon being called, achieved enormous popularity. It became the official hat of the Texas Rangers and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and ten thousand were ordered for the South African police force. But primarily it became the insignia of the American cowboy. The lowest-paid cowpoke would hoard his money for months so that he could own a genuine Stetson. The big hat took its place beside the six-shooter and the saddle as a symbol of the vast western half of the United States.

CHECK YOUR READING

- 1. The Stetson hat was outstanding for its**
 - A variety of uses
 - B lasting quality
 - C Both A and B
- 2. John started work in a hat factory**
 - A when he was a child
 - B as soon as he finished school
 - C after his father's death
- 3. John's main reason for going West was to**
 - A learn a new trade
 - B improve his health
 - C complete his education
- 4. In his felting demonstration Stetson used**
 - A sheep's wool
 - B rabbit fur
 - C bear skins
- 5. His companions regarded his hat with**
 - A admiration
 - B annoyance
 - C amusement
- 6. Stetson regarded the coonskin cap unfavorably because it**
 - A looked dudelike
 - B carried fleas
 - C lacked warmth
- 7. In Colorado, Stetson's hat was**
 - A stolen by a dog
 - B lost in a flood
 - C bought by a man
- 8. Stetson's stay in Colorado proved disappointing from the viewpoint of his**
 - A health
 - B finances
 - C Both A and B
- 9. "The Boss of the Plains" was a name given to**
 - A John Stetson
 - B the Stetson hat
 - C Stetson's shop
- 10. Dealers reacted to Stetson's sample hat with**
 - A enthusiasm
 - B outrage
 - C skepticism

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