

Birth of a Hat (ca. 1920)

PRODUCTION COMPANY: John B. Stetson Company. RUNNING TIME: 16 minutes.

Birth of a Hat is an industrial short about, and sponsored by, the John B. Stetson Company. Founded by John Stetson in 1865, the company specializes in the mass manufacture of felt hats. Within ten years of its founding, Stetson developed the widely popular “Boss of the Plains” hat, the inaugural model of the now-traditional cowboy hat.¹ By the early 1900s, Stetson hats were the most popular in the American Southwest, and the company operated the largest hat factory in the world, with 5,400 employees, in Philadelphia.² Wearing a Stetson was a sign of prosperity and success for ranchers, as individual hats made with premium beaver fur could sell for upwards of \$20, about \$450 in today’s currency.³ In line with the practice of many other prominent manufacturing companies at the time, Stetson invested in a significant promotional exercise: the industrial film.

The first three minutes of *Birth of a Hat* are devoted to a rather perfunctory history of hat making. This demonstrates the film’s dual function of education and promotion, though it also confirms that education was a distant concern in comparison with Stetson’s hope of promoting its product and its image. The remaining fourteen minutes of the film provide an overview of the mechanized process of creating a felt hat from scratch from the pelts of rabbit, nutria, and beaver.

The film focuses on the industrial processes of producing a felt Stetson hat, and especially on the relationship between the employee, the machine, and the science behind the

1. Stetson Hats, “The History of Stetson Hats,” Stetson Cowboy Hats, www.stetsonhat.com/history.php (accessed February 10, 2012).

2. Stetson, “History,” Stetson—Made of America, www.stetson.com/history?view=history# (accessed February 10, 2012).

3. William Reynolds and Ritch Rand, *The Cowboy Hat Book* (Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith, 1995), 13.

process. Most shots demonstrate the machinery and chemical processes that make possible felting en masse—chemicals to soften the fur, large dryers to fluff the fur, a rotating copper cone in a heated chamber to attract the fur to the shape and cause it to interlock with itself; in all, the film describes more than twenty-five of the steps necessary to make a felt hat, doubtless leaving much out in an attempt to fit the entire process into a seventeen-minute film.

An important theme in industrial process films is the relationship between the employee and the factory's machines. *Birth of a Hat*, for the most part, focuses on images of individual employees working in tandem with their assigned machine, demonstrating their increased productivity and specialized abilities. Employees are seen acting much in the same manner as machines, repeating tasks endlessly but perfectly, efficiently and without mistake. *Birth of a Hat* is not only an educational film on the making of Stetson hats, then, but also a promotional film on the competency, increased productivity, and success of the company and its employees.

The intertitles in *Birth of a Hat* are notable for their unusual construct: a serif typeface with a double-line, corner-decorated border. In addition, a more decorated frame border is employed every three to four minutes, working the name "Stetson" into the bottom of the intertitle and the company's coat of arms (crested with a hat, held at either side by a beaver and an eagle, and supported by the ribboned phrase "American Manufacture") at the top.⁴ The opening title card reads

BIRTH OF A HAT
The Art and Mystery of making Fur Felt Hats.
Courtesy of
John B. Stetson Company

4. This is a common method of continually placing the sponsoring company's name in front of the audience. In Ford Motor Company's *De-Light: Making an Electric Light Bulb*, the phrase "Ford Motor Co." was added to the bottom of an intertitle every few minutes. *De-Light* was part of the Ford Education Series, originally distributed by Goldwyn. *De-Light: Making an Electric Light Bulb*; silent film; 35 mm.; in *More Treasures from American Film Archives, 1894–1931*, prog. 1 (Ford Motor Company, 1920; National Film Preservation Foundation, 2004), DVD.

Because no other production information survives on this film stock, it cannot be known for certain whom the Stetson Company hired to produce the picture. The end title, however, may provide a hint: The words “The End” are scripted over a painting of a lake surrounded by mountains, trees, and rocks, all under a heavily clouded sky. A similar picture, of remarkably similar style and construction, appears as the background of the opening and end title cards of the 1927 silent industrial film *The Saga of the White Pine Board*. For this film, there is production information: The Crane Lumber Company of Thessalon, Ontario, hired Edgar J. Fulcher and Kenneth R. Eddy as its photographers.⁵ Information on these individuals in connection with the motion picture industry, however, is unavailable; it also is not known if these background slides were the private property of Fulcher and Eddy or common stock available to non-theatrical filmmakers.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the distribution of non-theatricals, including industrials such as *Birth of a Hat*, was increasingly handled by outside companies. Institutions such as the Bureau of Commercial Economics (loosely, though not officially, associated with the United States government) facilitated the touring of non-feature films along circuits in the United States and internationally. The BCE, for example, was responsible for sending a large number of films to nations in South America, the British Empire, and the Commonwealth of Australia.⁶ Because *Birth of a Hat* provides no production information beyond the name of the sponsoring company—the Stetson Company—and because so few records regarding the distribution of non-theatrical silent film remain, it is not known which company facilitated *Birth of a Hat*'s travel to New Zealand, where its recovery was recently facilitated by the National Film Preservation

5. *The Saga of the White Pine Board*; silent film; 35 mm. (Crane Lumber Company, c. 1920; Global Image Works, www.globalimageworks.com/clip-the-saga-of-a-white-pine-board-stock-footage [accessed February 12, 2012]), online film.

6. Sean Savage, “The Eye Beholds: Silent Era Industrial Film and the Bureau of Commercial Economics” (master’s thesis, Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, 2006), 66.

Foundation. It is likely, however, that it traveled there through the aid of a company such as the BCE.

— Jessica Getman

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