

Adams' Sisters Hat

In the early 1900s, most Johnson County women did not leave their homes without a hat upon their head. And in the spring, ladies would be making plans to attend spring “millinery openings” at local millineries or hat shops and department stores in order to check out the latest in spring and summer hats. “We cordially invite everybody to our millinery opening,” reads an ad for Iowa City’s H.A. Strub and Co.’s millinery department in the March 19, 1903 Iowa City Daily Press. “We this season have an unusually pretty line of trimmed pattern hats.” Spring openings were popular events as women were often eager to replace their heavy winter hats like the one pictured here with the latest spring styles. As winter drew to a close, winter models were often showing the effects of wind and winter weather.

This winter hat was probably worn around 1915. Up until this time, fashionable hats were large somewhat cumbersome things perched on top of extravagant hair styles and held in place by many hat pins. The hats were highly decorated often with feathers (ostrich was very popular) and the wings of colorful birds like cedar waxwings and flickers. Even whole stuffed birds were often placed atop women’s hats. By 1915, hats had become smaller and fit more tightly over the head. The use of plumes and birds as decoration was also going out of style partially due to increased bird preservation laws advocated by groups like the National Audubon Society. These laws were enacted in part as a response to dwindling numbers of some birds that were in demand for hats. This hat is ornamented with one black and two white ostrich plumes. While the black feather looks to be stitched at its original location, the white feathers are held on by a safety pin so may not be where the hat trimmer originally placed them. Stitches and loose thread at the back suggests that the curved plumes may have originally come over the top of the hat.

The label on the inside lining, shows that this velvet hat was purchased from the Adams Sisters Millinery Parlor which was located at 126 Washington Street in Iowa City. Matilda and Lillian Adams opened their shop in 1901 at a time when professional opportunities for women were limited. Becoming a skilled milliner was not only a socially acceptable trade for women but owning a millinery shop was an acceptable business for women entrepreneurs and shops were important businesses in even small communities. Many shop owners like the Adamses were single and most worked for many years as milliners or dressmakers before going into business for themselves. The Adams Sisters were both around 40 when they started their store.

By the early 1900s, some millinery shops sold more ready-to-wear hats than those made in-house but not the Adams Sisters. “All our hats are made in our own workrooms, by our own skilled trimmers,” reads an advertisement in the Nov. 1, 1911 Iowa City Daily Press. Newspaper ads also show that like other millinery shops, the Adams Sisters in addition sold hair goods and plumes, flowers, and other individual adornments for women who wanted to spruce up an older hat or design and make their own. The Adams Sisters operated their shop in the same location until they sold it in 1922 to Josephine McNally, one of their employed milliners ready to venture out on her own.

Do remember your first or a special hat? Do you remember the Adams Sisters?