

The Stetson Hat

by Donna (Martin) Heid © 2003



NOTE: The Stetson hat is not just a cowboy-style hat, as some might believe. The Stetson brand stood for the highest quality, regardless of style. In the days of our fathers, when a man wore a suit, he usually wore a dress hat. If he had sufficient pride and money, the man was likely to prefer a Stetson-brand hat. The following recollections, from the late 1930s and early 1940s, were written by Donna (Martin) Heid about her dad "Bud," his Martin's Mercantile store in Dalton, his brothers and others, and their Stetson hats.

Where are the well-dressed men of long ago? In years past, wearing your Stetson set you apart as a man of distinction. Local farmers and businessmen had to have a new hat when family money allowed such a purchase. The following thoughts were small incidents I observed as a child in Dalton, Nebraska, but I was left with indelible memories.

Uncle Raymond Graff and Uncle Pete Worth, and the Martin boys prized their hats. Not just any hat would do. It had to be a Stetson, the name brand in men's hats. The men would come in Martin's Mercantile and Daddy proceeded to show them the fabric samples. The quality and texture of felt selected was of prime importance. Next was color, for it must be just right with the overcoat. The accompanying gross-grain ribbon for the headband needed to be complementary. All of these decisions required much discussion and exchange of ideas.

The final step in ordering the hat was the need for precise measurements. Daddy had an adjustable wooden ring to measure the size of the fit on the head which he checked and rechecked to insure a proper fit. The order went off to New York, and some six weeks later the precious article arrived in an outer and inner box. The storage box was gray and maroon. The Martin boys continued to order from Daddy even after moving away. I'd love to know what the cost of a hat was between 1940 and 1950.

Upon receiving the hat, it was examined and handled with reverence and respect. I recall the careful placement of fingers running along the top crease mold. Each purchaser inspected his selection with much attention to detail. After each wearing, care was taken to brush the hat with a special hat brush. Then, and only then, could it be placed back in the box to reside on the safe, top shelf of the closet.

There was such pride in owning and wearing your Stetson. An ultimate complement of courtesy was the gentleman tipping his hat to women. This gesture appeared quite significant. You could bring your hat to Daddy, and he would reblock it to achieve the perfect restored shape. This was done on an oak wooden head form Daddy kept in the safe. The well-dressed Dalton men valued their Stetsons right along with their wives, crops, and combines.

These reflections are so vivid in my mind, I review them from an almost ceremonial perspective. I watched the exchange of conversation, winking (a Martin trait), and laughter with wonder. The thoughts about the Stetsons remain a stunning memory of brotherly love among these gentlemen, a warm memory of our fathers



The Martin boys, proudly dressed with their Stetson hats, in front of the Martin house in Dalton, Nebraska, March 1942. They were together because of the death of their mother Mary Martin. (L-R): Kink, Dude, Bud, Chet, Clarence, Cliff, Glenwood.