

10-15-96

Hats

Last Sunday as part of my usher's duties at church, I was the note-taker for Hill Brown, our rector. I always enjoy being with Hill as he greets parishioners and visitors with his personal, Hill - sort of greeting, unhurried and unique to the individual. Yesterday, he admired the print fabric of one woman's dress; the print was an interesting array of ornamental head coverings scattered among random plumes: I noticed cavaliers' dashing hats, Scottish tam o'shanter, and visored helmets of mail, among several others. He mentioned the ceremonial connotations of those hats. Before he greeted the next person in line, he turned to me and suggested that I write a story about hats, because he saw it as a subject rich in all sorts of possibilities. I had a brief image of hats in my own experience, not at all what he had in mind, I imagine.

I remembered first a number of pictures of me as an infant and then as a toddler, always wearing a fussy, frilly bonnet, usually trimmed lavishly in small ostrich plumes, because until I was almost three years old I had very little hair. Mother's story, often repeated, was that she did not like for people to refer to me as a "fine little fellow." In order to assure that everyone recognized me as a girl, she always dressed me in unmistakably feminine hats. As she repeated her story, she usually included the fact that she spent far too much on my bonnets and always had me wear them when I was out of the house. (There may be some irony here in that I've just discovered that my current driver's permit has me identified as male. Even without a bonnet, my picture clearly is that of a woman, but I still have to go to the Division of Motor Vehicles to have another license made to correct that error.)



There is probably no connection between my early hats and my adult dislike of wearing hats. The fact is, I never felt comfortable in a hat, although I recall with fondness several hats I owned. I have a photograph of me wearing the first dress I ever bought alone. I had on a brown felt cloche, pulled jauntily toward the right and completely covering my hair.



A few years later, when I was very much aware of current fashions, I had a small black felt Empress Eugenie hat, a tricorn with a small glossy black feather pointing forward. I liked that hat, although I admired it more on the shelf of my closet than on my head. Later, I had a stylish pillbox hat, covered with small crimson feathers. It sat so lightly on the back of my head and was so bright and cheerful that I wore it happily for more than one season. I admired but never wore the kind of horsehair, pastel garden-party hats with wide swooping brims that were graceful and attractive; in fact, I avoided all brimmed hats when I could. I was sure that all of them would be a menace to keep on my head in the strong Texas spring winds. I did reluctantly conform to the dictates of fashion, wearing a hat (and gloves) to church, to parties, and to shop, even grocery shopping. Paul remembers one day when he suddenly came in from Trinidad, Texas, where he was working, and asked me to have lunch with him. He says I wore a white turban-like hat which I don't remember but which he thought was a knockout.

I was jubilant when fashion no longer required a woman to wear a hat (or gloves) for most ventures outside the home. The current fashion of the return of the hat for women does not tempt me, although I must admit that many of the broad-brimmed hats I see now are very dashing and becoming to most women. I tried on one and did not find it at all my hat. I think I'm just not the "hat" type. I've been amused at Paul's reaction to the new hats he sees in church. When he serves as chalice bearer, he finds it difficult to find the face of a woman wearing one of the new hats. Where does he offer the chalice to a woman kneeling and wearing a broad-brimmed hat?

Today I will wear a crocheted or knitting hat in heavy snow. The last hat I bought was in Jamaica when the tropical sun proved too much for my nose. I found a straw, brimmed hat that was supposed to fold easily for packing. I wore it tilting perilously over my forehead while we walked about the sun-baked streets of Ocho Rios. It was barely utilitarian and made only a negative fashion statement; alas, it did fold into unredeemable creases when I packed it.

Part 2

Perhaps because of my own avoidance of hats, I have paid attention to the fact that, in recent years, more men have worn hats than women have. In addition to the plain fedora, with its decorative ribbon marking the end of the crown and the beginning of the brim, there are various fashion statements in the width of the brim, its snap in the front and upward slope in the back, as well as the stylish indentations in the crown. I remember with fondness the fact that I was once fascinated with the careful way my Dad went about shaping a new hat to the precise shape that pleased him. The three indentations, on either side and on the top, came together in a blunt point that provided a handle for doffing his hat with his thumb and first two fingers and was the first place on the hat to wear out. When I was a little girl, I always looked forward to the times when he came home with a new hat so that I could watch it take on the shape that was particularly his, and I helped whenever he would let me. His hats were always light gray, trimmed with a narrow matching ribbon secured with a ribbon-covered button, making them a sort of modified Stetson. He sometimes referred to his hats as "two-gallon" instead of the standard "ten-gallon" western variety, beloved by cowboys. As a young man on the farm, he may very well have worn cowboy hats for his farm work involved a good many activities we associate today with cowboys.

I also recall his cream-colored panama straw hats in the summer time; they were essentially duplicates in shape of his felt hats. Occasionally, he would wear a stiff straw boater of the kind we associate today with the dancing of Gene Kelly or other vaudeville-type performers. He never managed to look quite comfortable in those boaters. But whatever hat, whether felt or straw, his hat was his constant companion whenever he was outside the house. I used to admire him and other men when they took off their hats in elevators even though the doffed hats seemed to me to take up too much room when the elevators were crowded. (Men may have continued to wear their hats in an elevator on which no woman appeared, but I never had a chance to observe that custom!) Daddy always doffed his hat when he greeted a woman outside the house. And like all other men who were at all conscious of the social graces, he never wore his hat inside the house or in any other building, even though movies were beginning to show shots of men wearing their big cowboy hats or billed caps in diners and saloons. I can imagine how disgusted he would be today to see boys and mature men keeping their hats on inside classrooms, restaurants, and even their homes.

The habit of a man continuing to wear a hat, no matter where he is, is of relatively recent origin. Looking back, I can remember that, in the past, students always removed their head-covering in the classroom until gradually the custom waned over the last fifteen

years so that today most of them keep their hats firmly attached to their heads in the classroom and most other buildings. I don't, however, believe I have seen any in church. Who knows?

Interestingly enough, all the hats appearing on that dress print last Sunday were men's hats: Napoleon tricorns, the plumed cavalier hats, and the visored helmets of mail. When I speculate on what kinds of hats might appear on a dress print a hundred years or so from now, I can only envision men's hats again. The rapidly changing styles of women's hats probably keep us from thinking of stereotypes of women's hats. Despite the democratization of our society, especially in dress, it is possible to observe distinctions in who wears what kind of hat. Think of the occupation-defining images of a football or space helmet, a Green Beret (or later blue beret of the UN peacekeeping forces), a sailor's hat, or a highway trooper's stiff-brimmed Stetson. What kind of hats will be on the print-covered dress for the Hill Brown of the end of the twenty-first century to see as a possible story topic?