

The Easter Parade in Early Iowa

As told to Mabel Morris by
MISS EDITH JACK

The milliner in early Iowa played an important and interesting role in the lives of Iowa women. Milliners then did not have a six-hour day; often in the busy seasons their work began at six a.m., extending until nine or ten o'clock at night. Fashioning those elaborate buckram frames with velvet, and the wire frames with silk or lace; then decorating them with flower and vegetable gardens in order to please a customer's husband or sweetheart, was a painstaking, conscientious job. The "coffee breaks," so familiar to us in 1955, were unknown. Often, however, a fatigued artisan would temporarily relax in a hammock which swung from iron posts in the corner of the workroom until time for the next showing.

Regardless of the education of the men who usually accompanied the women on shopping excursions, these helpers had one thing in common. They wanted their women to look well. There is the story of a young Iowan from a remote community who had never seen an ostrich feather, but he had heard of one.

"Give us one of those new oyster feathers," he said proudly. "We're newlyweds."

In the early 1900's the dark red half-velvet, half-pure silk "cabbage rose" was the season's "Must." Often placed on an Italian Milan straw and set at an angle where it drooped over one eye, the effect was quite coquettish. Many a husband chose this style for his wife's annual buy. Although husbands expressed themselves differently, the idea was always the same.

"Get something that makes you look like you did when I married you."

DISPOSAL PLACE FOR CREPE

The "mourning hat" was considered very important in the lines of some early Iowa women. It was made

with straight brim, high crown and draped black crepe, the long three folds touching the edge of the dress, which reached the floor. Often this "mourning hat" carried thirty-one yards of crepe.

Sometimes, even before the death occurred, the wife would call at the milliner's for materials to be ordered and ask that the work be begun. In case the person did not pass on, but lingered a year or two, the milliner was often directed to change the style, add new crepe or make an entirely new outfit.

Occasionally a "mourning hat" which had been returned for this reason was kept in the shop for lending purposes. If the woman was a steady, dependable one-hat-a-season customer, and the death occurred after she had bought her Easter hat, then the milliner would provide this mourning head costume from the stock. These hats were provided with bandeaux, which could be adjusted to various head sizes, or they could be changed or raised by adding velvet pads.

One of the hardest customers to serve was a woman with the nursing baby. Attention to the child detracted from attention needed for complete receptability of the artistic effect, and the undraped upper figure seemed not quite right under the elaborate "Merry Widow" brim of the 1908's worn by chorus girls in the play for which it was named.

LIMITED INCOME NO DETERANCE

Millinery business was usually good, but there was a depression in 1892, which caused real clutching of purse strings at Easter. But the maids of all work, whose salary was two dollars a week with board, could be depended upon for their usual five-dollar Easter purchase. Smart colors were often pointed toward association with fashionable women of diplomats. For instance, there was the popular "Alice Blue" named for Alice Roosevelt during "Teddy" Roosevelt's presidency.

Juvenile delinquency was not unknown in early Iowa. There was the story of the young lady who bought a bargain counter "Charlotte Corday" hat after Easter, in

order to drop it in the mud and tell an awe-struck group of school girls she had upset the family car. As a member of her family had been arrested for going ten miles per hour in this vehicle, she thought the story of an accident and a hat ruined in Iowa mud would be plausible.

Sometimes a milliner served as a psychiatrist. Divorces were rare in early Iowa, but occasionally a woman victim of this change in marital state would burst into tears as she saw herself in the mirror and tried to buy without the comforting assistance of the person who had always made her decisions. The helpful milliner would make an extra effort to find becoming colors, ribbons and bows to assist her in her next search for marriage.

"The way to a man's heart," the milliner would sing as she stitched away, arranging clusters of apples, grapes and cherries in great pyramids. These arrangements never failed to bring the desired result.

Sometimes an incoming revivalist minister in smaller towns would thunder disapproval of milliners and millinery, calling them "works of the devil." But usually he did not keep his parish long.

Occasionally, Iowa husbands breathed sighs of relief as they left the millinery "place" with hat sacks in hand and empty wallets. Said one exhausted male long ago, "I wonder if the Lord as He looks down tomorrow will know whether a woman has two folds on her Easter bonnet or one." But the Iowa wives, daughters and sweethearts were confident that He would know.

A Cherished Affliction

The sorrow for the dead is the only sorrow from which we refuse to be divorced. Every other wound we seek to heal, every other affliction to forget; but this we consider a duty to keep open; this affliction we cherish and brood over in solitude.—WASHINGTON IRVING.

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