Chapter Three

MILLINERY MATERIALS

There are three general classifications of millinery materials: (1) felts, (2) straws, and (3) miscellaneous hat materials. Each of these classifications requires a different working technique; and as you proceed with your millinery lessons, you will learn to apply the correct method to your particular hat. The procedure will hold true whether you are working with new or old materials. “To successfully remake a dress you must first know how to make a new one.” This truism applies also to millinery.

FELTS

Probably more hats have been made of felt than of any other material. Ever since the first English beaver was “invented,” women — and men, too — have been wearing felt hats. (To be technical, the first felts were worn exclusively by men!) A felt requires no frame; it can be styled over a block; it can be made in different colors, weights, and finishes; it will shrink as well as give in blocking.

Three kinds of felt are available. They are made from three different basic materials: fur—usually rabbit—wool fibres, and cotton fibres.

In addition to these three different types, there are combined mixtures.

“Felting” processes are the guarded secrets of their manufacturers; however, all the felts contain a filler or sizing along with their basic ingredients. When steam and great pressure are brought to bear on this mixture, the result is a felted material, or “felt.”

Fur Felt: Fur felts are the best and most adaptable felts. They are also the most expensive. They lend themselves to hand blocking and draping, and almost any
kind of styling. They may be worn the year around, and if they lose their shape, may be reblocked. If too soft, add sizing (on the underside to stiffen when reblocking or remaking).

**Wool Felt:** Popular priced hats are made out of wool felt. Most of them are machine blocked. In fact, it is almost impossible to block them by hand, except on very simple blocks. Usually they are not worth remaking if blocking is involved. Wool felt is subject to shrinkage; it is not as soft or pliable as the fur felt. It feels rather harsh to the fingertips. Use is limited, but it is the basis of millinery mass production.

**Cotton Felt:** This material is the cheapest of all the felts and does not greatly concern the milliner. It cannot be hand blocked, but hats — such as “party-favor” hats—may be made from it. School pendants, armbands, etc., use this material.

**Forms in Which Felt Can Be Bought:** Felt can be bought in the following different forms:

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**Flat Felt:** Cotton and wool felt come by the yard. Fur felt may be purchased in a folded flat piece called “skirting.” A very fine grade of skirting is called “handkerchief felt,” and it can be draped very beautifully over a block. It is extremely soft and pliable. (I once worked with a Hollywood designer who specialized in this type of hat. The motion-picture stars loved them and were glad to pay $50.00 and up for them.)

**Pre-Blocked Shapes:** Fur and wool felt also come made up in “bodies” and “hoods.” These roughly approximate the shape of the head and are without any style interest whatsoever — style is what you put into them by blocking, shaping, and sewing. A hood looks just like it sounds — imagine putting your head into a sacklike piece of material that comes down over your eyes. A body would not be quite as deep in the crown, and the bottom edge would flare out into a so-called brim.

**Choosing Shape and Size of Felt:** When you make a hat you will use the nearest shape and size of felt to your proposed style. For instance, if you are going to make a small turban or pillbox (hats without brims) use a hood. If you want to make a hat with a brim, choose a body. A
The blocked beret is made from a hood. Pattern berets are made out of flat felt, either fur or wool. (Pattern is laid out and cut, just as you would do in dressmaking.)

When you choose a body for your brimmed hat, you will also be able to choose the size brim you want — they vary from the 2-inch brim to the cartwheel size, about 6 inches wide. Hoods also vary in size — a large blocked beret would take a 14-inch or 16-inch hood.

Wool felt by the yard is one of the nicest and most satisfactory felts for the beginner to use. It is not expensive, and results will prove to be most gratifying in the way of style and wearability. It is a year-round material, and lots of department stores carry it. You will find this material used in inexpensive ready-made hats, and you will also find it used in higher-priced merchandise. The difference in price lies in workmanship and handmade details. The handmade details need not be elaborate to be effective. Very simple stitches and appliqués show up quite professionally.

In the pattern section are patterns designed for the use of “wool felt.” Directions for making — as well as directions for the making of a Dutch bonnet — will be given at the end of this chapter.

None of these hats require the use of a block.

**STRAWS**

Straw is also a millinery material, and light-weight hats have been made out of it for many years. Straw bodies and hoods may be purchased and these should be blocked and worked in much the same manner as you block and work felt.

When you block a straw crown, whatever style interest is in your block will be retained in your crown. Brim blocking as applied to felts may also be applied to straws.

In many ways, the making of straw hats closely follows the technique of making felt hats. You will find, however, that straws have limitations that felts do not have. Most of them neither give nor shrink as much as felt; a cut straw edge must always be **finished** in some way; and the use of sizing (for stiffening) is almost always required.

Straw also comes by the yard, varying in width from a fraction of an inch to 5- or 6-inch bandings. If you buy it by the
yard, you will have to sew it together, naturally, before you will be able to block it.

Stiff straw braids are more workable after they are wet. Just dip the straw in a pan of water and sew while wet. Use any kind of a stitch that will hide itself in the indentations of the straw.

Of course, when you block straw (steam-press) it is in a softened condition. While under control on the block, it will "give" and then stay that way after it has dried on the block.

**Kinds of Straw:** The kinds of straw are too numerous to list, and each season brings new variations, weaves, and names.

Many of the finer and more expensive straws have always been imported but in the last few years the domestic markets have shown a marked increase in quality straws. Panamas, milans, pedalines, bakus and toyos are a few of the well-known straws.

Good straws are worth remaking and reblocking.

**MISCELLANEOUS HAT MATERIALS**

This group of materials differs from straw and felt in that they have little, if any, body, and must be made over a frame. The frame has the style interest sewed or blocked into it, and, when the material conforms to the shape of the frame, then the style is put into the material. Covering a frame is not a new method of making hats and there are lots of materials made especially for milliners.

**Millinery Yard Goods:** The regular millinery yard goods include: petersham (looks like heavy bengaline), lyons hat velvet (very fine velvet which comes in a narrow width), straw cloths (in a variety of novelty weaves), chiffon and suede jersey (soft and drapable), and several kinds of
uncut velvets, including bagheera.
The first three materials mentioned are usually used over soft foundations made out of crinoline and starched chiffon. They may also be used with a partial or half-frame. When used over a complete frame, they make quite a stiff hat, which is sometimes desirable, depending on the style of hat.

HAND-MADE DUTCH BONNET

Use wool-felt by the yard and use contrasting “buttonhole twist” for hand sewing.

Small Headsiz e (to fit small child). Buy 6½ inch felt and follow pattern layout;

Medium Headsize (headsize 20½ inches to 21½ inches). Buy 7” felt and follow pattern layout;

Large Headsize (headsize 22 inches to 23 inches). Buy 7½ inch felt and follow pattern layout;

Cutting: Cut 1 inch off the entire length of felt, leaving a section 5½ inches x 36 inches or 6½ inches according to size.

Sew front and back sections together, matching notches. Use an overcast stitch or a small running stitch.

Loose sequins can be appliqued in a design. Lap each sequin under the one previously sewn.

Fold back “cuff” of bonnet, reinforce edge.
bonnet being made. This strip will be used for reinforcement.

Divide the rest of the felt according to the pattern layout: 5½ inches square is the back section for the small size. Cut ¾ inches off the felt on each side, as indicated by dotted lines.

The one-inch strip cut from entire length of felt is to be used for reinforcement and may be of same or contrasting color. A clever “Mother and Daughter” set was made by buying 7½-inch felt in navy blue and 6½-inch felt in bright red. The “reinforcement” strip in red was used to trim the mother’s blue cap — and the “reinforcement” strip in blue was used to trim the little girl’s red hat.

Sewing: Baste top-and-sides section to the back section, matching center back (C.B.)

Try the cap on your head. Side back seams may have to be cut away a little more to make it fit. However, this is not a headsize hat — it is supposed to fit loosely.
Sew along the top and sides, using a small running stitch and making a very small seam.

Fold back the "cuff" (top-and-sides section) as far as you like. Hand stitch the reinforcement section (1-inch strip) across the "cuff" of the hat. Use the rest of it to reinforce the under edge of the bonnet.

Divide the remaining strip and sew the ends together. Hand stitch all around the edge. Make a bow out of this felt strip and tack it to the center front of the bonnet. The bow may also be used across the hat at the center of the back.

Note: This hat is quite tailored, but there are lots of ways to dress it up. Trim it with colored felt appliqués, beads, or sequins. Outline a piece of colored felt with sequins.

Sequins come by the string, ready to use; but if you are not able to buy them in this way, perhaps you have an old ornament that you can unstring and reuse. The sequin stitch is very simple once you get onto it, and the result seems well worth the little time it takes to sew them on.