PART TWO

If the original Ezra Mallory could come back out of that shadowy but colorful past into which we have just adventured, he might still find in Danbury landmarks that have stood while he slept in the dreamy old graveyard. But his eager glances would seek almost in vain for familiar things in those far-reaching buildings that have grown out of his experiments in hat-making, a hundred years ago.

Well could Ezra Mallory's eyes glow with astonishment. Yet perhaps he might prefer to go back to that past he knew so well. Coming out of a sleep of seventy-eight years, who could wonder if he stood aghast at the task of adjusting his life to such a metamorphosis?

Ezra Mallory would see today buildings teeming with Mallory workers—hundreds of them, men and women. Far down long aisles, fading into dimness, his unaccustomed eyes would pass from row to row of workmen at benches. Up flights of stairs, and beyond into other buildings, always more workers, making hats.

He would look inquiringly at huge revolving devices telling no familiar story of old-time hat-making. In another room, groups of hissing
steam jets would be quite beyond his experience. Elsewhere he would come upon strange machines on which were hats in formative shapes; and still further on, great vats for dyeing. Again, his curious gaze would meet double and triple files of women working on sewing machines the like of which he never dreamed in those ancient days. Among all the army of workers, not a face would he know. Ezra Mallory indeed could scarcely believe that he himself had set in motion the impulses now driving this great hat plant of 1923.

DANBURY today, though having a population of only 25,000, is one of those highly concentrated communities that stand for definite, intensive things. Just as Pittsburg means steel to most people and Akron means rubber, so Danbury stands synonymous with hats.

Historical records give ground for the belief that among the original eight families who founded Danbury in 1684 was one hatter at least. The eight families trudged the weary trails from South Norwalk. About a hundred years later, one Danbury hat factory employed thirty hands and made seven hundred and fifty dozen hats a year; and this concern was considered very big and powerful. Its hats were heavy and unfinished, and brought from six to ten dollars apiece at
wholesale, to be finished later in South Norwalk or New York. In 1801, Danbury hat manufacturers produced more than twenty thousand hats, mostly for exportation.

Today Danbury perhaps makes more finished hats of all kinds than any other city in the country, and makes a considerable percentage of hat accessories and machinery used in its great factories.

Of the numerous hat factories in Danbury today, only six belong to the group of thirty-three that were there in 1895. This exemplifies the difficulties of the hat-making industry. For one thing, it is a business of such intricate technical requirements that failure follows any relaxation of scientific skill and discipline. And when a hat business can survive and continue to grow for a hundred years, it is evident that unusual influences have been back of it.

A hundred years ago the little Mallory plant made somewhere around twelve hats a week. For half a century the curve of its growth was hesitating and at times erratic; but always it struggled upward, as the composite experience of successive Mallory generations was handed down and woven into the substance of its management.

During the second half of the century, however, the curve has risen sharply; and while so
many hat manufacturers have succumbed to obstacles, the Mallory Hat Company now rounds out its hundred years by building great new extensions to its factory, and has the second largest Quality hat business in the United States.

Within the present generation, the growth has been extraordinary. For example, between 1888 and 1905 the output multiplied fifty-six per cent, while between 1905 and 1923 the increase has been two hundred and sixty per cent.

Before looking in on the scenes Ezra Mallory would behold today at Danbury, let us reflect that the great majority of men’s hats seen in a typical crowd are made of fur. Figuratively speaking, your own hat may have been roaming the wilds of Australia or Russia a year ago. By what vast and complicated system did the fur come out of Australia or Russia and shape itself into a hat, here in America? Surely it was no accidental occurrence.

No; a hat bought so easily stands for organization of the most exacting kind, beginning with the men who hunt and trap, and ending only when the hat goes out of the retailer’s store. This intricate organization is scattered over the earth. Many thousands of men have contributed their share toward the hats sold today over the counter.
UNTIL you see the inside of a great hat factory you have no conception of the countless handlings and multiplicity of operations in hat-making; nor have you any concept of the art's progress since Ezra Mallory with his hands slowly shaped the old-style hats.

Neither can you grasp the composite brain work that has gone into hat-making machinery. The Mallory Hat Company, with its century of contribution, perhaps typifies more than any other concern the history of hat-making.

The animals contributing chiefly to Mallory hats are the beaver, nutria, muskrat, coney, and numerous varieties of the hare. The skins come mostly from abroad — Russia, Australia, South
America, Scotland, and many other countries. These imported furs, brought to America by pelt dealers, come in great bales holding from two thousand to four thousand cured skins.

The cutting of fur by machinery was begun at Danbury shortly after Ezra Mallory made his first hat. This old contrivance used a foot treadle. Today the first process in fur preparation is to shake the skins clean in huge drums. After being slit and trimmed, they are ready for dehauling.

All fur-bearing animals wear coats that are both fur and hair. What you really see on the living creatures is the hair, which overtops and hides the soft and dense crop of fur. Before the latter can be used for hat-making, the hair must be taken out.

In the eighteenth century, Danbury made hats of fur from which the hair had not been wholly removed; and the women of the village, in their homes, were employed to pull out the hairs with tweezers.

Modern mechanical processes remove both hair and fur from the skin, and usually each animal gives only an ounce or two of the fur itself. It may be imagined that the hunting and trapping of hat-fur animals is a calling in itself. Yet our sympathy for these furry creatures is assuaged when we know that if markets did not
exist for pelts the little animals might over-run whole countries and cause untold damage to crops, trees, and things in general.

The casual observer would never guess that every fiber of these furs is set with many infinitesimal barbs or hooks. Before the fur goes to the hat factory these hooks are further developed by chemical treatment, called carroting, which alone makes possible the later felting, or making of the hat fabric. Carroting was discovered accidentally when a little acid got into a batch of fur.

The fur finally goes to the hat factory in paper bags of five pounds each.

Ezra Mallory in 1823 mixed his furs by hand. Quite different is the rather spectacular mixing at the Mallory plant today, for in a big room are conical machines within which cyclonic winds play an exciting game with great quantities of fur. The hatters graphically dub this stormy device the “Devil.”

Cylindrical blowers then take the mixed fur and eliminate all foreign substances. The fur, beautifully soft and fine, is now ready for the first process of actual hat-making. In an adjoining room, operators sitting before delicate scales separate to a fraction of an ounce the quantity of fur for each hat.

Next the fluffy stuff is taken to the forming
room. Here too is melodrama, upon which those old hat makers would look with awe. Set on a platform along the room are the hat-forming machines, enclosed in wood and glass cabinets several feet high, having hinged doors. Each cabinet or box holds a removable copper cone, hollow and perforated with minute holes.

The cone, having been removed at the end of the preceding operation, is moistened and replaced in the machine. It begins to turn when the door of the cabinet is shut, and underneath a rapidly-revolving fan creates a vacuum inside.

On a high stool back of each cabinet a girl now feeds into it the fur for one hat at a time, and the flurry of fibers falls on the cone softly and evenly.

Thus is made a fabric without spinning or weaving. The barbs seize each other with a grip that never lets go, once the process is complete, though at first the felt is very fragile.

When the workman stops the machine and opens the door, the cone wears the embryo hat—merely a limp and loosely-knitted “dunce cap” two-and-a-half feet high. We are talking now chiefly of soft hats, and derbies. However, the earlier processes apply generally to all fur hats.

The workman now takes out the cone. Working on a bench across a narrow aisle, he
slips off the new fabric, which immediately begins its adventuresome trip through the plant.

These mechanisms indeed bring memories of long inventive struggle, one epoch of which had its climax in 1845 when a man named Wells secured a patent for a hat-forming machine. Many regarded it as grotesque and impossible, for it eliminated altogether the catgut bow, for decades considered the last word in hat-making. Ezra Mallory as a small boy had stood in the doorways of the little Danbury hat shops and watched with deep fascination the curious performances of the bow.

Quite a time elapsed before the strange new hat-forming machine was firmly established among the great inventions of industry. Of course numerous improvements followed. In 1857, according to an old account, G. E. Cowperthwaite purchased an interest in one such machine and was then sued by H. A. Burr for infringement. The tale has it that when Cowperthwaite won he sold his machine to Burr for $100,000.

But go back to the freshly-made fur fabrics from the modern forming machines in the Mallory plant. After a process or two they reach a room where long rows of men wearing leather aprons stand at machines. Their task is to dip the queer-looking dunce caps, four at a time,
repeatedly into tanks of boiling water, rolling and kneading them, wrapped in cloths, between immersions. This heavily shrinks the still primitive hats, and when they have been through this process, they begin to look as if some day they might bear resemblance to headgear.

Many operations ensue, in which hand and brain still play a big part despite the near-human machines. Inferior hats can be jammed through automatic machinery to a large extent, but the fine art of the hat maker and real distinction in fashion are attained only through individual skill and seemingly endless work with human fingers.

Machines and fingers, indeed, work together. There are rolling machines, for instance, and a hat "barber shop," where the felt fabric gets a shave. Some one introduced this clever contrivance in 1878. Thus the brains of many men were constantly groping. Nearly all of these marvelous machines at the Mallory plant are evolutions that began in the days when journeymen hatters performed the processes wholly by hand. Numerous inventions came out of the brains of the old-time proprietors who worked, as Ezra Mallory did, at the bench in their own shops.

Following the shave and other processes come treatments with various solutions, and
pouncing machines work with sandpaper. There are blocking and ironing machines, and complexities of hat-making up and down the long reaches of Mallory buildings, from the sixth story to the ground.

The secret of making velour hats, in which Mallory excels, lies first in selected fur, and then in special manipulation of the felt. In the end, the nap of the hat resembles the fur on the animal.

Danbury has made a motley sequence of hat styles since colonial days, reflecting the whims of passing eras; but for the more extraordinary flights of fashions we must go back into earlier history.

Hats were worn in bible days, chiefly by men, and later became exceedingly ornate—far more magnificent than any hats worn by women today. They were of queer shapes and sizes and colors, and were decorated with plumes, silks, gold and silver ornaments, and insignia of endless kinds. The jeweled hats of royalty were famed, and often so costly that when not in use they were kept in heavy iron boxes in a special hat room of the palace. Some of the royalty of France had functionaries known as the Keeper of the King’s Hats.

There were wonderful horned hats, reminding one of the headpiece of a bull, and gloriously
draped; there were hats built after the fashion of a corkscrew wound with garish embellishments; heavily-feathered hats designed to be carried in the hand in courtly fashion; head-gear like the modern silk hat but twice as high, and sometimes shaped like a church spire cut off near the top.

Gay indeed were those medieval people, scarcely content two days at a time with their hat furs, wools or velvets; or with the colors or fashions. Hats played tag with their vanities.

Hats of beaver fur were worn even in the twelfth century. Some six hundred years later Sir Walter Scott observed: "I have always been known for the jaunty way in which I wear my
castor,” meaning beaver hat. The modern silk hat, though not made of beaver, is a relative of that famous old style.

The origin of present hat fashions can be traced here and there to individual conceits and inventions of sovereigns or perhaps the nobility. One tradition has it that the forerunner of the derby first appeared on the head of a fashionable young English bachelor. He had ordered his hatter to make him a top-piece that would draw the arch eyes of more girls than any hat known, and yet be severely plain and outstanding among “the silly ribbon-and-rose-tete-bedecked head trash of lady hunters.”

The hat styles of past ages have been indicative of caste; the peasant would not have dared to wear the headgear of the gentry. Here in America the most lowly man wears the every-day hat of the millionaire, so far as general shape is concerned. The people as a whole follow pretty much one vogue, yet in many sections of the country variations are more or less permanently in fashion. The hat of the western ranchman does not fit in on Broadway; nor that of the southern planter. Mallory hats are not limited to the current eccentricities of style, but are designed to meet the needs of all men. The clever young woman who checks headgear in the big hotel instinctively associ-
ates the styles of hats with types of men. In their hats she reads perhaps dignity, frivolity, conceit, or vanity. She can often divine their very pursuits.

The Mallory organization, with its corps of skilled designers, has placed its hats in a class by themselves.

The Mallory product, embracing fine hats only, is subjected to the most minute inspection at every stage of manufacture, and all precautions are taken to insure the best for Mallory hats.

The Company’s raw products are all of the highest grade. The best markets of the world are searched for fur and the most careful selections made. The shellac for stiffening comes from India; the skins for sweatbands from France; the silks for hatbands and linings from Japan and Italy. Dyestuffs are partly German and partly the high-quality dyes now made in America. The Company forever stresses its reputation for keeping up Quality. Its aim since the days of Ezra Mallory has been to satisfy the most critical hat buyers and dealers, and give everybody a square deal.

Mallory growth over a period of a hundred years is attributed to undeviating ideals of manufacture and to a code of ethics that has marked the Company since it was founded. In contact
with the trade and with competitors the principle of fairness has always been one of its fundamentals.

The large additions to the Mallory plant, completed in 1923, are designed to maintain and improve the Quality rather than the quantity of output. The actual increase in production is about thirty per cent, though the increased floor space is the equivalent of two-thirds of a city block. These additions also house the Mallory straw hat department, a new and important branch of the business.

Three years ago the Company built a great three-story concrete building to supplement its other large factory facilities and to provide new quarters for the general offices. This building was scarcely completed before the need became apparent for still more room. So in 1922 work was begun on the three additional stories covering the whole building, and on a sixty-foot extension of six stories—all of concrete.

In connection with these building activities was the installation of an entirely new system of handling fur in the blowing room, and other processing in the forming and sizing departments, located in the older sections of the plant. The Company has always had a definite policy of discarding machinery and methods in order to take on the newer and better.
This narrative does not purport to be complete; it aims merely to characterize in some degree the Mallory Hat Company on its hundredth birthday, and to contribute something worth preserving to the history of industry. More than an account of the Mallory Company, it is a story of Danbury and of early and modern New England.
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