

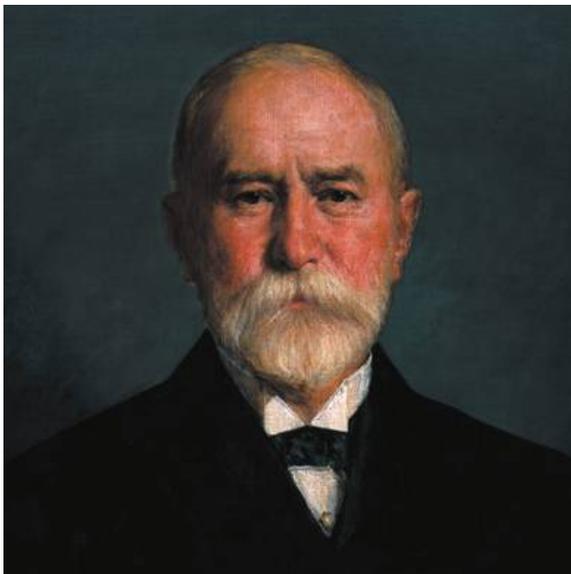
# Feature



## The Cowboy Hat: A Western Icon Don Reeves

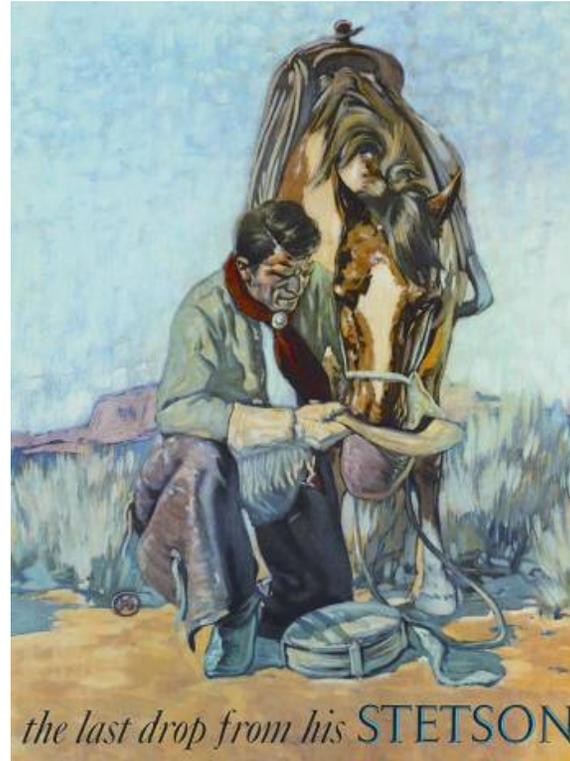
*The cowboy hat is an iconic symbol and an indispensable part of historical costuming for the American West of the late 18<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

Freshly-creased or crumpled, the cowboy hat is recognized around the world as a symbol of the American West. Vaqueros and Texans wore broad-brimmed felt hats long before John B. Stetson made his first trip to Colorado. The Spanish influence was so pervasive in the West that



John B. Stetson (1830-1906). Eastern hat maker, made the West's enduring icon, the "Cowboy Hat."

mail order catalogs as late as 1900 still referred to the hat of the "cow boy" as a sombrero.



Advertising poster aimed at cowboys illustrated the versatility of the Stetson "Boss of the Plains" hat. Artist: Lon Megargee, 1924.

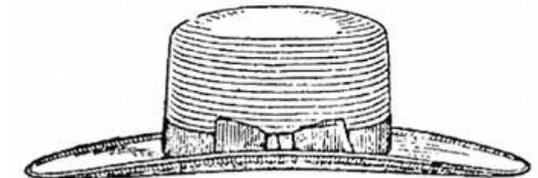
Western felt hats are traditionally made from the fine hair of beaver, nutria, and other small mammals. The processed hair is compressed into felt and emerges as a cone-shaped hat body. Hat makers use steam to mold the hat body over a form, or hat block.

Hats of the 19th century came in black and natural-fur colors; white and color-dyed selections appear on the market after 1920.

John B. Stetson's family had manufactured hats since 1790, but when he established his own shop, J.B. Stetson had his eyes on the West. Setting up business in Philadelphia in 1865, Stetson produced a light, durable, high quality hat at a high price. He marketed his products aggressively in the West as the best hat for a cattleman, particularly a hat style that came to be called the "Boss of the Plains" (below and left).



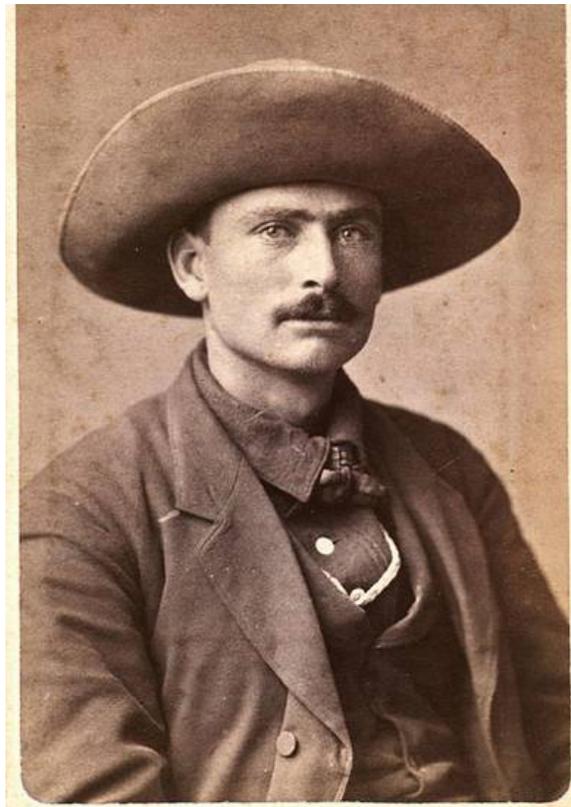
Above: Stetson Boss of the Plains. Below: 1875 Montgomery Wards catalog ad.



No. 52392 STETSON'S BOSS OF THE PLAINS, MOST POPULAR COWBOY HAT, MADE FROM THE FINEST SELECTED NUTRIA FUR. SILK BAND AND BINDING; CROWN, 4 1/2 INCHES; BRIM, 4 INCHES; WEIGHT, 6 OUNCES. THE SIZES RUN FROM 6 3/4 TO 7 1/2. COLOR, BELLY NUTRIA. WHAT SIZE DO YOU WEAR? EACH.....\$4.50  
IF BY MAIL, POSTAGE EXTRA, 38 CENTS.



Hispanic wagon driver's wide-brim, low crown hat with horsehair hatband, c. 1850. This is one of the oldest hats in the collection of the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum.



An iconic, wide-brimmed felt western hat dominates this striking portrait of a handsome cattleman c 1885.

By 1885, the John B. Stetson & Company produced 1,800 hats daily. In that day, a top quality Stetson cost a cowboy a month's wages.

An often repeated story about the origin of "cowboy hats" may have been the result of a small pamphlet entitled, [\*A Little Journey to the Home of John B. Stetson\*](#), published in 1911 by biographer Elbert Hubbard five years after Stetson had passed away. Hubbard recorded a story of Stetson's legendary trip to the west, the making of a hat in camp, and the creation of the new, cowboy-style hat.

Actually, his father, Stephen Stetson, started the family hat enterprise in East Orange, New Jersey.



J. B. Stetson's family ran this hat company in New Jersey for 100 years. It is ironic that the most famous brand name in hats is Stetson, but the family business in New Jersey was the No Name Hat Company.

The family could not think of a name at the beginning and operated as the No Name Hat Company for all those years.

Western cattlemen needed hats that would protect them from the elements and hold their shape. Stetson supplied quality felt hats in popular styles. Though there

were other sources of wide-brim felt hats available in the West, Stetson was the largest producer and a genius at marketing his product. John B. Stetson did not invent the cowboy hat, but he set the standard and developed styles immortalized by rodeo champions and movie idols.

On the Great Plains during the nineteenth century, the majority of young cowboys were from Texas, the eastern United States or Europe, and this showed in the style of their hats. The Hispanic heritage of many riders with tall wide hats could be traced to the land below the Rio Grande. Whereas low-crown hats with flat brims reflected styles popular on the great ranches of California.

Low-crowned, soft felt hats were common on the plains as cattlemen from mid-western states established ranches along the route of the Oregon Trail. Flat-crowned hats were popular throughout the West. Since the hats tended to expand in hot



Wardrobe hat worn by James Arness on the set of "Gunsmoke" as Marshal Dillon. Collection of the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum.



Rancharo wearing wide-brimmed sombrero.

weather, hatbands of leather or woven horsehair helped tighten the fit while adding regional character.

The wide brim of the Mexican sombrero provided protection from the sun and was popular with both Mexicans and Anglos along the border. Sombra is the Spanish word for shade. Through the turn of the nineteenth century, early Texas cowboys



Montana Peak hat.



1896 photo of cowboy/songwriter D. J. O'Malley (1867-1943) wearing a striped twill shirt with double-front, angora hair "woolies," and a Montana Peak hat. Source: [Montana Historical Society Research Center](http://Montana Historical Society Research Center).

commonly referred to their large, floppy hats as sombreros. Rancheros, or wealthy Mexican landowners, wore elaborate sombreros with high-crowns and brims heavily embroidered in silver and gold thread. At the turn of the century John B. Stetson manufactured many sombreros that were later ornamented by hatters in Mexico.



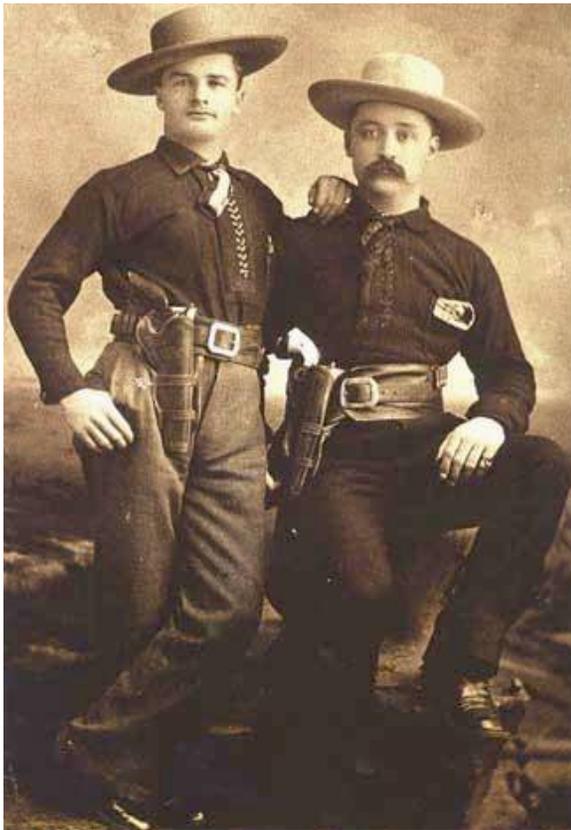
Hat owned by western television star Dale Robertson illustrating a Denton Crease. Collection of the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum.

Many cattlemen hand-creased their hats according to personal tastes. Other hats earned their creases and dents by experience. Sometimes a man would remove the sweatband from a new hat and dunk it in water, allowing it to conform to his head as the hat dried with the heat of the sun.

The fabric bow at the back of a sweatband is a holdover from the days when quality hats had drawstrings that could be tightened for a better fit. Hitching horsehair bridles and hatbands became a common way for inmates to earn extra money while serving time in Montana and Wyoming prisons.

Cowmen often could identify the home region of a rider by the shape of his hat. However, the pinched-crown hat called the Montana Peak enjoyed widespread popularity. On the northern ranges, cowboys often wore hats with smaller brims because of the wind. Rolling the brim and adding a ribbon binding helps hold the brim shape.

By the 1890s commercial products like Stetson hats and Levi Strauss denim “overalls” were marketed specifically for the



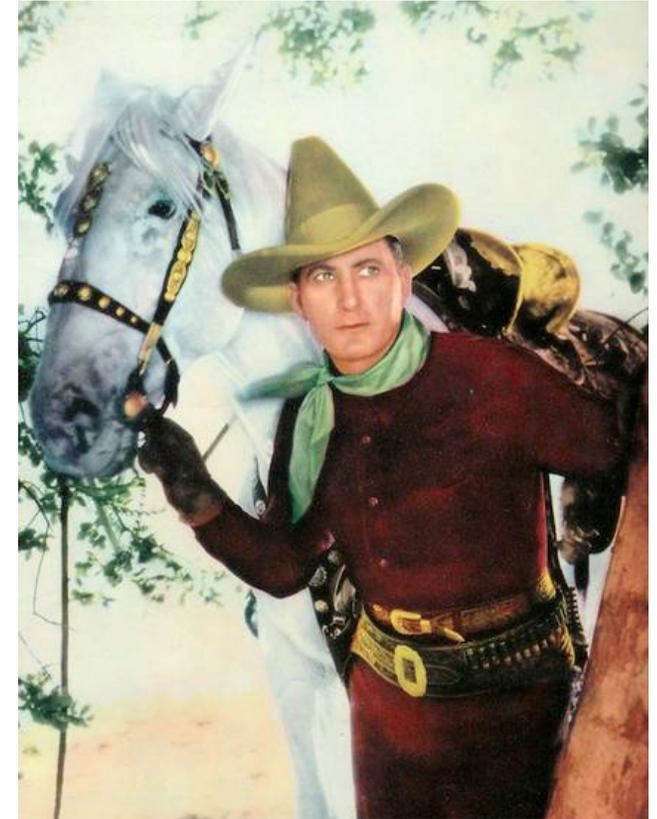
Two Dudes in new duds had their pictures taken in Cheyenne, Wyoming, 1885 . Boss of the Plains hats, lace-up shirts with turn-down collars, and Cheyenne style gun leather. Source: [curtrich.com website](http://curtrich.com).

working cowboy. Many young men first arriving in the West would have photos made in western dress to send to relatives (below left).

Cattlemen or ranch owners of the last fifty years generally preferred hats with smaller brims than those of working cowboys. In this way, the ranch owner or foreman could be easily recognized in the field.

Cowboy actors Tim McCoy (right), Tom Mix, and Jack Hoxie popularized the big hat in the early western movies. The phrase "ten-gallon hat" derives from the elaborate Mexican hats of the 18th century. The Spanish term galón referred to a stripe that indicated the quality of the hat. A sombrero with ten galónes would be a very fancy hat. Mix became famous as the good guy in the white hat. Stetson even marketed a hat style known as “The Tom Mix.” Mix ordered similar hats in large numbers from John B. Stetson Company and gave them to dignitaries while on promotional tours.

The popularity of rodeo champions and western movie stars transformed the work clothing of cowboys into western fashion. Harry Rolnick, the co-founder of Resistol Hat in 1927, made hats popular among rodeo performers including Casey Tibbs. Tibbs favorite was the Denton Crease (previous page) which had a strong pinch in the front of the crown like the bow of a ship. Wide-brimmed, low-crowned hats were popular throughout the 1950s and early 1960s.



Above: Photo of Tim McCoy (1891-1978). Color photos of film stars were given as premiums for Dixie cup ice cream from 1933-1954. Saving enough lids from the ice cream cups meant mailing them away for large premium photos of stars. This photo is a Dixie Cup premium from 1934. Photo: Columbia Pictures. Below: Tim McCoy hat. The Ron McCoy Collection of the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum.





Eloise “Fox Hastings” Wilson (1882-1948) performed trick and bronc riding with the Irwin Brothers’ Wild West Show, and was known as the redheaded feminine daredevil of the arena.. She was inducted into the Rodeo Hall of Fame at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in 1987. Circa 1930. Photo: Ralph Russell Doubleday.

Even today, when a working cowboy is dressed in a suit, his hat and boots usually remain. These are part of his personality, put on first thing in the morning and pulled off last thing at night. The most famous cultural icon of the American West is the cowboy.

Tall wide-brimmed hats, embroidered shirts, and brightly colored boots are recognized world-wide as distinctly cowboy in origin.

Visit the [National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum](#) website for information about the West and the kaleidoscope of cultures that make up this fascinating region of America. The Museum houses an extensive collection of cowboy hats from a variety of periods, regions, and cultures.

*Don Reeves holds the McCasland Chair of Cowboy Culture at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum and has been on the curatorial staff for more than 35 years. During the Museum expansion from 1994-2003 he curated the Children’s Cowboy Corral, American Cowboy, and Western Performers Galleries. He worked with the Traditional Cowboy Arts Association since its inception in 1998, and curated the 16 annual exhibitions. He has authored numerous publications and magazine articles, and participated in many television and documentary film projects.*



Dale Evans (1912-2001) was an American writer, film and TV star, singer-songwriter, and the third wife of singing cowboy Roy Rogers. Evans has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame for radio, and a second star for her contributions to television. In 1976, she was inducted into the Western Performers Hall of Fame at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum. Photo: the [Doug Abbott Collection](#), circa 1960s.



Cowboy hats made by John B. Stetson Company: Carlsbad Crease “Gus” (left), Pinched Front Crease with pencil-rolled brim (right), rare Stetson advertising sign (center). Source: National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum.