Garland's Hat Heritage

Harry, William & John

Hats keep you warm in winter and cool in summer, protect your eyes from glare and your head from wind and water. Historically, a hat revealed the wearer's status. Hat Talk said it best: "Kings wore crowns of gold, a fool wore a motley of bells and everyone else in between used their hats to establish their spot in the pecking order." People have worn hats as we know them today since ancient Greece. Hats were the most prominent article of clothing on a man's body, worn religiously between the end of the Wars of the Roses and the start of the Vietnam War. However, the industry began actively fighting the decline of hat-wearing in the 1920s. This gradual downsizing led to the eventual amalgamation or closing of almost all the original hat labels in the United States. For more than 100 years, through the 19th century, hat factories were as large as small towns—and serviced their employees in like manner. The 20th century saw these complexes absorbed and discarded; forced to tear down their buildings and sell equipment. Of course, hat-wearing isn't dead. And neither is the hat-making industry. Currently, there are three hat manufacturers with international reach producing right here in Garland, Texas. The story of these manufacturing companies couldn't be told without Harry Rolnick, William C. Cook and John Milano. And it all began with Harry.

"Harry Rolnick wasn't just a character, he was impressive. He was a real gentleman. A real class act."
– Bob Posey, product development manager for Hatco and Resistol employee for 30 years

Harry Rolnick was born April 12, 1900, and grew up in a Jewish neighborhood in Brooklyn. He and his family moved to Houston in the early 1900s and then to Dallas. In 1917 he began working in his parents' hat renovation shop and in 1922 opened "Harry's Hat Shop." Harry Rolnick was born to be in the world of fashion and was propelled down the path of success after meeting Ed Byer, a successful entrepreneur and millionaire. Their company, Byer-Rolnick Hat Company, would become the largest men's hat manufacturer in the country due, in part, to Rolnick's three greatest innovations. First, the Resistol Hat, constructed with a trademark interior leather band that allows for expansion and "resists" confining contact with the head. Second was the patented Kitten Finish, which gave a more luxurious feel to felt hats compared to those produced by conventional processing. Finally, Byer-Rolnick's main plant in Garland became the first hat-finishing plant to establish "straight line" production (think of Ford's famous factory assembly lines). Harry became a fashion industry icon with residences in California, Dallas and London. An acquaintance of Neiman Marcus' Stanley Marcus, Harry would regularly call on Hollywood legends such as Clark Gable, William Holden, Humphrey Bogart, Alan Ladd, John Wayne and Henry Ford, just to name a few. U.S. presidents from Truman to Reagan also received calls from Harry to ensure they were all wearing both western and dress-style Resistols.

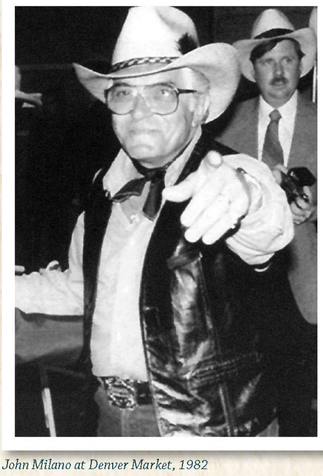
Harry Rolnick with a straw hat display, 1963

"Harry Rolnick delegated and knew how to use people. He was always open for suggestions and would listen. He knew the business and understood the goals."
– John Milano

William C. Cook, head of quality control for Byer-Rolnick, with open-crown Byer-Rolnick hats, 1955

William C. Cook was born Feb. 1, 1917, in Mabank, Texas, and was a farmer until moving northwest to Dallas. Cook began working for Byer-Rolnick in 1936 when the company factory was still located in Dallas. In 1938, William and wife Dorothy moved to Garland on Forest Lane as a part of the original Garland Byer-Rolnick workforce. He started his career as a hand finisher on the product line. He was promoted to head of quality control and would eventually become a master hatter. In 1968, William retired from Byer-Rolnick and established his own successful hat-manufacturing company, Master Hatters of Texas, in Garland. Master Hatters initially manufactured on a contract basis with Resistol Hat Company. Today, Master Hatters makes fine-quality straw, wool and fur felt hats in its 5.5-acre, 50,000-square-foot facility in Garland.

John (Giovanni) Milano was born March 19, 1928, in Sorrento, Italy. His innate entrepreneurial skills were honed dodging the Germans and making deals with American GIs. He was a born salesman with a limited education and even more limited grasp of the English language. After falling in love and marrying Maria, an Italian-American girl from Staten Island, he immigrated to New York in 1955 and began working for Weber and Heilbroner's in lower Manhattan. He learned the hat business from the bottom up. In 1965 John Milano moved from New York City to Garland to become the vice president of Byer-Rolnick's retail division. Through persistence, hard work and the mentorship of Harry Rolnick, John Milano not only became president of the largest manufacturer of men's headwear in the country, Byer-Rolnick, but went on to start his own successful business, the Milano Hat Company. John founded Milano Hat Company in Garland, knowing that the community had a large pool of highly skilled workers. He continued to grow the company into the giant it is today, producing Justin, Biltmore and Larry Mahan hats among others.



John Milano at Denver Market, 1982

"John Milano is more than a man of his word. He is a man filled with passion, integrity, honesty and sincerity in all that he does – from his roots in Sorrento, Italy, until today. He is one of a kind."
– Larry Mahan, six-time All Around World Champion cowboy

Early Days

1865
John B. Stetson designed the first cowboy hat by using fur and boiling water over a campfire.

1903
48 million hats are produced per year in the U.S., which has a total population of 80 million men, women and children.

1914
A shellac shortage during World War I moves men's hat fashions from stiff felt hats (bowlers and cambridges) to soft felt hats (hombergs, fedoras and trilbys).

1917
Rolnick family opens hat renovation shop in Dallas on North Ervay.

1922
Harry Rolnick launches his own enterprise, "Harry's Hat Shop."

1925
Harry Rolnick begins experimenting with some overstock homburgs after noticing a change in dress hat tastes.

1926
Harry Rolnick partners with Nathan Florence of Florence Hat Company, whose styles feature narrower, turned-up brims.

Rolnick Bros. Hatters, Dallas 1922

Late 1920s
Prince of Wales Edward VIII wears a bowler to events that previously would have required a top hat, and subsequently bowlers become the uniform for formal wear.

> "Byer and Rolnick complemented each other. Harry Rolnick knew the hat-manufacturing process from the bottom up and had a great sense of style and promotion. Byer had none of these but had remarkable foresight and financial ability, and they were a great team."
> *– Henry Bromberg, attorney for the Mable and Ed Byer estate*

1928
Giovanni "John" Milano born in Sorrento, Italy, on March 19.

Resistol interior "self-conforming" leather headband being sewn into a hat

1929
National Association of Merchant Tailors announces that the well-dressed man must own no less than a dozen hats in order to be prepared to go outdoors: the high silk, the folding opera, the black or midnight blue soft hat, the derby, the homburg, the snap brim, the off-the-face, the lightweight felt, the sports, the straw sailor, the panama and the semi-sport type.

1930-31 Byer-Rolnick, formed when Edward Byer bought out Nathan Florence's interests, creates Resistol Hat as its first branded line, so-called because of patented interior leather headbands constructed to allow expansion, contain perspiration and "resist" confining the head. The hat was intended to rest atop the wearer's head with a maximum of cool and comfort. Initially, distribution was limited to Texas and Oklahoma.

Early 1930s
Harry Rolnick creates the Kitten Finish, an innovation in the finishing process of felt, which helped him gain national exposure.

Kitten Finish stamp in a vintage fedora made by Resistol and designed by Harry Rolnick

1935
Anticipating the '36 Texas Centennial, Byer-Rolnick introduces its western hat line. Initially, these accounted for only 10 to 15 percent of sales, as they competed with the world's most famous hat company—Stetson Hat Company of Missouri.

The Mad Hatter

For hundreds of years, hatters used mercuric nitrate on rabbit and beaver felt hats to separate the furs from the pelts in a process called carroting. Ventilation was often poor and hatters who were exposed to mercury for extended periods of time would begin to show symptoms similar to Alzheimer's disease. The effects of inhaled mercury and mercury poisoning were not understood and lead to the term "mad hatter."

Texas Centennial souvenir hat made of wool-felt

John B. Stetson sold the first cowboy hat for $5 dollars. Today, hats can sell for more than $3,000.

Hats Come to Garland

Aerial view of Byer-Rolnick factory, ca. 1953

1939 Byer-Rolnick builds in Garland on 50 acres of Flook family land, some of which had been acquired in the 1800s. The new 50' x 500' hat-making complex became the country's first to establish "straight line" manufacturing procedures. Estimated capacity was 360 hats per day.

William Cook, head of quality control for Byer-Rolnick, moves from Dallas to Garland as a part of the original workforce.

Early 1940s
During World War II, Byer-Rolnick is one of the few manufacturers able to produce during wartime shortages due to their facilities, equipment and heavy accumulation of fur and felt inventory.

Early 40s
Last recorded cases of "mad hatter" syndrome caused by inhaling mercuric nitrate on rabbit and beaver felt hats.

Early 1950s
Harry Rolnick negotiates leased Resistol departments in strategic cities, selling Byer-Rolnick hats between $9 and $75.

> "...Byer-Rolnick Company was one of the few hat companies in America that could produce men's hats during the war that could establish accounts with retailers, notably Neiman Marcus Company with whom they had been able to sell previously."
> – *Edward R. Byer*

1953
Eisenhower wears a black homberg to his inauguration instead of the traditional silk top hat, which ignites the popularity of the homburg as formal attire and marks the decline of the top hat.

1955
John Milano and wife Maria immigrate from Italy and he starts work with one of Weber & Heilbroner's stores in New York City.

John & Maria Milano, 1955

Weber & Heilbroner's Hat Shop window display on Fifth Avenue, 1930

Fur-Felt Hat Industry in 1939

Average Hourly Earnings	
Skilled Men	85.5 cents
Skilled Women	62.8 cents
Semiskilled Men	58.6 cents
Semiskilled Women	48.8 cents
Unskilled Men	42.3 cents
Unskilled Women	38.6 cents
Workweek averaged	37.2 hours

1956 Resistol is the sixth largest hat company in America.

John Milano is assigned to Weber & Heilbroner's leased hat department, where he learns Resistol hats.

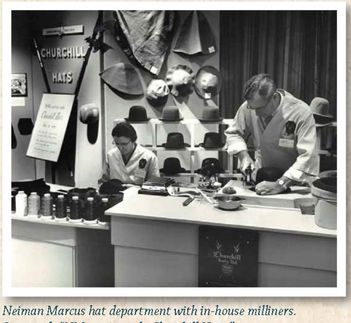
> "The most important element of the company is the manufacturing operation and the people who run it."
> – *Harry Rolnick*

Harry Rolnick working with straw weaver in the Bahamas, 1956

1957
John Milano is promoted to oversee hat department sales in all Weber & Heilbroner's New York City stores.

1958
Byer-Rolnick debuts Churchill brand at Pierre Hotel in New York City for top-end, head-to-head competition with Cavanaugh.

> "Our standard of quality is measured by the quality of our product."
> – *Harry Rolnick, 1950s*



Neiman Marcus hat department with in-house milliners. Sign reads "NM carries only Churchill Hats."

Resistol hat display at the Garland Industrial Show, April 1958

John Milano at his office in the Empire State Building as vice president of the retail division of Byer-Rolnick, 1960

1959
Byer-Rolnick loses Weber & Heilbroner's leases to Hat Corporation of America, but rather than lose John Milano, Harry Rolnick offers Milano the position of director of retail operations for Byer-Rolnick.

Cowboy Hat Etiquette

- When entering an enclosed living space, such as a home, it is proper to remove one's hat. This does not count for barns and bars, only places where people reside.
- Do not leave your cowboy hat in your car while parked out in the heat of the day.
- It has always been considered bad luck to place your cowboy hat brim on the bed.
- A gentleman always removes his hat when first meeting a lady. In subsequent meetings, the gentleman tips his hat to the lady.
- When looking for a place to put your cowboy hat, the first and most appropriate spot is on top of your head.

Fur felt can be made into the smoothest and lightest fabric known.