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FOREVER YOUNG

## GORD ATKINSON'S SHOWBILL

### When the Fedora Was in Fashion

While watching an old movie on TV recently I was reminded of a male fashion statement from my formative years. The film was a drama set in the 1940's. The action took place in the summertime on the streets of New York and in every outdoor scene the actors wore hats. No man of that era would leave his home or place of business not wearing a hat. It was the protocol of the era that dictated proper attire. A gentleman always wore a hat, either an informal cap or a stylish fedora. This unwritten rule of acceptable dress applied to all four seasons of the year.

During our courtship and the early years of our marriage I always looked forward to receiving from my wife, Elaine, a miniature hat box as a birthday or Christmas gift. I would then take it to a haberdashery where I would be fitted with a rakish fedora with a jaunty feather in the hat band. My attachment to the fedora began in my early teen years as a student at a boy's college. It was a visible declaration of approaching manhood.

The male movie stars of that bygone era, Humphrey Bogart, Clark Gable, Gary Cooper, Jimmy Stewart and their contemporaries all wore fedoras both on and off the screen. The HBO television special of last year, *Boardwalk Empire*, set in Atlantic City in the 1920's, along with the ongoing TV hit drama of the 1960's, *Mad Men*, have brought the forgotten fedora back into style.



To wear or not to wear a hat in 2011 is the question. But a word of caution to potential young hat aficionados, good manners still dictate that you don't wear a hat indoors and never at the dining room table. My dear Aunt Kathleen, who was the authority on proper etiquette in our family, insisted that a gentleman remove his hat in the presence of a lady. She also told me that when walking outside with a lady, I should always be on the curb side of a sidewalk to shield her from the traffic. At any time while out strolling, she insisted that a gentleman must "tip his

hat” when approaching a lady. I often wonder how she would react today to our informal way of life. Along with her contemporary, the doyenne of good manners, Emily Post, I am certain she would not be amused.

It was in Hollywood movies of the 1930’s and ‘40’s’ that the fedora became the hat of choice for every shady actor who appeared in underworld films. James Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, Paul Muni and George Raft would not leave home for the studio without wearing a snap brim fedora. The “good guys”, the detectives, “private eyes” and federal “G Men” also wore the standard hat that had a crease on top and was pushed in on both sides.

The precursor of the fedora was introduced by the incomparable French actress of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Sarah Bernhardt. In 1889 on Broadway, she wore a stylish chapeau in the role of “Princess Fedora”. She inspired a fashion trend for women with her debonair bonnet. A similar style hat crossed the gender lines a few years later and quickly became the acceptable formal headdress for men.

I am uncertain of when and why I stopped wearing a fedora but it has been years since I left home or office with one on my old noggin. No doubt it was the rejection of the fedora by my children’s generation that put the once staple headdress out of style. Now, my grandsons and their pals have taken the fedora out of mothballs and on occasion wear one as a “new look” for young males.

I wonder if Stetson still sells those little gift boxed fedoras? I do have a birthday coming up soon!

We get letters and e-mails – our thanks to Paul Park, Barbara Graham, John Weeks, Gail Denton, Scott Payne and Marilyn Adair for their responses to my profiles of Dick Maloney and Al Alberts of The Four Aces. Our readers’ memories often suggest a topic or personality for a tribute column.

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