

Men in Hats

Mary Murphy

*“Wear your hat with an air, with a dash, with a hey
nonny nonny!”*

—Dorothy Stote, *Men Too Wear Clothes*, 1939

Indiana Jones gave his to the Smithsonian. Rick Blaine strolled into the night at the beginning of a beautiful friendship topped with his. Dashiell Hammett wore one as, no doubt, did the Continental Op when he came to clean up Poisonville. Fedoras—those soft felt hats with a snap brim, a lengthwise crease at the crown, pinched at the sides for easy doffing—adorned the heads of the dashing, the dangerous, and the shady in the early part of the twentieth century. They were ubiquitous in Butte.

When the Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographers traversed Montana in the 1930s and early 1940s, they took a lot of pictures of men in hats. Until the 1960s, practically everyone wore a hat when in public. Women’s hats spoke of their sense of fashion and their economic well-being. Men’s hats spoke of their occupation and their urbanity, or lack thereof. Soft caps of wool, tweed, and serge with short visors were common everywhere for both men and boys, but when a man went to work, he commonly wore signature headgear. Ranchers and cowboys wore cowboy hats, dramatic symbols of the mythic West—too new and



Arthur Rothstein. Men in hats lounge in front of the Arcade Bar and Café, Butte, 1939. Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection (LC-USF33-003112-M4).

tidy a cowboy hat marked a dude. Some sheepshearers sported peculiar beanies, the kind of hat that in another world would signal a college freshman. Farmers and loggers snuggled into warm wool hats with practical earflaps that could be pulled down as shields against the bitter Montana cold. Miners in Butte donned hard hats topped with lights when they went underground. But aboveground they wore fedoras.

Fedoras were urban. In 1902, the *New York Times* reported that the city was “thick” with the newly fashionable fedora. The style spread throughout the United States, dominating men’s headgear from the 1920s through the 1940s. Butte men could walk into any of a dozen men’s clothing stores in the 1920s and 1930s and purchase a fedora, or they could order one from the Montgomery Ward catalog for \$2.45 plus 7 cents postage. It was the hat of choice for city men. By the 1920s, the fedora had also become associated with bootleggers, detectives, and newspaper reporters—the characters who would later dominate film noir, the characters who peopled the streets of Butte.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Butte was Montana’s metropolis, a teeming, tumultuous, twenty-four-hour-a-day hive of hard work and hard play. Men and boys filled its streets. Newsboys hawked papers; delivery boys toted bundles of laundry and buckets of beer. Men marched purposefully on their way to work or to the lodge or union hall, and



Arthur Rothstein. Cowboys branding a calf during a roundup, Quarter Circle U Ranch near Birney, Montana, 1939. Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection (LC-USF33-003235- M1).



they lounged on street corners, outside saloons and speakeasies, smoking, talking, ogling girls. It was the odd fellow who didn't wear a hat in his perambulations about the city.

FSA photographers Arthur Rothstein and Russell Lee caught the tail end of this Butte when they came to the city in 1939 and 1942. Assigned to document the Great Depression and the country's recovery, Rothstein and Lee found Butte fascinating.

*Arthur Rothstein. Dudes in town, Billings, Montana, 1939.
Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division,
FSA/OWI Collection (LC-USF33-003092-M3).*

Rothstein photographed the streets in 1939; Lee followed miners to work, home, and the union hall in 1942. Their photographs capture the seriousness of Butte men's work and the vitality of their street life. And they also portray their hats.



Arthur Rothstein. Men in hats and the Art Deco façade of the Board of Trade, Butte, 1939. Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection (LC-USF33-003128-M4).



Russell Lee. Miner waiting to take the cage down into the mine, Butte, 1942. Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection (LC-YSW3-008150-D).



Russell Lee. John Herliby, shift boss, Mountain Con Mine. Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection (LC-USW3-008263-D).



Russell Lee. Playing cards in the Miners' Union Hall, Butte, 1942. Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection (LC-USW3-00968r-D).