

## A CAUTIONARY TALE

“Technology changes us, but in ways we can’t predict”

On October 6, 1909, a middle-aged matron from Richmond, Quebec was tricked into buying a hat she didn’t want. Margaret Nicholson walked the mile to town that morning to cancel her order with Miss Eugenie Hudon, local milliner, but when she arrived at Hudon’s Main Street shop, she found the hat in question had been trimmed in advance.

“I guess I will have to wear it now,” 55 year old Margaret wrote in a letter to her daughter, Edith. “But I find it much too large.”

Yes, hats were big in 1909.

So big in size that filmmaker D. W. Griffith created a comical silent short, *Those Awful Hats*, to be played before each motion picture show, instructing women in the audience to remove their immense flower and feather festooned headpieces so that others could see the screen.

Such big *business* that the millinery industry (defined as the design, crafting and trimming of hats for individual wear) was wanting for skilled workers, even though starry-eyed young women were flocking to the field. Top designers for prestigious department stores earned astronomical salaries – and a gal could dream, couldn’t she?

Miss Eugenie Hudon, it seems, was in one of the era’s ‘glam’ jobs, although she had her worries. Her younger, fashion-conscious customers, like Edith, were moving to Montreal to work. Just a few months before, Edith had splurged big time at Ogilvy’s on a large black hat lushly embellished with pink roses and a giant velvet bow.

It’s no real surprise, then, that Laurier’s Royal Commission on Industrial Training and Technical Education (that federal fact-finding foray into education) recommended in its 1913 final report that dressmaking and millinery be taught in elementary school.

Let’s imagine how this was decided:

Commissioner 1: Now, point 1.2. Millinery. Do we recommend hat-making be taught in schools?

Commissioner 2: Yes, certainly. There’s a demand for skilled workers.

Commissioner 3: And it will save young women the long, unpaid apprenticeships.

Commissioner 1: Yes, capital idea. Women will always love their hats.

Commissioner 3: Couldn’t agree more. Last Spring my wife’s costly new hat flew off on a country drive, sailed into the middle of a muddy field and guess who had to go fetch it!

Commissioner 2: What auto do you drive?

Commissioner 3: A Bergdoll.

Commissioner 2: I drive a Lozier, myself but am thinking of getting a Cadillac.

Commissioner 1: (sarcastically) Not a Model T?

And, hypothetically speaking, the conversation takes a decidedly masculine turn, with the panel over-looking the obvious connection: *Big hats and cars don’t mix.*

A cautionary tale, this. One hundred years ago, in the era of suffragettes, nickelodeons, record immigration, and mass migration to the cities (often to work in factories) many of society’s stakeholders felt a need to strengthen the link between business and schools to address the problems – and potential – of industrialization. With our nebulous ‘new economic reality’ this is happening again. But, if predicting the future job market was difficult in 1910, it’s got to be exponentially harder today.

There are experts a-plenty with important opinions eager to help shape the curriculum, but in times of swift and sweeping change who really has the clearest crystal ball (unclouded by too much self-interest) stakeholders or outsiders?

For instance, had our Royal Commissioners broken off their consultations with captains of industry while in France, 100 years ago, and chatted up a former cabaret dancer turned designer named Coco Chanel, they would have learned first-hand how her scandalously small hats were all the rage among the avant-garde.

Had they popped into a Toronto nickelodeon, they might have noticed how ‘society women’ in D.W. Griffith’s works were made to look haughty and ridiculous in their huge head-dresses, while the sympathetic heroines of those silent films, the doe-eyed waifs, often went bare-headed.

You guessed it, of all the female professions, dressmaking and millinery suffered the most serious decline in the next two decades – for a confluence of reasons hinted at here.

Big hats never did come back into fashion. It could be argued that ‘hair’ is the new ‘hats’, communicating a very different kind of social status at a glance.

Who would have guessed that one hundred years ago?

As it happens, Margaret Nicholson, my husband’s great grandmother, wore her big hat to church that day feeling very self-conscious. At the church door, she met a friend with an even bigger hat and asked to sit beside her so as to lessen her own embarrassment. The Minister’s sermon was a rousing one, however, and she soon forgot all about earthly issues. Still, she doubted if anyone sitting behind could see the pulpit. |

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