



“Felt, Feathers, & Fancy” Reading Comprehension Questions

“Felt, Feathers, & Fancy” is an article about the millinery trade in Renton during the 1910s. Millinery was an important trade in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when hats were considered a necessary part of women's attire. This article discusses the careers of several Renton women who made and sold hats for a living, and how changing times and changing trends affected their profession.

This activity is designed for readers in 7th grade and above. Questions can be used for discussion or as writing prompts. [You can find the original article from June 2018 on Renton History Museum’s Newsletters Page.](#)

1. Millinery is the art of hat-making and hat decoration. Why was it important to women who settled in Renton to have a millinery shop in town?

2. Margaret J. Stafford was a widow who supported her family through her millinery shop at Third and Williams Ave. Based on what you have read about her business, what do you think drew customers to her shop?

3. According to U.S. census data, the three most common jobs women held in 1910 were servant, factory worker, and laundress. Why do you think work as a trimmer in a millinery shop might have seemed like a more attractive profession to women like Rose Chevalier, Minnie Jenkins, Bertha Keller, Mary A. Williams, Gertrude Kavanagh, and Nellie Kavanagh?

4. How was the art of hat making taught? What special skills did aspiring milliners learn?

5. How did hats made in Renton differ from those made in Seattle and on the East Coast?

6. In September 1904, thirteen hat makers and hat shop owners in Spokane were arrested. What were they arrested for? Which law do you think they broke?



7. Why did many millinery shops go out of business in the late 1910s? Name at least two reasons.

8. When milliner's shops closed down, women had to find other places of employment. What new career opportunities were available to women in the 1920s?

Short Essay Question: Feathers, wings, and whole birds were once incorporated into women's hats as decoration. The act of hunting birds and selling them for use on hats was known as the "plume trade." How did the plume trade affect the natural environment? Who took action to stop it?

Creative Essay Question: Imagine that it is 1910 and you work at an advertising agency. Some of your clients are milliners whose shops are in Renton. Choose one of the milliners who are mentioned in the article and create a newspaper ad for their shop. The ad can include a drawing and several lines of text. Think about all the information that customers might need to know before coming to the shop. How would you make your client's shop appealing to potential customers? How will you make your ad stand out from the competing milliners in Renton and Seattle?



Answer Guide for Parents & Teachers

1. Millinery is the art of hat-making and hat decoration. Why was it important to women who settled in Renton to have a millinery shop in town?

Women who settled in Renton wanted to bring fashion from the eastern states with them to the West. Familiar fashions reminded them of home. It was also a widely held belief among the settlers that respectable women should keep their heads covered, so having access to a millinery was important to them.

2. Margaret J. Stafford was a widow who supported her family through her millinery shop at Third and Williams Ave. Based on what you have read about her business, what do you think drew customers to her shop?

Margaret J. Stafford was a skilled businesswoman who drew customers to her shop through advertisements. Her ads announced when new hats arrived in the spring and fall. Ads for Stafford's millinery business also promised customers expert trimmers and the lowest prices. Women shopping at Stafford's knew they could count on being able to purchase the latest styles to impress their friends.

3. According to U.S. census data, the three most common jobs women held in 1910 were servant, factory worker, and laundress. Why do you think work as a trimmer in a millinery shop might have seemed like a more attractive profession to women like Rose Chevalier, Minnie Jenkins, Bertha Keller, Mary A. Williams, Gertrude Kavanagh, and Nellie Kavanagh?

These women may have chosen the millinery profession because the pay was enough to support a single or widowed woman's family. Millinery was also considered a respectable job for women during a time when career opportunities for enterprising women were limited. Unlike work in factories, it was safe and clean, and unlike being a servant or laundress, there were opportunities to be creative.

4. How was the art of hat making taught? What special skills did aspiring milliners learn?

Women who wanted to learn the millinery trade could do so on the job or at schools in major cities. Milliners in training had to learn how to create a frame for a hat, which was then covered and faced. They also learned how to make folds, twists, ends, knots and bows. Draping veils, steaming velvet, pressing silk, and curling feathers were also among the skills learned by prospective milliners. It took practice—according to an account in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, a young woman might need to make between twelve and fifteen hats before she was considered competent.



5. How did hats made in Renton differ from those made in Seattle and on the East Coast?

Hats on the East Coast were more likely to incorporate the feathers or bodies of birds until a series of laws passed between 1900 and 1918 restricted the hunting and trading of bird plumage. Hats in Seattle also incorporated birds, as it was located close to important feather-hunting centers. Feathers were less commonly advertised in Renton, where hats were more likely to be made of straw and decorated with ribbons. Renton hats were less grand than the ones available in Seattle, and when Seattle milliners began advertising in Renton newspapers, local milliners found themselves competing against grander shops.

6. In September 1904, thirteen hat makers and hat shop owners in Spokane were arrested. What were they arrested for? Which law do you think they broke?

In September 1904 thirteen hat-makers and hat shop owners were arrested in Spokane for selling illegal plumage. This was probably in violation of the Lacey Act, passed in 1901. It was the first federal law to prohibit selling illegally captured birds across state lines.

7. Why did many millinery shops go out of business in the late 1910s? Name at least two reasons.

The United States entered World War I in 1917. Around this time, hats became more simplified, as spending on elaborate headwear seemed extravagant and even unpatriotic in wartime. Milliners also struggled to compete with department stores and mail-order catalogues, which delivered lower-priced hats right to customers' doors. As women moved into the workforce during the war, they had less need for fancy clothing and accessories. All these trends meant that custom hats from local shops were no longer in demand.

8. When milliner's shops closed down, women had to find other places of employment. What new career opportunities were available to women in the 1920s?

The 1920s saw the rise of a new set of jobs for women that were more public and more professional. At that time, many more women in Renton had jobs as stenographers, telephone operators, and retail saleswomen than as milliners. Women who were interested in applying the skills learned via the millinery trade found work in department stores and other kinds of apparel shops.

Short Essay Question: Feathers, wings, and whole birds were once incorporated into women's hats as decoration. The act of hunting birds and selling them for use on hats was known as the "plume trade." How did the plume trade affect the natural environment? Who took action to stop it?

Sample Answer: The plume trade harmed the natural environment. Birds like the snowy egret and the Carolina parakeet were hunted so extensively that the snowy egret became endangered and the Carolina parakeet went extinct. In 1875, an editorial in *Harper's Bazaar* decried the hunting of birds for fashion. In 1886, a survey conducted by Frank Chapman identified 174 bird hats with 37 different species on the streets of New York City. Eventually, concerned women took action to try to convince their contemporaries that the plume trade needed to end. Harriet Hemenway and Minna Hall of Boston began hosting tea parties where they educated their peers about the damage the plume trade was doing to bird populations. This led to the creation of the National Audubon Society and legislation to protect American birds. The Lacey Act of 1900 forbade the trading of poached birds across state lines,



and in 1918 the Migratory Bird Treaty Act criminalized the capturing, killing, or selling of any migratory bird or its parts, including nests, feathers, and eggs.

Creative Essay Question: Imagine that it is 1910 and you work at an advertising agency. Some of your clients are milliners whose shops are in Renton. Choose one of the milliners who are mentioned in the article and create a newspaper ad for their shop. The ad can include a drawing and several lines of text. Think about all the information that customers might need to know before coming to the shop. How would you make your client's shop appealing to potential customers? How will you make your ad stand out from the competing milliners in Renton and Seattle?

For this creative essay, students are asked to take on the roles of both a copy writer and graphic designer to create a newspaper ad. Encourage students to think about how they can convey the most important information about a milliner's shop in the most concise way possible. A few questions they may want to think about during the brainstorming process include: How would customers know how to find the shop in an era before GPS and when access to telephones was limited? Based on the information available in the article, what enticed customers to visit a milliner? What might attract a customer's attention visually? Encourage students to underline or highlight anything in the article that might be helpful to them during the ad creation process.

Milliners in Renton in 1910 that students can choose to advertise include Minnie Cope, Margaret J. Stafford, Harriet Cook and her daughter May S. Morrison (page 1, with addresses mentioned on pages 1 and 5). The article discusses Ms. Stafford's advertising techniques on page 5. For real-life examples of milliner's ads in 1910, you may want to take a look through some of the pages of [The 1910 Millinery Trade Review](#) together—it is listed in the additional resources below.



Supplemental Resources (all available at no cost)

Millinery History

History of Milliners – This article gives a synopsis of how millinery came to the US from Europe, and includes a list of famous milliners and their contributions. <https://fashion-history.lovetoknow.com/fashion-clothing-industry/history-milliners>

Millinery Trade Review v. 35 (July-Dec. 1910) – This fascinating collection of periodicals originally published in 1910 contains over 900 pages of ads, illustrations, articles, and instructions for milliners. Some highlights include “How to Build up a Retail Business” on page 61, as well as write-ups about the state of millinery in major cities throughout the U.S. and Europe. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433008194676&view=1up&seq=13>

Exeter History Minute – Milliners – This short video presentation from the Exeter Historical Society in New Hampshire gives an overview of the millinery trade in the eastern U.S. and also explains how the skills women learned in the millinery trade were transferable to other professions. It includes a photo montage of hats. <https://www.facebook.com/ExeterHistoricalSociety/videos/249641413548994/>

Hats Off To Women Who Saved The Birds – This NPR History Department article goes into more depth about the damage caused to the natural world by the plume trade and explains how the boycott led by Harriet Lawrence Hemenway and Minna B. Hall of Boston helped to reverse the trend of hunting birds for hats. <https://www.npr.org/sections/npr-history-dept/2015/07/15/422860307/hats-off-to-women-who-saved-the-birds>

Critical Thinking Questions: Where did the term “milliner” originally come from, and how did its meaning change over time? How did millinery survive as an art form in Europe throughout the latter half of the 20th century? Why do you think milliners read publications such as the *Millinery Trade Review*? How could the skills women learned through millinery be applied elsewhere? What role did Audubon Societies play in ending the plume trade, and what kinds of work do they do today?

1910s Fashion History

The Price of Fashion in 1910 – Large ornamented hats came into fashion as skirts narrowed, and working women in the U.S. wore shirtwaists for function as much as fashion. This slideshow, presented as a supplement to the American Experience documentary *Triangle Fire*, depicts American women’s garments of the 1910s alongside images of the immigrant laborers who made them—often in cramped and dangerous conditions for very little pay. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/triangle-fire-price-fashion-1910/>

Women’s Hats – 1910s – This webpage from the University of Vermont contains a brief showcase of hat styles popular in the 1910s. https://glcp.uvm.edu/landscape_new/dating/clothing_and_hair/1910s_hats_women.php

War Time Fashion – This article is part of a digital history course hosted by Central Connecticut State University. It examines women’s fashions for the wealthy and working classes in America during the



1910s, and explains how the outbreak of World War I caused drastic changes to the fashion industry in both Europe and the United States. <https://library.ccsu.edu/dighistFall16/exhibits/show/women-and-dress--women-s-contr/war-time-fashion>

Critical Thinking Questions: How were shirtwaists made affordable to working-class women? What role did Italian and Jewish immigrants play in the fashion industry? Look at photos and describe the conditions in the clothing factories and sweatshops of the 1910s—do you think working conditions in the fashion industry have changed since then? Why or why not? Why might a fancy hat be an important item to a working-class woman with limited wardrobe options? How did the outbreak of World War I affect the fashion industry in Paris? How did this, in turn, affect the American fashion industry?

Women in the Workplace – Early 20th Century

Women’s Occupations in the Early Twentieth Century – This study was conducted by a genealogical researcher using census data. It lists the top occupations for women in 1910 and 1920, along with the fastest-growing and fastest-declining jobs for women during that time. It also includes explanations for some of the social and societal factors that affected the women’s job market during this time period. <https://www.thesocialhistorian.com/womens-occupations/>

Muller v Oregon – This webpage from Cornell Law School gives a brief synopsis of this 1908 landmark Supreme Court decision, which upheld the constitutionality of Oregon's ten-hour workday for women. Muller was the owner of a laundry who made women work longer than 10 hours, which conflicted with Oregon law. Muller was found to be in violation of the law and made to pay a fine. [https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/muller_v_oregon_\(1908\)](https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/muller_v_oregon_(1908))

Washington State Senate Approves an Eight-Hour Workday for Women on March 2, 1911 – This *HistoryLink* article explains the events that led to the passage of House Bill 12/Senate Bill 74, which limited Washington women’s workdays to 8 hours. Prior to 1910, women in the food service industry, fisheries, canneries, laundries, breweries, hotels, restaurants, and confectioneries faced 10- to 14-hour workdays. Although the bill passed, fishery and cannery workers were excluded. <https://www.historylink.org/File/8315>

50 Most Common Jobs Held By Women 100 Years Ago – Published in 2020, this article examines the top 50 jobs held by women in 1920. It includes photos and a brief description for each type of job. Millinery ranks at number 28. <https://stacker.com/stories/6511/50-most-common-jobs-held-women-100-years-ago>

Critical thinking questions: How do you think *Muller v Oregon* set a precedent for House Bill 12/Senate Bill 74? Women gained the right to vote in Washington in 1910. How do you think this affected the passage of House Bill 12 and Senate Bill 74? Why were fisheries and canneries excluded from the bill? Based on census data, how did age, marital status and country of origin influence the employment status of women between 1900 and 1920? Why do you think the number of women in some professions, such as millinery and servants, sharply declined during this time period, while the number of women in others, such as clerks and telephone operators, sharply rose?