In the Days of Straw Hats

The frescos at Pompeii reveal that hats made from straw and other leaves were used in ancient times to protect the wearer from the sun. Centuries later in The Tempest, Shakespeare mentions “rye-straw hats” as country wear, as does famous diarist Samuel Pepys commenting on a visit to Hartfield in Hertfordshire in 1667. He recorded that his wife “had pleasure in putting on some straw hats which are much worn in this country.”

Hats from English straw, since it was heavy and unwieldy, remained the province of rustics for many years. During the 18th century Regency period in England, the time in which Jane Austen spent most of her adult life, bonnets were all the rage. But far from the embodiment of rural charm, they were made from expensive imported straw from Italy. These “Leghorn Bonnets” were made in Livorno, Italy (known as Leghorn in English) from straw specially treated to become a lovely bleached white. A multitude of plaiters and milliners kept the fashionable men, women and children of the period in a wide array of straw hats and bonnets.

Eventually the straw “boater” arrived on the scene. Also known as a basher, skimmer, cady, katie, somer, sennit hat, or even can-can hat (in Japan), it became a popular men’s summer hat. In France, it is known as a canotier, a fashion prop which French chansonier and actor Maurice Chevalier was rarely seen without.
The “boater” is an oval-shaped hat with a flat brim and straight sides to the moderately deep crown that has a perfectly flat top. It is normally constructed of layers of stiffly woven sennit straw, allowing the hat to be relatively lightweight. Sennit is plaited straw, grass, hemp or similar fibrous material used in the making of hats. The “boater” typically has a solid or striped Petersham or grosgrain ribbon around the crown, very much like the gondoliers in Venice, which is where the hat is said to have originated. Others have opined that it is derived from the flat-topped caps of French sailors, but most believe it was Italian immigrants who carried this hat style all over Europe and to the United States.

The hats of Venetian gondoliers sported a long doppio nastro, in navy and red. It was later modified to a much easier to wear hat-ribbon, also of navy and red. “Il cappello della gente”, or “the hat of the people” caught on like wild-fire with the general public and reached the height of its popularity during the period 1880-1930. It was especially favored among the emerging “middle class,” not only as an everyday hat but as a festive hat for weekend outings. The “boater” also became the costume hat of choice for entertainers, such as vaudeville performers and barbershop quartets. Even FBI agents donned them as an unofficial uniform in the pre-war years. The “boater” was also a very popular hat for boating and sailing. English schools that originally adopted the hat for wear during the summer term fancied it a cut above the ubiquitous school cap. And the ribbons could display the school colours. On the river Cam in Cambridge, the straw “boater” is still worn by the punt chauffeurs who provide passengers with river tours throughout the year.
Straw hats were available in New Orleans for many years prior to the 1880-1930 period. Vincent Nolte & Co. advertised “Straw hats for men and women” in the Orleans Gazette and Commercial Advertiser of June 15, 1818. New Orleans merchant and financier Vincent Nolte was born on November 21, 1779 in Leghorn, Italy (center of the Italian straw hat trade).

VINCENT NOLTE & Co.

Vincent Nolte house, 537 Royal, Toulouse Street side

An advertisement in the Daily Picayune, dated April 27, 1849, promoted the “the Fashionable Hat and Cap Store” of J. Robertson & Co., 31 Canal Street, offering “all kinds of Straw Hats found in our market, such as Panama, Leghorn, Campeachy, Canada Straw, Pedal, Patent and Jenny Lind Hats.” Straw plantation hats were also advertised regularly in ante-bellum New Orleans newspapers.

Author Walker Percy mentions a "hard katy straw" in his novel, The Moviegoer. Emile Frederick Domning (1907-2005), a resident of Ocean Springs, Mississippi, recalled, “Those hats were what we called a straw katy; that was just a cheap straw hat that everybody wore in the summer. It was only good for the summertime. If you wore them past a certain date, anybody that came along and knew anything about it would grab the brim and pull it down, and you'd be looking through the top of it! That's all it was good for, was that summer. The next summer you'd have to buy a new katy - they cost about a
dollar or fifty cents, I don’t know; they were very cheap.”

The word “cadey” may have originated in Lancashire, England, where in 1869 a straw hat was vulgarly called a cady or straw cady. Barrère and Leland’s Dictionary of Slang (1897) suggests that the hat’s shape resembled a “cadi,” the provincial English for a barrel or small cask – or was perhaps worn by a “cadi,” or magistrate, or by the army cadet, who was phonetically known as a “cadee.”

*Straw Hats on Canal Street, 1915*

According to an article in the *Times-Picayune*, dated March 28, 1929, Sir John Fastolfe, who died in 1459, bequeathed among his other effects “a hatte of bever lined with damaske” along with “strawen hattes.” It was not known, reported the paper, whether there were other “strawen hattes” in England at that time, “but if there were any they were rare and expensive treasures, imported from the continent, where the art of weaving straw was flourishing in Lorraine, Tuscany and Milan.” The first straw hats made in the British Isles were, according to the article, manufactured in Scotland. “Mary Queen of Scots brought some straw weavers from Lorraine to Scotland in 1552 to teach the trade to the Scotch.” But, as stated earlier, “straw hats for years were only worn by countrymen.”

In New Orleans, straw katys, or skimmers, could be seen all over the city during the warmer months. And since they were worn by all strata of society, customs came along to regulate their use.
An article in the March 30, 1925 issue of the *Times-Picayune* announced that the following day would be “Straw hat day,” the day when any wife, mother or sister (who permitted any men in the family to wear a felt hat after midnight on the 30th) would be “failing in her duty to fashion and to the maintenance of New Orleans’ reputation as ‘the Paris of America.’”

City Officials model their straw hats in 1925 New Orleans

According to the paper, “Captain Anthony Sambola of picturesque memory used to speed summer hats by using them as cannon fodder and any man caught wearing a woven katy on or after the fall day annually selected for their doom automatically exposed himself to assault and hatlessness.”

The annual salute, known in the city as “Boom! Boom!” was conducted each October under the auspices of Captain Sambola at the levee at the head of Canal Street and later at Elks Place and Canal, where some 100 “bombs” were set off. These bombs were, according to the *Picayune*, specially made with the help of a Chinese fireworks expert who enclosed in each burst a “big hat made out of tissue paper” folded within each charge. After “a screech and a roar,” the hat unfolded and “began to descend, held in equilibrium by nicely-adjusted lead weights.”
Anthony Sambola, a veteran of the Fifth Company, Washington Artillery, was born in New Orleans, February 29, 1836, the son of Francisco Sambola, who came to Louisiana from Catalonia, Spain. He graduated from Spring Hill College in Mobile and in 1859 was graduated in law at the University of Louisiana, whereupon he began his practice in the city. He fought gallantly in numerous battles on the Confederate side during the Civil War, including Shiloh, Chickamauga and Missionary Ridge. In 1874, he was commissioned captain in the State national guard and was also involved in politics, serving two years in the legislature. For eleven years, he served as judge of the second recorder’s court, much of the time presiding. But his greatest fame came from putting his skills as artillerist to use each year and blowing New Orleans straw hats to smithereens in cannons.
Noted New Orleanians and their straw hats, March 28, 1929

The annual custom provided that after the October Straw Hat Day festivities, that if a man is seen on the streets wearing a straw hat he is followed by all the urchins and every man who sees him, crying ’Boom! Boom!

Eliza Moore Chinn McHatton Ripley (1832 - 1912) mentioned the beloved cannoneer in her Social Life in Old New Orleans, Being Recollections of my Girlhood:

“In the tiny parlor was a life-size, full-length portrait of a Confederate officer in full uniform, Captain Sambola, of the Washington Artillery.”

In 1902, Sambola (now referred to as “General Sambola”) commanding the Department of the Gulf, was on hand for the twenty-fifth anniversary of his incumbency. The Master of Ceremonies and artillerist for so many Straw Hat Days before “commanded in person the detachment that fired 100 guns at 1 o’clock in the evening in Elk Place, on Basin Street, near Canal.” For many generations New Orleanians celebrated the end of hot and humid summers each October with “Captain Sambola’s Annual Shooting of the Straw Hat.”
General Sambola would not live long enough to see the following October. He died June 12 1903. “Hundreds of eyes grew moist,” reported the Picayune, “as they witnessed the sounding of ‘taps’ over the Grave of Judge Anthony Sambola, in St. Vincent de Paul’s Cemetery.” Hundreds of hearts were touched with “the sad, mournful notes of the bugle, calling the soldier to his last farewell.”

The bugler was Professor Charles E. Boehler, who was allowed to sound the final call as a special favor. Judge Sambola and Professor Boehler’s father were lifelong friends. Twelve years before, the Professor and Judge Sambola “took a drink in the Sazerac one afternoon.” Sambola told him that he proposed to make sure “taps” was “sounded over the grave of every member of his old company that passed away.” He asked Boehler, “Charley, if I die before you, I want you personally, to do me the same service.”

Charles Boehler kept that promise and announced at Captain Sambola’s funeral that he woud “free of charge” play “taps” over the grave of every member of the old Fifth Company, Orleans Artillery – the company of his father and that of the ever-popular straw hat destroyer, Anthony Sambola.
Tombstone of Captain Anthony Sambola

Today there are not as many straw boaters around, but they are donned from time to time by those fashionably inclined. A beautifully crafted skimmer made in Venice, Italy, can be purchased at Meyer the Hatter on St. Charles. Prices, however, have changed since Sambola’s time.

Another place to see a boater or two is at a performance of THE LAST STRAWS, a wonderful jazz orchestra formed back in 1957. Co-founder and drummer Bobby McIntyre describes the original band as “a group of four white-collar uptowners” that “gave birth to a Dixieland Band.” Soon there were “four downtowners” who joined. Beginning at the original Bruno’s and entertaining folks all around the Crescent City, the band has gone on to represent traditional New Orleans jazz across the globe. Ella Fitzgerald performed with the band in Vienna, Austria. The STRAWS also appeared on NBC’s Today show.
THE LAST STRAWS liven things up

Judge Anthony Sambola, Boss of Boom! Boom!, presided over Straw hat days for twenty-five years, and was lovingly remembered for many years afterward. The STRAWS have been around almost sixty years, longer than the predominant years of straw hats in the Crescent City, 1880-1930. In New Orleans, it’s all about getting a bang out of life.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
“In the Days of Straw Hats”
Ned Hémard
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