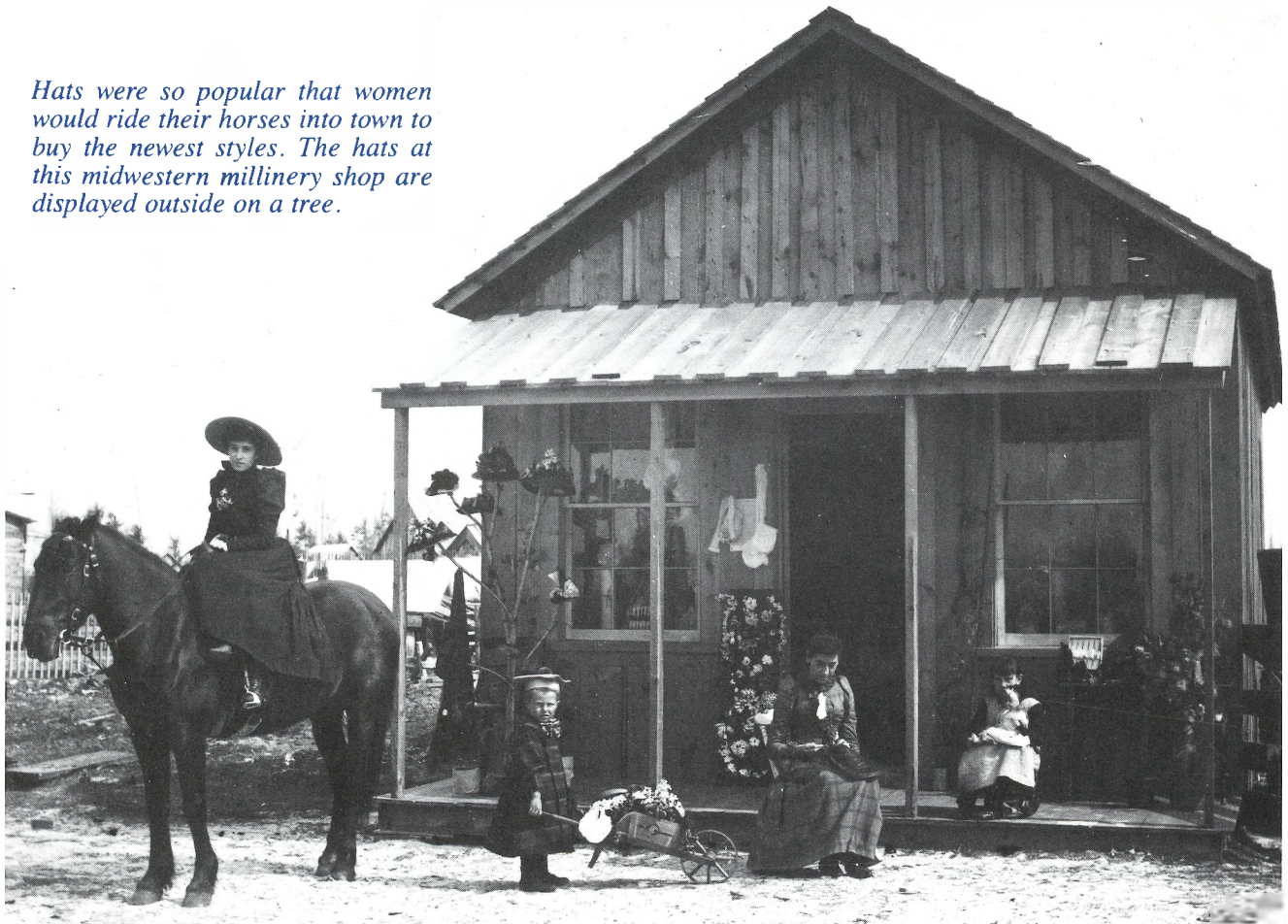


Hats were so popular that women would ride their horses into town to buy the newest styles. The hats at this midwestern millinery shop are displayed outside on a tree.



Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin

In the Millinery Shop

TWENTY-YEAR-OLD Elizabeth Wright Heller sold hats in 1880 at Mrs. Ann Swezey's millinery shop in Marengo, Iowa. "It was fun to sell hats and I had very good luck at it," Heller recalled. "So I tried them on myself to show them off, and usually made a sale."

Hats were an important accessory for a nineteenth-century woman's wardrobe. Women wore a hat or bonnet whenever they left the house.

Some women bought a new hat every season or for special occasions. While hats were available from general stores and mail-order catalogs, most women preferred buying individually designed hats at local millinery shops.

A **milliner** designed, trimmed, and sold hats and bonnets. Most nineteenth-century Iowa millinery shops were owned and managed by women. In the 1870s and 1880s, millinery work



Gilbert Irish Collection. SHSI

Women at this Iowa City millinery shop are ready for the Christmas rush of customers.

was the third most popular employment for women.

The majority of milliners were single women. However, one study found that almost one-third of Iowa milliners in 1880 were married women.

Owning a millinery shop was one of the few socially accepted ways women could own businesses. Mostly men operated other types of stores. A milliner had a wide variety of duties. She was a buyer, designer, stocker, salesclerk, advertising manager, and accountant.

Milliners were creative in designing hats. Edith Jacks, a nineteenth-century milliner, remembered “fashioning those . . . wire frames with silk or lace; then decorating them with flower and vegetable gardens.” Milliners also designed hats with colored feathers, satin ribbons, and clusters of artificial birds and fruit.

Besides hats, millinery shops sold ladies cuffs, collars, gloves, sewing supplies, fashion magazines, and the current dress patterns. The shops provided rural Iowa women with the

current fashion styles of eastern cities. An 1873 newspaper advertisement for Pratt and Strub, an Iowa City millinery, read: “Nowhere else are the equals of our millinery offers to be found. We believe we are the only house where original New York Pattern Hats are to be found.”

Some milliners traveled to eastern cities to buy new hats. Mrs. Whitcomb, a Hampton milliner, visited Chicago every spring to select new styles. “Pausing from biting off a thread or plying her needle to a bit of straw,” remembered Oney Fred Sweet, “she told of her personal contacts with the famous ones of the metropolis.”

Women also flocked to local millinery shops to meet friends and socialize. “Every afternoon the narrow space inside the walls of packing boxes was crowded. After school we girls always went there,” wrote one novelist. “Married women began to call each other by their first names. In the milliner shop they chattered like girls, laughed, and spoke without thinking.” □