

At first, settlers and travelers in the American West wore whatever hats they had worn back home: knit caps, wool derbies, or straw sombreros.

Some wore old sea captain's caps; others wore army hats, calico sunbonnets, homburgs, slouch hats, or even silk high hats. Everyone wore some kind of hat, though, because the weather was likely to be either burning sunshine, drenching rain, whipping wind, or swirling snow. A hat was important protection.

One hat would come along that was particularly well suited to frontier life. This is the true story of that amazing hat – the hat that won the West.

In the 1840s, while explorers pushed on through new territory and pioneers tamed the mountains and plains of the West, twelve-year old John Batterson Stetson sat on a high wooden stool, working along with his father and his eleven brothers and sisters in the family's tiny, damp hatmaker's shop in Orange, New Jersey.

The Stetsons made hats the same way hatters had done it for years; by pressing felt, made from wet fur and wool, over a wooden form to shape it. John sat at the worktable and dreamed of the West he'd heard customers and neighbors talk about.

Out west there were clear skies, roaming buffalo, and the promise of adventure. Everyone seemed to be going there. Everyone except hatmakers. It wasn't until years later, when the dampness and steam of the shop had weakened his lungs and he became sick with tuberculosis, that John Stetson decided to go west himself. If he wanted to see the West, he couldn't wait. So he headed to the town where the West began: St. Joseph, Missouri, the jumping-off point where people bought gear and supplies for their journey to the goldfields.