

## “Hat Man” Last Of A Vanishing Breed



Dahmen's "wheel fence" starts in front of his house and loops around a small pasture.

### MORE THAN 1,000 WHEELS

## Steel “Wheel Fence”

An antique steel “wheel fence”, made from more than a thousand antique steel wheels welded together, has become a landmark for people passing by the farm of Steve Dahman, Uniontown, Wash.

The “wheel fence” starts in front of Dahmen’s house, goes by an old barn, up a hill, loops around a 3 1/2-acre pasture, then finally heads back to the house again.

“A lot of people stop on the highway to take photos of it,” says Dahmen, who got the idea for his “wheel fence” about 25 years ago. “A day never goes by that four or five people don’t stop. We also get students from photography classes who come in groups or individually.

“My wife, Junette, is an artist, and I guess she kind of inspired me to do this. I feel the fence is a continuing sculpture, not just an enclosure for the pasture. With the recent addition of a new section of fence there are now 1,004 wheels in the fence, and I still have a few more to add.”

Wheels come from every kind of machine, including side delivery rakes, threshing machines, push-binder wheels, steam engines, baby buggies, tractors, rotary hoes,

wagons, etc. There are also a few cogged gears of every kind, large and small.

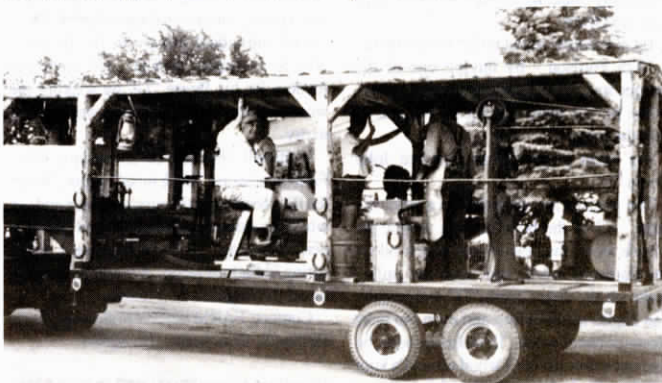
Dahmen started with antique dump rake wheels that he used to make a simple, attractive gate. One winter he started to add more wheels outward from the gate. After that, it just continued to grow. When friends saw what he was doing they became interested and began bringing in wheels they dug out of their junk piles. The Dahmens also advertised for wheels in local publications and bought them at junkyards and estate sales.

Dahmen says his most unusual wheel is a 6-ft. high gear wheel that a farmer dug out of a field. “No one can figure what kind of equipment it’s from.”

Once the Dahmens had an offer from a California man who wanted to buy the fence for \$50,000. He was going to reconstruct it near Los Angeles. They turned down the offer.

Dahmen and his wife offer a guest book for visitors to sign, along with photocopied information on the fence.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Steve Dahmen, Box 62, Uniontown, Wash. 99179 (ph 509 229-3369).



Swiderski built a blacksmith shop on flatbed trailer and bolted tools to it.

### WINS FIRST PRIZE AT NEARLY ALL PARADES

## “Blacksmith Shop On Wheels” Parade Float

Ray Swiderski, Willingdon, Alberta, started working in a blacksmith shop back in 1942 and, although he later got into the farm equipment salvage business, in the back of his mind he always wanted to have his own complete blacksmith shop. This year he finally put one together, mounting it on a flatbed trailer so he could take it around and show people.

“We took it to 7 parades last summer and we won first prize 6 times and took second prize at the other one. People love seeing the equipment operate,” says Swiderski.

He started with a new IH flatbed trailer and started bolting equipment to it including: heavy blacksmith grinding stone, trip hammer, regular blacksmithing forge, anvil, wet stone, vice, cross-cut saw, axe and

“I found this hat buried two feet under when I was plowing one day.”

“This hat is 50 years old. It belonged to my great-grandfather . . .”

Hundreds of well-worn, ill-used and much-loved felt cowboy hats from all over the world sit stacked on a shelf in the back room of a shop in Bryan, Texas, with notes like those above attached to their brims. A separate document lists each hat’s ailments like a diagnostic manual: Soiled, greased, sweat-stained, holes in crown, blood stained, soft, no body, nap-worn, etc.

The room isn’t a graveyard. It’s a waiting room for hats on the way to complete restoration at the hands of Catalena Hatters, a professional hat shop that renovates old felt hats to like-new condition.

First all old leather - the lining and band - is removed. Then surface dirt is removed and stains chemically treated. The hat is then washed in a chemical solution and dried. Stiffener is applied, and the hat is steam blocked to the correct head size and crown height, making it larger or smaller, if desired.

Next, the hat is ironed and the felt reworked to regain color and finish. Since no two hats are alike, this step requires extensive handwork. Finally, the hat brim is pressed and a new leather band, silk liner and trim or ribbon is added and the hat goes through a final inspection.

“Some hats come out better than others,” says co-owner Carolyn Catalena who, with her husband Sammy Catalena, has operated the shop for 11 years. “Hats that are 40 to 50 years old are hard to work on but the time is well-spent because those hats are usually so well-made.”

About 50 percent of their business is by mail order. Hats come in from Thailand, Australia, New Zealand, Russia, China, Japan and Canada, to name a few. During summer, turn-around time is 4 to 6 weeks.



Hat is ironed and reworked to regain color and finish.

In winter, it takes about 2 1/2 months.

The oldest hat the Catalenas ever renovated was 63 years old sent in by a 77-year old man who bought the hat as a teenager and had never had it cleaned.

The Catalenas also sell custom-made hats. Customers select hat size, brim size, crown height, and how many “X’s” they want, which is a measure of felt quality. For example, a 5X hat is made primarily of rabbit fur. A 10X hat is half rabbit and half beaver. A 20X hat, almost all beaver, is the highest quality felt. Orders come in for everything from 10-gal. cowboy hats to top hats and fedoras.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Catalena Hatters, 203 N. Main, Bryan, Texas 77803 (ph 409 822-4423).

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## Cowboy Hat Care

A common mistake made by felt hat owners is to keep them in a box. “A hat in a hat box will lose its shape,” says Carolyn Catalena. “It also attracts silverfish and moths.”

She suggests keeping it in a plastic bag instead and hanging it on a peg for storage. “Don’t let it touch the wall or another hat. You can also keep it on a stand or possibly upside down.”

Climate control is important because heat makes hats “melt” and lose their shape, she says. If a hat gets soaking wet, Catalena advises pulling the leather headband inside out and resting the hat on it.

“Don’t handle the hat until it’s completely dry. Then it may need reshaping.”

Catalena advises treating stains, such as blood and alcohol, by running a small amount of cold water on the area as soon as possible and scraping off residue so the stain won’t set.

All of the above hints apply to felt hats of all qualities. Straw hats are a different story.

“A straw hat is pretty much a disposable hat. If it’s stretched, shrunk, stained or scorched, there’s really not much you can do for it.”

draw knife, rim shanker, and other miscellaneous equipment.

“It takes five people to operate the float. One on the trip hammer, one on the forge, one on the grinding stone, a candy girl to throw treats to the crowd, and a truck driver to pull it. A stationary IHC 5 hp. water-

cooled engine provides power to the trip hammer and grinding wheel,” says Swiderski.

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