

The straw braid industry

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The following are the principal reasons for the indisputable superiority of its products :

1. The collaboration of highly qualified technical and commercial cadres, thanks to a centuries' old tradition with regard to manufacture and export.
2. The technical development of the auxiliary industries, particularly that of dyeing.
3. Continually modernised mechanical equipment.
4. A man-power associated with the ribbon industry, in most cases for generations, which loves its work and goes in for quality by atavism, and to whose

professional training manufacturers have always devoted and still devote all their care and attention.

The effects of these four causes enabled the silk ribbon industry to adapt itself successfully about the year 1920 to working with rayon and to survive the upheavals brought about by changing fashions in women's hair styles and the difficulties of the war and post-war years. The principle of quality, which Swiss ribbon manufacturers have made a rule, explains why « Basle ribbon » is appreciated the world over, and is a guarantee for the future of this typical branch of the Swiss export industry.



THE STRAW BRAID INDUSTRY

by A. ZWAHLEN, President of the Association of the Millinery-Braid Manufacturers, Wohlen



The hat braid industry of Aargau has achieved world-wide fame in its own particular line, although its development has never equalled that of other famous Swiss industries. Its products are to be found in hat factories and milliner's salons all over the world. And yet the general public is hardly aware of their existence, for they do not appear on the market in the form of finished products, but in the semi-manufactured state.

In Paris, London and New York, when Madam pays a visit to the milliner's to buy a new spring hat, what matters most is that her new acquisition should be a reflection of the latest Paris fashions. As a general rule she hardly gives a thought to the name of the manufacturer and still less to the origin of the raw materials. It is for these reasons that in the glittering world of fashion the Aargau braid industry remains somewhat in the background. However, although behind the scenes, its role is none the less important.

Plaited hats made their appearance in Switzerland in the middle of the 17th century. It was a modest beginning — craft work carried out in the home — before becoming a great industrial activity on an international scale, centred at Wohlen, a small market town in the canton of Aargau.

If we still speak of the Aargau « straw industry », it is because in the early days rye straw was used exclusively in the making of braid by hand in the home. But things have changed since then, not only as regards the raw materials used but also the methods of work. After other natural fibres had been adopted for plaiting such as raffia, cotton, silk, hemp, horse-hair and various bark fibres, synthetic products with a cellulose (rayon) base began to be plaited just before the first World War. Furthermore, the mechanisation of Switzerland's industries, which had been taking place at an ever increasing pace since the 19th century, also affected this branch and caused the making of straw braid and other work done by hand to fall off considerably.

Nevertheless work done by hand, whether in the factory or in the home, continued to have a certain

importance owing to the fact that there are some articles and operations which cannot be carried out by machine.

In normal times, and particularly during the winter season, the straw braid industry, including its auxiliary industries, employs some 2,500 to 3,000 people. These are small numbers it is true, but they can be seen in their true perspective when it is considered that this industry is confined to only a small part of Switzerland, which is essentially rural in character.

There are few outlets in the country itself, and that is why attention was focussed on export right from the very start. Now where millinery is concerned it is a strict rule that the final finishing operations are best carried out at, or as near as possible to the place where the article is to be sold to the public. This is the reason why even to-day, as for the last 200 years, the products of Wohlen are despatched to the workshops of the great towns, to the fashion centres of Paris, London and New York, where they are worked on by the milliners who use them to make their creations; they are also used by hat manufacturers (see article below).

It may be wondered how it is that in a country district of Switzerland, far from all the world fashion centres, an industry so essentially connected with luxury fashion should have succeeded not only in surviving but even, these last few years, in maintaining

its lead. It must be pointed out that this industry is seasonal, that it is dependent on fashion and is only practised in the winter months, from October to May. It does not provide all the year round employment for its workers. That is why conditions in Aargau are so ideal, for most of the population which is occupied in agriculture during the summer months, is free during the winter to work in the straw braid industry. Moreover the energy and enterprise of the manufacturers and merchants play a decisive role with regard to competition, for the existence of their industry depends on the manufacture of high-grade products, on the continual creation of novelties and on a rational organisation of labour.

In Aargau therefore the greatest attention is paid to the professional training of the technical staff; the mechanical plant is continually improved and brought up to date. During these last ten years many technical improvements have been effected in the Swiss straw braid industry. Most of the basic materials used to-day for the manufacture of braid are made in Switzerland.

The strength of this Aargau industry lies principally in the production of novelties and, in this respect, the results have been remarkable, for the manufacturers remain in close touch with Paris, the centre of world fashions, and with the principal markets of both the old and new worlds.



THE MILLINERY INDUSTRY

by Dr. H. R. LÄNG, Erlenbach (Zurich)

It might easily be said that the hat is to a certain extent the dot on the «i» of chic. Without it the silhouette of the best dressed of women would be lacking in harmony and grace. That is why the hatless fashion, the nightmare of the milliner, which is considered by some to be an expression of woman's emancipation, appears to many others as the sign of the worst neglect and consequently deserving only to be despised.

The field of millinery, more than any other, is subject to the sudden passing whims of fashion. The manufacture of women's hats is therefore largely ruled, from the economic point of view, by seasonal variations in production and the great risks arising out of sudden changes in taste; it may therefore be considered as the perfect example of an industry entirely dependent on fashion.

In Switzerland, as in France where the fashion of the day is dictated, the original form of this activity was the small workshop of the milliner who sold, in addition to her own creations, copies of Parisian models imported by wholesalers. The situation changed completely after the first World War when the sudden vogue for felt and straw hats, to the detriment of hats made of fabrics, developed mechanical production while striking a blow at manufacture by hand. The factories opened up at this time were able to meet almost entirely the requirements of the home market as regards hats of the simple type and in the lower price brackets. On the other hand, the «model»

