

# LAUREL & HARDY: THE HAT FACTS (Part 1)

## By Tyler St. Mark

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Exploring the numerous Laurel & Hardy websites worldwide, it appears that the subject of the legendary team's film wardrobe comes up frequently. Most often discussed, of course, is their derbies. Perhaps it's ironic that their most notable lost film is titled "Hat's Off" (1927) because also missing from public record are the simple facts pertaining to Stan and Ollie's iconic headwear.

When I began seriously researching Stan Laurel not long after his passing in 1965, I was eleven years old and, along with my best friend, already celebrated in our community for our impersonation of Laurel & Hardy. We were often excused from class to give special performances, appear in local talent shows, or participate in charity events and, by the time we entered high school, we had our own professional touring company and were being interviewed in newspapers nationwide as an exceptional novelty act.



The author & his derby, age 15, as Stan Laurel in 1969

No doubt this greatly influenced certain producers in 1975 to cast me in the very first theatre production based on the life of the 74 year old comedian aptly titled, "An Evening With Mr. Laurel," even though I was greatly younger than the comedy legend and would have to undergo several hours of aging makeup created and applied by Don Post Studios.

Additionally, with relatives and mentors firmly entrenched in the entertainment industry, I was fortunate to have extraordinary access to those who had known and/or had collaborated with Stan and Babe during their illustrious career. However, if youth is wasted on the young, then so is opportunity since I shamefully took for granted the information I obtained from these gracious and insightful people who worked and played with Stan & Ollie; failing to make any permanent record of their insights. So, I've forgotten far more about Laurel & Hardy than I can recall now.

Nonetheless, one of the subjects I have managed to retain the facts about is Stan Laurel's film wardrobe. The original motive for procuring this information was merely to achieve an accurate costume of my own. Many years later now, it appears the information I gleaned back then is unknown to many in the Laurel & Hardy Fancy today; so I hope to resolve a few uncertainties regarding Dick und Doof's Derbies.

Among the past resources for this obscure information were people behind the scenes like costume designer Sam Benson and wardrobe assistant Carlyle Hughes who were among those responsible for providing Stan and Babe's wardrobe at Hal Roach Studios and later at 20<sup>th</sup>

Century Fox and M-G-M. “Sammy” Benson was not only a great wardrobe supervisor, he was a close friend of my Pop and so was his daughter, Marjorie. When she heard in 1974 that we were involved with a play based on the life of Stan Laurel, she was of particular assistance. Marjorie helped us track down many rare items for our theatre production and patiently answered even my silliest questions regarding her late father’s history with Stan going back to the early days of the Hal Roach Studios.

Carlyle was also a long time family friend and had worked as a wardrobe assistant at various studios during the 30s and 40s, mostly serving when and where needed. “Lyle” knew just about everything there was to know about period costumes from seams to buckles. He worked at MGM while Stan and Babe were there and his specialty was making a man look plausible in a dress—whenever necessary. Lyle knew every star’s wardrobe foibles as well as all of the studio gossip. Pop used to say that “Lyle knows which star needs padding and which needs paddling.” Lyle himself often mused archly that he “never met a mannequin I didn’t like.”

Another resource was Ruth Burch, a veteran casting director who had known The Boys well and worked with them in at least one film. She, like the Bensons and Hughes, was very helpful to us during those years we were researching Stan and gathering obscure facts about the team.



Stan with trademark high crowned flat-brim derby

So here you are; straight from these and other notable industry colleagues who knew or worked with The Boys: the “hat facts” as best I can recall them...

Stan’s normal hat size was in fact  $7 \frac{1}{8}$  (His daughter, Lois Laurel-Hawes, has confirmed this; she has several of her father’s street hats). However, he deliberately wore his character derby (he rarely called it a bowler) a size or two smaller so that it sat higher on his head. So, his derbies were usually  $6 \frac{7}{8}$  or an English size 7. Babe’s hat size was, of course, larger;  $7 \frac{1}{2}$  -  $7 \frac{3}{4}$  but here’s an inside secret; in those films where they mix up their hats, Babe’s derby was usually substituted with an even larger one—so that it would look so humorously oversized on Stan and, likewise, Stan’s derby was substituted for an even smaller one when placed on Babe’s head.

Contrary to popular belief (and the Roach publicity department), Stan and Ollie did not wear one particular brand of derby—they wore whatever the wardrobe department could obtain at the time which included numerous brands and several variations over the years. The reason for this was purely economical. The Boys went through a shipload of derbies; both as wardrobe and as props. Although, for the sake of continuity, they attempted to retain the same derby in each film; Laurel & Hardy could go through as many as a dozen derbies in a month of film-making. This doesn’t include the derbies they gave away to friends, visitors, and colleagues visiting the lot. Nor does it include derbies worn by their stand-ins or stunt doubles. Our Gang’s “Stymie” Beard was the recipient of one of Stan’s derbies which he wore proudly during his brief film career and

afterward. Stan even took to keeping spare derbies on hand as he didn't have the heart to refuse anyone brazen enough to ask for one as a keepsake.

Although he wore a traditional derby in their initial films, Stan soon adopted a flat-brimmed derby (1 to 1.5 inches) with a high crown (4.5 to 5 inches). Some devotees have described it as an Irish or school boy derby; others refer to it as an equestrian or riding derby. Some aficionados insist that Stan chose this style to look more impish and childlike, lending additional innocence to his character. Others maintain the riding derby was associated with the "rich and snooty" back then and this, along with his standup collar and batwing bowtie, gave his bohemian character a kind of half-assed dignity. My recollection regarding Stan's reason in choosing this style is simple; he thought the short brim and higher crown made him look thinner and funnier.

In any case, whenever derbies with a "stingy" brim could not be found for Stan, the studio hatter would simply cut the brim down by another half inch or so and replace the grosgrain edge trim. If in a hurry, the trim was glued rather than sewn and, if you look closely in several film stills where Stan's derby has been drenched, the brim edge-trim appears to have come loose in places.

Eventually, the studio hired a local hatter who made custom hat molds for The Boys so that their derbies would look consistent from film to film. Of course, Stan's derby was often customized for films like *The Bohemian Girl*. I was told that the eight inch crown was achieved simply (and cheaply) by cutting the brim off one of Stan's derbies and stacking it on top of another, then hiding the seam with an extra wide cloth hat band.



Stan & Ollie might go through a dozen derbies in a month of filming

Although Stan always wore a firm or "stiffed felt" derby in his Roach films, when Laurel & Hardy worked for 20th Century Fox and MGM, he was remanded to wearing a soft felt derby—again for budgetary reasons. Sammy (Benson) told my Pop that one of the many outrages suffered by Stan while at Fox was the studio's insistence upon exercising total authority over their wardrobe and makeup. When Stan balked, the studio issued an ultimatum; either Laurel & Hardy wore what they were told or they would pay for their own wardrobe! Stan, who always had creative control over their films at Roach Studios, never forgot or forgave Fox for this and other grave offenses. Forever afterward, he bitterly referred to them as "those Fox people."

As a result of this clash over costuming, Sammy had to deftly maneuver between what Fox execs demanded and what Stan insisted their characters would wear. Not surprisingly, Stan's wardrobe in these final films looks a bit awkward; his character seems almost uncomfortable wearing the winter-weight tweed double-breasted suits that Fox insisted upon. In many film stills and publicity photos, his wardrobe appears somewhat stiff and ill-fitting. Stan may not have been amused with his wardrobe at Fox but he did, in his own way, have the last laugh!

Regardless, Stan actually grew to appreciate the durability and comfort of the soft felt derby, according to Sammy's daughter, Marjorie, and wore them for the remainder of his film career. Indeed, according to Lois (his daughter) by the late 40s, Stan was obtaining them from a Los Angeles hattery which kept a supply of "schoolboy" derbies for a nearby parochial school.

Upon the passing of his beloved film partner in 1957, Stan stated simply, "That is the end of Laurel & Hardy." As if to underscore this, Stan never publicly donned another derby after that. At least no photograph appears to exist in which he is wearing one. Indeed, according to his daughter, by the time he settled in at the Oceana in Santa Monica during the late 50s, he no longer owned a derby. According to a close friend of his at the time, when asked if he desired to have one on hand, he replied dismissively, "What for?"



Stan grew to appreciate the flexible soft-felt derby

For the collector, of course, having one of Stan or Babe's original derbies is the "holy grail" of Laurel & Hardy memorabilia and, although I have inspected perhaps a half dozen of them in forty-five years, only a few of them were likely the genuine article. This is because, during their countless public appearances, The Boys often donned random derbies handed to them for a quick photo or to oblige an eager fan or official. An example would be the derbies momentarily modeled by Stan and Babe during their appearance on *This Is Your Life* (1954). Stan's derby is clearly larger than usual with a wide curved brim. These "ad hoc" hats would eventually become identified as authentic Laurel & Hardy wardrobe. One such derby, neither Stan's style nor his size, sold online a few years ago for \$5,500. However one of Stan's later soft-felt derbies, (likely the last he ever wore) sold at Christy's recently for over \$26,000 underscoring its rarity.

However, uncovering an authentic derby worn by Stan or Babe is not as impossible as you might think. Film and theatrical wardrobe has a short career and a very long storage life. Roach, like most film studios at the time, wasted little and recycled everything. Worn or damaged wardrobe was recycled for shabbier film characters. With a patch here or re-stitch there, the item would easily suit a hobo, factory worker, or perhaps a field hand in the next two-reeler!

So then it goes to reason that not every hat and/or derby thrashed by The Boys during film production would have been discarded. Some most certainly found their way back to the Roach Studios Wardrobe Department and, subsequently, out into the world. Remember, studios didn't view this stuff the way they do today. Back then, wardrobe was considered, well, wardrobe and sat for years unused before being sold to another studio or a costume company or a wardrobe warehouse. Few items were catalogued or labeled in those days so it is like searching for diamonds in a coal mine to locate an authentic wardrobe relic but, every so often, a precious gem will suddenly reveal itself as if to say, "At last you found me—what took so long?!"

This is the perfect opportunity to tender my firm belief that such memorabilia has a mind of its own. We do not find these wonderful artifacts so much as they find us and we never really own them, we are merely their caretakers and, therefore, have a supreme obligation to share them with the world, particularly younger generations of film fans. Respectfully, those who collect these wonderful relics merely to horde, posture, or impress others do no real service to the memory of Laurel & Hardy and waste valuable opportunities to inspire new enthusiasts.

That being said, Stan and Babe went through literally hundreds of hats during their career—like Buster Keaton. In fact, a math wiz once calculated for me the odds of coming across one of Laurel & Hardy’s derbies—and the statistical possibility might amaze you! However, you need patience, diligence and, of course, to know where to look. These wardrobe relics are rarely marked but may often bear indubitable evidence which points to their authenticity. For example, Stan often wrote or printed his name on the inward facing (hidden) sweatband. Stan labeled most personal items—a habit from his music hall days to distinguish his property. He even had some of his derbies imprinted on the outward facing sweatband with his name but few are known to have survived intact—the custom lettering simply wore off with use over time.



The St. Mark Collection

The collector’s grand prize: one of Stan’s early flat-brim derbies

Derbies which were handled in their films (not just worn) by The Boys were usually stamped inside with the Hal Roach Studios brand as they were considered props rather than wardrobe. Bernie Hogya ([LettersFromStan.com](http://LettersFromStan.com)) has one such derby in his collection. These are the type most often found today as they were numerous and often acquired by crew or studio personnel. To add to the confusion, derbies worn by Laurel & Hardy’s stand-ins or stunt doubles were often identically marked so it’s not always easy to determine the exact provenance of every studio hat.

Although they are forever identified with their trademark derbies, Laurel & Hardy actually wore more *other* hats in their 106 films together. Yes, film for film, Stan and Ollie wore bowlers less often than you may think. Part of the reason for this was simply that Stan loved wearing different hats (figuratively and literally) and spared no opportunity to crown their characters with different headgear whenever and wherever possible in their scripts. Even between films, when they went off on their European tours, The Boys eagerly donned a variety of hats; berets in Paris, balmorals in Scotland, tamoshanters in Ireland. And more often than not, in the countless photos which chronicle their theatrical treks across the continents, Stan is wearing one of several fedoras he favored and, upon occasion, he would flip the wide brim up in front for humorous affect.

Most importantly, Mr. Laurel understood what was necessary to project the correct balance between their characters’ idiocies and the “half-assed dignity” (as Stan called it) they desperately strived to maintain in their films which only makes their lunacies funnier. Their film wardrobe, particularly their derbies, was always a vital part of this conspiracy between dumb and dapper.

Part 2 of “The Hat Facts,” will address some of the numerous other hats worn by Laurel & Hardy both in and outside of their films.

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