



AS GREELEY HAT WORKS APPROACHES ITS 100<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY, OWNER TRENT JOHNSON ELEVATES THE ARTISTRY AND CRAFTSMANSHIP OF CUSTOM COWBOY HATS.

## Hats Off

By Tracey Feist

**The business card declares,** simply, “Trent Johnson, Hatter.” And yes, Trent Johnson does make hats, but anyone who knows the owner of Greeley Hat Works knows that the title doesn’t quite capture the measure of the man. This gregarious, down-to-earth Coloradoan is more than a craftsman. He is an artisan. The only differences between Johnson and a conventional artist are the materials he uses, which in Johnson’s case are felt, straw, and the other makings of custom-made Western hats.

His artistry is his gift for working his media into headwear that perfectly complements the personalities of his clientele. Selling more than 3,000 hats a year from his new 5,000-square-foot store in

the heart of Greeley, Colo., and cleaning and restoring another 1,200 hats annually, Johnson is nonetheless modest enough to describe himself as a guy who “didn’t have good enough grades to get into business school in college.”

For all of that, Johnson was honored as Greeley’s “Entrepreneur of the Year” by *Northern Colorado Business Report*.

“As a kid I didn’t collect baseball cards, I collected hats,” Johnson says. “On a family holiday to the grand opening of Epcot, I took hats home as souvenirs from all the different world booths—a fez hat from Morocco, a beret from France, a ‘bobby hat’ from London—that’s kind of not normal,” he says with a grin.

His foray into hat making began in an indirect fashion when he went to work for Greeley Hat Works owner Susie Orr

in 1993—not as a hat maker, but as a cowboy. Orr and her family owned a ranch outside Greeley. Johnson met her when he went to her hat shop, which was located on the ranch grounds, to get his own hat cleaned and blocked.

Orr had been looking for a ranch hand. Johnson recalls that, when the subject came up, “One of the things they liked about me was that I had no preconceived notions [about ranch work]. I hadn’t grown up on a ranch and learned from my dad or granddad.”

From that beginning, it was fairly predictable that the guy who collected hats would find his way into the hat making shop and find something to occupy himself with in there, too. His penchant for immersion was showing itself on both fronts. Says Johnson: “I was basically a sponge, analyzing cows and cowboy hats.”

Three years later Johnson and his wife, Melissa, bought the business and that same year doubled the production numbers from 60 to 120. Two years after that, Johnson was awarded his first major contract, to build a private label cowboy hat for the National Cattleman’s Beef Association (NCBA) centennial. Now he has contracts selling hats across the United States under the Greeley Hat Works name and other private labels, through retailers such as Rod’s Western Palace and Teskey’s Saddle Shop.

It was Johnson’s connection with the NCBA that afforded him the opportunity to build two hats for President George W. Bush. The NCBA commissioned Johnson to make President Bush a cowboy hat for its national convention in 2002. The President liked the hat so much that he wore it to the opening ceremonies of the Utah Winter Olympics. Johnson had the honor of presenting the second hat personally to the President in 2005.

“Being in the Oval Office with President Bush was a surreal moment. But I didn’t go ‘Wow, I’ve made it, that was incredible,’”

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Johnson says. “It was more ‘Oh no, where do I go from here? I’m not ready to peak at 36!’” he says with a laugh.

Johnson says his approach to business is to grow smart, not fast. “Do I have a business plan? Yes,” he says. “But luckily we’re so small that if things change with fashion, style, and the economy, I can stop things on a dime. We’re building the business one step at a time.”

Those baby steps have paid off. Johnson says his work ethic and hands-on approach have set him apart from other custom hatters. “All of my clients have been on a handshake. I really work closely with each store to make sure the hats we are building for the clientele are working. That’s the other nice thing about being a ‘smaller’ company—I can give them that kind of service.”

Even though Johnson has a rigorous schedule, travelling between 100 to 150 days a year, he still finds the time for what he calls the touchy, feely, artsy work. “I come home and there are 150 hats that need flanging or shaping. It’s my two hands that do the final pressing and shaping, and 98 percent of the time I do all the hand creasing. I’m a hands-on guy.”

Johnson, 36, has an eye for personality that finds expression in his handiwork. He strives to make each custom hat a reflection of the customer who will wear it.

Most of the equipment found at the shop is what Johnson calls “retro-tech,” and dates back to the turn of the century. “Remember, our company’s been in business for 100 years, so a lot has been handed down. Our sandbag press was built in the ‘40s, and came from the Hatters Supply House in Chicago,” he says.

The entire hat-making process

starts with the most important tool: a conformateur, a machine patented in 1843 by Parisian-based hat makers Allie and Maillard. The device looks like a metal hat and uses small pins, similar to miniature horseshoe nails, to accurately outline the head’s circumference. It then puts an impression on a single white piece of paper placed on top of the person’s head. Johnson keeps those pieces of papers, by the thousands, in an antique oak library card catalogue.

It’s these unique tools of the trade that allow Johnson and his staff of five to focus on their craftsmanship. Perhaps Johnson’s biggest ‘Ah ha’ moment happened early in his career—he grasped that people wanted a higher quality hat, something more than what Johnson calls “just the standard X factor.”

“Our lowest quality hat is often compared to a standard 15X hat in a store. There is no industry standard when it comes to making hats,” explains Johnson. “One guy can make a 15X hat out of wool, and that hat will be at the bottom end. I put in the effort when it comes to educating both my retailers and customers about quality, getting them [retailers] the quality their customers want.”

D.P. Payton, Clothing Manager for Teskey’s Saddle Shop in Weatherford, Texas, says the Greeley Hat Works Hat is his best seller. “We have hundreds of his hats in stock, and of every ten people who come in to buy a hat, eight or nine buy a Greeley,” says Payton. “When you put one of his pure Beaver hats up to a standard 20X hat from a competitor, there’s no comparison. You can feel the quality by feeling the hat bodies.”

Johnson plays this up in his marketing, with his company icon pairing a slogan

A custom hat built for President George W. Bush by Greeley Hat Works



(“We start with Better Bodies”) with an image of a voluptuous-looking cowgirl in vintage 1950s cheesecake style.

Greeley Hat Works will celebrate its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2009. And given the fact that his business is solid and profitable, he’s found a way to also give back to his community. Johnson is making a limited edition cowboy hat for Colorado State University (CSU). His goal is to raise \$20,000 to support the livestock judging team. His rationale is simple: “I wanted to keep good agriculture students here in Colorado.”

Supporting students and encouraging self-confidence is important to Johnson.

“I was raised to believe in myself and to learn from failure. I’ve been blessed to be able to learn from my mistakes. Knowing we’ve failed [at times] has helped me be a better businessman and hat maker,” he says. Through it all, Johnson’s love of hats has stayed true to form.

And even though there have been numerous high-end customers, for Johnson it all comes back to where he first got started—building hats for everyone.

“From the guy who’s saved up his paycheck working at the feedlot, to the guy who just sold his high-tech business, you can see the pleasure on their face when they put on the finished hat. That moment is as cool as being in the White House.”

Info: [www.greeleyhatworks.com](http://www.greeleyhatworks.com)

