

From Marcel Waves to Gibson Girls, museum explores beauty salon history

Written by Darci Tomky



Whether it is 1930 or 2009, one thing is always true—women want to look beautiful. Yes, beauty salon technology has changed dramatically over the years, but just like hairdresser Misti Redman said, “No matter what, women will still take time to have their hair done.”

Phillips County Museum takes a look back at beauty salon history and what it took to get that perfect permanent wave or a to-die-for manicure.

One item that will certainly catch your eye in the museum is the vintage Marcel Wave machine. Easily mistaken for some sort of a torture device, this machine was the latest craze in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. What was originally the “Undulation Marcel” became known as the “Marcel Wave,” named after a French hairdresser.

The curling irons were heavy tongs with rounded internal surfaces, heated individually for each curl. Rectangular shaped gas burners were used to heat the tongs, but heating was unpredictable since early models did not have thermostats making it difficult to control the temperature. To achieve the much sought after permanent wave look, special waving lotion was put on the hair and was activated by the heat from the curlers.

A word of caution—use the Marcel Wave machine at your own risk. When the tongs were heated too hot, the hair was burned, but on the other hand, the perm would not set if the tongs were too cool. After many uncomfortable hours of sitting in the beauty salon, women could boast of their stylish Marcel Wave, but perms were very harsh and drying, sometimes leaving the hair in tight, frizzy curls that were difficult to manage.

Advertisements in The Holyoke Enterprise newspapers from 1936 promoted steam oil permanent waves for as low as \$2.25. The reopening of Helen’s Beauty Salon in the Peerless Theatre building featured genuine Nestle permanent waves, paper curling and finger waves for your personality.

Cold wave perms, similar to the method used today, were introduced in the 1940s. Chemicals instead of heat are used to perm the hair. Now, there are more choices for perms, and recent advances allow for perms and coloring to take place the same day.

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In addition to curling irons and hair dryers, the walls of the museum give viewers a glimpse into pre-World War I style with posters from Collier's magazine. This publication as well as other popular magazines printed pen and ink drawings by Charles Dana Gibson. Using his wife, Irene Langhorne Gibson, as a model, he created "The Gibson Girl" who would become the American ideal.



Women aspired to be the Gibson Girl, modeling their hair, shoes and dresses after her practically perfect appearance. These Gibson drawings influenced and reflected the spirit and attitude of America in the early 1900s. The Gibson Girl's popularity came to an end with World War I when America's collective outlook changed from confident optimism to reserved cynicism, and Gibson's perspective now seemed out of place.

Even though the ideal of the Gibson Girl came and passed a century ago, Americans are continually looking to celebrities and public figures for that flawless outward appearance whether it be Marilyn Monroe or Jennifer Anniston.

Look a little more closely at the museum display and you'll see Ralph Gale's 1923 certificate from the State Board of Barber Examiners of Colorado, Invisible Scoldy Lox Extra Quality Hair Pins, Joseph Rodgers & Sons Razor and even Dusharme Scalp Balm.

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Beauty salon products, services and fashion trends have all changed through the years, and so have perceptions about beauty salons. Both Redman and Veronica Marroquin of Veronica's Full-Service Hair Salon remember their moms cutting or perming their hair at home when they were children. They noted just a few decades ago, beauty salons seemed to be for the elite whereas now everyone takes them for granted.

Time is also a factor in today's busy world. Some curling irons can now heat up in just 11 seconds! While modern technology allows many services to be done in much less time than in the past, Marroquin pointed out people will always want to be pampered and will always take time out of their day to treat themselves to a haircut or manicure.

In looking to the future, beauty salons will continue to evolve. Redman and Marroquin noted some products are "going green" and are more ozone friendly. Men use more services than just haircuts and are also moving toward more stylish cuts. Beauty salons are now able to offer more services with everything from nails to tanning, and hair products are becoming more of a necessity.

After some pampering this week, take time to visit Phillips County Museum's display and travel through beauty salon history from Marcel Waves and barber clippers to Nestle Nestyle and Scoldy Lox Hair Pins.