

# Derby Hats: A Kentucky Tradition



Customer Sharon Grady choosing a hat

*“Hats are a tradition at the Derby. If you look back at pictures even in the late 1800s, you’ll see women in hats . . . I think they went through a period where they didn’t do it quite as much . . . Then the last fifteen years is picking up again because people really enjoy dressing up and they don’t dress up as much as they used to.”*

Kathy Olliges, owner and manager of Dee’s in Louisville

During the weeks and months leading up to the Derby, many functions and gatherings take place that relate to the tradition of Derby hats. Organizations host Derby hat contests, raffles, auctions, and parties as entertaining fund-raisers for special causes.

*“Well, the fund-raiser & events are related in the sense that they are hats. They’re not part of the official Derby festival events. It’s this time of the year because of the Derby. It’s an event you couldn’t have any other time of the year.”*

Kathy Olliges



Ester Louise Cornelius at hat party. Kentucky Historical Society Collection.



Fashionable hat on display.



Kentucky Folklife Festival

Making and wearing hats at the Kentucky Derby are time-honored traditions. Part of this evolving tradition derived from attendees trying to look their best on Derby Day. Often those in the expensive seats of the Churchill Downs Clubhouse wear more graceful and fashionable hats, while crowds that fill the infield of the track wear more whimsical hats.

*“If you’re in the infield you’re basically dressed in shorts, depending on what the weather is and a lot of people wear goofy hats just for fun.”*

Kathy Olliges

# A Day at Dee's: The Search for the Perfect Hat

Folklorists consider hat-makers and hat-wearers to be a **folk group** because they share a sense of aesthetics, design, and language that are linked to this annual tradition. Hats are made by a wide range of people, from experienced designers to amateurs. Within the folk group of hat enthusiasts, many look for help in choosing, designing, and assembling their hats. Dee's of Louisville specializes in Derby hats and is one of these traditional establishments recently documented by the Kentucky Folklife Program.



Ready to wear hats



More expensive designer hats

While there are no official rules on what makes a good Derby hat, some common characteristics are:

- how well the hat matches the person's Derby outfit and shoes
- the use of ornamental accessories like flowers and feathers
- awareness of the year's color styles and whether to wear the popular color or be a maverick and buck the trend

According to our sources, this year's color trends are:

*"Now if I'm having a problem convincing her or she's having a problem deciding or we can't decide or we just can't match it, I might turn and say, 'Lori, what do you think?' Usually you want (her) to say 'that looks good' because you want somebody to confirm what you've already thought looks good. Now if you really want to be convinced, you get my husband. He'll say, 'That hat looks really good on you.' It's sold."*

Kathy Olliges



Blank hats ready for decorating

Kathy Olliges, owner of Dee's, has been decorating and selling hats for the Kentucky Derby for over twenty years. She decided to serve the everyday customer by offering a wide array of hats to fit anyone's budget. Dee's employees have expert knowledge and skills for making artistic decisions and creating hats to satisfy and please their customers.

Customers look to experienced staff for assistance, creative ideas, and reassurance. The staff members suggest ideas, match dresses, purses, and shoes, and help make final decisions. They work as a team. They record this information on order sheets, complete with drawings and decoration choices.



Customer Susan Corbet bucking the trend with her classic navy blue dress and matching shoes



Hat decorating materials



Typical Dee's order sheet

# A Day at Dee's: The Pressure is On

*“Last year we had about 1500 hats but we actually decorated about 980. Some people brought those in and some we sold them; it’s kind of a combination.”*

Kathy Olliges

Choosing a hat for the Derby is itself a social event. During the weeks before Derby Day, new and return customers fill Dee’s store seeking to buy the perfect Derby hat. The workroom is filled with staff busily assembling Derby hats and stacking boxes of orders from floor to ceiling.

During April, the tension builds for area businesses who sell hats for the Derby. Each day sees more and more action. Customers rush in to wait their turn with a seasoned employee who will assist them in matching a hat with their new outfits.



Kathy Olliges works with customer to match hat to outfit



(above) Stack of boxed hat orders. (below) Kathy and her co-worker, Lori Laughhead doing their art



*“The week of the Derby you get all these corporations, they have tickets. Something happens, they can’t come. So now they’ve got these tickets available, it’s filtering down to the managers. He comes home on Tuesday and he says, ‘Honey, I’ve got tickets to the Derby. You’ve got to wear a hat. Buy a new dress, shoes, whatever you need.’ So that’s why you get so many that last week. It’s not procrastination, they didn’t even know they were going until the last week.”*

Kathy Olliges



Cutting and adding feathers, creating the customer’s dream



A perfect match