REAL Panama Hat

By José T. Tuñón

RICH OR poor, young or old, no man or woman of Panama's interior is ever caught without a "montuno" hat—well, hardly ever. For the distinctive native hat is as much a part of the national attire as the well-known "montuno" outfit is for men and the now internationally famous "pollera" is for women.

Except that sex makes no difference in the use of the hat.

At first glance, there is nothing out of the ordinary in the appearance of Panama's "montuno" hat. The crown is of normal size, about 6 inches high, and raised or flat depending on the locality where it is made. The wide brim is circular.

But the fiber and the weaving are unique.

The raw material is the shoot of a palm tree that grows wild in the high mountains of Coclé and Veraguas Provinces, in an area some 100 miles west of Panama City. In Panama it is known as "bellota," elsewhere in Latin America as "bombonaje" or "jipijapa." Incidentally, it is the same fiber that is used in Ecuador to make the once-famous "Panama" hats.

Descendants

In the Coclé and Veraguas mountains of central Panama live the "cholos"—descendants of the fiery Indians and the proud Spaniards. It is their women who have preserved the art of hat weaving from generation to generation.

Two Styles

There are two distinct styles of "montuno" hats. One is the "ocuño," named for the region of Oco where it is most popular. The "ocuño" hat is woven of white fiber, except for a 1-centimeter wide black strip around the edge of the brim. The other is the "pintao" (a corruption of "pintado" or spotted) hat, its name deriving from the "pintas" or designs obtained from interweaving white and black fiber strands.

Each design is up to the weaver's imagination; hence, the variety is almost limitless. Look at a collection of "pintao" hats and you will wonder at the artistic
touch of these women from the mountains of Panama. The designs—some in concentric circles, others in spirals, in squares, cross-shaped or simply in dots—evidence a sense of refinement and exquisite care. The crown of the “pintao” hat is flat instead of raised as in the “ocueño” style.

Regardless of the color, all the fiber that goes into a “montuno” hat comes from the same “ballota” palm. The black strands have been dyed with a special clay that is a zealously guarded secret of the “cholos.” The jet black color imparted to the fiber is indelible.

### Hat Bands

No matter its style, the “montuno” hat is usually adorned with a delicately woven cord of black or multi-colored thread or wood that serves as a band. The weaving of the cord is another home craft transmitted from generation to generation among the women of Panama’s countryside, particularly in the area of Ocú. It involves an ingenious technique: pins are stuck around the hole at one end of an ordinary spool of sewing thread—one pin for each of the colors in the finished cord. The colored strands then are interwoven around the pins and the finished cord emerges through the other end of the spool. In Ocú the weaving of cords for use as “montuno” hatbands is a pastime for most women—from the richest matron to the humblest girl.

When should one wear an “ocuño” or a “pintao” hat? Mrs. Dora Pérez de Zárate, an authority on Panamanian folklore, explains the difference, from a woman’s standpoint.

“The campesina” in Ocú or Veraguas prefers her hat plain, rounded, with no special adornment or particular shape to the brim. She wears this hat with her daily attire and also, when she pleases, with her lace ‘pollera’. . . . The people of Herrera Province . . . the Province of Los Santos and of the rest of the country . . . wear the ‘pintao’ hat only with their ‘pollera montuna’ (the common ‘pollera’); the headdress is different when a lace ‘pollera’ is worn. . . .”

### The Important Thing

And what about the men? They have an everyday, working hat of a rougher nature, and for holidays and festive occasions wear similar hats but these are better made. Regardless of the style, the important thing is to wear a “montuno” hat. Why?

Writer Roman B. Reyes put it this way:

“The ‘montuno’ hat is indispensable to dance the ‘tamborito.’ It is an emblem of masculine enthusiasm and of courting, a prerequisite for his gestures of tribute and admiration to the woman who shares with him the pleasure of native dancing.”

Panama’s “montuno” hat industry is very old. No one really knows when it began. Knowledgeable persons such as Elias Vega, an expert hatter in Penonomé, say it goes back to pre-Columbian times.

A distinguished American educator played an important part in an interesting chapter of the history of the native hat industry in Panama. He was Federico E. Libby, who was employed by the Panama government in 1914 as Inspector General of Education. He spoke Spanish fluently, having worked in Puerto Rico for a long time. Libby was convinced that the rural school had to be adapted to the environment of the students in order to train them in useful crafts. When Libby heard of the hat industry in the Cocle highlands, at La Pintada and Ocú, he brought an expert hatter from Ecuador, Francisco Lara, and established a school in Penonomé to teach the weaving of Panama hats.

### Hatters School

Few persons realize it, but Panama hats made in the Penonomé Hatters School were sold in the United States and in Germany and were worn by members of Panama’s most prominent families.

Graduates from this school, which operated for 20 years, spread throughout central Panama, mainly in Cocle and Herrera Provinces, resulting in a marked growth of the native hat industry.

Thus, an American left the imprint of his work on the “montuno” hat craft of Panama.

In recent years, the Panama Government and the United Nations, through SENAPI (National Service of Craftsmanship and Small Industries), have boosted the industry. In La Pintada, SENAPI has established small shops for fiber weaving where expert instructors teach residents the secrets of working with materials from native plants. There are many learners and both the quality and the variety of the articles are increasing.

Still, the most authentic “montuno” hats—and the finest—are those woven in the glow of rustic lanterns by the skilled fingers of “cholos” in the highlands, between 4 and 8 every morning.