

Women in History/Careers

Extraordinary Entrepreneur Set New Style Standards

Madam Walker was symbol of sophistication

BY FASHUN N. STYLES
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Madam C.J. Walker started a product line that revolutionized the hair products industry and changed the face of black hair care as we know it.

Born Sarah Breedlove on Dec. 23, 1867, this Louisiana daughter of former slaves transformed herself from an uneducated farm laborer and laundress into one of



Madame C. J. Walker

the 20th century's most successful, self-made woman entrepreneurs.

An African-American businesswoman and philanthropist, she made her fortune by developing and marketing a hugely successful line of beauty and hair products for black women, under the company she founded, Madam C.J. Walker Manufacturing.

Her most popular product was the hair relaxer. Next time you sit in your

stylist chair and get a relaxer close your eyes and thank Madame Walker. In 1917, she was one of the wealthiest women in the United States by developing a line of cosmetics and hair products especially for African-American women.

She trained many women to become sales representatives. She owned a beauty salon, a beauty school, a line of hair care products and a flourishing mail-order business. She was said to have been the first self-made woman millionaire in the United States.

Along with her special creams, she also marketed a

heated metal comb known as a 'pressing comb' to 'straighten' or 'press' hair. Though she became one of the most famous African Americans of her time, she enjoyed her business success for only 14 years before her death.

Walker's accomplishments paved the way for today's businesswomen. Just as important, she used her wealth and influences to help others by making large contributions to the NAACP, YMCA and YWCA, historic preservation projects, black churches, and black schools and colleges.

Looking Beyond Hot Combs and Fades

Hair styles through the decades

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Key hair styles have showcased, shined and shaped women's styles through the decades.

The business of beautician and barbering has gone beyond hot combs and high top fades.



This style, from Africa in the 1950s, might have originated on the west coast of Africa centuries earlier.

- **1444:** Europeans trade on the west coast of Africa with people wearing elaborate hairstyles, including locks, plaits and twists.
- **1619:** First slaves brought to Jamestown; African language, culture and grooming tradition begin to disappear.
- **1700s:** Calling black hair "wool," many whites dehumanize slaves. The more elaborate African hairstyles cannot be retained.
- **1800s:** Lighter-skinned, straight-haired slaves command higher prices at auction than darker, more kinky-haired ones. Internalizing color consciousness, blacks promote the idea that blacks with dark

skin and kinky hair are less attractive and worth less.

- **1865:** Slavery ends, but whites look upon black women who style their hair like white women as well-adjusted. "Good" hair becomes a prerequisite for entering certain schools, churches, social groups and business networks.

- **1880:** Metal hot combs, invented in 1845 by the French, are readily available in the United States. The comb is heated and used to press and temporarily straighten kinky hair.

- **1900s:** Madame C.J. Walker develops a range of hair-care products for black hair. She popularizes the press-and-curl style. Some criticize her for encouraging black women to look white.

- **1920s:** Marcus Garvey, a black nationalist, urges followers to embrace their natural hair and reclaim an African aesthetic.

- **1954:** George E. Johnson launches the Johnson Products Empire with Ultra Wave Hair Culture, a "permanent" hair straightener for men that can be applied at home. A women's chemical straightener follows.

- **1962:** Actress Cicely Tyson wears cornrows on the television drama "East Side/West Side."

- **1966:** Model Pat Evans defies both black and white standards of beauty and shaves her head.

- **1968:** Actress Diahann Carroll is the first black woman to star in a



Cicely Tyson

television network series, "Julia." She is a darker version of the all-American girl with straightened, curled hair.

- **1970:** Angela Davis becomes an icon of Black Power with her large afro.

- **1971:** Melba Tolliver is fired from the ABC affiliate in New York for wearing an afro while covering Tricia Nixon's wedding.

- **1977:** The Jheri curl explodes on the black hair scene. Billed as a curly perm for blacks, the ultra-moist hairstyle lasts through the 1980s.

- **1979:** Braids and beads cross the color line when Bo Derek appears with cornrows in the movie "10."

- **1980:** Model-actress Grace Jones sports her trademark flat-top fade.

- **1988:** Spike Lee exposes the good hair/bad hair light-skinned/dark-skinned schism in black American in his movie "School Daze."

- **1990:** "Sisters love the weave," "Essence" magazine declares. A variety of natural styles and locks also become more accepted.

- **1997:** Singer Erykah Badu poses on the cover of her debut



Diahann Carroll

1998. L'Oreal purchases Carson two years later and merges it with Soft Sheen.

- **1999:** "People" magazine names lock-topped Grammy award-winning artist Lauryn Hill one of its 50

Most Beautiful People.

- **2001:** Rapper Lil' Kim wears a platinum blonde weave, while singer Macy Gray sports a new-school afro. Some black women perm, some press, and others go with natural twists, braids and locks.

- **2003:** New Bedford, Mass. Dance teacher Amy Fernandes' refuses to allow 4-year-old Amari Diaw to participate in her ballet dance recital along with the other children in her class who have been practicing for the exciting event because she requires the girls to pull back their hair into a bun. Amari's mom put Amari's very curly hair into cornrows and pulled it back into a bun. Fernandes, however, insisted that the braids be removed and that Amari's hair be pulled back straight into



Grace Jones



Amari Diaw

a bun.

- **2006:** Baltimore Police Department's new, more rigid professional appearance standards prohibit such hairstyles as cornrows, dreadlocks and twists. These natural hairstyles are deemed to be "extreme" and a "fad" by the department.

- **2007:** MSNBC Radio Host Don Imus loses his job when he calls the Rutgers' women's basketball team "some nappy-headed hos."

- **2006:** Black hair-care is a billion-dollar industry.



The New Yorker

- **2008:** "The New Yorker" draws heat when a cover photo portrays Michelle Obama with an Afro and Barack Obama in a turban doing the fist bump. Many felt the cartoon reinforces negative stereotypes about both Muslims and natural hair.

- **2009:** Comic Chris Rock unveils "Good Hair" at the Sundance Film Festival, exploring the way black hairstyles impact the activities, pocketbooks, sexual relationships, and self-esteem of black people.