

Colson, Marta: Iliila's Beauty Shop ^[1]

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Marta Colson: Iliida's Beauty Shop

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 11/9/2003. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

I was walking up the street in downtown Hertford when I saw an old, black-and-white photograph of a young beautician in the window of Marta Colson's hair salon. It was Colson's mother when she opened the little coastal town's first beauty shop in 1929. When I walked into the shop, I met Marta, a charming woman who laughs often and hugs all her regulars. "I've never known anything but the beauty shop all my whole life," Marta told me. "Between Mama and me, it's 74 years' worth of doing hair. It's been a lot of curling going on."

In Marta Colson's words:

Mama's name was Iliida and she was born in 1910. She met her husband in 1926, and he died two years later with meningitis and left her a widow. He was her first love and her heart was just torn out. She had to take over everything. She to
When she came to Hertford, there was no beauty shop here. She would come in early in the mornings and work until probably 11 o'clock at night. She worked her fingers to the bone to have something. But when Mama wanted to do somethi
Everybody thought she was just the most gorgeous thing they had ever laid eyes on when she first came to Hertford. She looked like a movie star -- frisky, beautiful clothes, red dresses. Mama was like me: She was never afraid to show her l
Mama's sister and her friends, they'd all come into the shop together and help with shampooing and taking down. They'd have a ball. And on Saturday nights, the street would be just full of people. Everybody would come in, Mama would do t
Back then most older women wore the high-top shoes, black dresses, and their hair up like in a knot on their head. They were too busy to go to a shop to get all prised up. My grandma Mathews raised eight young'uns. She got up every mor
Oh, back then, I'm going to tell you, I shampooed hair for some of them. They would come in and a lot of them hadn't even washed their hair in a month, and that is no lie. They looked like they were 90 and they were about 50.
That's just how it was. Women didn't go out. Grandma stayed home and Granddaddy went out and did his thing. If he wanted to leave out to the poolroom, Grandma was still home in the kitchen. Then in Mama's time, the younger ladies start
Women sometimes just need somebody to talk to, and you'd be surprised what you'd hear in the shop in Mama's day. Everybody thinks now that older ladies were so prim and proper, but Mama told me a whole lot of stuff about older ladies tl
I grew up in the shop. And as soon as I got tall enough, I was shampooing hair to the sink. At beauty school I knew how to do everything except cut hair with a razor. I had watched Mama do everything else. Then, too, Mama used combs, no
Styles change, hair has changed. Women are holding their age better than they used to. Where years ago, women looked their age, they wore their hair their age. Now they're keeping their youthfulness more. Their hair is freer. We're hangin
But you know that's how it is: I want to stay young. I don't want to get old. My grandkids think their grandma can do anything. I can get out there and play ball with them. They love that, because Grandma has the energy. You didn't see too m
I love my ladies, and I'm with them start to finish. I cut a lot of babies' hair in here for the first time. I put it in envelopes so their mamas can take it home and put it in their baby books. Little girls come in to get their bangs cut for the first time. I
And all my ladies tell me, when I die I want you to go do my hair. It's heartbreaking. I go up to the funeral home, and I think how much I enjoyed talking to them and that I won't get to talk to them again. Like say with my friend Polly, when I we
When I get through with them, I'm like, you really look pretty. It's hard, but then I've got all these memories they've left me. They've told me things. And when I go out to the cemetery to visit these graves, I say they're lying there with my haird
I've already told my young'uns, you better fix my hair right and make sure I don't have any roots shining.
I like seeing women take pride in themselves. Beauty is skin deep, as the old saying goes. But anybody, I don't care how you look, how big you are, how doggy you look in the face, you can fix up a little bit and then your personality comes ou
I have one lady I do is 101 years old. Miss Mattie went to my mama 'til my mama died. She did not realize that I was still doing hair -- she lives way out in the country -- and when she found out I was still here, she started coming to me. She s
I don't care if she is 101. She's got some youth there! I cut it off and fluffed her up. She looked 10 years younger.

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