

the Original Jeans

Levi Strauss quietly started a San Francisco company making pants that would become a favorite around the globe

BY SARAH ACHENBACH

No other garment symbolizes new ideas, ingenuity and independent thinking quite like a pair of jeans. And no other person is as synonymous with the iconic garment as Levi Strauss, the dry goods merchant and co-inventor of the modern blue jean.

In 1847, when Strauss, then 18, arrived in New York City from his native Bavaria, denim and jean were two different fabrics. Jean fabric was a blend made of cotton, wool or linen, while denim, a close cousin of today's blue jeans, was a comfortable, durable fabric woven from cotton, wool or linen. Both fabrics were twills with one key difference: two same-colored threads were woven to make jean, while one colored thread and one white thread were (and still are) used in denim. In Europe, both fabrics were popular, with denim typically the fabric of choice for laborers while finer clothing was made from jean fabric. In America, both fabrics were used for work wear.





Levi Strauss' transforming influence on the fashion industry would blur the linguistic lines between the fabrics forever. Today "denim" and "jeans" are interchangeable terms, both referring to the same fabric. The garments he manufactured from denim would surpass all other fabrics in popularity for work clothes, and the men and women Levi Strauss & Co. outfitted—for work and play—would help shape a nation. Today, his blue jeans are deeply woven into the world's cultural and social fabric, a fitting legacy to Strauss, who was as modest and straightforward as the humble, utilitarian fabric he used.

Strauss was born Loeb Strauss in 1829 in Bavaria (now southern Germany), the youngest of dry goods merchant Hirsch Strauss' seven children. After his father's death in 1845, Loeb immigrated to New York City with his two sisters and widowed mother in 1847 to join older brothers Jonas and Louis in the family's wholesale dry goods business, the J. Strauss Brother & Co. Once in America, he adopted the nickname "Levi," and in 1853, became an American citizen. That same year, he headed west to San Francisco with his brothers' blessing to open up a dry goods business under his own name, while serving as a West Coast representative for his brothers' firm.

Strauss correctly reasoned that the prospectors and pioneers pouring into California for the Gold Rush would need dry goods. He began importing clothing and bolts of fabric from his brothers' firm to supply to small stores along the West Coast and in the other Western states. His business prospered, as did his reputation for fairness and an uncompromising work ethic. By 1863, the company was renamed Levi Strauss & Co.

His fate and the future of denim changed in 1872, when he received a letter from one of his regular customers, Jacob Davis, an immigrant tailor in Reno, Nev. Davis sent a sample pair of denim work pants with an interesting modification: copper rivets at the pocket corners and base of the



A leather patch from a 1939 pair of Levi's, left. Miners from Placer County, Calif., wear early Levi's jeans in 1882, above. Copper rivets like the one below, c. 1879, made Levi Strauss' jeans unique and sturdy.

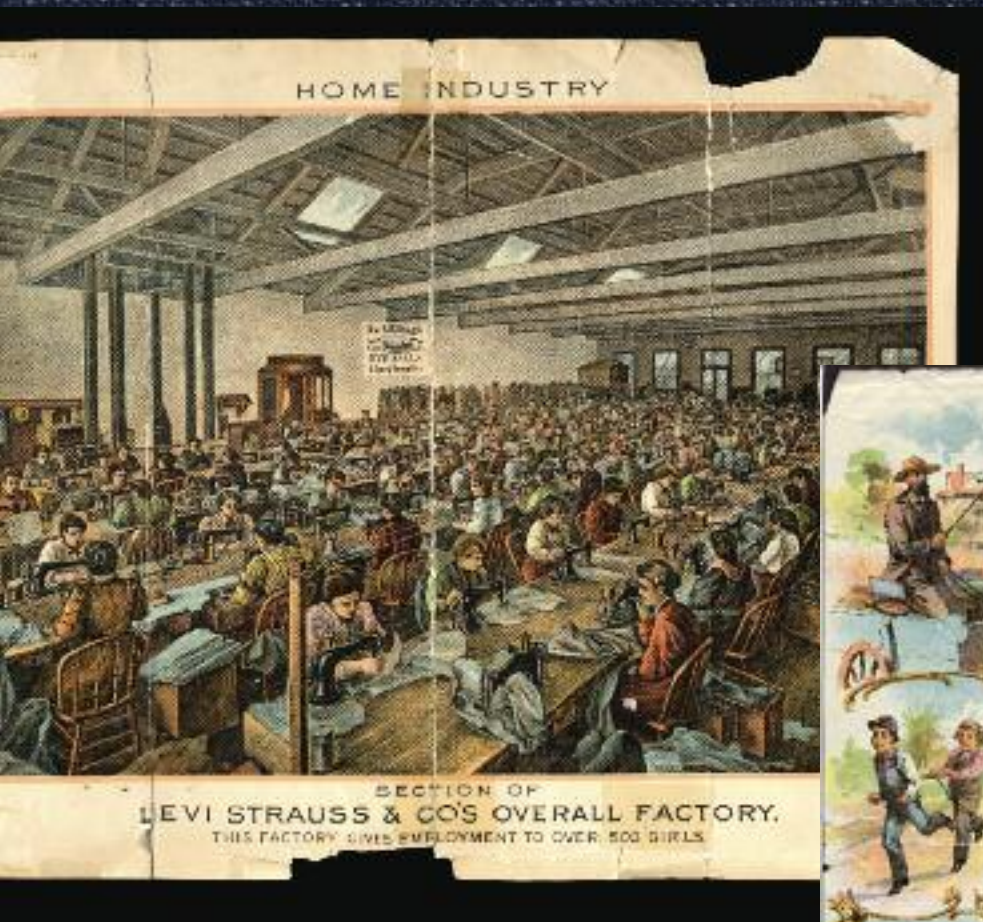
button fly on pants, points of stress where cloth would frequently rip. Lacking the funds to apply for a patent for his invention, Davis appealed to Strauss for financial backing. Strauss filed for the patent under both their names, and on May 20, 1873, they received U.S. Patent 139,121 for an "Improvement in Fastening Pocket-Opening," and the quintessential American blue jean was born.

Strauss brought Davis to San Francisco to oversee manufacturing of the "waist overalls"—Levi Strauss & Co. would not use the term "jeans" in print until the late 1950s when millions of American teenagers adopted the pants as their unofficial uniform and started calling them "jeans." Davis' exact role is unknown, as all company records from the 19th century were destroyed in the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire, but it is believed that Davis oversaw the cutting and production by individual seamstresses across San Francisco.

What is certain is just how quickly the "waist overalls" caught on with American workers. By the 1880s, the famous 501® cut—it was known as "XX" until 1890 when Levi Strauss & Co. incorporated and named its flagship garment after its lot number 501—was a best-seller.

When the never-married Strauss died in 1902 at age 73, he left a thriving company in the hands of his nephews and Davis, who sold his interest in the patent and manufacturing





A handbill, left, shows the Levi Strauss factory in the 1880s, south of Market Street in San Francisco. Levi's salesmen used the 1899 handbill, below, as advertisement for the new, popular clothing line.



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to the company before his death in 1908. Strauss' estate was worth some \$6 million (\$800 million in 2007 dollars), and his adopted hometown of San Francisco was infinitely better for his largesse. Soon after arriving in San Francisco, Strauss began supporting the region's Jewish community, specifically the Pacific Hebrew Orphan Asylum and Home and the city's first synagogue, Temple Emanu-El. His generosity extended to scholarships at the University of California, Berkeley, and he was a charter member and treasurer of the San Francisco Board of Trade, as well as a director of the Nevada Bank and the San Francisco Gas and Electric Co. Though it ultimately failed, Strauss and other prominent businessmen in the city funded a new railroad from San Francisco to the San Joaquin Valley.

By 1911, the demand for the company's denim line was so great that the company discontinued manufacturing garments out of heavy cotton duck, which did not soften after washing. A decade later, Levi's jeans were the top-selling men's work pants in the western United States (they were not sold east of the Mississippi until the 1940s). In 1936, when Levi Strauss & Co. added a red tab next to the back pocket—the one-word tab simply states "Levi's," after the man who insisted that his employees refer to him by his first name—the company became the first to sew a label on the outside of a piece of clothing.

The 1940s elevated the blue jean to mythic proportion with movie heroes like Gary Cooper and John Wayne and on-leave American GIs introducing jeans to the world. Levi Strauss & Co. began exporting jeans a decade later, and

today, the global jeans business is a highly competitive, \$51.6 billion industry. Levi's are sold in more than 110 countries, and 501 jeans are made in 108 sizes and 20 finishes and fabrics. A few pairs of the company's jeans are part of the Smithsonian Institution's permanent collection.

Levi Strauss & Co. continues to emulate its founder's compassionate corporate leadership. In the mid-20th century, the company's U.S. factories in the South were integrated before mandated by the government, and decades later, Levi Strauss & Co. was a pioneer in policies to assist employees with HIV/AIDS, as well as the first in the blue jeans industry to develop responsible product sourcing guidelines. Whether worn for work or play, the blue jean—and the company responsible for the garment—remains steadfast to its humble, hard-working beginnings by a man known for his humility and humanity in the storefront or on the factory floor. ■

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