

Levi Strauss & Co.

## THE INVENTION OF LEVI'S® 501® JEANS

May 20, 2003 marked the 130<sup>th</sup> anniversary of an historic event: the day that Levi Strauss and Jacob Davis obtained a U.S. patent on the process of putting rivets in men's work pants for the very first time. In other words, it's the birthday of the blue jean.

So how did jeans get invented? It's really a simple story. Levi Strauss was a dry goods merchant, who came to San Francisco in 1853 at the age of twenty-four to open a west coast branch of his brothers' dry goods business. He had spent a number of years learning the trade in New York after emigrating there from his native Germany. He built his business into a very successful operation over the succeeding twenty years, making a name for himself not only as a well-respected businessman, but as a local philanthropist as well.

One of Levi's many customers was a man named Jacob Davis. Originally from Latvia, he made his living as a tailor in Reno, Nevada. He regularly purchased bolts of cloth from the wholesale house of Levi Strauss & Co. Among Jacob's customers was a difficult man who kept ripping the pockets of the pants that were made for him. Jacob tried to think of a way to strengthen his trousers, and one day hit upon the idea of putting metal rivets at points of strain: pocket corners, base of the button fly, etc. These riveted pants were an instant hit with everyone, and Jacob began to get worried that someone might steal this great idea. So, he decided to take out a patent on the process, but had trouble scraping together the \$68 he needed to file the papers. What he needed was a business partner, and he immediately thought of Levi Strauss.

He wrote to Levi to suggest that the two men hold the patent together. Levi, being an astute businessman, saw the potential for this new product, and agreed to Jacob's proposal. The two men received patent #139,121 from the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office on May 20, 1873.

Soon the first riveted clothing was made and sold. (We're not sure of the exact date because we lost all our historic records in the 1906 earthquake and fire.) Jacob Davis was in charge of manufacturing once the company opened its two San Francisco factories. The denim for the riveted work pants came from the Amoskeag Mill in Manchester, New Hampshire, a company known for the quality of its fabrics. We made our first jeans out of denim because denim was the traditional fabric for men's workwear, which is what the new riveted products were. Within a very short time, all types of working men were buying up the innovative new clothing, and spreading the word.

We consider May 20, 1873 the "birthday" of blue jeans, because although denim pants had been around as workwear for many years, it was the act of placing rivets in these traditional pants for the first time that created what we now call jeans.

By the way, "waist overalls" was the usual name for work trousers and that's what these first jeans were called. This is because the early pants were designed to literally be worn "over" your street clothes; kind of like protective work gear. After 1900 they were just called overalls and people began to wear them like regular pants. By the way, if you wanted bib overalls you had to ask for those specifically. We didn't use the word jeans until around 1960, when the baby boomer generation adopted that name for its favorite pants.

Holding a patent on this process meant that Levi Strauss & Co. was the only company allowed to make riveted clothing until the patent went into the public domain. This happened in 1890, which means that from 1873 until 1890 the only riveted clothing in the world was made by LS&CO., and an entire generation of people grew up with this knowledge.



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Of course, when the patent ran out, dozens of garment manufacturers began to make the riveted clothing, but people knew that these were just imitations of the original.

So, the next time you see someone wearing a pair of Levi's® jeans, remember that these pants are a direct descendant of that first pair made back in 1873. Remember also that it was two visionary immigrants – Levi Strauss and Jacob Davis – who turned denim, thread and a little metal into the most popular wearing apparel on earth.