Levi Strauss & Co.

A SHORT HISTORY OF DENIM
(c) Lynn Downey, Levi Strauss & Co. Historian

Denim is more than just a cotton fabric; it inspires strong opinions within the hearts of historians, designers, teenagers, movie stars, reporters and writers. Interest bordering on passion can be found among textile and costume historians today, especially in the debate over the true origins of denim. These experts have put decades of work into their research; here is a summary of the prevailing opinions about the birth of denim, followed by a discussion of the way Levi Strauss & Co. has helped to contribute to denim's movement around the world.

In 1969 a writer for **American Fabrics** magazine declared, "Denim is one of the world's oldest fabrics, yet it remains eternally young." If continuous use of and interest in an item makes it "eternally young," then denim certainly qualifies. From the 17th century to the present, denim has been woven, used and discarded; made into upholstery, pants and awnings; found in museums, attics, antique stores and archaeological digs; worn as the fabric of hard, honest work and as the expression of angry rebellion; used for the sails of Columbus' ships **in legend;** and worn by American cowboys **in fact**.

Legend and fact are also interwoven when scholars discuss the origin of the name denim itself. Most reference books say that denim is an English corruption of the French "serge de Nimes;" a serge fabric from the town of Nimes in France. However, some scholars have begun to question this tradition.

There are a few schools of thought with regard to the derivation of the word "denim." Pascale Gorguet-Ballesteros, of the Musee de la Mode et du Costume in Paris, has done some interesting research on both of these issues. A fabric called "serge de Nimes," was known in France prior to the 17th century. At the same time, there was also a fabric known in France as "nim." Both fabrics were composed partly of wool.

Serge de Nimes was also known in England before the end of the 17th century. The question then arises: is this fabric imported from France or is it an English fabric bearing the same name? According to Ms. Gorguet-Ballesteros, fabrics which were named for a certain geographic location were often also made elsewhere; the name was used to lend a certain cachet to the fabric when it was offered for sale. Therefore a “serge de Nimes” purchased in England was very likely also made in England, and not in Nimes, France.

There still remains the question of how the word “denim” is popularly thought to be descended from the word “serge de Nimes.” Serge de Nimes was made of silk and wool, but denim has always been made of cotton. What we have here again, I think, is a relation between fabrics that is in name only, though both fabrics are a twill weave. Is the real origin of the word denim “serge de nim,” meaning a fabric that resembled the part-wool fabric called nim? Was serge de Nimes more well known, and was this word mistranslated when it crossed the English Channel? Or, did British merchants decide to give a zippy French name to an English fabric to give it a bit more cachet? It’s likely we will never really know.

Then, to confuse things even more, there also existed, at this same time, another fabric known as “jean.” Research on this textile indicates that it was a fustian - a cotton, linen and/or wool blend - and that the fustian of Genoa, Italy was called jean; here we do see evidence of a fabric being named from a place of origin. It was apparently quite popular, and imported into England in large quantities during the 16th century. By the end of this period, jean was being produced in Lancashire. By the 18th century jean cloth was made completely of cotton, and used to make men’s clothing, valued especially for its property of durability even after many washings. Denim’s popularity was also on the rise. It was stronger and more expensive than jean, and though the two fabrics were very similar in other ways, they did have one major difference: denim was made of one colored thread and one white thread; jean was woven of two threads of the same color.

Moving across the Atlantic, we find American textile mills starting on a small scale in the late 18th century, mostly as a way to become independent from foreign producers (mainly the English).

From the very beginning, cotton fabrics were an important component of their product line. A factory in the state of Massachusetts wove both denim and jean. President George Washington toured this mill in 1789 and was shown the machinery which wove denim, which had both warp and fill made of cotton.

One of the first printed references to the word "denim" in the United States was seen in this same year: a Rhode Island newspaper reported on the local production of denim (among other fabrics). The book **The Weavers Draft Book and Clothiers Assistant**, published in 1792, contains technical sketches of the weaving methods for a variety of denims.

In 1864, an East Coast wholesale house advertised that it carried 10 different kinds of denim, including "New Creek Blues" and "Madison River Browns." **Webster's Dictionary** of the same year contained the word "denim," referring to it as "a coarse cotton drilling used for overalls, etc."

Research shows that jean and denim were two very different fabrics in 19th century America. They also differed in how they were used. In 1849, a New York clothing manufacturer advertised topcoats, vests or short jackets in chestnut, olive, black, white and blue jean. Fine trousers were offered in blue jean; overalls and trousers made for work were offered in blue and fancy denim. Other American advertisements show working men wearing clothing that illustrates this difference in usage between jean and denim. Mechanics and painters wore overalls made of blue denim; working men in general (including those not engaged in manual labor) wore more tailored trousers made of jean.

Denim, then, seems to have been reserved for work clothes, when both durability and comfort were needed. Jean was a workwear fabric in general, without the added benefits of denim. In **Staple Cotton Fabrics** by John Hoye, published in 1942, jean is listed as a cotton serge with warp and woof of the same color, used for overalls, work and sport shirts, doctors and nurses uniforms and as linings for boots and shoes. Hoye says, "The most important fabric of the work-clothing group is denim. Denims are strong and serviceable; they are particularly strong in the warp direction, where the fabric is subjected to greater wear than the filling."

Twenty years after this was written, the magazine **American Fabrics** ran an article which stated, "If we were to use a human term to describe a textile we might say that denim is an honest fabric - substantial, forthright, and unpretentious." So how did this utilitarian and unpretentious fabric become the stuff of legends that it is today? And how did pants made out of denim come to be called jeans, when they were not made out of the fabric called jean? One very important reason can be found in the life and work of a Bavarian-born businessman who made his way to Gold Rush San Francisco more than 150 years ago – Levi Strauss.

Levi Strauss was a wholesale dry goods merchant beginning with his arrival in San Francisco in 1853. He sold the common dry goods products, including clothing whose manufacturers are unfortunately unknown to us. Levi worked hard, and acquired a reputation for quality products over the next two decades. In 1872 he got a letter from tailor Jacob Davis, who had been making riveted clothing for the miners in the Reno area and who purchased cloth from Levi Strauss & Co. He needed a business partner to help him get a patent and begin to manufacture this new type of work clothing. Well, Levi knew a good business opportunity when he saw one, and in 1873 LS&CO. and Davis received a patent for an "Improvement in Fastening Pocket-Openings."

As soon as the two men got their manufacturing facility under way, they began to make copper riveted "waist overalls" (which is the old name for jeans). The denim for the first waist overalls came from the Amoskeag Manufacturing Company in Manchester, New Hampshire, on the East Coast of the United States. This area, known as New England, was the site of the first American textile mills, and by 1873 their fabrics were well-known and well-made. The Amoskeag mill itself dated to 1804, and their denim production dated to the mid-1860s (this being the time of the American Civil War, the company also manufactured guns for a few years).

In 1914 an article about the association between LS&CO. and Amoskeag appeared in the mill's own newspaper. It read in part, "In spite of the many cheaper grades offered in competition, the sale of the Amoskeag denim garment has kept up due in part to the superior denim used in its construction and in part to superior workmanship such as sewing with linen thread, etc. Doubtless

the Amoskeag denim has contributed in no small degree to the success of Levi Strauss & Co. and, in return, that concern has contributed in an equal degree to the success of Amoskeag denims, advertising as it does, their superiority over all other denims."

At Levi Strauss & Co., the duck and denim waist overalls were proving to be the success that Jacob Davis had predicted. Levi Strauss was now the head of both a dry goods wholesaling and garment manufacturing business. In addition to the waist overalls, the company made jackets and other outer wear out of denim and duck; they also branched out into shirts of plain or printed muslin.

Levi Strauss died in 1902, at the age of 73. He left his thriving business to his four nephews - Jacob, Louis, Abraham and Sigmund Stern - who helped rebuild the company after the disaster of 1906. The earliest surviving catalog in the Archives shows a wonderful variety of denim products for sale.

Within a few years, it became obvious to the Stern brothers that they needed a new source of denim. Near the end of the 19th century Amoskeag and other New England mills had begun to experience a slow decline, due to competition from mills in the southern states, higher labor and transportation costs, outdated buildings and equipment and high taxes. The demand for waist overalls was so great that LS&CO. needed a more reliable method of obtaining the fabric they needed. Interestingly, by around 1911 the company had stopped making garments out of cotton duck. It's possible that this was due to customer preference: once someone had worn a pair of denim pants, experiencing its strength and comfort - and how the denim became more comfortable with every washing - he never wanted to wear duck again; because with cotton duck, you always feel like you were wearing a tent.

By 1915 the company was buying the majority of its denim from Cone Mills, in North Carolina (by 1922 all the denim came from Cone). Founded in 1891, it was the center of denim production in America by the turn of the century. Cone developed the denim which brought Levi's ® jeans their greatest fame during the following decades.

By the 1920s, Levi's® waist overalls were the leading product in men's work pants in the Western states. Enter the 1930s - when Western movies and the West in general captured the American imagination. Authentic cowboys wearing Levi's® jeans were elevated to mythic status, and Western clothing became synonymous with a life of independence and rugged individualism. Denim was now associated less often with laborers in general, and more as the fabric of the authentic American as symbolized by John Wayne, Gary Cooper and others. LS&CO. advertising did its part to fuel this craze, using the West's historic preference for denim clothing to advertise Levi's® waist overalls. Easterners who wanted an authentic cowboy experience headed to the dude ranches of California, Arizona, Nevada and other states, where they purchased their first pair of Levi's® (the products were still only sold West of the Mississippi). They took these garments home to wow their friends and help spread the Western influence to the rest of the country, and even overseas.

In the 1940s during wartime, American G.I.s took their favorite pairs of denim pants overseas; guarding them against the inevitable theft of valuable items. Back in the States, production of waist overalls went down as the raw materials were needed for the war effort. When the war was over, massive changes in society signalled the end of one era and the beginning of another. Denim pants became less associated with workwear and more associated with the leisure activities of prosperous post-war America.

Levi Strauss & Co. began selling its products nationally for the first time in the 1950s. Easterners and Midwesterners finally got the chance to wear real Levi's® jeans, as opposed to the products made by other manufacturers over the years. This led to many changes, within the company and on the products.

Zippers were used in the classic waist overalls for the first time in 1954. This was in response to complaints from non-Westerners who didn't like the button fly (the jeans they were used to wearing had zippers). We received similar comments from men who had grown up using a

button fly, saying rather rude things about finding a zipper where buttons should be. We did offer both products all over the country, but making changes to people's favorite pants is always a risk.

Some things took longer to change. One of them was the attitude that denim clothing was appropriate only for hard, physical labor. This was dramatically demonstrated to LS&CO. in 1951. Singer Bing Crosby was very fond of Levi's® jeans and was wearing his favorite pair while on a hunting trip to Canada with a friend in that year. The men tried to check into a Vancouver hotel, but because they were wearing denim, the desk clerk would not give them a room; apparently denim-clad visitors were not considered high-class enough for this hotel. Because the men were wearing Levi's® jeans, the clerk did not even bother to look past their clothing to see that he was turning away America's most beloved singer (luckily for Bing, he was finally recognized by the bellhop).

LS&CO. heard about this, and created a denim tuxedo jacket for Bing, which we presented to him at a celebration in Elko, Nevada, where Bing was honorary mayor. Interestingly, the day set aside for this special presentation was called "Blue Serge Day" not "Levi's Day" or "Blue Denim Day." Was the word "denim" not sophisticated enough for the organizers of the event (who were not from LS&CO.)? I don't think we'll ever know the answer to this.

The 1950s brought great acclaim to Levi's® jeans and denim pants in general, though not in the way most company executives would like. The portrayal of denim-clad "juvenile delinquents" or, as one newspaper put it, "motorcycle boys" in films and on television during this decade led many school administrators to ban the wearing of denim in the classroom, fearing that the mere presence of denim on a teenager's body would cause him to rebel against authority in all of its forms.

Nearly everyone in America had strong opinions about what wearing blue jeans did to young people. For example: in 1957 we ran an advertisement in a number of newspapers all over the U.S. which showed a clean-cut young boy wearing Levi's® jeans. The ad contained the slogan, "Right For School." This ad outraged many parents and adults in general. One woman in New

Jersey wrote, “While I have to admit that this may be ‘right for school’ in San Francisco, in the West, or in some rural areas I can assure you that it is in bad taste and not right for School in the East and particularly New York...Of course, you may have different standards and perhaps your employees are permitted to wear Bermuda shorts or golf togs in your office while transacting Levi’s business!”

Interesting, isn’t it, how this woman predicted the future trend toward casual clothing in the workplace?

But even as some Americans tried to get denim out of the schools, there were just as many who believed that jeans deserved a better reputation, and pointed to the many wholesome young people who wore jeans and never got into trouble. But no matter what anyone thought or did, nothing could stop the ever-increasing demand for Levi’s® jeans. As one 1958 newspaper article reported, “... about 90% of American youths wear jeans everywhere except ‘in bed and in church’ and that this is true in most sections of the country.”

Events in this decade also led the company to change the name of its most popular product. Until the 1950s, we referred to the famous copper riveted pants as “overalls;” when you went into a small clothing store and asked for a pair of overalls, you were given a pair of Levi’s® jeans. However, after World War II our customer base changed dramatically, as referred to earlier: from working adult men, to leisure-loving teenage boys and their older college-age brothers. These guys called the product “jeans” - and by 1960 LS&CO. decided that it was time to adopt the name, since these new, young consumers had adopted our products.

Now how did the word “jeans” come to mean pants made out of denim? There are two schools of thought on this one. The word might be a derivation of “Genoese,” meaning the type of pants worn by sailors from Genoa, Italy. There is another explanation: jean and denim fabrics were both used for workwear for many decades, and “jeans pants” was a common term for an article of clothing made from jean fabric; Levi Strauss himself imported “jeans pants” from the Eastern part of the United States to sell in California. When the popularity of jean gave way to the even

greater popularity of denim for workwear, the word “jeans” seemed to get stuck with the denim version of these pants.

Certainly the word jeans has been used to describe any type of pant made out of denim, and not just the riveted, indestructible, working-man’s pants originated by Levi Strauss & Co. in 1873. We even called some lightweight denim Western Wear pants in the 1940s “jeans.” But until America’s youth decided what jeans meant to **them**, we stuck with the classic moniker “overalls.”

From the 1950s to the present, denim and jeans have been associated with youth, with new ideas, with rebellion, with individuality. College-age men and women entered American colleges in the 1960s and, wearing their favorite pants (jeans, of course), they began to protest against the social ills plaguing the United States. Denim acquired a bad reputation yet again, and for the same reasons as it had a decade earlier: those who protest, those who rebel, those who question authority, traditional institutions and customs, wear denim.

Beginning in the late 1950s, Levi Strauss & Co. began to look at opportunities for expansion outside of the United States. During and after World War II, people in Japan, England and Germany saw Levi’s® jeans for the first time, as they were worn by U.S. soldiers during their off-duty hours. There are letters in the company Archives from people who traded leather jackets and other clothing items to American G.I.s for their Levi’s® jeans, and wrote to the company asking how they could get another pair. Word began to spread via individual customers, and American magazines which made their way overseas. Letters came to us from places as diverse as Thailand, England and Pitcairn Island in the South Pacific, written by people begging us to send them a pair of the famous jeans. British teenagers would swarm the docks when American Merchant Marine ships came into port, and buy the Levi’s® jeans off the men before they even had time to set foot on dry land.

By the late 1960s, the trickle of jeans into Europe and Asia had become a flood. Denim was poised to re-enter the continent which had given it birth, and it would be adopted with an enthusiasm shown to few other American products. Indeed, despite its European origins, denim

was considered the quintessential American fabric, beginning even in the mid-1960s, when jeans were still a new commodity in Europe. We entered the Japanese market a few years later. One writer wrote prophetically in 1964: "Throughout the industrialized world denim has become a symbol of the young, active, informal, American way of life. It is equally symbolic of America's achievements in mass production, for denim of uniform quality and superior performance is turned out by the mile in some of America's biggest and most modern mills. Moreover, what was once a fabric only for work clothes, has now also become an important fabric for play clothes, for sportswear of all types."

By the 1970s, these "play clothes" tended toward the flared and bell bottom silhouette. At the same time, new fabrics were used for products that had traditionally been made out of denim. The product line of Levi Strauss & Co. was no exception. "Blue Levi's®" were still a staple of the company's collection, but a glimpse at sales catalogs will reveal that customers also wanted plaid, polyester, no-wrinkle flares with matching vests. What looked almost like the end of simple, cotton denim as the fabric of everyday wear, was merely a pause in denim's continued ascension to global dominion. A closer look will show that denim never really disappeared.

Even in the 1970s, when it seemed that denim was being pushed aside in favor of these other fabrics, writers, manufacturers, and marketing executives worked hard to keep denim in the public eye. A writer in the Fall 1970 issue of **American Fabrics** said, "Indigo Blue Denim...has become a phenomenon without parallel in our times. To the youth of this country, and many other countries in this shrinking world, Indigo Blue Denim does not stand for utility. It's the world's top fashion fabric for pants." By the mid to late 1970s, the craze for doubleknits and other like fabrics began to slow. At the same time, marketing reports in various trade magazines showed an upward surge in the popularity of denim, as seen in the number of denim-clad models in print and television advertising.

Those who followed clothing trends into the late 1970s were quoted in the trade papers with comments such as, "Jeans are more than a make. They are an established attitude about clothes and lifestyle." This attitude could be seen very clearly in the "decorated denim" craze

which saw beaded, embroidered, painted and sequined jeans appearing on streets from California to New York and across the ocean. Personalizing one's jeans was such a huge trend in the United States that Levi Strauss & Co. sponsored a "Denim Art Contest" in 1973, inviting customers to send us slides of their decorated denim. The company received 2,000 entries from 49 of the United States, as well as Canada and the Bahamas. Judges included photographer Imogen Cunningham, designer Rudi Gernreich, the art critic for the San Francisco **Chronicle** newspaper, and the Curator for San Francisco's De Young Museum. The winning garments were sent on an 18-month tour of American museums, and some of them were purchased by LS&CO. for the company Archives.

In the introduction to the catalog published to accompany the museum tour, contest coordinators wrote that Levi's® jeans had become "a canvas for personal expression."

Personal expression found another medium in the 1980s with the "designer jean" craze of that decade. It seems you can't keep a good fabric down, no matter what form it takes. We all remember the ways in which denim was molded onto our bodies and the way that jeans were now worn almost anywhere, including places where they would have been completed banned in previous years (such as upscale restaurants). A writer for **American Fabrics** predicted this trend all the way back in 1969, when he wrote, "What has happened to denim in the last decade is really a capsule of what happened to America. It has climbed the ladder of taste."

Today, LS&CO. employees wear Levi's® jeans to work. Looking back, we see that the very first people to wear Levi's® jeans worked with pick and shovel, and though our tools are computer keyboard, PDA and cell phone, we have both been moved to wear the same thing each and every work day: denim jeans.

Born in Europe, denim's function and adaptable form found a perfect home in untamed America with the invention of jeans; then, as now, denim makes our lives easier by making us comfortable; and gives us a little bit of history every time we put it on.