



## WHEN GIRLS STARTED TO WEAR THE PANTS

DENIM JEANS FOR WOMEN: FROM THE WILD WEST TO THE CATWALKS

Back in May 1935, an article in Vogue Magazine heralded the brand new women's Levi's® jeans as a must-have fashion item. And from that point onwards this traditionally masculine garment became a constantly evolving fashion statement for women, and our wardrobes have never been the same since! But how did it all start?



AS WORN BY ICONS THROUGH THE AGES:

**Annie Oakley ~ Angelina Jolie ~ Lucille Ball ~  
Beyonce ~ Brigitte Bardot ~ Britney Spears ~  
Cameron Diaz ~ Cat Deeley ~ Destiny's Child ~  
Drew Barrymore ~ Gwen Stefani ~ Gwyneth  
Paltrow ~ Hillary Clinton (as a 1968 student  
leader!) ~ Jennifer Aniston ~ Jennifer Lopez ~  
Julia Roberts ~ Kate Hudson ~ Kate Moss ~ Kylie  
Minogue ~ Lauryn Hill ~ Lou Doillon ~ Madonna ~  
Marilyn Monroe**





## THE HISTORY OF LEVI'S® WOMENSWEAR

When Levi Strauss & Co. created the first jeans in 1873, they were aimed at working men. Young girls had been known to wear boys' bib overalls, and some women ranch-hands in the West wore the men's "waist overalls" (the old name for jeans).

However, by 1918 the company had decided to branch out into women's clothing, realising that women were playing an ever increasing part in society, especially in the American West. So Levi Strauss & Co. created "Freedom-Alls," a one-piece garment for women perfect for "Work or Recreation". The name itself is revealing: the word "Freedom" was used because America had just entered World War I, and many items of personal or household use were given this kind of patriotic name. The word also refers to the freedom of movement that the garment gave the wearer.

It's significant that the advertising for Freedom-Alls showed women doing both housework and some form of physical exercise, like hiking. It's known that one California woman wore a pair of Freedom-Alls as her wedding outfit when she married a sheep rancher; the couple then spent their honeymoon travelling by horseback to the husband's various sheep ranches. This shows that even then Levi's® considered women to be valuable customers, and created clothing that liberated, rather than restricted them - in direct contrast to most other women's clothing of the period. But despite this being the era of the Suffragette, the Freedom-Alls were still considered a bit too "progressive", and so they disappeared from Levi's® catalogues and price lists around 1919.





# LEVI'S® WOMENSWEAR EVOLUTION



In 1922 Levi Strauss & Co. added hiking pants or “togs” to their line. These were generously cut short pants which buckled at the knee and were designed to be worn with boots. A simple top and hat completed the ensemble (both of which were also sold by Levi Strauss & Co.). This item was deliberately targeted at women who spent a lot of time outdoors.

By the 1930s, more and more women were wearing the same Levi's®, jeans as their husbands, sons and brothers. But Levi Strauss & Co. also knew that women wanted to look fashionable in denim and so in 1934 we created Lady Levi's®, a traditional button fly blue jean for women made of lighter weight denim and cut for the feminine figure. The selvedge in these girls-only jeans was yellow or pink, rather than red.

This was such a revolutionary thing to do that Vogue magazine featured an illustration of two very fashionable ladies wearing women's Levi's® in its May 15, 1935 Summer Travel issue.

Lady Levi's® were mainly distributed through up-market equestrian shops and they soon became the clothing of choice for respectable ladies at the so-called 'divorce ranches'. In the 1930s Nevada's divorce law was the most relaxed in the U.S. and special ranches were opened so that women could establish residency in Reno, Nevada for a few weeks and then be entitled to a 'quickie' divorce.

The late 1930s also saw the creation of our first Western Wear line of clothing, called “Dude Ranch Duds”. These were aimed at a new audience, people who visited the Dude ranches - working cattle ranches recreated as vacation ranches for city folk who wanted to play cowboy - and the bigger ranches carried the new Levi's®, “Duds” in their stores. In addition to jeans (still called “waist overalls”), the company also created shirts and wool or khaki pants as traditional “dude ranch” wear. The “Rodeo Shirts” were made of rayon and satin, and in bright, splashy colors. The riding pants - called “Riders” - had a reinforced seat to keep them from wearing out after hours in the saddle. The shirts and pants were made to fit both men and women, and company catalogues of the time show women wearing Rodeo Shirts and riding pants in all sorts of styles and colours.



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# LEVI'S® WOMENSWEAR EVOLUTION



A rather unusual line of clothing for women was introduced in 1938, and which also had a very short life. The line was called “Tropical Togs” and reflected the kind of leisure clothing worn by women in Hollywood.

During the World War II days of the 1940s Lady Levi's®, and a few of the Western Wear shirts were the only clothing available for women. Production on all types of clothing (except uniforms!) went down during the war, but by the end of the decade things were back to normal.

In the 1950s Levi's® created a number of new products for the whole family. “Denim Family”, “Casuals” and “Lighter Blues” were some of the new lines and many of these new products were aimed at women. The Casuals line, especially, appealed to women, and the Levi's® Archives have a 1955 catalogue showing the wide variety of items created for women and girls.

Interestingly, the women's Levi's®, made from this decade now had a zip rather than a button fly. Maybe this change was due to the fact that Levi's® had begun selling its products beyond the Western states of the U.S. and into the East (New York etc.) for the first time. People on the East Coast were not used to women wearing functional work wear like jeans, and it was not considered “ladylike” to button one's fly, so the zipper was used instead.

By the 1960s the teenaged girl had surpassed the grown woman as the main consumer, and items such as stretch jeans, bell bottoms and flowered flares began to appear in our product lines. Even denim bathing suits and halter tops were made during this period, and girls would sometimes open up the seams of their bell bottoms and turn them into full-length skirts.





# LEVI'S® WOMENSWEAR EVOLUTION



In 1981 Levi Strauss & Co. introduced the first Levi's® 501® Jeans. Cut specifically for women, the jeans were announced to the U.S. market through a television campaign which echoed a scene from the James Dean film "Giant."

In 2000, the shape of denim jeans changed dramatically as the twisted-seamed Levi's® Engineered Jeans® were created. Girls throughout Europe embraced this new street-wise style, although the girls of Milan and Barcelona ensured the fashion aspect of these jeans prevailed over their functional freedom of movement - as Levi's® Engineered Jeans® were the hottest denim style in Italy and Spain for that year.

In 2007 it's all about new great fitting jeans. With the emergence of the 570 Straight Fit Jean, the 571 Slim Fit Jean and the 572 Bootcut Jean, the female form has never looked so good in denim. With an emphasis on a great looking bottom and longer, leaner looking legs, this range of jeans flatters the female figure in all the right places. And at the core of these jeans remains a timeless sense of style and appeal that make Levi's® the Original denim label.

With thanks and appreciation to Lynn Downey, Historian, for allowing us to use this article and for her help in securing the images from the Levi Strauss & Co. Archives in San Francisco.

