

# Feature



## The Pants that Won the West Paul Trynka

*How two 19<sup>th</sup> century innovators turned denim pants into an icon of the American West by marketing them to miners, cowboys, and eventually the general public.*

### A Riveting Tale

Jacob Davis had a difficult customer

The woman lived close to his tiny taylor's shop in Reno, Nevada, and was in search of a pair of pants for her husband. A woodcutter apparently bloated with dropsy, he was too big for regular pants, and without pants he couldn't work. It was December 1870; she needed the pants by January, when he'd be out cutting wood again. And those pants needed to be strong – workmen's trousers wore out quickly.

Jacob was paid the \$3 for the custom-made pants in advance. He soon set to crating them using a sturdy white cotton

### Editor's Note

This article is excerpted from *Denim From Cowboys to Catwalks: A Visual History of the World's Most Legendary Fabric*, by Graham Marsh, Paul Trynka, and June Marsh. Aurum Press Ltd., 2002.

duck fabric he'd purchased from a helpful dry good supplier in San Francisco, named Levi Strauss.

Jacob had stitched the pants when his eyes alighted on a pile of rivets that he used for attaching straps to the horse blankets he supplied to a local blacksmith. "The rivets were lying on the table," he remembered a couple of years later. "The thought struck me to fasten the pockets with those rivets." He hammered the rivets into the corners of



Jacob Davis (above left) is the unsung hero of Levi's history. He came up with the idea of strengthening work overalls using copper rivets, and enlisted the help of Levi Strauss (above right) to secure a patent (below) and oversaw production of early Levi's.



the pickets, reckoning they would help the woodcutter's pants hold out that bit longer. "I did not make a big thing of it. I sold those pants and never thought of it for a time."

In February, Jacob sold around ten pairs of his riveted pants to local teamsters. In March, he sold even more, his business spreading by word of mouth as his customers concluded they stood up to more wear and tear than anything they'd seen before. It was a much-needed break.

An immigrant from Riga, on the Baltic, Davis had tried making a living as a brewer, a coal merchant, and a tobacconist before moving to Reno in 1868; he'd even essayed a career as an inventor, applying for patents on a steam-powered canal boat and an ore-crusher. This new invention generated cash, where its predecessors had failed, because the riveted pants fetched a hefty premium over conventional overalls. All the same, the \$68 it would take to apply for another patent was a lot of money. This time around, Jacob Davis would spread the risk.

On 5 July 1872, Jacob sat down and wrote a letter to his fabric supplier. He explained to Levi Strauss that the riveted pants were so popular, "that I cannot make them up fast enough My nabors are getting yealouse of these success and unless I secure it by patent papers... everybody will make them up."



Earliest known pair of Levi's jeans acquired by Levi Strauss & Co. for \$45,000 in May 2005 Ebay auction. Dating from the 1880s, they predate the 501; the shape is different with more of a "work pant" cut. The widely spaced seam stitching on the single back pocket (above) is also characteristic of Levi's workwear. Front pillar pocket (far left) is also rarely seen on Levi's jeans. Note the all-white selvage edge of Amoskeag denim, (near left) which used natural vegetable as opposed to synthetic indigo dye..

Offering half share in his invention if Strauss funded the patent application, Jacob enclosed two examples of his new pants so that the San Francisco merchant could see this innovation for himself. One pair was in white cotton duck. The other pair was blue, fashioned from denim supplied by Strauss. One of his most popular lines, the denim was made at the Amoskeag factory in New Hampshire.

Levi's reply to Jacob's letter has never surfaced – it was probably lost in the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906 – but his response was favourable and speedy. On 9 August, Levi's lawyers filed the joint patent application for an "improvement in fastening seams." The patent was finally granted in May 1873, by which time Jacob had moved to San Francisco to oversee clothes production for Levi's new business.



Why did Jacob fix on Levi Strauss as a potential business partner? Perhaps it was simply the fact that Strauss had been a helpful supplier who extended him credit. Perhaps it was the common bond of their Jewish faith. Perhaps it was simply Levi Strauss' reputation as an honest businessman, a reputation that would later



Levi Strauss & Co. was already a thriving concern before the company produced its first Waist Overalls. Here the sales force poses in front of the Battery Street Building occupied from 1866. The building burned to the ground in the 1906 San Francisco earthquake.

be reinforced with acts of largesse and philanthropy, and one that Jacob knew about, for in his first letter to Levi he enclosed a \$350 check, which left him a large credit balance, telling Levi, “The reason I send so much money is because I have no use for it, and you may allow me

interest as well as the bank.” Whatever the reason, it was a fateful choice.

### **Partnership in Denim**

Loeb Strauss was born in Bavaria in 1929, and followed his brothers Louis and Jonas to New York in 1847; he anglicized his name to Levy, then Levi, around 1850.

In 1853, he moved to San Francisco and founded Levi Strauss & Co – in effect, the West Coast branch of the Strauss family business. However grandiose the firm's title, Levi's early career must have been essentially that of a traveling salesman. Over the next twenty years, however, he built the company into a thriving wholesale business selling fabrics, clothing, and boots from its headquarters at 14-16 Battery Street.

Levi had only sold clothes made by other people; actually making the product was an entirely new enterprise. Davis organized the production process, probably initially by sending pre-cut stacks of fabrics, buttons, and rivets to seamstresses around

the city. Many of those early pants were made from brown cotton duck (which would later give rise to the erroneous assumption that Levi's first “jeans” were made from brown canvas dyed blue).



Brown cotton duck Youth's Waist Overalls c. 1880, the closest surviving relatives of the very first pair of riveted waist overalls crafted by Jacob Davis in January 1871.

But as word spread of Levy's sturdy new riveted pants, demand grew for the blue version, made in the denim his company bought from Amoskeag. Nobody knows exactly when, but by 1925 Levi Strauss & Co.'s costumers started referring to them using a new term: *jeans*.



Weave Room, Amoskeag Manufacturing Company from a postcard c. 1910.

From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, it is easy to define Jacob and Levi's riveted denim pants as the first pair of jeans. Yet, behind that indisputable fact lie many tangled threads. The first is the origin of denim itself. The name is generally thought to derive from "Serge De Nimes," a twill fabric made in the textile-producing town in the south of France. More recently, it's been suggested that the name comes from another fabric called simply "nim." In any case, both these French fabrics were made from a wool and silk mix, whereas the denim produced in America from the late eighteenth century was made from cotton.

Quite possibly, the missing link came from textile mills in Lancashire, England, which by 1800 were producing a fabric named denim, made out of cotton and probably designed to echo the look of French wool/silk twills. There was also another, entirely different fabric made in the

States called jean, which derived from woolen fabric woven in Genoa, Italy. It was used to make cheap pants, but as true "jean" fabric fell out of favour, the name seemed to transfer to denim pants.

By 1800, the USA boasted a booming textiles industry. The Amoskeag Manufacturing Company in New Hampshire (left) was one of the biggest producers; opened in 1804, it introduced its first denim in the middle of the century. A twill fabric that used one coloured and one plain thread, it bore only a slight resemblance to its French or English predecessors, which were generally piece-dyed. Significantly, the coloured thread was almost invariably dyed with indigo; a chemical quirk means that indigo's molecules simply sat on the surface of the cotton thread it dyes. As the fabric is worn the indigo chips off. Denim wears itself in. It was the perfect medium for Levi's new product.

Apart from the rivets, Levi's trousers were not significantly different from those of his competitors. But Levi Strauss concentrated on pants, or Waist Overalls, as opposed to the denim bib overalls that were popular at the time. This style made them comfier and more intimate; as the

denim aged, they grew comfier still. Above all, Levi Strauss & Co. knew how to differentiate its product.

By 1886, the pants bore a leather patch showing two horses attempting – unsuccessfully – to rip apart a pair of Levi's. Around 1890, they started using the lot number 501 for their top of the line waist overalls, made from XX Amoskeag denim. In 1892, a removable oilcloth ticket bore an impressive guarantee (below).

Jacob Davis had supplied the simple technical innovation that differentiated Levi's product. But it was Levi's vision that effected a subtle transubstantiation, as these simple pants, originating from a cottage industry in Reno, Nevada became an international phenomenon. Levi has started with a good product. He emphasized and consistently advertised its superiority. By 1900 he was claiming the product was "known the world over." It would take fifty years, but Levi's lofty claim would be proved right.



Levi Strauss pioneered what today we'd call "brand identity," as shown by the oilcloth guarantee label, introduced in 1892 (this early example, which proclaims "This is a pair of them" rather than "This is a pair of Levi's," dates from c. 1908).

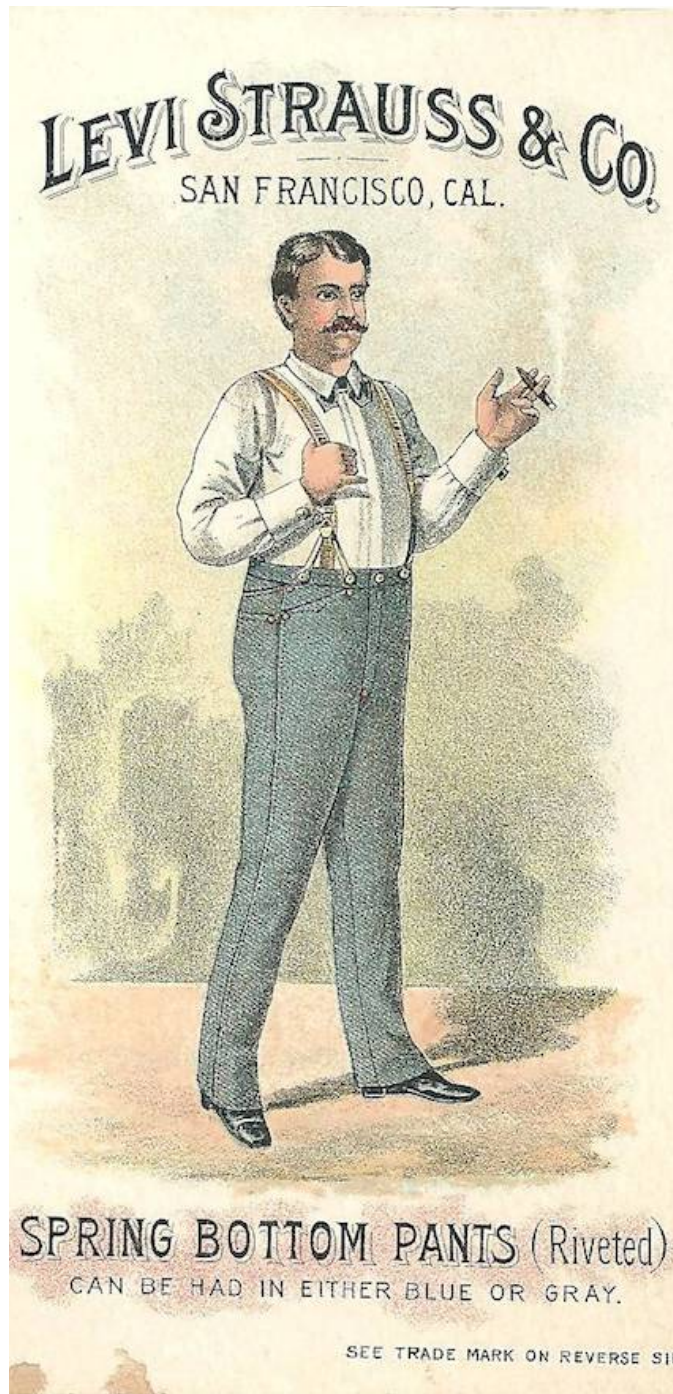




The 201 Waist Overalls (above) were a budget version of the 501; the unfortunate owner of this 1893 pair was wearing them when killed in a coaching accident. The 201 featured simpler stitching in cotton rather than linen, and whereas the 501 was made of "9oz XX Amoskeag denim," that of the 201 remained unspecified, although of similar weight. They bore the Two Horse patch in linen rather than leather (below)



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Bell bottoms weren't a 1960s invention; they were one of Levi Strauss's earliest lines. Made from luxury blue and gold denim manufactured by Amoskeag, these Spring Bottom pants (below) feature ornate pocket design details and complex body hugging tailoring. There were rivets at the point of strain, just like the 501 jeans, but these pants weren't meant for laborers. As the cigar toting dandy on the 1905 trading card (left; a gift with purchase) proclaims, they were something of a luxury item.



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## Rivals on the Range

The turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century also marked the inescapable passing of the Wild West. Thousands of cowboys were still running steers from the plains to the market, and riders on the Pony Express, long rendered obsolete by the telegraph, were still celebrities. Yet the new media of Hollywood – fortuitously located right on Levi's doorstep – and radio were already celebrating the American icon with an elegiac air. The cowboy was passing from real life into legend.

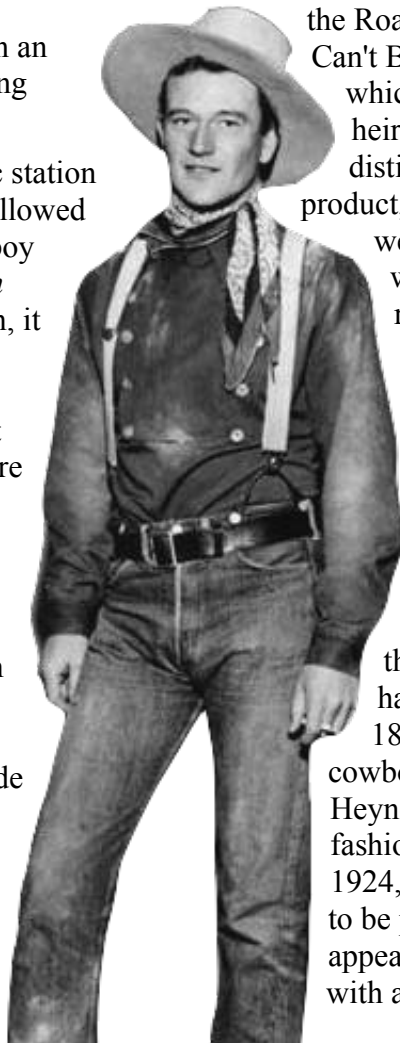
America's first country music station opened in 1919 and others soon followed around the country. The first cowboy movie was 1904's *The Great Train Robbery*; just ten minutes in length, it was filmed by Edison Corporation technician and prototype auteur Edwin S. Porter. By 1914, the first feature-length Western movies were being made in Hollywood.

Levi's was already directing its advertising at cowboys; by the 1920s, their jeans were becoming obligatory wear for their on-screen counterparts, worn by actors like William S. Hart and John Wayne. Before that time, few people outside

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Although their market was confined to the West Coast in the 1920s and 1930s, Levi's Jeans were omnipresent thanks to the influence of Hollywood. John Wayne from *Stagecoach*, 1939, wearing classic pair of Levi's 501 with both belt loops and suspender buttons.

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of California had seen a pair of their pants. Now their increased visibility inspired new competition.

Levi's had always had plenty of rivals right on its doorstep; apart from brands like Boss of the Road and Can't Bust 'Em, which each had their own distinctive product, there

were many smaller competitors who'd attempted to copy its riveted pants. The response was generally a lawsuit – there was a modern zeal to Levi's efforts to wipe out counterfeit products.

By 1924, however, rivals were confident that the patent on Levi's rivets had expired (in fact, although there's no conclusive evidence, it had probably run out around 1898), and introduced their own cowboy pants. In 1923, Eloesser-Heynemann was mocking the “old fashioned” rivet in its advertising. In 1924, their new riveted pants (soon to be proudly titled “Copper Kings”) appeared in their price lists, along with all-black “Frisko Jeans”.



“Can't Bust 'Em” Copper King cowboy jeans ad, 1938.

Over in Kansas City, H.D. Lee Mercantile Co. had always produced its own waistband overalls; its main model was the 11W, but it had never enjoyed the popularity of Lee's bib overalls. All of that was to change with the company's own “101 Cowboy Waistband Overalls”. Probably introduced in 1924, they were first mentioned in the price lists for the company's San Francisco outlet in 1925, but it would be another four or five years before they were listed in all of Lee's territories.

In many respects, those first 101s were an unashamed attempt to muscle in on Levi's territory. They featured copper rivets, the basic cut was similar to that of Levi's 501, and many early examples featured the “double arcuate” stitching on the back pickets, which became synonymous with Levi's.

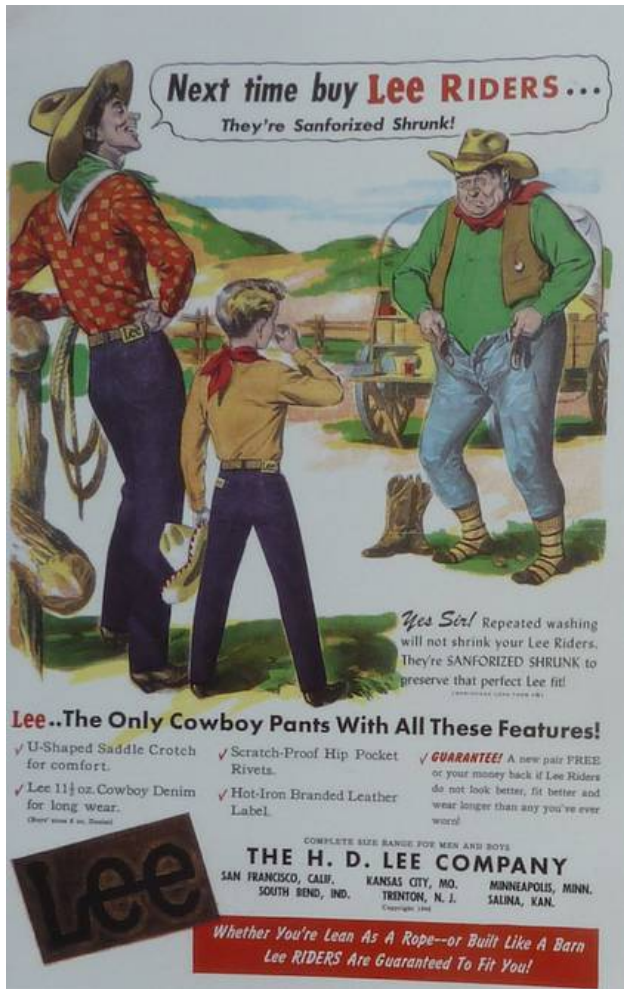


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Lee's 101 Cowboy Pants, the company's definitive jeans.

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As time went on, Lee's cowboy pants became more distinctive; a deeper yoke (the triangular section above the pockets) and a “U-shaped Saddle Crotch” made them comfier when riding a horse. Lee introduced a zipper-fly version, the 1010, as early as 1925; it was later retitled the 101Z. Whereas



The H.D. Lee Company was using Sanforized non-shrink denim by the 1930s. This is one of a series of advertisements from the hand of in-house advertising artist Chester Blueman.



Levi 506 jacket with its red tab and earlier, silver-coloured back buckle, was made between 1936 and 1942.

Levi's distribution was essentially confined to the West Coast, Lee jeans were strong in the Midwest and the East; the company soon claimed to be selling more pants to cowboys than Levi's.



The 101J was arguably Lee's first truly original article of cowboy clothing. This example dates from the 1950s.

The company's first cowboy jacket also bore a strong resemblance to contemporary Levi's but by 1932, when Lee introduced its Slim 101J jacket, the company was no longer content to copy its competitors. Levi's own 506 jacket, or blouse overall, was pleated and comparatively baggy; Lee's was shorter, snugger, and sexier, just the thing for cowboys. It was doubtless a substantial influence on Levi's own 557 Trucker jacket, produced nearly three decades later.

Lee wasn't the only company trespassing on Levi's home territory. By the mid-1930s, many major denim makers were offering products that resembled the 501. JC Penny had its own Foremost brand aimed at cowboys, while OshKosh, Washington Dee Cee, and many major names offered their own riveted pants.



If Levi's had been subjected to such intense competition earlier, the company might well have been forced to close down. After Levi's death in 1902, the business passed into the hands of his sister's sons, Jacob, Louis, Abraham, and Sigmund Stern. In 1919, Sigmund asked his new son-in-law, Walter Haas, to join the business, which by then was ailing. Haas turned the company around, not least by his insistence on spending unthinkable sums on advertising, even in the mid-1920s when cotton prices dropped and the US clothing industry was in turmoil.

Haas continued the tradition, established by Levi, of accentuating the product's "brand values". Compared to its competition, Levi's image and advertising was slicker and more clearly differentiated. When other manufacturers started producing riveted clothing, Levi's responded by adding yet another visual device to brand their product: the red tab. Introduced in 1936, it was the brainchild of sales manager Chris Lucier. It was intended as a foolproof method of identifying the definitive brand of riveted pants, and so it remains today.



Traditional red tab, and blank red tab without Levi's name.

Some purchasers might wonder why it's possible to buy the odd pair of Levi's that features a blank red tab without the Levi's name (below left). The reason? It's a trademark gambit, to register the distinctive nature of the red tab alone, as opposed to the Levi's name that it carries.

If anyone doubted that the heyday of the cowboy was finally over, perhaps the most conclusive evidence came in the form of the "Dude Ranches," which started springing up over California and Nevada in the 1930s. Designed for city slickers to get a taste of life on the trail, it was the perfect product placement for Levi's, which by 1938 had introduced a wide range of Dude Ranch Duds.

The "High colour Rodeo and Fiesta shirts" hardly epitomized the tough, labourers' practicality that Levi Strauss and Jacob Davis had championed. But they signaled the company's unconscious, telepathic ability of being at the centre of every new social trend.

## SINCE 1853

AMERICA'S FINEST OVERALL

XX No. 1 CONCEALED-RIVET LEVIS

SUIT  
501XX Specially woven Extra Heavy Blue Denim copper-riveted at all points of strain, with new patent Concealed non-scratch copper-rivets on back pockets. 5 pockets (2 front, 2 back, 1 watch); belt loops..... \$17.00  
Sizes Reg. 30 to 42, waist.  
Extra sizes \$1.50 additional.

502A As above; boys' 22 to 26..... 14.25  
502H As above; youths' 27 to 30..... 15.50

XX No. 1 RIDER'S JACKET

506 Same material as 501XX Levi's. Roomy shoulders, snug at waist; 2 pleats on both sides of front opening; 1 breast pocket; adjustable back-buckle; non-rust metal buttons. Sizes 34 to 44..... 18.00  
506Y As above; boys' 28 to 32..... 16.00

LADY LEVIS

701 These are made just like our men's Levi's—but are tailored to fit and look neat and trim on the feminine figure. The Demin used is a softer weave and shrink-proof..... \$16.00

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LEVI STRAUSS RIDER JACKETS  
(Continued)

Genuine "Hecksuede"  
(See Men's Pant Nos. 5378-5379 for description of this Fabric.)

SUIT  
9314 Men's Chocolate Brown..... \$4.25  
9315 Men's Light Cocoa..... 4.25

## LEVI STRAUSS & CO.

SINCE 1853

*Authentic Western  
Riding Wear*



PRICE LIST MAY 15, 1938

**LEVI'S** The Original Copper Riveted Western Overall (Levi Strauss Patent 1873)

**DUDE RANCH DUDS**

HIGH COLOR RODEO AND FIESTA SHIRTS  
FRONTIER MODEL RIDING PANTS  
FINE WESTERN Featherweight  
Worsted SHIRTS

Have our salesman call, or see these lines at  
98 Battery St., San Francisco  
722 So. Los Angeles St., Los Angeles  
1061 Merchandise Mart, Chicago  
1182 Broadway, New York City

Levi Strauss & Co. catalogue featured a new Dude Ranch jacket, the "Riders" plus a range of "High Colour Rodeo and Fiesta Shirts".

*Paul Trynka is editor-in-chief of "JOJO" Magazine, the respected international bible of rock 'n'roll culture. He is the author of "Portrait of the Blues" (Da Capo), "The Electric Guitar" (Chronicle), and has written on music, travel, and architecture for "The Face," "Elle," the "Independent," and more.*