

Levi Strauss – a Bavarian-American Success Story

The life of Levi Strauss, the "inventor" of blue jeans, is perhaps more representative of the "American Dream" than any other. Löb (his original name) was born on February 26, 1829 in the Franconian town of Buttenheim, the son of Hirsch Strauss and his second wife Rebecca (née Haas). When he married Rebecca, Hirsch Strauss already had five children (Jakob, Rösla, Jonathan, Lippmann and Mathilde) from his first marriage. Löb and his sister Vögela (later called Fanny) were the youngest Strauss children. Like many rural Jews from Franconia, the father was a peddler of textiles and haberdashery, and made only just enough to keep the family afloat financially. When Hirsch Strauss died of tuberculosis in 1846 after a long illness, the family was suddenly impoverished. For this reason Rebecca, the mother, and her youngest children Löb, Vögela and Mathilde had no option but to emigrate to America in 1847 via Bremerhaven, to stay with her eldest sons Jonathan and Lippmann (meanwhile Jonas and Louis). They had turned their backs on Buttenheim a few years previously and set up a textiles business in New York. Löb – who soon Americanised his name to Levi – became an apprentice trader in his brothers' business and worked in their shop. In 1853, Levi became an American citizen. Levi's sister Fanny married David Stern and both had just moved to the still-young city of San Francisco when the news of gold finds in California reached the East coast. San Francisco and the possibility of making his fortune there attracted Levi too – so in March 1853 he arrived in the city and founded a haberdashery and textiles store together with his brother-in-law and his brother Louis. The assortment there contained everything that the mineworkers and pioneers of the still very wild West needed, from toothbrushes and braces to buttons and elegant suits. The company was registered as "Levi Strauss & Co. Importer, Real Estate Agent, Clothing & Haberdashery". The young firm flourished. In 1867, after several shifts of location, the firm had become so large that it moved into Battery Street 14 & 16 – still the headquarters of the company today. Levi had struck gold – his trading house made him into a wealthy man.

In 1872 Jacob Davis, a tailor from Reno, Nevada who regularly bought textiles from Levi Strauss & Co., wrote a letter to Levi Strauss describing how he made exceptionally long-wearing trousers for his customers by reinforcing frequently-worn areas such as corners of pockets with small copper rivets. He did not have enough money to patent the invention, however – so he suggested that Levi finance the patent application, and then they could both share the patent together. Levi agreed, and on May 20, 1873, blue jeans were born.

There was huge demand for the copper-riveted "waist overalls", as they were then called – the term "blue jeans" only came into fashion in the 1960s. Levi invited Jacob Davis to San Francisco, to supervise production of the new trousers. They were made from a robust type of cotton (Serge de Nimes) which soon became known as "denim". Seamstresses produced

the jeans at home, but because of the high demand this production system could not last, and Levi Strauss & Co. opened two factories in San Francisco. The head of the company was Jacob Davis; Levi continued to run his trading house. The riveted overalls were given the production number 501, which is still used to denote the classic cut of Levis jeans today. The young company expanded incredibly fast: by the end of 1873 it had already sold 5,875 pairs of trousers and coats made from denim.

Ten years later the company had 450 employees, as well as 85 warehousemen, accountants and sales representatives. Soon the profits from jeans production outstripped the profits from the trading houses – but it would take until the mid-20th century before the firm of Levi's finally stopped its other production activities completely. Towards the end of the 19th century Levi left the day-to-day running of his business, handing it over to his four nephews, Fanny's sons. In 1890 Levi and the Stern brothers had the firm registered as a corporation. At this point the 61-year-old businessman had already turned his attention to other business and philanthropic interests. Levi was a founder member of the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce, and its treasurer from 1877 onwards. He was also a director of the Nevada Bank, the "Liverpool, London and Globe Insurance Company", and the "San Francisco Gas and Electric Company". He sponsored a Jewish orphanage beside the Pacific, as well as the charitable "Eureka Benevolent Society" and the "Hebrew Board of Relief".

On September 26 1902, Levi Strauss died at his San Francisco home. His death made the headlines: the Sunday edition of the San Francisco Call (September 28, 1902) praised him as an important member of civic society, and as someone who had excelled himself not only because of his fairness and loyalty in business but also because of his generosity to his employees. On the day of his funeral, many stores in San Francisco closed their doors because their proprietors were among the mourners. Levi Strauss was buried at the "Hills of Eternity" cemetery in Colma, south of San Francisco. He left the group of companies to his four nephews, and also left money in his will to several charities and foundations. Even today, 28 scholarship grants at the University of California in Berkeley date back to Levi Strauss.

On April 18, 1906 the company suffered a further blow: large sections of San Francisco were destroyed by a large earthquake and subsequent fire. The firm's headquarters lay under the rubble. Even though the earthquake was a severe blow, it did not destroy the company. The Stern brothers developed plans for a new factory, just as Levi Strauss himself would probably have done. They not only undertook to rebuild the company, however, but continued to pay their employees and also granted long-term loans to less fortunate business partners so that they, too, could start over again.

For a long time, jeans were considered robust work clothing for lumberjacks, gold prospectors and the hardworking men of the Wild West. The leap from working trousers to fashion occurred during the global recession of the 1930s. During that time the wealthy inhabitants of the Eastern US dispensed with their usual trips to Europe and instead discovered the tough life of cowboys on so-called "Dude ranches". They brought pairs of jeans back with them as souvenirs and fashion items to the Eastern cities. Western films became popular, and Western stars such as John Wayne or Gary Cooper were frequently filmed in jeans, adding to the general acceptance of denim trousers. A short while later, jeans appeared for the first time in fashion boutiques and magazines as popular regional folkwear. During the 1940s, Levi Strauss & Co. opened production and sales outlets all over America and soon became world's largest clothing company.

During World War II, jeans were acknowledged as a product important to the war effort, and were rationed. For a long time they were only available to soldiers and members of the arms industry. The Second World War also marked the success of jeans in Europe, Levi Strauss's former home, because American GIs had their Levi's in their battlepacks when they came over. In Germany, jeans were only available on the black market or in so-called PX shops, which catered solely to American soldiers. German companies found it very difficult indeed to import them. It was only in 1960 that Levi's were officially sold in Germany by a general import company. The German subsidiary Levi Strauss Germany GmbH has been in existence since 1970.

Today, Levi's is an international group of companies with roughly 11,000 employees worldwide, and Levi's jeans are now available in over 100 countries. Numerous youth cultures of the post-war years such as hippies, punks or hip-hoppers made jeans into part of their uniform. Here they were far more than just an item of clothing: their adaptability made them a means of expression for youth culture, capturing the spirit of the age. Even today, jeans are still associated with freedom, individuality and youth. Jeans-wearers still retain some of the mystique of the cowboys, whose pioneering achievements civilized an entire continent.

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