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AN OLD-FASHIONED TREAT: CZECHOSLOVAKIA'S CIRKUS EVROPA

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CAROL VANESS

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CATHERINE THE
GREAT'S CARRIAGE

BLACK PEARLS

FROM ONE LAGOON AND A HUNDRED TIMES RARER THAN WHITE







BLUE JEANS

AN AMERICAN ICON

By Deborah Hufford



here's The Stars and Stripes. There's motherhood. There's apple pie. And there's blue jeans. Nothing could be more quintessentially American than the blue-denim, rough-and-ready, double-stitched jean that has faithfully served double-duty in American work and play for more than a century and a half.

The blue jean has become so much a staple of American attire, it has been enshrined in the Smithsonian and the Louvre as classic Americana. Few symbols in the iconography of American culture embody the changing American psyche.



Blue denim began as purely functional apparel in mining camps, then ranches and farms. But, beginning in 1950s Hollywood, blue denim evolved into a powerful fashion statement.

The genesis of the jean took place during the 1850s California Gold Rush when Bavarian immigrant, Levi Strauss, first sold the tough trousers to miners. Their popularity soon spread over the West and it was not long before the blue jean became the booted insignia of the American cowboy.

The denim pant ambled East to urban areas during the Depression when rich city folks discovered them on vacation dude ranches in the West. They took the blue jeans home and the dude-ranch dungarees metamorphized into city slicker chic. The working class took the jeans in stride, too, enamored of their durability and high value for low cost.

Dutiful to de Rigueur

During World War II, the jean had one leg in the war effort and the other in fashion's future. Declared "essential industry" by the War Production Board, the blue jean industry continued manufacturing by only defense workers were allowed to draw from the limited production. Blue jeans, consequently, became coveted commodities, and demand far outstripped supply.

After the war, jeans were the vogue and the industry found itself bursting at the seams with demand.

Denim gained further notoriety in the 1950s when Bing Crosby—wearing jeans—was denied access to a fancy restaurant. In retaliation, Crosby returned to the restaurant in a custom-made denim tuxedo designed by Levi Strauss and Co. He was seated and dined in style.

The Fifties ushered in denim's debut on the silver screen when Marlon Brando in *The Wild Ones* (1954) and James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) immortalized jeans as the uniform of rebellious youth. Then, in the 60s, hip-hugging, bell-bottomed, patched-and-tattered blue jeans became the medallion of the anti-establishment. "Jeans represent a rip-off of and rage against the establishment," wrote media sociologist Marshall McLuhan, as azure waves of protesting students flooded the streets of American cities and flashed across the nation's television screens.

Time magazine wrote that college seniors of 1968, "the



Marlon Brando in The Wild Ones ((1954) and James Dean in Rebel Without A Cause (1955) gave jeans cultural cache.



most conscience-stricken, moralistic and, perhaps, the most promising graduates in U.S. academic history,” wore faded blue jeans under their baccalaureate gowns.

Rock-and-roll giant Eric Clapton paid homage to jeans in his 1970s hit song, “Bell-Bottom Blues,” and the Rolling Stones depicted tight-crotched blue jeans on an album cover complete with real zipper.

Straddling Fashion and Function

In the ‘70s and ‘80s, spurred on by movies like *Urban Cowboy*, *Midnight Cowboy* and *The Electric Horseman*, the western look stampeded onto the fashion scene and even the likes of Ralph Lauren and Calvin Klein were bucking cowboy chic. Riding the trend, manufacturers stretched the limits of denim derrieres. There were pre-shrunk jeans, stretch jeans, bell bottoms, straight-cut, boot-cut, elephant bells, permanent-press, zip flies, button flies, tie-dyed, zip ankles, and, finally, designer jeans, a gentrified, hoity-toity version of the aw’ shucks honest originals.

Then came the faux-finish look. Denim artificially stressed a la bleaching, sand-papering and machine-fatiguing to suit insta-pop trends of a culture extravagant enough to consider the worn-out look chic and *manufacture* the wear-and-tear. Marketers called it the “stone-washed” look, taking a stab at simulated authenticity hearkening back to the original washing methods (if indeed the first Levi-wearing gold miners ever bothered with the niceties of bathing).

American western chic spread like a prairie fire to Europe and soon blue jeans could be found even in the foyer of the Paris Ritz and Red Square at the Kremlin. So deified had denim become on international horizons, Soviet leaders declared the blue jean an evil symbol of American capitalistic tyranny. But Russian youth, in clandestine eagerness, clamored for the denim-clad look and, in the black market, mega-rubles were feverishly exchanged for American blue jeans.



Movies such as Midnight Cowboy, Urban Cowboy and The Electric Cowboy spurred a new popularity of jeans in the ‘70s and ‘80s.





Levi Strauss went West planning to provide canvas tents for miners. But he found they needed tough pants, not tents.

In fact, the Kremlin was right—the blue jean *was* a brainchild of the capitalistic system. When German immigrant Levi Strauss went to California during the Gold Rush, he did not hit the mother lode in

gold but in fabric. In 1853, Strauss headed west from New York with rolls of canvas he planned to sew into tents and Conestoga wagon covers for the hordes rushing to California mining camps. But fate put a snag in his plan and snagged the hem of destiny, instead.

As supply-and-demand economics would have it, Strauss found that what miners really wanted were not tents but tough trousers that could withstand rugged mining conditions. Being the good capitalist he was, Strauss got his leg-up to success by converting his canvas to pants which sold like hotcakes. He called them “waist over-alls,” but the miners called them “Levi’s pants” and then, simply, “Levis.”

Strauss improvised on his original canvas prototypes. He switched from canvas to tough cotton that was as durable but not as stiff. The fabric, imported from Nîmes, France, was called “serge de Nîmes,” hence the American abbreviated name “denim.” (The word “jean” is also derived from the French “Genes,” meaning Genoa, and referred to sturdy cotton pants worn by sailors from Genoa, Italy.

The pants were modified further in the 1860s when gold diggers complained that the weight of gold nuggets ripped out their pockets. Together, Strauss and a Russian immigrant tailor named Jacob Davis patented the idea of using rivets for reinforcements.



The “Seamy” Side of Style

Davis joined Levi Strauss & Co. in 1873 and made auspicious contributions to the evolution of the blue jean. One was the orange thread, which matched the copper rivets. The other was the decorative stitching on the back pockets, called “arcuate.” Originally, the double arcuate pattern had a practical function of reinforcing a cotton lining in the pocket. Although the lining was eventually dropped, the curved stitching remained. Thus, a decorative flourish insinuated itself upon the pragmatism of jean design. Today, the arcuate on Levis is the oldest apparel trademark still in use in the U.S.

During World War II, the War Production Board mandated the removal of the arcuate pattern to conserve scarce materials. In lieu of the arcuate stitching, the design was painted on every pair manufactured during the war. The stitching return in peacetime.

In 1886, a leather patch was introduced to the waistband of Levis. On it was an illustration of two horses hitched in opposing direction to a pair of jeans. Urged by the whips of their taskmasters, the horses strain — futilely—in their traces to rip the pants apart. The patch has become a hallmark of blue jean toughness.

Indeed, the legendary durability of the blue jean helped to catapult Levis to their popularity. The archives of Levi Strauss & Co. contain a pair of jeans from the 1880s unearthed when a modern excavation crew discovered the grave of a California Gold miner. The miner’s coffin had crumbled, his bones had turned to dust, but his jeans were good as gold.

A century ago, as now, the jeans were guaranteed to shrink to fit, to fade, and not to rip. In the mining camps, breaking in a pair of jeans became a ritual in which wearers would jump into a stream or water hole, then allow the pants to dry and shrink to fit. Later, on some dude ranches, ceremonial dunking were opportunities for cowboys and staff to sully the pride—and the pants—of city-slickers in brand-new britches.

Around 1890, Levi Strauss began assigning “lot numbers” to his clothing products. His waist-high overalls were allotted the number, “501” and the name stuck. The 501 Levis of today are, in fact, very similar to the first 501 blue denim jeans made over a century ago, with only slight modifications.



The “arcuate” stitching pattern on jean pockets has become one of the most distinguishing features of jean brands. The Levi Strauss arcuate is the oldest apparel trademark still in use.



The most recent change came in the 1930s when the crotch rivet was removed—so the story goes—after the company president, Walter Hass, squatted too long at a campfire (in what must have surely been a riveting experience). The following week, the board of directors, in deference to their president's wounded...ah... pride, voted unanimously to remove the crotch rivet. Back pocket rivets were also discontinued following complaints they scratched school chairs and expensive saddles.

The Blues Come of Age

Perhaps the most fateful development in the evolution of denim jeans came with Strauss's decision to change the pant color from the original brown to blue. He selected indigo dye because of its rich midnight blue color, its unvarying quality, and its availability.

Today's blue jeans are dyed with synthetic indoxyl instead of natural indigo but the effect is still the same. Indoxyl adheres to the surface of the cotton fibers, as does indigo and, with wear, the colorant eventually diminishes, resulting in the unique aging process of the jean. Denim ages gracefully and, like a fine wine, increases in character. Its well-cured patina assumes a range of hues, depending on relative wear, from deep midnight blue to sapphire, hyacinth, powder blue, then almost white. It can be argued that a blue jean reaches its true essence only in this heightened state of wear. This is perhaps the reason why the 501 blues ad campaign depicts rugged youth in weathered jeans, stylishly slumming in cobalt chic.

The character of a jean—as with a good Bordeaux—becomes full-bodied with age, assuming the shape of the wearer. It is transformed into a sort of body sculpture in blue. Like an indigo chameleon, blue jeans are molded by their environment, be it bronco-busting or single-bar schlepping. So it is that the denim jean is a perfect weaving of form and function, filling the needs—and contours—of its wearer. It is likely that the blue jean will continue to be reshaped in the image of the ever-changing national psyche and, with its rugged sapphirine charm, will endure as a true American classic.



Simulated wear—fading, fraying, tears, rips, holes—have given blue jean sales a leg-up.

