

# Coronet

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## Levi's Remarkable Pants

by ANDREW HAMILTON



*Since 1850, his jeans cover 'em all—  
miner, milady or drugstore cowboy*

A CALIFORNIA RANCH HAND was standing in front of a saddlery one day in Fresno when a salesman for a tailored-to-measure house came up.

"Interest you in a suit of clothes, cowboy?"

"Nope. Got the best tailor in the world already."

"Yeah? Who is he?"

"Levi Strauss," said the cowpuncher. "Been makin' my clothes ever since I put on long pants."

By that he meant Levi's, those tough, form-fitting low-hipped blue denim pants with the orange stitching and copper-riveted pockets which Levi Strauss and Company of San Francisco turns out at a rate of nearly 9,000,000 a year.

Levi's—and their many imitations—are not only standard regimentals for today's teen-agers of both sexes virtually the world over but for more than a century they have been found wherever hard wear and hard work go together. They were on the job when California gold was panned and the Panama Canal dug. They are worn on rubber plantations in Sumatra, in uranium mines in Canada and on oil-drilling rigs in Iraq.

Some people think it was Mar-

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Levi added rivets to pants because a miner stuffed ore in his back pockets.lene Dietrich who put American women in long pants. Others credit Levi Strauss. For many years, Western women have borrowed trousers from their husbands for riding or for heavy work around ranches. During World War II, Rosie the Riveter made blue denim pants so popular with the ladies that several feminine styles are now manufactured.

Women who first climbed into "cowboy pants" made the surprising discovery that Levi's were flattering to their figures. And many a hard-pressed American father has found Levi's the answer to the clothing needs of a growing family. Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Earl Warren, when Governor of California, confessed that his six children grew up in blue jeans.

"We'd probably have gone bankrupt without 'em," he said jovially at the 100th anniversary celebration of the company in 1950.

The tradition of college students wearing Levi's is said to have originated at the University of California in Berkeley during the 1930s. Later, the custom spread to Midwestern and Eastern universities.

In the West, where they originated, these famous pants have been used to stuff cracks in log

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cabins, tie around the necks of sick calves and mop floors. They have even been known to stand up by themselves.

Levi's derive their name from Levi Strauss, a round-faced, German-born New Yorker who, at the age of 20, sailed around the Horn in 1850 to make his fortune in California. Part of his grubstake was a bundle of tough canvas fabric, which he hoped to sell to tent makers and owners of Conestoga wagons.

After his ship docked in San Francisco, young Levi met a miner who asked what he'd brought from the East. Strauss told him.

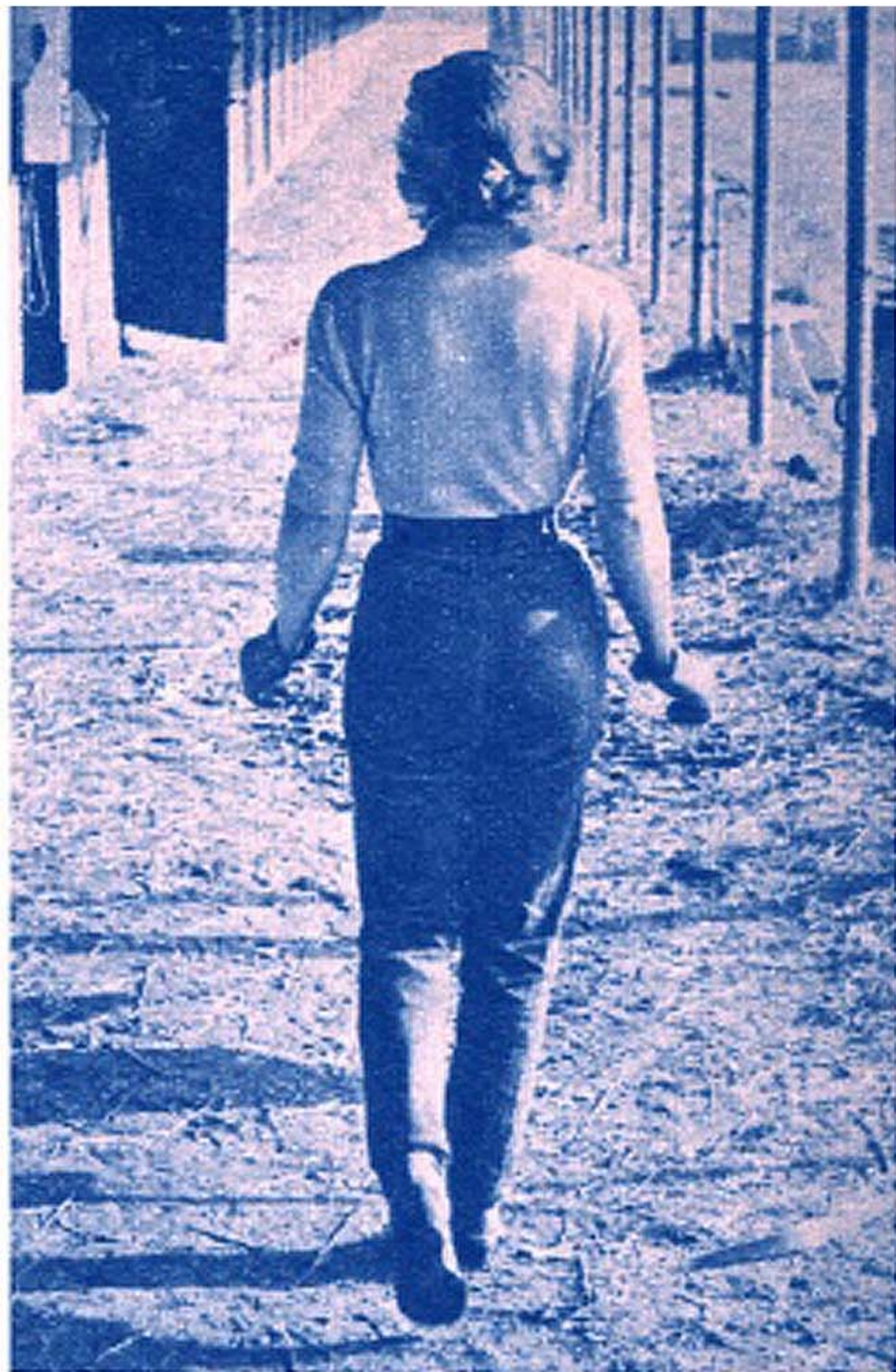
"Should have brought pants," said the miner.

"Pants?"

"Sure. Up in the diggin's, pants don't wear worth a hoot. Can't get a pair to last no time at all."

Levi had an idea. He took his roll of canvas to a tailor and asked him to make two pairs of pants—one for the miner, one for himself. The miner strutted all over San Francisco bragging: "See these pants of Levi's—best doggone pair I ever had."

The name stuck. Other gold-seekers demanded the pants that would outlast the rigors of the mines and the saddle.



Levi's act as a girdle by pulling tummy in and flattening the stern section.

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Young Strauss never got an opportunity to pan for gold, but he did strike it rich. He sent an urgent letter to his brothers in the East to "buy up all the canvas and duck you can lay your hands on." By 1853, he was hiring all the tailors and seamstresses he could find for his pants factory on California Street.

Except for the color of the fabric and the copper rivets in the pockets, today's Levi's are exactly the same as the pants made by the original factory.

Somewhere along the line, however, Strauss switched from canvas and duck to a tough fabric now called denim. It came in three colors: light blue, brown and gray. Because two pieces rarely dyed exactly the same shade, Strauss ordered a deeper indigo blue, which has remained the standard color.

Rivets entered the picture in the 1860s—all because of a prospector named Alkali Ike who carried jagged pieces of ore samples in his back pockets. As a result, the seams often ripped out. On visits to Virginia City, Nevada, Alkali always marched to the tailor shop of Jake Davis and complained loudly about his tailoring.

One day, Jake became fed up. He crossed the street with Alkali's pants and told a blacksmith to rivet the pockets at the corners with black-iron square nails.

On his next visit to Levi Strauss' factory to purchase materials, Jake told Levi the story.

"Maybe this is an idea we can use," Levi said. "Patent it and I'll make you foreman of my shop. Perhaps a copper rivet would be even better—wouldn't rust and discolor the fabric."

Copper rivets have been a distinguishing feature of Levi's ever since.

In 1937, a further improvement was made. Two Levi executives had been hunting in the High Sierra. One of them bagged a bobcat.

"Strange, isn't it, how a cat can sheath its claws?" he remarked "Maybe we could figure out a way to cover the rivets with the cloth

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*The  
oldest  
(1885)  
surviving  
pair of  
blue jeans*

so they won't scratch furniture and upholstery."

They did, and U. S. Patent No. 1,999,927 was granted on the idea.

Old-timers required that their Levi's fit good and tight around the hips. If they were too loose, there was a cure that present-day teenagers also know—and use—jump in a rain barrel (or a bathtub) and let the pants dry on you. Average shrinkage: about an inch around the waist and two inches in length.

**L** EVI STRAUSS remained a bachelor all his life. After his death in 1902 at the age of 73, the business was taken over by four nephews. One nephew's son-in-law, Walter Haas, became president in 1928 and was succeeded last year by Daniel Koshland.

Levi Strauss and Company today employs 2,500 people in its ten factories, with an annual payroll in excess of \$7,000,000. It sells its products through 25,000 independent retailers. Besides denims and other work clothes, the company makes a wide assortment of garments—Western wear, wool shirts, leather jackets, men's, women's and children's sports wear.

The company is proud of the many letters it has received commenting upon the durability of its products. One of the most remarkable came from a California woman who told of exploring an old mine near the ghost town of Calico and finding several pairs of Levi's—

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dusty but well-preserved in the desert air. She washed and wore them, and then discovered from markings on the pockets that they were over 80 years old!

For years, the Strauss trademark has been two horses straining to pull apart a pair of pants; their guarantee: "A New Pair If They Rip."

Mrs. M. H. English of Otto, Wyoming, put the idea to more practical use.

"Going between here and Basin," she wrote, "we found a man who had run his car off the highway and was stuck. We had no chains or rope . . . but we found an old pair of Levi's in the back of our car. We tied one leg to our car and one to the front of his. We really had to pull, but the pants held and out he came."

Levi's are said to be the only article of clothing in the American wardrobe whose tailoring or style hasn't changed in the past century. President Daniel Koshland seriously believes they will be worn by rocket engineers, space satellite technicians and uranium miners on the Moon in 2056 A.D.—and still be America's most famous pants.

