

FOREVER IN BLUE JEANS

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

One hundred-fifty years ago, a pair of San Francisco business partners — one you've probably heard of and one you probably haven't — were granted a patent for a new style of highly durable work pants made of denim and reinforced with copper rivets.

Tailor Jacob Davis and dry goods merchant Levi Strauss called them blue jeans.

THE ORIGIN OF BLUE JEANS

Levi Strauss was born in Buttenheim, Bavaria — which would later morph into Germany — in 1829.

At age 18, he moved with his mother and two sisters to New York to join his brothers, who had opened a wholesale dry goods business in Manhattan.

He became an American citizen in 1893 and lived in Louisville, Kentucky, for a while before moving to San Francisco in 1854 to open his own wholesale operation as the California Gold Rush kicked into high gear.



Jacob W. Davis was born in Latvia in 1831, trained as a tailor and immigrated to the United States at age 23.

He worked as a tailor in Maine, moved to San Francisco in 1856 and then to western Canada two years after that to try his hand at gold prospecting.

He returned to the U.S. in 1867 and eventually settled with his family in Reno, Nevada, where he returned to tailoring clothing and supplies for railroad workers, farmers and gold miners.



Davis specialized in sewing tents, horse blankets and wagon covers out of heavy-duty canvas and duck cloth. He began buying his cloth from Levi Strauss' wholesale operation in San Francisco.

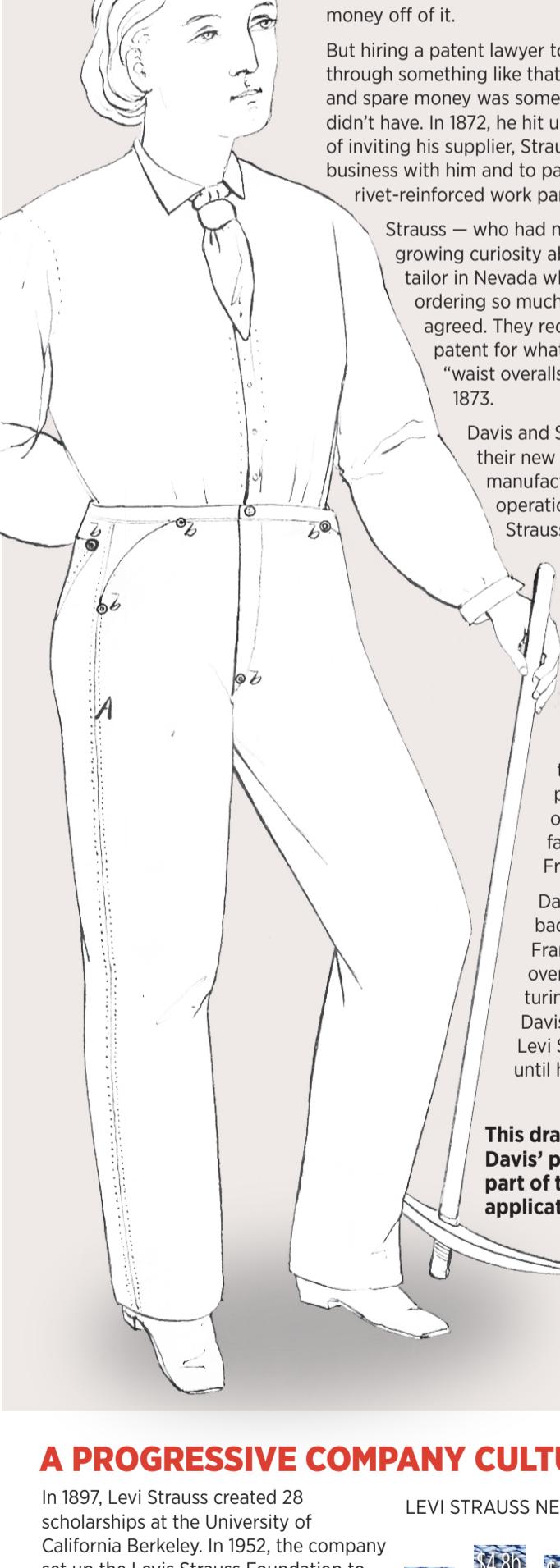
In 1870, Davis was hired to make a pair of working pants for a woodcutter.



He had the idea to reinforce commonly ripped seams in the pants — such as at the corners of the pockets and at the base of the button fly — with copper rivets.

The next year, Davis switched to denim and began dyeing the pants indigo blue, to help hide grass stains. Sales took off.

BLUE JEANS BRING IN LOTS OF GREENBACKS



Before long, Davis was swamped with orders. The next step would be to patent that idea so Davis could make proper money off of it.

But hiring a patent lawyer to push through something like that cost money, and spare money was something Davis didn't have. In 1872, he hit upon the idea of inviting his supplier, Strauss, to go into business with him and to patent the rivet-reinforced work pants.

Strauss — who had nursed a growing curiosity about this tailor in Nevada who was ordering so much denim — agreed. They received their patent for what Davis called "waist overalls" on May 20, 1873.

Davis and Strauss folded their new pants manufacturing operation into Strauss' wholesaling business, Levi Strauss & Co. At first, Strauss hired seamstresses to work in their homes to make pants. He later opened a factory in San Francisco.

Davis moved back to San Francisco to oversee manufacturing operations. Davis worked for Levi Strauss & Co. until his death.

This drawing of Davis' pants was part of their patent application.



A pair of Levis from the 1880s found in an abandoned mine shaft sold at auction last year for \$87,000.



The modern version of the 1886 "two horse" logo.



The "red tab" added in 1936,

1875

Strauss buys two cloth mills to help supply his growing manufacturing operation.

1886

With its patent set to expire in four years, the company launches a new logo showing two teams of horses struggling to pull apart a pair of Levis.

1890

The rivet at the base of the crotch is eliminated when miners complain that they would squat around a campfire, stand up and receive a painful burn in a sensitive area.

1902

Strauss dies, passing his company along to four nephews and, later, to his in-laws, the Haas family.

1908

Davis dies.

1934

Levi Strauss & Co. introduces jeans for women. An advertisement in Vogue magazine the next year depicts two society women in snug-fitting Levis, helping blue jeans become a high-fashion item.

1936

The company begins adding what it calls a "red tab" to the right back pocket of its signature product, the 501 jeans.

1937

The company begins to phase out pocket rivets after school principals complain that rivets on the back-pockets of their jeans are scratching and gouging wooden desks and benches.

1946

Levi Strauss & Co. abandons wholesaling entirely and concentrates on manufacturing clothing.

1971

Now operating in 50 countries, the company goes public.

1985

The Haas family and other descendants of Levi Strauss stage a leveraged buyout that returns the company to private ownership.

1986

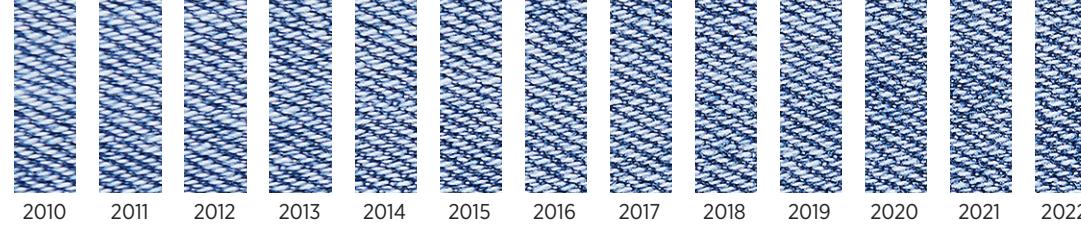
Levi Strauss & Co. introduces a new line of casual pants it calls Dockers.

A PROGRESSIVE COMPANY CULTURE

In 1897, Levi Strauss created 28 scholarships at the University of California Berkeley. In 1952, the company set up the Levi Strauss Foundation to coordinate the company's giving.

The company's CEO has banned guns from Levi's stores and has been outspoken on issues like immigration, LGBTQ rights and access to abortion. It offers full medical benefits to unmarried partners of employees and, since 2000, has paid employees to volunteer. Levi Strauss & Co. is so "woke" that "Saturday Night Live" even did a skit about it in 2017.

LEVI STRAUSS NET SALES



Sales of Levis were up in 2022 on the strength of its new direct-to-customer business and new non-denim lines for men and women. This has offset weak sales in Europe and expected uncertainty in the demand for denim in the return to offices for many who had worked at home during the pandemic, Reuters reports.