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Photo by Hank Trotter

We all wear 'em...they've become an American institution sort of like apple pie and Chevrolet. In fact, they've made a hit throughout the world, and are considered ultimate fashion in Tokyo, London, Paris and Milan.

Alison Lurie, author of "The Language of Clothes," even claims they subconsciously represent American power and virtue to the contemporary European teenager.

What are these magnificently influential, patriotic items?

Levi's.

The story behind Levi's 501 button-fly jeans dates back to 1853 when Levi Strauss booked passage on a clipper ship from New York to San Francisco. He traveled to the American frontier with money on his mind: He wanted to market supplies to the wealthy gold miners.

Included in his supplies were rolls of canvas intended for use in tents and wagon covers. After a short visit to the mining country, he realized the potential for a different use of this material. You guessed it...a stout pair of pants.

Strauss took his canvas to a tailor who fashioned the world's first pair of jeans. He called them "pantaloon" and "waist-high overalls."

His customers just called them "Levi's."

They were tailored from heavyweight brown canvas, without back pockets or beltloops. The number "501" was the lot number assigned to the product.

During the 1850s, Strauss switched from canvas to a tough cotton fabric loomed in Nimes, France, called "serge de Nimes" — soon to be known as "denim." Strauss selected an indigo dye for uniform color, and it became the standard shade still used today.

The original 501 jeans were sold stiff and oversized, and fit correctly only after they were washed and dried a few times. Miners, cowboys and farmers often shrunk their Levis by putting them on and dunking themselves in a watering trough. When the pants dried, they fit — snugly.

Over the next several decades, Levi's 501 jeans acquired the trademarks that made them

unique and identifiable. When "Alkali Ike," a Virginia City miner, complained that his pockets kept ripping under the strain of "nuggets bigger than your thumb," a local tailor, Jacob W. Davis, began riveting the pocket corners for added strength. Davis told Levi Strauss & Co. about the innovation, and the company adopted the idea and acquired a patent in 1873.

The next significant design change to 501 jeans came half a decade later, in 1936, when the red tab trademark was patented and added to the right-hand back pocket.

Walter Haas Sr., then the president of Levi Strauss & Co., personally requested another design change. As the story goes, Haas, an avid fly fisherman, crouched too close to a mountain campfire one night, and the flames heated the crotch rivet on his Levi's. The rivet removal modification was made soon afterwards.

World War II put a temporary halt to the manufacturing of 501s. The production of the jeans was considered an "essential industry," and only those engaged in defense work were allowed to buy the jeans.

At the end of the war, Levi Strauss & Co. prepared for the effects of the "baby boom" by shifting its sales emphasis to young people.

The post-war generation saw a "cowboy-hero" emerge from the West. He rode in not from the range, but from Hollywood, and his name was James Dean. Emulated by thousands of American teenagers, Dean's casual, moody, almost rebellious behavior became a trademark. He wore Levi's 501 jeans.

Dean was succeeded by another hero shaped out of the '50s culture — Marlon Brando. Appearing in the 1954 film "The Wild Ones," Brando made a lasting impression wearing a leather jacket and Levi's, sitting astride a motorcycle. Together, Dean and Brando helped fashion an image for a new generation of jeans wearers.

It's been almost thirty years and the excitement hasn't wavered yet: The Levi's legend lives on.

Mike Duncan

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