

Levi's Levis

Levi Strauss, who gave his name to that most American item of clothing—blue jeans—was born Loeb Strauss in Bavaria in 1829. Two years after his father died, Loeb and his mother and sisters went to New York. They were met by his older brothers, Jonas and Louis, who had started a **dry-goods** business, J. Strauss Brother & Co. Loeb began to learn the business. By 1850, his family and friends were calling him Levi.

When he learned of the California gold rush, Levi went to San Francisco to make his fortune. He decided to sell supplies to the miners who arrived in the city to outfit themselves before heading off to the gold fields. He arrived in San Francisco in 1853 and started a dry-goods business under his own name, in addition to serving as the West Coast representative of the family business.

As the company continued to grow, it moved to increasingly larger buildings, and in 1863 it was renamed Levi Strauss & Co. Strauss was well-known around the city. He was also active in the Jewish community and was a member of San Francisco's Temple Emanu-El ("God Is With Us"). He contributed to several Jewish charities and to the gold medal that was given each year to the synagogue's best Sabbath-school student.

A tailor named Jacob Davis of Reno, Nevada, had a customer who kept ripping the pockets of any pants Davis made for him. Davis, a customer of Strauss & Co., wanted to strengthen the pants, so he put metal rivets where the pants often tore, such as at the pocket corners and at the bottom of the button fly.

The pants were a big success, and Davis wanted to be sure that no one stole his idea, but he did not have the \$68 legal fee that was needed to apply for a patent. He knew he needed a



business partner, and he thought of Levi Strauss. On May 20, 1873, the two men received patent 139,121—and blue jeans were born. Holding the patent meant that for almost twenty years, Levi Strauss & Co. was the only company permitted to make and sell clothing with rivets.

At first, the firm manufactured waist overalls (the old name for jeans) by giving the material to women who did the sewing in their homes. Jacob Davis was in charge of manufacturing, and demand was soon so great that the company opened two factories. In 1890, the year that the number 501 was used for the overalls for the first time, Levi and his nephews, who were working with him, officially incorporated the company.

Despite his importance in the business community, Strauss insisted that his employees call him Levi, not Mr. Strauss. He was well-known for his generosity to both Jewish and non-Jewish causes. When Levi Strauss died in 1902, he was remembered in the *San Francisco Call* for his "fairness and integrity . . . with his customers and liberality toward his employees."



Dry goods are fabrics and items such as thread, needles, buttons, and so on.

