

— Inspirational Figures —

Levi Strauss:

Family Ties as Strong as a Pair of Levi's

In *River of Shadows*, author Rebecca Solnit notes that when Eadward Muybridge invented a high speed camera to photograph a trotting horse at a San Francisco racetrack in 1872, he laid the groundwork for cinema and also launched California's reputation as a place of exciting technological innovation.

A less technological but equally influential innovation also came out of San Francisco in 1872. Around the same time Muybridge was photographing Leland Stanford's horse, a tailor named Jacob Davis wrote to his cloth supplier with a business proposition. Davis had developed a technique for using metal rivets to reinforce the stress points of pants he was sewing. Unable to afford the patent process, he offered the dry goods wholesaler an opportunity to fund the process and share the patent. His supplier liked the idea. His name was Levi Strauss.

LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

Born February 26, 1829, in Buttenheim, Bavaria, Loeb Strauss's early life was full of hardship, due to severe economic strife in Germany. The Strauss family scraped by, and Loeb's older brothers immigrated to America as soon as they could. After his father's death from tuberculosis, young Loeb and his mother and sister also moved to the United States.

Loeb arrived in New York in 1847 and joined his older brothers' wholesale dry goods business, which was called J. Strauss Brother & Co. The brothers established their company near the docks of New York Harbor, and young Loeb set about learning the business. Loeb also gave himself a new name to go with his new life in the United States, so when news of the California gold rush reached New York, it was young Levi Strauss who wondered whether a man might make his fortune supplying the miners with dry goods.

PICKS, SHOVELS, AND PANTS

Today it is well understood that very few prospectors found wealth in the gold fields of California, but the gold rush nevertheless produced great fortunes. Levi Strauss provides a good illustration. In January of 1853 Levi became an American citizen, and in February he set out for the west coast. Arriving in San Francisco in March, he set up his own dry goods wholesale business and became the west coast representative of his brothers' New York firm.

Strauss imported dry goods such as clothing and bolts of fabric and sold them to the small stores that were springing up all over California as prospectors and homesteaders poured into the new state. Not everyone in the state would need a pick or shovel for mining, but everybody would need clothes.

Strauss's business grew fast, and so did his adopted city. Visitors to San Francisco may not realize that streets we today consider downtown were once right on the water. In the city's Wild West days, garbage filled in portions of the bay and more of the city was built right on top of the landfill. It's difficult for modern Americans to appreciate how quickly the region's population doubled, then

tripled, and then quadrupled. With the completion of the transcontinental railroad, people poured into California in general and San Francisco in particular. The original railroad robber barons, including Crocker, Stanford, and Hopkins, built huge mansions in the city and used their railroads to promote western travel.

Then Levi Strauss and Jacob Davis got their patent for riveted denim "waist overalls," and a very successful business became a juggernaut. The dry goods wholesaler had to become a manufacturer to keep up with demand, so Strauss built factories and soon was producing mass quantities of the most popular pants in the world. Levi's riveted denim



pants earned a reputation for quality and strength that stands to this day.

A CITY OF BROTHERS AND SISTERS

Strauss loved and trusted his family. He began his career by working for his brothers. Soon after founding his own firm, he welcomed his brother-in-law and nephews into the business. A lifelong bachelor, Strauss reached out to his siblings but also to his extended family. And by extended family, he seemed to include the entire city of San Francisco.

Even before his invention of "blue jeans," Levi Strauss was a well-known and well-loved figure in the city. Widely known by his first name (as his jeans would be for over a hundred years), Levi actively participated in the business, culture and philanthropic activities of San Francisco and

"Fairness and integrity in his dealings with Eastern factors and his customers and liberality toward his employees soon gave the house a standing second to none on the coast." Today we suspect a company led by Levi Strauss would be a perennial selection on any list of best companies to work for.

The San Francisco Board of Trade eulogized Strauss in a special resolution that included the following comments:

"...the great causes of education and charity have likewise suffered a signal loss in the death of Mr. Strauss, whose splendid endowments to the University of California will be an enduring testimonial of his worth as a liberal, public-minded citizen and whose numberless unostentatious acts of charity in which neither race nor creed were recognized, exemplified his broad and generous love for and sympathy

Levi Strauss and Nevada tailor Jacob Davis co-patented the process of putting rivets in pants for strength. On May 20, 1873, they received U.S. Patent No. 139,121. This date is now considered the official birthday of "blue jeans."

northern California. In addition to co-founding the city's first synagogue, Temple Emanu-El, he was also a charter member of the San Francisco Board of Trade, and a director on the boards of the Nevada Bank and the San Francisco Gas and Electric Company.

As a philanthropist he supported the Pacific Hebrew Orphan Asylum and Home, the Eureka Benevolent Society, the Roman Catholic and Protestant Orphan Asylums, and the University of California.



Original signed document by Jacob Davis for the patent of his 'Fastening Pocket-Openings' in 1873.

Levi Strauss died on September 26, 1902, and the news resulted in a huge outpouring of love from the city. On the day of his funeral, businesses throughout the city closed so their proprietors could attend and pay their respects. Commenting on Strauss's standing as an employer and citizen, the San Francisco Call newspaper wrote,

with humanity."

EARTHQUAKE, FIRE, AND RECOVERY

The Levi Strauss & Co. online biography of the company's founder notes that the company's headquarters on Battery Street and its factory were destroyed by the fires that followed the great San Francisco earthquake of 1906.

"It was a great loss, but it did not signal the end to the company. As the ashes cooled, the Stern brothers made plans for a new facility and a new factory, as their uncle Levi would no doubt have done. They also continued to pay employee salaries and extended credit to other, less fortunate merchants until they could get back on their feet. Although buildings and factories fell, the company built by Levi Strauss was bedrock solid, due to his foresight, his business sense and his unswerving devotion to quality."

In 1872, in San Francisco, California, high-speed photography and blue jeans were born. Eadward Muybridge, like Levi Strauss, had come to America seeking opportunity, and his photographic innovations led to the development of motion pictures. We think it is worth noting that at the height of the Cold War in the 1960s and 1970s, two American products were treasured above all else by young people behind the iron curtain: movies and Levi's jeans.

Levi Strauss and his family came to America to escape oppression and find their fortune in a land of liberty. One hundred years later, Levi's blue jeans became a symbol of liberty for oppressed young people all over the world. We believe Levi Strauss would have liked knowing that. ▲