

LEVI STRAUSS: A BIOGRAPHY

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Levi Strauss, the inventor of the quintessential American garment — the blue jean — was born in Buttenheim, Bavaria on February 26, 1829 to Hirsch Strauss and his second wife, Rebecca Haas Strauss. Levi — named "Loeb" at birth — had three older brothers and three older sisters, but his sister Fanny (born Vogele) was the only other child of his mother, Rebecca.

Hirsch succumbed to tuberculosis in 1846 and two years later Rebecca, Levi, Fanny, and the next oldest sister Maila emigrated to New York. There, they were met by Jonas and Louis, two of the older brothers, who had already made the journey and had started a wholesale dry goods business, called “J. Strauss Brother & Co.” Young Loeb soon began to learn the trade himself, and by 1850 he was known among his family and customers as “Levi” (in the census of that year, his name is spelled “Levy”).

When news of the California Gold Rush made its way east, Levi immigrated to San Francisco to make his fortune, though he knew he wouldn't make it panning gold. At the end of January 1853 he became an American citizen, and in February he headed for the West coast via the Isthmus of Panama. He arrived in bustling, noisy San Francisco in early March, establishing a wholesale dry goods business under his own name and also serving as the West Coast representative of the family's New York firm. His new company imported dry goods — clothing, underwear, umbrellas, handkerchiefs, bolts of fabric — and sold them to the small stores that were springing up all over California and the West. It was these stores that helped

outfit the miners of the Gold Rush and, eventually, the new families that began to populate the western regions.

The first address where Levi conducted business (that we know of) was at 90 Sacramento Street, and the name of his firm was simply, “Levi Strauss.” In the 1850s this location was very close to the waterfront, handy for receiving and selling the goods that arrived by ship from his brother Jonas in New York. In 1856 Levi moved the business to 62 Sacramento Street and then to 63 & 65 Sacramento as its trade and reputation expanded. By this time David Stern — who was married to Levi’s sister Fanny — was associated with the firm. In 1861 the business relocated to 315 & 317 Sacramento Street, and in 1863 the company was renamed “Levi Strauss & Co.” Then in 1866 Levi moved the headquarters again, to larger quarters at 14-16 Battery Street, where it remained for the next forty years.

In his mid-thirties, Levi was already a well-known figure around the city. He was active in the business and cultural life of San Francisco, and actively supported the Jewish community, including Temple Emanu-El, the city's first synagogue. Despite his stature as an important businessman, he insisted that his employees call him Levi, and not Mr. Strauss.

In 1872, Levi received a letter from Jacob Davis, a Reno, Nevada tailor. Davis was one of Levi Strauss’ regular customers; he purchased bolts of cloth from the company to use for his own business. In his letter, he told the prosperous merchant about the interesting way he made pants for his customers: he placed metal rivets at the points of strain — pocket corners, and at the base of the button fly. He did this in order to make the pants stronger for the laboring men who were his customers. He wanted to patent this new idea but needed a business partner to get

the idea off the ground. So he suggested that the two men take out the patent together (sharing the costs, as well). Levi was enthusiastic about the idea and the patent was granted to both men on May 20, 1873. The blue jean was born.

He knew that demand would be great for these riveted "waist overalls" (the old name for jeans), so Levi brought Jacob Davis to San Francisco to oversee the first West Coast manufacturing facility. It's possible that the first manufacture of the jeans was undertaken by individual seamstresses who worked out of their homes. By the 1880s Levi had leased factory space and then opened his own factory south of Market Street (though the dates and information are a bit vague here, thanks to the loss of the company's historical records in the 1906 earthquake and fire). The famous 501® jean — known at the time simply as "XX" — was soon a best seller, as were the other riveted products Levi and Jacob added to their new manufactured lines.

Levi carried on other business pursuits during his career, as well. He became a charter member and treasurer of the San Francisco Board of Trade in 1877. He was a director of the Nevada Bank, the Liverpool, London and Globe Insurance Company and the San Francisco Gas and Electric Company. In 1875 Levi and two associates purchased the Mission and Pacific Woolen Mills from the estate of former silver millionaire William Ralston, and the mill's fabric was used to make the Levi Strauss & Co. "blanket-lined" pants and coats.

He was also one of the city's greatest philanthropists. Levi was a contributor to the Pacific Hebrew Orphan Asylum and Home, the Eureka Benevolent Society and the Hebrew Board of Relief. In 1895 he and a number of other prominent San Franciscans provided funds to build a new railroad from San Francisco to the San

Joaquin Valley (a project which unfortunately failed). And in 1897 Levi provided the funds for twenty-eight scholarships at the University of California, Berkeley.

As the end of the 19th century approached, Levi was still involved in the day-to-day workings of the business, though he had brought his nephews into the firm by this time. David Stern had died in 1874 and his four sons — Jacob, Sigmund, Louis and Abraham — were now working with their uncle Levi. In 1890 — the year that the XX waist overall was given the lot number "501®" — Levi and his nephews officially incorporated the company.

During the week of September 22, 1902 Levi began to complain of ill health but by Friday evening the 26th, he felt well enough to attend the family dinner at the home on Leavenworth Street, which he shared with Jacob Stern's family. He awakened briefly in the night, and told the nurse in attendance that he felt "as comfortable as I can under the circumstances." Then, peacefully, he died. His death was headline news in the Sunday, September 28 edition of the San Francisco Call. On Monday, the day of his funeral, local businesses were temporarily closed so that their proprietors could attend the services. The eulogy was read at Levi's home by Rabbi Jacob Voorsanger of Temple Emanu-El; afterward, company employees escorted the casket to the Southern Pacific railway station, where it was transported to the Hills of Eternity Cemetery in Colma (now Home of Peace), south of San Francisco.

Levi's estate amounted to nearly \$6 million, the bulk of which was left to his four nephews and other family members. Other bequests were made to the Pacific Hebrew Orphan Asylum, the Home for Aged Israelites, the Roman Catholic and

Protestant Orphan Asylums, Eureka Benevolent Society and the Emanu-El Sisterhood.

In summing up Levi's life and the establishment of his business, the San Francisco Call stated: "Fairness and integrity in his dealings with his Eastern factors and his customers and liberality toward his employees soon gave the house a standing second to none on the coast." An even more fitting testimonial was pronounced by the San Francisco Board of Trade in a special resolution:

"...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 with humanity."

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On April 18, 1906 San Francisco was devastated by a massive earthquake and fire. Counted among the buildings which did not survive the catastrophe was the headquarters of Levi Strauss & Co. on Battery Street. The building survived the earthquake, but not the fire, which raged for three long days: all dry goods, furnishings and business records were destroyed. The factory suffered the same fate.

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.

For 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.