

How jeans conquered the world

By **Stephanie Hegarty** - BBC World Service

It's difficult to find a garment as widely embraced, worn and loved the world over as jeans. The classic symbol of the American West is now a staple in wardrobes around the world. But why?

Cowboys may wear them but so do supermodels, farmers, presidents and housewives.

Ask any group of people why they wear jeans and you will get a range of answers. For some they're comfortable, durable and easy - for others they're sexy and cool. Jeans mean different things to different people. Does this explain their wide appeal?

It is a subject that is relatively unstudied, says anthropologist Danny Miller, whose book *Blue Jeans* will be published next month.

In every country he has visited - from the Philippines to Turkey, India and Brazil - Miller has stopped and counted the first 100 people to walk by, and in each he found that almost half the population wore jeans on any given day.

Jeans are everywhere, he says, with the exception of rural tracts of China and South Asia.

The reason for their success has as much to do with their cultural meaning as their physical construction.

They were first designed as work wear for workers on the farms and mines of America's Western states in the late 1800s.

When a Nevada tailor called Jacob Davis was asked to make a pair of sturdy trousers for a local woodcutter, he struck upon the idea of reinforcing them with rivets. They proved extremely durable and were soon in high demand.

Davis realized the potential of his product but couldn't afford to patent it. He wrote to his fabric supplier, the San Francisco merchant, Levi Strauss, for help.

Levi's, as the patented trousers became known, were made in two fabrics, cotton duck (similar to canvas) and denim.

"They found really early on that it was the denim version that would sell," says Paul Trynka, author of *Denim: From Cowboys to Catwalks*. Denim was more comfortable, softening with age, and its indigo dye gave it a unique character.

Indigo doesn't penetrate the cotton yarn like other dyes but sits on the outside of each thread. These molecules chip off over time, causing the fabric to fade and wear in a unique way.

"Why did it sell?" asks Trynka. "Because the denim changed as it aged and the way it wore reflected people's lives."

Because of its fading quality, denim was sold raw - unwashed and untreated - and by the beginning of the 20th Century workers began to realize they could shrink the trousers to a more comfortable fit.

Not only were they more durable but each pair of jeans began to tell the story of the worker and his work.

Before World War II jeans were only worn in America's Western states. In the east they were synonymous with romantic notions of the cowboy - rugged, independent and American, but at the same time rural and working class.

Affluent easterners would escape humdrum suburban life to holiday on "dude ranches" - working farms where they could play at being cowboys - and wearing jeans was part of the experience. But back in Connecticut or New York, the jeans stayed in the closet.



When they did start to be worn as casual wear, it was a startling symbol of rebellion - the spirit captured by Marlon Brando in his 1953 film *The Wild One* and by James Dean two years later in *Rebel Without a Cause*.

"If you were a 15-year-old boy in 1953 you wanted to be Marlon Brando," says Downey.

"Hollywood costume designers put all the bad boys in denim."

Dean and Brando wore denim off-screen too. Both represented a subversive counter-culture - a group of young soldiers just returned from war, who rode around the US on motorcycles instead of moving to the suburbs and having children. They were soon banned in schools from coast to coast which only added to the fervor with which teenagers embraced them.

Outside America the trend was beginning to catch on too. Many of the American soldiers stationed in Europe and Japan during the war were working-class boys from the Western states. While off duty they wore their jeans proudly as a symbol of home. The trousers represented an easier, happier American way of life, which Europeans wanted to buy into.

During the 1960s jeans had also spread to the American middle class. Protesting college students began wearing them as a token of solidarity with the working class - those most affected by racial discrimination and the war draft.

But jeans weren't only a symbol of democratization; they put different classes on a level playing field. They were affordable and hard-wearing, looked good worn as well as new, and didn't have to be washed often or ironed at all. They conformed to the body in a way that matched even the most finely tailored clothes. This became especially important for women because then, as now, they paid more attention to fit.

This versatility, the ability to become all things to all people, is the secret to jeans' survival as a clothing staple.

Adapted from: *How Jeans Conquered the World*. BBC News Magazine. 28 February 2012. 4 March 2013
<<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-17101768>>.

Question Sheet
How Jeans Conquered the World

1. Where were jeans invented?
2. Why were jeans invented in the first place?
3. According to anthropologist Danny Miller to what extent has the cultural trait of wearing jeans diffused to other countries?
4. What factors accounted for the cultural diffusion of jeans?
5. Describe the cultural diffusion of jeans by completing the chart below:

Late 1800s	
From the late 1800s to World War II	
During World War II	
1950s	
1960s	
Now	

In the 1950s, Hollywood gave jeans a bad reputation. Movies came out about motorcycle gangs and violence in schools. All the young troublemakers wore the same clothes: jeans and leather jackets. Before long, schools started banning denim pants. In the end, it didn't matter. Teens liked wearing clothes their parents hated. In 1958, one article said that 90 percent of young people owned jeans. And they wore them almost everywhere. Today, the average American owns seven pairs of jeans. And the company that started it all is doing pretty well. "How jeans conquered the world". BBC News. Retrieved 25 August 2015. ^ Salazar, James B. (1 June 2010). "Fashioning the historical body: the political economy of denim". *Social Semiotics*. 20 (3): 293–308. doi:10.1080/10350331003722851. ^ "World Denim Market – A Report on Capacities, Market Size, Forecasts etc". *Denimsandjeans.com*. Retrieved 25 August 2015. ^ The Textile Magazine (17 October 2016). "An overview of the Global and Indian Denim Market". www.indiantextilemagazine.in. See also. Bell-bottoms. how jeans conquered the world. they started in Nevada and spread to countries all over the world. Culture shared. people all over the world can share their culture with other people. Culture learned. people can be taught about a culture. Culture dynamic. new traits are added and some are lost. Culture adaptive. Changes to adapt to modern or new ways. Jeans are easily one of the most ubiquitous pieces of clothing on Earth with millions of pairs being made, sold and wrapped around the butts of style conscious individuals every single day. But why are jeans so popular and for what purpose were they first made? Before we answer that it's important for us to first define exactly what we mean when we say "jeans" because the word has changed in context over the last few hundred years. As detailed by the Fashion Encyclopedia, the term "jeans" has existed since the 1600s, where it was used as a catch-all term to describe the rough clothing worn by These jeans were designed with lots of strong pockets as requested by gold diggers. The jeans were discovered by Levi Strauss and Jacob Davies in 1873, and they patented the modern, mass-produced prototype with two pockets in front and one on the back with copper rivets. Denim work pants acquired fame through cowboy movies, and after WWII they became increasingly popular among young people. In Italy, however, blue jeans were actively banned by work managers and headmasters for most of the 20th century. It wasn't until the founder of Fiat car manufacturing, Gianni Agnelli, started wearing jeans in public, they became generally acceptable. A historic galleon anchored in the harbour of Genoa. A question of authenticity.