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as I see it;
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Idaho Common Sense™



Craig L. Bosley, MD

The little-known link of Levis to yodeling

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Some very important information we need for life is unfortunately left out of our educational system. One such critical bit of information is the history of Levi Straus and the copper rivet. Equally important is how best to refer to this class of information. Years ago when I was in medical school acronyms were already taking over. Everything had an acronym – Portneuf Medical Center is PMC and so on. One of my professors who desperately needed a life spent far too much time considering an appropriate acronym for this category of information. His came up with LKFAWGAD (pronounced lick faug ad). It stands for Little Known Facts About Who Gives A Damn. Since the story of Levi is a truly an all-American story I would venture to say this is very important LKFAWGAD but I fear the term “important LKFAWGAD” is actually an oxymoron.

Here is the LKFAWGAD of Levi Strauss and the copper rivet. Levi Strauss is a bit of an American legend. In many ways he represents all that encompasses the American dream. He was born in Bavaria, Germany emigrating to the United States at the age of 14 and within 10 years had earned citizenship. He settled in San Francisco starting a dry goods business. At the same time a man named Jacob, Davis in Reno, Nevada was a tailor and began ordering cloth from Levi primarily to make work pants for the miners. One of Jacob’s customers kept ripping the pockets on the pants. Jacob kept trying to figure

out a way to reinforce the pockets for the man and finally came up with the idea of placing copper rivets at the stress points on the pocket corners and the bottom of the button fly. An ingeniously simple concept!

And now the American promise and the American dream! Jacob’s new “riveted work pants” caught on quickly and were in demand. Worried someone would steal his idea; he decided to apply for a patent to protect his invention but did not have the necessary \$68 for the application. He wrote Levi, they became partners, and in 1873 they received patent number 139,121. For the nearly twenty years of their patent’s life, they were the only company allowed to make riveted work pants. But we would wait until the 1960s before the term “jeans” came to be associated with their work pants. That term came from Genoa, Italy who’s sailors were called “Genes”.

The story is still not complete. Levi and his partner Jacob are also responsible for one of the most original of American singing styles. It is amazing that a dry goods merchant and a tailor could also be involved in music and the arts. But they were.

If you recall the copper rivets were on the pocket corners, both front and back, and at the bottom of the fly where the four seams came together creating a significant stress point. For many years there had been rumors and mutterings about those crotch rivets, as they were called. The cowboys were not happy with them and they complained regularly.

What was their problem? Levi and Jacob and given them a very durable denim work pant with copper rivets so they wore very well and were ideal for the cowboys job. The problem is with the physics of copper. Copper is an excellent conductor and therefore can get quite hot rather quickly. Take a moment imagining a very tired cowboy at the end of a long day squatting by the campfire having a last cup of coffee before a few hours sleep and another day of the same. If he dallied at the fire too long anatomy in the vicinity of the crotch rivet could receive a rather uncomfortable burn making the next day in the saddle a very long day. But, even worse was when the cowboy did not realize the rivet had gotten hot and he got back on his horse. When he settled down into the saddle that hot copper rivet came into contact with . . . Suffice it to say many historians give tribute to Jacob Davis’ copper rivet for creating the cowboy yodel. It seems the yodel was pretty much all the cowboy could utter for the duration of his agony.

The Levi Company abandoned the crotch rivet in 1942, in part due to the years of pleas from the cowboys and in part due to wartime rationing restrictions. But the yodel would be with us forever reminding us of the lone cowboy riding the range with a red hot copper rivet taking him to higher yodeling octaves than had ever been reached before.

Thank you for the yodel Mr. Strauss and Mr. Davis.