



NAME GAME

The official "birthday" of blue jeans is May 20, 1873. Although denim pants had been around as work wear for many years, it was the use of rivets in these traditional pants for the first time that created what we now call blue jeans. During their early days, they were known as "waist overalls"; we didn't use the word "jeans" until around 1960, when the baby boomer generation adopted that name for its favorite pants.

ON THE LOOKOUT

So where do you find vintage jeans? Begin by looking in second-hand stores, online auction sites, and—believe it or not—garbage dumps! When you come across one of these ageless beauties, isn't it fun to imagine who wore them? What was their life like? What store did they buy them in? How much did they pay for them? The big question, though, is how much you'll have to pay for them now. The answer: It depends on where you find them. Suffice to say that you'll pay anywhere from a few bucks to \$25-\$50 for common types of vintage jeans to four-figure prices for rarities like vintage Levi's "Big E" hidden-rivet redline denim jeans.

INSIDE INFO

BLUE JEANS, BABY

At the Reno *Antiques Roadshow* last summer, I examined several examples of vintage jeans courtesy of the Levi Strauss & Co. Archives. The most impressive, of course, were the "Nevada jeans" (see lead story) that sold for \$46,532 in 2001 after being discovered in a garbage dump in a mining town. In the 1880s, they cost their original owner 75 cents.

The other noteworthy jeans in Reno included a pair of "501" Levis (c. 1901-1910) found in Goldfield, Nev., and another pair of 501s from the 1920s or '30s.

The latter featured a customized flap, hand-carved buttons, and Levi Strauss & Co.'s original leather "two-horse" label. The label depicts two horses trying to pull apart a pair of waist overalls. Legend has it that in the 1940s, a Mr. Moodie wrote to the company asking for his money back after he actually tested the two-horse concept—and saw his jeans get ripped apart. Levi Strauss & Co. gave Mr. Moodie a refund (\$4.50) but to their great surprise, he returned the money a short while later, stating that his contest was hardly fair: He used two mules instead of horses. Mules, he



wrote, are stronger than horses—and in the end one of the mules keeled over from exhaustion and died.

—Caroline Ashleigh

FOREVER IN FASHION

You've heard of the story
When Harry Met Sally....
But have you heard the
riveting tale *When Jacob
Met Levi?*

By Caroline Ashleigh

Of the thousands of objects I have seen as an appraiser on *Antiques Roadshow* over the past 10 years, there's only one that was born in the 19th century, is still in heavy demand today, and captures the essence of the energy and events of our time. This article has been around since the California gold rush, during the Depression, from Woodstock to the White House, in small-town America and in our biggest cities.

The item? Would you guess... blue jeans?

This consummate American icon—a garment that represents the United States of America to the rest of the world—reminds us that some things can transcend all cultural and geographic boundaries. And sometimes, they're surprisingly collectible, too.

Consider the \$46,532 price that a bidder paid for the oldest pair of Levi jeans—dating to the 1880s—in a 2001 online auction. Dubbed "the Nevada Jeans," they had been found in a garbage dump in a mining town and are now owned by Levi Strauss & Co. Another pair of Levis from 1890 sold for \$25,000. And 20th-century jeans manufactured before 1950 can sell for anywhere from a few hundred dollars to as much as \$15,000, depending upon age and condition.

Top-condition, museum-quality Levis aren't the only examples that draw high-end prices. So too do jeans that were worn by a celebrity. Such prime examples usually end up as display pieces or are put away for posterity. Jeans worn by the likes of Marlon Brando, James

Here's one case where worn, rough condition adds appeal:

The so-called "Nevada jeans" sold for \$46,532 in a 2001 auction.



Dean, Bob Dylan, and Marilyn Monroe, who helped popularize denim in the mid-20th century, are "holy grail" items to collectors of vintage couture and valued in the thousands of dollars.

More "common" vintage jeans attract collectors because of their stylistic appeal. In other words, collectors buy 'em to wear 'em.

How can you recognize an older pair of Levi jeans? It's an authentically vintage piece if it was produced before 1983. Such jeans are recognizable by the presence of one or more of the following features and details:

- **The red tab:** The tab trademark on the back pocket was introduced in 1936. A capital E in "Levi's" is a good indicator that the jeans date to 1971 or earlier.
- **Threads:** Another way to identify a vintage pair of Levis is by looking for colored threads woven into the selvage (the edge of a fabric that's woven so it



This c. 1933 pair of jeans belonged to an Arizona cowboy.

The author is proprietor of Caroline Ashleigh Associates, a Michigan-based firm that provides art and antiques appraisal and consultation services (www.appraiseyourart.com). She's been an *Antiques Roadshow* appraiser since Season 1 (1996).





Levi Strauss (left) and Jacob Davis in portraits from c. 1900.

won't fray). Levi used red selvage as a distinctive fabric mark up until 1983.

• **Design:** The "arcuates," or double arcs, on the back pockets of Levi jeans first appeared in 1873 and are still in use today. On vintage jeans, however, the stitching is irregular and uneven and may even look a bit crooked.

• **The cinch-back:** This feature allowed the wearer to adjust the fit of their jeans for comfort. It's still in use today on selected styles, but authentic cinch-backs carry distinctive-looking buckles, often with copper prongs.

STARTING OUT

So how did blue jeans get invented? The story starts with Levi Strauss, a dry goods merchant in San Francisco. One of Strauss's many customers was Jacob Davis, a tailor in Reno, Nev., who purchased bolts of cloth from Levi Strauss & Co.

One day, Davis hit upon the idea of putting metal rivets in his trousers to strengthen them for clients who worked in Nevada's silver mines. He decided to patent the process but needed to scrounge up the \$68 that was required

to file the papers. So Davis wrote a letter to Levi asking him to become his business partner. By 1873, they were producing work pants that flew off store shelves—and continue to do so today.

So the next time you see someone wearing a pair of Levis, remember that it was two visionary immigrants—Strauss and Davis—who turned denim, thread, and a little metal into one of the most popular types of wearing apparel on earth. "I fully expect," says Robert D. Haas, chief executive officer of Levi Strauss & Co., "that decades from now, people will be floating about in their Levi jeans as they make their shuttle run to outposts on Mars." ❁

A CLOSER LOOK

CELEBRITY JEANS

Collectors paid anywhere from hundreds of dollars to thousands for a single pair of celebrity-owned blue jeans at the second annual "Blue Jeans for Genes" auction in December. The online sale, which raised money for the National Hemophilia Foundation, featured more than 70 pairs of jeans.

Big-ticket items included jeans worn and autographed by rockers Eric Clapton (\$2,300) and Rod Stewart (\$1,260) and actresses Gwyneth Paltrow (\$710), Courteney Cox (\$575), and Jennifer Anniston (\$480). —L.C.



Details from signed blue jeans worn by rock'n'roll icons Eric Clapton (above) and Rod Stewart.



A pair of California miners wearing their sturdy Levis in an 1882 photograph.