The Making of an American Icon: The Transformation of Blue Jeans during the Great Depression

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Introduction

As the chapters in this volume show, at the current conjuncture, an astonishing number of people in a striking number of cultural contexts have come to deploy jeans as a symbol of movement between social worlds and boundary crossing – be it generation, gender, culture, religion or class-inflected boundary crossing. In a world characterized by intensifying exchange and transposable goods, produced by the now ‘virtually universal intersection of (cultural) structures’, blue jeans seem to epitomize this exchange and intersection. And just as the intersection of cultural structures has lead not to homogenization but to increasingly complex differentiation between seemingly similar practices and products, so too, blue jeans do not so much homogenize as simultaneously translate between and highlight differences among social worlds. A key element permitting this is the now general, cross-cultural social expectation that blue jeans are inherently changeable – materially and symbolically. But why do people today believe in and embrace such diversity in jeans styles, looks, and uses? And why do we associate jeans’ material and stylistic changeability with social-symbolic ambiguity? This chapter contributes to part of the answer by explaining how and why jeans gained their first, initial layer of material and symbolic protean-ness, and the manner in which this was connected to the emergence of mass-culture in the 1930s.

Prior to the 1930s few thought of blue jeans as ambiguous in meaning or capable of much stylistic variation. However, in just one, short decade, a remarkable shift began to take place. The undistinguished working-class dungaree started to become a gender- and class-blurring icon of ‘the American people’. While iconic status would not be fully established until the 1950s, the groundwork for the transformation was laid down in the crucible of the Great Depression. During the Depression, a series of contingent events and circumstances in the US encouraged industry and the
public to take up blue jeans as a stylistically and symbolically versatile, class- and gender-blurring national icon. As the idea of the changeable jean was constructed in multiple realms, for multiple reasons, emerging mass-culture industries found growing public interest in the symbolically and stylistically amorphous middle-class jean commercially useful and suggestive. The blue jean’s accruing capacity to resonate with an expanding variety of audiences and customers, just as mass-culture was searching for bridges between working and middle class and male and female consumers, made it both alluring and exemplary. So just why did jeans initially take on new, potentially iconic meanings in the late 1930s? How did it come to pass that non-working-class men and women began to embrace what had just a decade earlier been considered the ultimate plebeian garment? And furthermore, why did American clothing makers and retailers so doggedly pursue and embellish upon the newly minted American blue jean, commercially?

Those who have written on the topic take two distinct approaches. Some emphasize ‘consumption-side factors’, while others emphasize ‘production-side factors’. On the consumption side, Leslie Rabine and Susan Kaiser explain these changes in terms of shifts in everyday habits and emulation. They argue that changes in middle-class Americans’ everyday activities (such as increased leisure time, women’s entry into paid work, greater emphasis on women’s sports) led to ‘a need’ for casual clothing. Given these needs, women then chose dungarees over, for example khakis, because stars like Greta Garbo wore them, and they wished to emulate them. In a different vein, production-centred authors like Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold argue that, in the first decades of the twentieth century, the changes in technologies and strategies of mass-production and mass-distribution created the competition in the women’s ready-made garment industry to push manufacturers and retailers to market dungarees and other standardized garments in new ways in order to expand their markets and compete with one another. In this account, Hollywood’s uses of jeans and new middle-class leisure activities figure as latent conditions until competing marketers and advertisers activate them by convincing users of their social value and relevance.

The production and consumption approaches disagree on the ‘primary factors’ explaining the emergence of jeans as a class-ambiguous American icon. However, they both share the belief that underlying conditions (such as shifts in everyday activities, or shifts in production and distribution) and specific mechanisms (such as emulation or advertising) transformed the working-class blue jean into an American icon. These shifts and mechanisms play an important role but these factors alone cannot explain why jeans sellers and consumers made such a radical departure from previous practice, neither can they sufficiently explain why the middle-class jean became such a compelling symbol. In times of stability and continuity it may make sense to think in terms of generalizable forces and mechanisms but William Sewell has pointed out that in moments of crisis and radical departure, relatively
slow-changing conditions and static mechanisms cannot adequately explain the drastic reorganization of society’s practices and outlooks.\textsuperscript{6}

The shift in patterns of jeans production and meanings during the Depression was a radical one, emblematic of deeper political and economic changes in society. It was produced by a breakdown in normal ways of operating, and by a sudden unknowability of the future. Accounting for shifts of this nature requires an enhanced conceptualization of consumption and production – one that pays close attention to jeans consumers’ and sellers’ experiences and interpretations of disruptive and unexpected events, and one that examines the role of event sequence and conjuncture in shaping interpretations and actions. To be pushed out of deeply ingrained habits of thinking of the blue jean as plebeian, and to embrace the strange idea of blue jean as a class-less American icon, Hollywood, consumers, and jeans sellers had to have their normal ways of doing and thinking substantially disrupted and called into question.

In addition to the factors emphasized by consumption and production schools of thought, two categories of events (regulatory and aesthetic) were crucial in jostling participants’ understandings of jeans in the 1930s. The first series of events was regulatory in nature and involved efforts to reorganize clothing consumption and production in a more equitable fashion. These events disrupted the garment trades and inspired unorthodox interactions between previously separate women’s and men’s work-clothing industries, which often involved experimentation with the middle-class blue jean. The second series of events consisted of spurts of aesthetic activity aimed at making sense of Depression-era calamities and reinterpreting American institutions accordingly. For a variety of reasons, narratives of Depression-era events and experiences repeatedly drew upon blue jeans as a mnemonic leitmotif linking different social categories of people in ways that encouraged the public to see jeans as quintessentially American for the first time.

Neither regulatory nor aesthetic events, nor shifts in the broader conditions of jeans production or consumption produced the transformation of the work dungaree into a class-muting American icon. Rather, it was the particular timing, sequence and conjuncture of disruptive regulatory events and perspective-changing aesthetic events that shaped manufacturers’ and retailers’ actions, and public tastes. As William Sewell notes, the causal significance of the sequence and timing of disruptions and responses to disruption amplifies and deepens remarkably in moments of serious societal upheaval.\textsuperscript{7} Tracing the intricacies of how and why the blue jean became a part of American middle-class and women’s clothing repertoires during the volatile 1930s shows just how the timing and sequence of seemingly minor events mattered. It also sheds light on the important role that ordinary elements of material culture like blue jeans can play in helping to connect and reorganize previously separate practices and social categories and tastes.
The Department Store and the Middle-class Women’s Dungaree

Prior to 1930, high-end department stores did not offer women’s denim dungarees for sale. In fact, a significant portion of the clothing they offered was either manufactured in Paris, or made to order by jobbers from patterns imported from France. The association with French fashion was one of the major sources of the high-end department store’s prestige among middle- and upper class customers. Because many of these Parisian designs were based on the French regime of production, a large number of the items were relatively complex in terms of their sewing and required considerable finesse and adjustment of operations by the sewing operator. The quick changes in variety and the complexity of women’s clothing encouraged department stores to keep costs down by using agile jobbers, or middlemen, who hired fly-by-night sweat shops or networks of home workers willing to work cheaply and sporadically. All of this started to change in the 1930s as department stores began emphasizing more standardized, simpler, American sportswear for women.

Beginning in 1934 high-end department stores began using dungaree advertisements that emphasized California and Hollywood as a new American fashion frontier. One early Bullock’s advertisement made this quite explicit by placing a map with movie set locations and the ‘wild west’ alongside pictures of men and women in leisurewear. This new realm of American style was defined by its casual sportiness. To emphasize the point, sailor’s dungarees were foregrounded to emphasize informality and cosmopolitan travel. Why did department stores start experimenting with dungarees? Why did they decide to offer the unlikely blue jean to middle-class American women who were accustomed to tea dresses and cocktail clothing? Below I will show that shifts in the cultural practices of Hollywood taste-leaders, combined with a series of disruptive regulatory events, motivated department stores to sell dungarees.


In the early 1930s reports of Greta Garbo, Katherine Hepburn and Marlene Dietrich wearing bell-bottomed dungarees as street clothing crowded magazines and newspapers. For example, male commentators sarcastically declared Katherine Hepburn’s dungarees a ‘sartorial thrill’. They criticized ‘La Hepburn’ for wearing dungarees ‘like a common farmhand’. Others announced that Hollywood had become ‘Trouser-Land’ and ascribed the fad to women’s ‘blind striving … in a man’s field.’ In short, actresses’ trousers and mannish habits were reviled by journalists,
fashionistas, and film producers, alike. What exactly was the public’s fascination with actresses’ dungarees? And why, if male film makers found mannish actresses in jeans so personally repugnant, did they choose to generate films and publicity that featured these same women, challenging gender and class norms?¹³

To explain this we must take a few steps backwards to understand the changing social context of working-class women, who became the main group driving the production and sales of articles and films on the subject. Going into 1930, working-class households in urban centres tended to subscribe to patriarchal norms that hinged on the idea that, because men were the main breadwinners, they should be given preference over other family members. As working-class men lost their factory jobs, and women’s informal work and government relief sustained more and more households, women began to question patriarchy in their homes.¹⁴ As a result, working women began to take a special interest and pleasure in Hollywood news and films that played on the themes of the fragility of gender roles and differences. During this time, the importance of working-class audiences to Hollywood box-office receipts grew as well. As working-class tastes increasingly interested Hollywood, executives commissioned studies that showed working-class women were particularly influential in determining what films their families and friends saw. As a result, while male film producers and directors disliked the strong personas of the dungaree-clad starlets, they produced more and more movies and publicity playing on the gender-troubling themes that working-class women seemed to like best.¹⁵

Yet, heightened working-class women’s interest in these themes did not directly translate into a desire on their part to emulate Garbo’s or Hepburn’s blue jeans. Working-class women associated jeans with male toil, which made them unenthusiastic about dungarees. Nevertheless, heightened circulation of jeans did capture the interest of a small group of young, elite, college-bound women who wanted to wear less ostentatious forms of clothing in line with the seriousness of the times. This isn’t to say it started a fad. In the mid-1930s only a few college women began to wear dungarees in the manner of Kate Hepburn. Detractors persistently described college women’s jeans uses as emasculating and used them as an example of how working-class tastes were increasingly degrading an emergent, middle-class American mass-culture.¹⁶

In this negative context, then, why did highbrow department stores opt to carry the dungaree? Careful review of the timing of highbrow department store advertising suggests that the dungaree’s status as symbol of gender and class transgression and modern Hollywood style became important as a result of three regulatory events: changes in trade rules, changes in wage rules and the right to organize and the institution of something called the Cotton Code. As I will show, these events, and their interplay with Hollywood meanings, motivated department stores to offer women’s dungarees.
Regulatory Events: Disorder, Contingency, and the Active Role of the Dungaree in Nudging High-end Women’s Clothing towards Mass Production

As mentioned earlier, prior to the Depression, most women’s clothing sold in department stores was derived from samples, or made-up clothing imported from French fashion houses. Beginning in June of 1930, the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act raised import duties on Parisian ready-made clothing and patterns dramatically. This led to a drastic decline in imports from France. Searching for alternative sources of prestige, stores puzzled over how to develop American sources of distinction. One strategy adopted by department stores was to feature shockingly modern, slightly disreputable, women’s dungarees in their newly established ranch and resort shops. Women’s dungarees as a signature item in these shops helped stores to propose a new, gender-bending, democratic, American, and Hollywood fashion sensibility against the old, formal, hierarchic, Eurocentric sensibility. Dungarees’ plebeian, gender-defying associations provided a shock value that could be profitably used to emancipate department stores from the dominance of Parisian fashion.

By 1935, department stores’ assertion that dungarees were markers of an alternate American sartorial space was consecrated when Vogue magazine featured ‘Lady Levis’ in its summer travel issue. In the article Vogue declared: ‘True Western chic’ is an invention of the cowboy, ‘but the moment you stray from (authentic cowboy) tenets, you’ll be lost.’ Despite the Vogue boost, most department stores continued to avoid brand-name, stiff denim jeans, of the straight-legged variety, which were associated with male cowboys. Instead, they offered soft, faded, flowingly feminine bell-bottoms and emphasized the daringly modern, hybrid, gender-blurring qualities of the jean. In emphasizing Hollywood, and back-grounding the cowboy image, the majority of department store advertisements sought to avoid overlapping with the growing associations between Levis and cowboys. Since the department store’s goals were to lower costs and maintain control over dungaree designs, they tended to avoid messages that directly competed with Levis and which might have compelled them to carry Levi Strauss & Co.’s more expensive jeans.

These dynamics explain how department stores began advertising women’s sports dungarees (usually a flowing, sailor-style jean, distinct from the straight-legged, men’s Levis) in the early 1930s. However, they do not sufficiently account for why department stores’ dungaree advertisements rose in 1934 and 1935, collapsed in 1936, and then increased significantly from 1938 until military purchases raised dungaree prices in 1941. Understanding this ebb and flow is important because it helps us to identify what really drove department stores’ decisions to carry blue jeans. The sudden spike, drop off, and recuperation of denim dungaree advertisements during this period are best understood in terms of the ebb and flow of events altering garment industry regulations.
In 1933 the National Relief Act mandated that the federal government develop codes aimed at stabilizing labour costs and ending competition based on cut-throat pricing in the garment industry.\textsuperscript{23} One of the first mandates of the NRA was to require the clothing industry to gather detailed information on garment wages and employment practices throughout the country. These efforts provided unions with information and encouraged new methods for evaluating, comparing, and negotiating piecework regimes and contracts.\textsuperscript{24} Many of these methods were borrowed from the far more standardized work-clothing industry, where management and unions had been working on issues of parity in worker compensation for some time.\textsuperscript{25} As one labour historian noted:

The code agencies travelled widely from market to market inspecting shops, examining books, conducting hearings, and comparing labor costs under all types of operations and conditions of employment. A common procedure was to estimate the comparative labor costs of making sample garments … from market to market. After … intensive study, these agencies produced the first truly industry wide surveys of production cost factors in their respective trades …\textsuperscript{26}

Armed with new information and tools, unions were better equipped to collectively bargain with the manufacturers, especially in union-resistant labour markets where it had been difficult to gain insider-knowledge of factory practices.\textsuperscript{27} At the same time, under new NRA protections of the right to organize, unions finally had the legal room and broad worker optimism necessary to launch highly successful unionizing drives that organized vast numbers of workers across the garment industry.\textsuperscript{28} Federal restrictions on homework and the union drive encouraged manufacturers to move to producing within their own inside factories, significantly reducing contractors and home workers.\textsuperscript{29} The NRA also required clothing factory owners in different segments of the industry to develop national organizations in order to work with unions to establish codes delineating minimum wage-rates and rules for different segments of the garment industry.\textsuperscript{30} This strengthened unions’ bargaining power and introduced greater standardization of wages and wholesale prices across regional markets.

However, collaboration between the industry and the state to define the new clothing wage codes also had some unintended effects. Up until the passage of the NRA, union-management bargaining had always recognized a supposed skill differential in the work of sewing operators making garments in different clothing genres. As a result, differences in earnings between industry segments had developed over time. The NRA cotton codes preserved this hierarchal difference in wage rates based on traditional distinctions.\textsuperscript{31} The ‘Cotton Code’ distinguished between appropriate rates for sewing operators making ‘women’s clothing’, ‘men’s clothing’, ‘cotton clothing’ and ‘work clothing’, with work clothing wage rates being the lowest of all.\textsuperscript{32} As wage rates were standardized and raised, department stores – whose profits had depended
on exploiting wage discrepancies by pitting contractors against one another – sought new ways to exploit wage differentials. One option was to develop new garment lines, such as leisure dungarees, that could be made by ‘work clothing classified’ workers. Because the sportswear genre was relatively novel, rates governing its manufacture were ambiguous, which meant that women’s dungarees could be made by workers classified as work-clothing sewing operators, to lower costs per unit. The non-unionized manufacturers in rural areas colluded with this practice to attract business. Southern and South-Western manufacturers were especially quick to adopt the work-clothing status in order to thwart efforts to raise wages in the South. Thus, strong unionization of the women’s clothing industry in the North, increased standardization of regional wage-rates, and special work-clothing wage-rates under the Cotton Code in 1933 explain high-end department stores’ increased efforts to sell women’s leisure dungarees from 1934 to 1935.

The significance of the NRA codes in shaping department stores’ initial decision to offer dungarees is supported by what happened to department store dungaree offerings after three subsequent events. First, generic department-store dungaree advertisements fell after the Supreme Court’s 1935 abolition of the NRA clothing codes. Second, department stores’ dungaree advertisements recuperated after a wave of new union contracts reinstated Cotton Code-like wage differentials in 1936 and 1937. Finally, the sharp 1941 drop in dungaree advertisements when military jeans purchases raised prices also suggests that department stores’ interest in selling dungarees had much to do with wage-differentials. This conclusion is also substantiated by the fact that there was no similar drop in independent stores’ advertisements for Levis until 1943, when material shortages made Levis unavailable. From this evidence, it is clear that regulations favouring denim work clothing, combined with Hollywood uses of the blue jean, were the key reasons department stores began selling women’s dungarees in the second half of the 1930s.

Towards an Event-oriented Explanation of the Department Store Women’s Dungaree

The event-centred analysis presented thus far shows that trade and labour-law based disruptions of department stores’ usual practices forced department stores to seek alternative strategies of generating fashion prestige and of keeping costs low. The coincidence of these challenges with heightened Hollywood dungaree use, and work clothing wage rules, caused department stores to experiment with selling dungarees. This suggests that jeans were not introduced to middle class women as a result of shifts in norms of production. Rather, women’s jeans were introduced as a result of a breakdown in norms of production, combined with the advent of the Cotton Code and conditions like new Hollywood meanings and uses of the dungaree. This attention to sequence and timing of events leads us to ask if the Cotton Code and
department stores’ interactions with the work-wear industry contributed to subsequent tactical shifts in the production of women’s wear.

The evidence available suggests that the Cotton Code and the decision to emphasize women’s sportswear and dungarees made in work-wear factories were influential in reorganizing department stores women’s wear practices. That is, department stores’ collaboration with work-wear companies and unions to measure production methods under the Cotton Code, and their subsequent use of work-wear factories to produce sportswear and jeans encouraged those in charge of selecting clothing and managing the production process to adapt the Taylorist principles work-clothing makers had developed from the 1920s through the early 1930s. Department stores’ increasing use of work-clothing manufacturers’ approaches to clothing design and production is suggested by fashion designer Elizabeth Hawes’ description of how the women’s wear industry was changing in her 1942 book, *Why is a Dress.*[^39] It is also suggested by letters sent to the United Garment Workers between 1936 and 1942 by factories seeking advice on how to implement new Taylor-based regimes of production.[^40] As Elizabeth Hawes points out, once department stores used the new Taylorist strategies of managing garment production, and appreciated the savings involved, they increasingly selected designs that could be easily and efficiently manufactured under this regime.[^41] Thus, the Cotton Code and introduction of dungarees and simpler sportswear helped women’s wear buyers appreciate the advantages of selling pared-down designs amenable to the Taylorist principles used in the work-wear sector, and led them to think about clothing designs that followed in terms of whether they could be easily made using such principles.[^42]

Thus far, I have answered the question why department stores started offering dungarees to middle-class women. This is what an event-centred reworking of Fine and Leopold’s production oriented framework does best. However, what it cannot explain on its own is why middle-class consumers finally embraced the blue jean in 1939 and 1940, which will be explored in the next section.

The Manufacturer Designed and Marketed Levi’s Brand Blue Jean

In the early 1920s the men’s work-clothing industry was quite distinct from the women’s wear industry. Levi Strauss & Co. and H. D. Lee ran in-house manufacturing facilities and maintained regional distribution networks of independent community-based stores. As many of these stores were the sole suppliers of clothing and consumer credit in their communities there was little competition from other suppliers. However, by the mid-1920s discount chain stores, like J. C. Penney, and mail order companies, like Sears, began seriously competing with the independent community retailers.[^43] While some manufacturer-merchandisers, such as H. D. Lee and the Oshkosh Overall Company, began selling a portion of their clothing to the chain stores, local, independent stores remained their most lucrative clientele. As
this happened the increased influence of discount chains depressed manufacturer-
merchandisers’ jeans prices.

As a result, Levi Strauss & Co. and H. D. Lee began taking a number of meas-
ures to lower their costs of production. To do so, they experimented with Taylorist
principles, breaking down whole garment production into a series of separate simple
tasks, introducing new time and productivity accounting schemes, and experiment-
ing with reorganizing the shop floor to better manage the work flow from one task
to the next. Additionally, they increased their advertising, producing their own
catalogues, and store cards. These advertisements emphasized the utilitarian quali-
ties of jeans and overalls as work-wear. The care put into manufacturers’ hand bills
contrasted sharply with the few independent store advertisements, which simply
listed blue jeans with a price.

However, in the first half of the 1930s, manufacturer-merchandisers began to
experiment not only with lowering production costs but seeking out new markets. Le\vi Strauss & Co. was the first to introduce jeans oriented toward middle-class
dude ranch and frontier themes in 1933, as well as the first to design middle-class
women’s jeans in 1934. After the 1935 Lady Levis fashion spread in Vogue maga-
zine, several of the other large inside-manufacturer-merchandisers, like H. D. Lee
and Oshkosh, followed Levi Strauss & Co.’s lead.

Why did the manufacturer-merchandisers begin pursuing Western, frontier, dude
ranch, middle-class meanings in the early 1930s? Why did Levi Strauss & Co. lead
the way?

Changing Conditions of Production and Distribution in the
Work Clothing Industry

To answer this it is important to first appreciate why Levi Strauss & Co., and
eventually other manufacturer-merchandisers, pursued the middle-class market. Con-
sumption-side explanations attribute Levi Strauss & Co.’s campaign to the pop-
ularity of Westerns and dude ranches, and the use of Levis by Hollywood stars. How-
evertheless, the popularity and prestige of the Western film genre plummeted from
1930 through 1938. Furthermore, while a handful of LA, New York, and Chicago
news articles mentioned dude ranch uses of Levis between 1928 and 1930, there
were no further mentions until late 1933. Why then did Levi Strauss & Co. begin to
allocate scarce resources to advertise the middle-class cowboy concept precisely in
1933? The main reasons have to do with the discount chain stores’ growing control
over the work-wear market and with the 1934 San Francisco Levis boycott.

The main crisis that began the shift in manufacturer-merchandisers regime of
retailing was the dramatic decline in farmers’ and workers’ consumption. Between
1929 and 1932, industrial unemployment rose from 1.5 to 15 million persons. At the
Figure 1.1. Salesman’s flyer for Levi Strauss & Co. work clothing, c1926. Courtesy Levi Strauss & Co. Archives, San Francisco.
same time farm income fell from 12 billion to 5.3 billion dollars a year. As a result, workers’ and farmers’ expenditures on work-clothing dramatically declined.49

Declines in demand for work clothing affected all players but the well-capitalized discount chain stores suffered far less. In fact, the collapse in work clothing demand allowed discount chains to use their superior purchasing power to obtain unparalleled concessions from workers and manufacturers. This enabled them to cut prices on overalls from one dollar and twenty cents a pair in 1929, to eighty-nine cents a pair in 1932.50 Wielding lower prices and superior cash reserves, the chain stores undercut the independent retailers, upon which Levi Strauss & Co. and HD Lee depended for their most lucrative business.51 To make matters worse, many workers and farmers not only stopped buying jeans from their local stores – they also stopped making payments on the jeans they had purchased earlier on credit. By the end of 1931 43 per cent of the independent stores in business in 1926 had closed, and those that did survive often lacked the cash to rapidly replenish their work-clothing stocks.52

As a result, Levi Strauss & Co.’s 1932 sales reached only half of their 1929 levels, and LS & Co., HD Lee and others shortened their work weeks and temporarily shuttered factories.53 In the meantime, some of their cheapest Southern competitors actually grew, as discount chains increased their purchases from the South.54 The ability of chain stores to set up distribution regimes linking South to North, and East to West gave them another advantage over the small town retailer, and by 1933 more local stores had closed their doors.55

Thus, manufacturer-merchandisers’ loss of independent retailers, willing to sell their jeans at a premium price created a strong incentive for them to seek out alternative markets. Levi Strauss & Co., as the only manufacturer-merchandiser not regularly selling jeans to the chain stores, was particularly devastated by these losses. By 1933, concerned about the company’s survival without its loyal small-town stores, Levi Strauss & Co. began to tentatively develop a series of advertisements leveraging Hollywood uses of Levis in the ranch context.56 However, Levi Strauss & Co.’s commitment to pursuing the middle-class dude ranch theme significantly intensified after San Francisco workers stopped buying Levis because of the company’s non-union status in 1934.

The 1934 Boycott as Decisive Event Propelling Levis to Devote Substantial Resources to Middle-class Frontier themed Ad Campaign

The catalyst of the event was the labour unrest in California and San Francisco between 1933 and 1934.57 Working-class agitation and brutal repression of workers in California’s fields, factories, and docks bred widespread disgust with industry and bolstered pro-worker sentiment, particularly in San Francisco. This led to a concerted workers’ campaign to promote buying union-label consumer items only.58 While
other major manufacturer-merchandisers were already unionized, Levi Strauss & Co. did not sign a union contract until 1937. As a result, the company’s normally loyal neighbourhood stores were forced by workers to stop carrying Levis throughout 1934. In the end, Levi Strauss & Co.’s only San Francisco outlet for its blue jeans in 1934 was a middle-class-oriented saddlery in the suburbs outside the city. From this point forward Levi Strauss & Co. pursued middle-class cowboy and frontier leitmotifs with unusual vigour. As one company manager recalled the period, ‘We put a certain imagination into [the Levis]. It was different from a workman’s garment . . . We were on the western theme continuously in our advertising.’ The continuous advertising paid off with the 1935 *Vogue* article on the Lady Levi. This initial achievement then convinced other manufacturer-merchandisers like H. D. Lee to imitate the Levis-look and marketing messages in the hopes of freeing themselves from the growing power and control of the chain stores.

The above production-oriented narrative satisfyingly explains how manufacturer-merchandisers began advertising middle-class frontier and cowboy themes. As should be clear, the rise of manufacturer-merchandisers’ emphasis on old West themes was particularly contingent upon the specific experiences of Levi Strauss & Co. General conditions, such as the loss of independent retail outlets to the chain stores, and particular circumstances like Levi Strauss & Co.’s special historic relationship with California ranchers and Hollywood stars, encouraged Levi Strauss & Co. to pursue the dude ranch theme, which encouraged others to follow. But the specific event of the 1934 boycott of Levis in San Francisco enhanced the company’s commitment to this idea, before the notion had borne fruit in terms of increased sales. In addition, the *Vogue* feature on Lady Levis enhanced the legitimacy of the Western jeans theme still further.

These efforts kept the Levis signature ‘Western-style’ blue jean with copper rivets, red-threaded seams and the leather patch circulating as a special symbol of the Western frontier in the advertising culture of 1934 and 1935, particularly in California. But nation-wide popularity and desire for this style of blue jean was still four years away, when Eastern stores would begin to regularly carry Levis. And it was not achieved by advertising alone. As will be evident, California artists uses of the Western-style jean to tell the story of dustbowl migrants and the Great Depression significantly shaped the outcome, as well.

*From Mundane Work Pant to Symbol of the Working Class*

As many historians have observed, the economic chaos and uncertainty of the Depression brought on a society-wide ‘inability to imagine what had happened and would happen next.’ Initially, the profound effects of the Depression were hardly reported at all. However, the introduction of pro-worker legislation with the New Deal, encouraged workers who had experienced severe deterioration in working
conditions between 1930 and 1933 to respond with the largest wave of worker activism and militancy in American history. The intensity of feeling and sense of societal rupture sent writers, artists and singers out across the byways of the nation in search of ‘the real America’.64 No image was more repetitively documented or invoked than that of working people in their overalls and straight-leg blue jeans.

Jeans and overalls appeared on the machine-wedded urban labourers of Diego Rivera’s 1933 Detroit murals of the River Rouge Ford factory; they protected Charlie Chaplin and his fellows as they were sucked into the relentless pace and machinery of the assembly line in his 1936 film, *Modern Times*.65 Newly established photo-magazines and Sunday news photo-supplements pictured jeans on embattled Southern textile workers, destitute sharecroppers, and striking miners. Many of these were produced by photographers working for governmental agencies who circulated these images freely in a bid for public support of their social agendas.66 Uniting portraits and panoramas of rural tenant farmers and urban wage-workers, blue jeans became a mnemonic image that readily evoked the ‘new iconography and rhetoric of class’ sweeping the US in the mid-1930s.67

*The Role of Aesthetic Events in Transforming ‘Working-class Jeans’ into ‘American Jeans’*

These aesthetic shifts suggest how jeans gained initial purchase on the American imagination, but do not explain why Western jeans and Levis become so symbolically powerful, as a sign of ‘the American people’. The simple explanation is that advertisements for copper-riveted Western blue jeans that circulated heavily in California became an attractive symbol and resource for California artists. They drew upon Western jeans as a symbolic resource as they pieced together a modern frontier parable that would become the dominant way of making sense of the Depression years and redefine Americans’ understanding of themselves and the nation. The full story of the political events, artists, journalists, politicians, and state officials that produced the new frontier parable is another paper in itself. However, below I will summarize the key events and artistic interpretations that produced the parable, and helped elevate the Western jean to an American icon.

The contours of the new frontier narrative of the 1930s began taking shape when photographer Dorothea Lange and economist Paul Taylor were urgently sent by California and the federal Farm Security Agency to investigate the problems facing farm workers from the Southwest as they searched for work in California. Lange and Taylor likened these migrants to modern-day pioneers forging a new life in an unfamiliar world of mechanized, industrialized agriculture. Often Lange photographed migrant workers in the Levi-style blue jeans that were widely worn in California at the time. Their 1935 article, titled ‘Again the Covered Wagon’, described refugees’ westward migration as a search for ‘individual protection in the traditional spirit of
Figure 1.2(a). Drought Refugees Stopped Along the Highway. Dorothea Lange 1936. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection, LC-USF34-016739-E

Figure 1.2(b). Towards Los Angeles. Dorothea Lange 1937. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection, LC-USF34-016317-E

Figure 1.2(c). Near Meloland. Imperial Valley. Large Scale Agriculture. Gang labor, Mexican and White. Lange FSA1939. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection, LC-USF34-019195- -E
the American frontier’. They warned, however, that what refugees found when they arrived was a modern frontier ‘of social conflict’ and insecurity. Lange and Taylor advocated government aid to these worker-pioneers as a modern solution for taming the ‘wilderness’ of social conflict, just as the Homestead Act had tamed the physical wilderness of the nineteenth-century old West. This analogy was driven home by combining such statements with cowboy movie-like images of Southwestern migrant workers in Western, Levi-style cowboy jeans leaning alongside canvas-covered jalopies and walking down the lonely road in their Stetsons. The story struck a chord in more progressive circles and generated numerous articles, pamphlets, and books.

However, it was Archibald MacLeish’s epic 1938 photo-poem narrating the Depression that proposed a transformative pioneer myth explicitly linking the massacres of Eastern industrial workers to the struggles of sharecroppers and farmer-workers in the agricultural fields of the West. Using many of Lange’s images, MacLeish proposed that during America’s expansionist period the allure of frontier land had produced blindness to the evils of concentrated wealth in the East. The Depression, for him, represented both a reckoning with this illusion and a new wilderness of social conflict that workers of all backgrounds and classes had to resolve through focus on their common humanity.

Both Lange’s and MacLeish’s versions of the dustbowl migrant as working-class pioneer were picked up in Steinbeck’s March, 1939 novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and John Ford’s 1940 film adaptation of the novel. The popularity and notoriety of Steinbeck’s book made his dustbowl family, the Joads, a metaphor for the times, and inspired thousands of articles and photo spreads. At the same time, John Ford’s film emphasizing the story’s utopian agrarian impulses, and support for legitimate outlawry against monopoly capital, tied the story to a new Western movie formula that Ford had successfully proposed the previous year in his film, *Stagecoach*, starring John Wayne. Following this model other film-makers rehabilitated the prestige Western as parable of the Depression. As they did, prominent use of Western jeans became the preferred way for Western films to gesture toward working-class, Western, and populist rhetorics and America’s past and present all at once.

*The Interpretive Contexts of the Eastern Dude Ranch and War: Bringing Together Women’s Fashion Jeans and Western Frontier Jeans Meanings*

The events discussed above not only multiplied commercial and state-sponsored narratives invoking the Levi-clad cowboy as totem of American egalitarianism. They encouraged middle-class men and women to join in the myth. By 1940, 25,000 families a year visited Western dude ranches to pursue their own frontier fantasies. Simultaneously, many Eastern farms and resorts established vacation dude ranches near large cities. Travel articles lauded the Eastern dude ranch for the access it
Figure 1.3(a). Dudes and cowboy from Quarter Circle U Ranch. Marion Wolcott 1941. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection, LC-USF34-058898-E
Figure 1.3(b). Production. B-17F Heavy bombers. Alfred T Palmer 1942. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection, LC-U5E6-D-007811
provided white-collar workers to the Western experience. Now secretaries, office clerks, bankers, and tycoons could enjoy the equalizing experience of addressing one another on a first name basis, wearing the same Western jeans, participating in the same demanding physical activities, and eating around a common table. Anxious to mix appropriately with the leisure elite, white-collar women purchased the flowing jeans touted by department stores and the Western jeans proscribed by fashion mavens and Eastern equestrian shops. Once on the dude ranch, white-collar and middle-class men’s and women’s uses of Western-style and department store-style jeans to act out their equalizing frontier dreams bonded their intimate fantasies to the larger State- and Hollywood-promoted ideas of the Western jean as symbol of Americans’ ‘natural’ distaste for elitist pretension and greed.

Meanwhile, another shift was also afoot in general women’s dungaree use. While writers had consistently condemned women’s jeans in the 1930s, the symbolic use of the dungaree to delineate American clothing style and tastes gained legitimacy as the looming war shifted public understandings. By 1940 journalists were writing about college women patriotically dressing in jeans to train for the jobs left vacant by male soldiers. Through the lens of war, college women’s choice of jeans suddenly seemed patriotic, practical, frugal, and in keeping with the national shift from consumerism to wartime conservation and military production. In addition, the liberty of American women to choose what suited them best (for the war effort or just plain comfort) was contrasted with the absolute prohibition of pants-wearing imposed on French and German women. As Marlene Dietrich put it:

The idea (that women’s slacks) . . . are not respectable . . . is old fashioned and European . . . I am reminded of my last visit to France when it was unlawful for a woman to appear in trousers in public . . . Here the freedom to wear slacks at all is a little liberty we women cherish . . . Girls are entitled to more freedom in dress . . . because of the part many play in national defense . . . Slacks are more sensible . . . They are a great economy . . . (and save) on the expense of . . . underclothing (and) hose . . . I’d say the American way would be to let girls dress as they please.

The war years encouraged many to see women’s work and jeans as patriotic and emblematic of American pragmatism and democracy. The war context legitimated department stores’ use of women’s jeans as a symbol of American style. Contrasts between American and European attitudes towards women’s clothing especially encouraged people to associate the gender-egalitarianism of the fashion dungaree with the class-egalitarianism of the predominantly male Western blue jean. Whether for or against women in jeans people began to see jeans as a sign of youthful America’s repudiation of gender and class hierarchies, and distaste for elitist, wasteful ostentation. Through everyday use and the new interpretive context of war, previously separate meanings of women’s fashion jeans, and men’s frontier jeans began to blend into one contradictory, protean, symbol that artists and everyday people would return to again and again.
Conclusion

To conclude, at the general level this chapter has presented an event-centred approach to explaining the broad shifts in jeans consumption and production that took place during the Great Depression. This has helped identify the regulatory and aesthetic events that most contributed to this transformation. An event-centred approach is, in my view, particularly necessary for understanding dramatic shifts in material culture that occur in moments of societal upheaval and crisis. This is because the approach highlights the transformative importance of interactions between processes of production and consumption, as well as the transformational effects of exchanges between distinctive regimes of production or strategies of meaning making, for example between women’s and work clothing industry networks, or working- and middle-class oriented film and photo-magazines. It shows that, in fact, economic, political, and cultural events are the contingent forces that push different groups to link and rearrange these processes and regimes in ways that fundamentally change them.

At a more specific level, while this chapter has shown that the emergence of blue jeans as a boundary-blurring sign of American egalitarianism was a fragile, event-driven outcome, it also suggests why inventing class- and gender-bridging artefacts and symbols like the dungaree was an integral part of how commercial entities and state reformers sought to resolve the economic and political crises of the period. That is, declines in consumption among all social groups during the 1930s encouraged commercial entities from Levi Strauss & Co. to Twentieth Century Fox to search and foment the kinds of material culture and tastes that might extend the appeal of their products to new social groups and bolster sagging sales. At the same time, the collapse of public confidence in the American capitalist system in the early 1930s sent reform-minded intellectuals and state bureaucrats alike in pursuit of narratives, symbols, and artefacts with the resonance to speak to and draw together diverse groups and sensibilities in order to encourage the broadest numbers to identify and favour their society-changing projects and agendas.

In a short, while the emergence of the socially transposable blue jean in the 1930s was unique and contingent, it was also the expression of a general, crisis-inspired turn toward intensified mass-forms of consumption and mass-forms of political culture that would define the century to come. Once a certain potential and allure became evident, experiments with social-category-transcending blue jeans became highly useful to the mass-culture industries and mass-oriented politics, and were reproduced with aplomb. While the chapter cannot make any bolder claim as to why blue jeans have spread so intensively and extensively beyond their Depression-era home, the unusual protean-ness with which blue jeans emerged from the peak Depression years certainly made it a highly attractive resource in the nascent mass-cultural industries and mass-politics of the time. The chapters that follow suggest
that blue jeans’ protean-ness and association with boundary crossing have remained their most important and compelling qualities. The question remains as to what extent the remarkable persistence of these qualities is still as intimately intertwined with the spread and deepening of localized mass-culture industries and mass-forms of political mobilization and culture.\(^6\)

**Notes**

1. I would like to acknowledge the University of Western Ontario’s internal Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Internal Grants for funding a portion of the archival research in the Southern Labor Archives. In addition UWO’s Sociology Department and Michael Carroll, Sam Clark and Laura Huey in particular, provided a supportive environment in which to write. I would also like to acknowledge the enthusiastic and invaluable assistance of Traci JoLeigh Drummond, Archivist at the Southern Labor Archives at Georgia State University. Finally, Leah Stevenson-Hastings’ indefatigable work copying and organizing materials for analysis was also essential to this chapter.


3. There is disagreement over when mass-culture industries emerged in the US. These disagreements have to do with the conflation between popular culture and mass culture, as Michael Kammen points out. Here I am asserting that mass culture industries emerged between the 1930s and 1950s. This is when photo magazines came into their own, when films began to strive for the broadest audiences possible, and when well-to-do women’s wear became most generally mass produced. (Green 1997; Hawes 1942; Kammen 1999; May 2000).


7. See *Logics of History* (Sewell, 2005: 219, 225–70). Philip McMichael explores the methodological implications of this world view in terms of how it changes the comparative strategies we must employ when comparing periodically or steadily interacting phenomena (McMichael 1990).


15. Welters and Cunningham (2005); Thomas (1935); Berry (2000); May (2000).
16. ‘Article 10 – No Title’ (1941); ‘Detective Lends Motif to Fashion’ (1941); ‘She is Not Sure Where She is Heading in This Angry World . . .’ (1941); Warner and Ewing (2002).
19. Best & Co. (1933); Bullock’s (1934); Green (1997: 114); Macy’s (1933).
21. These advertisements emulated the popular bio-pieces highlighting Hollywood stars’ idiosyncratic tastes, habits, and transgressions. According to Michael Kammen, by the late 1920s entertainers’ biographies gained prominence and emphasized their private lives, consumption, and tastes (Kammen 1999: 57). These consumption-focused articles were bolstered by merchandisers’ distribution of photos of stars wearing their clothing in national magazines (Gledhill 1991: 34–5)
22. Although Macy’s and Best’s briefly experimented with Levis for a few weeks following the Vogue articles.
27. Braun (1947).
28. The ILGWU alone went from 50,000 members in the spring of 1933 to 200,000 members in 1934 (Herberg 1952: 47–8).
29. 94% of the men’s clothing industry was brought into inside factories by 1940 (Green 1997: 63–71).
31. By 1934, 85% of the men’s clothing trade was unionized. The ILGW, in less than three years, had multiplied eightfold from 23,876 in 1932 to 198,141 in 1934 (Carpenter 1972: 649).
35. Cray (1978: 88); Marsh and Trynka (2002: 24–38); Staff (1933, 1936); Box 268, United Garment Workers of America Records, L1992-17/L1997-08. Southern Labor Archives. Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University, Atlanta (hereafter referred to as UGWAR SLA),
36. This was then reinforced by the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 which strengthened unions by establishing nation-wide minimum wages and reducing clandestine clothing production (Blackwelder, 1997: 39–44, 102–3, 16; Monroy 2006; Wolensky, Wolensky and Wolensky 2002).
37. ‘Plants Here Speed Clothing for Army’ (1941); ‘Pay Rises Sought in Cotton Trades’ (1941).
38. ‘Clothes Shortage Found in 25 States’ (1943); Fear Textile Drain in Relief Programs, (1943); Gritz (1943).
40. Braun (1947: 1–91); Gomberg (1948); Production Systems. Box 83, Folder 14: UGWAR SLA.
42. Hawes (1942).
43. Cobrin (1970); Fraser (1983).
44. Cray (1978); Howarth et al. (2000).
48. ‘Correct Clothes for Feminine “Dudes”’ (1930); ‘Melancholy Days?’ (1929).
49. ‘Business World’ (1932); Cray (1978: 80); ‘Great Depression’, *Encyclopedia Americana*; ‘Work Clothing Sales Pointed to Employment Turn March’ (1930)
50. UGWA correspondence with J.C. Penney. Folder 2, 3, and 4, Box 2: UGWAR SLA.
51. Cray (1978: 82); Staff (1930, 1931, 1932).
52. Burd (1941); ‘Twenty Percent of Small Town Stores are Chains’ (1933).
54. Cray (1978); ‘Business Notes’ (1933); ‘Garment Company Plans Five-Day Week’ (1930); Organizer Notes, Boxes 386, 389: UGWAR SLA.
55. 1930 Articles. Box 2, Folder 4: UGWAR SLA; ‘Twenty Percent of Small Town Stores are Chains’ (1933).
59. Box 377: UGWAR SLA
60. Cray (1978: 85–8).
64. Stott (1973).
67. Denning (1996: 8–9)
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