

**The Evolution of Women's Jeans in the United States From the 1930's to Present Day**

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**Abstract**

This paper will explore the evolution of women's jeans in America. As the social, political, and economic state of the country has changed they impacted the trends and what women were wearing, this classic denim pant was no exception. The fit, wash, rise, length, and embellishments of jeans has changed with the start of each decade and continues to evolve while constantly remaining a staple item in every woman's closet. Levi's Strauss & Co., Guess, and Calvin Klein are just some of the brands who have helped to set these trends and keep women wanting to wear jeans.

**Keywords:** jeans, denim, women's pants.

## Women's Jeans From 1930 to Today

Practically every woman in America owns a pair of jeans, they are a must have item that through the years have evolved a lot. They started out as men's working pants and were unacceptable for women to wear, but as society's view on women has changed, jeans were able to enter women's wardrobes across the country. Jeans have continued to be made of denim fabric yet by changing their details such as fit, wash and rise, they have been able to evolve with women. With each new decade the political and economic issues in America impacted the role of women in society and along with that changed what was acceptable for women to wear. Jeans have been a piece of clothing that has been able to evolve with these issues through its constantly changing details, to adapt to what women need from their clothes.

Denim has had a long history in America dating back all the way to the mid 1800's in the west. With the rise of the gold rush in California men needed sturdy work clothes so Jacob Davis and Levi Strauss came up with a solution by creating denim pants, better known as jeans. Levi's Strauss & Co. created the classic Levi's 501 jeans, which were dyed indigo, made of heavy denim fabric, and its most popular feature were rivets on the pockets which reinforced them to prevent ripping (Levi's Strauss & Co., 2013). At this point in history women mainly wore long skirts and dresses, so working men were really the only ones wearing jeans. There were some rare exceptions to this such as the occasional woman working on a ranch in the west who might wear a pair of the men's 501 jeans. This was not very common and women who did this would not wear jeans outside of work because this wasn't widely accepted by society yet. Overall, when jeans first came out, they were bulky heavy-duty pants used for work, and unlike today were only offered in one style exclusively for men.

Jumping forward to the 1930's Levi's, now a well-established brand in the American west because of their men's work pants, realized that there was a market for jeans among women so they released their new line, Lady Levi's. the release of these jeans in 1934, Levi's made history selling the first pair of women's jeans. The first ad for the pants described them as, "A rugged denim with terrific iridescent lustre. Completely washable. Left side zipper openings. Keystone belt loops." (Levi & Strauss Co., 1934) As described in the ad, jeans were still being advertised as strong durable work pants and their target audience was still geared towards ranch and labor workers in the West. The women's jeans still looked quite similar to the classic men's 501 style, they were baggy, but most women would cuff the bottom of their pants to adjust the length. Actors such as John Wayne helped to further associate wearing jeans with the "wild west" and cowboys by starring in several western themed movies throughout the 1930's (Idacavages, 2017). Although jeans were being made specifically for women, it wasn't considered lady like to wear them, those who did mostly worked on ranches, and women in big cities most likely wouldn't even own a pair of jeans. Regardless of this, the release of Lady Levi's was major for the future of women's jeans and would set off a trend in women's clothing that would only gain more popularity in years to come.

With America entering World War Two in 1941 traditional gender roles had to start to change, women had to enter the industrial workforce as men began leaving to fight in the war. With the need for women working in factories also came the need for a uniform that they could wear, because the delicate dresses currently in their closets weren't going to be easy to work in. The uniform for many industrial jobs became jeans or denim overalls, because of how durable the denim was. The look of the jeans was still fairly similar to how they were in the past, still the same blue color, loose fit and often cuffed at the bottom. Posters were made encouraging women to go to

work such as the iconic Rosie the Riveter “we can do it” poster and several others showing women wearing these denim uniforms. Even with women being encouraged to go to work and so many of them wearing these denim uniforms, jeans still weren’t considered something a woman should be wearing outside the factory. At home and going out women still stuck to their dresses and skirts because jeans were what was worn to work and were still being strongly associated with working class people. The 1940’s is a perfect example of how a women’s changing role in society impacts what they wear.

By the 1950’s jeans weren’t being associated as much with the west and cowboys and were now getting the reputation as rebellious clothing, attracting the attention of teenagers. This was because of movies featuring actors such as James Dean where he would wear dark jeans and play the role of a rebellious “bad boy”, as well as Marilyn Monroe who did a photoshoot wearing a pair. This new popularity among young people who wanted to look like these cool rebellious movie stars helped to popularize jeans in America and move away from the idea that they were solely a “western” look. We can even see the start of housewives wearing jeans at home as shown on tv shows like I love Lucy, where Lucille Ball’s character on occasion would wear a pair of jeans around the house. At this time women’s jeans were popular in darker washes, and were slightly more fitted compared to the baggy look of the factory worker jeans from the 40’s. A major change that happened to the look of jeans in the 1950’s was that most of them now had zipper fly closures (Hawthorn, 2020). The youth in America played a major role in making jeans so popular in the 50’s and would continue to do so in the following years.

The late 1960’s and 1970’s was a time of great political and social unrest in America with the rise of the Civil Rights Movement, sexual revolution and The Vietnam War protests. The youth counterculture movement played a major role in supporting many of these movements, and with

that came a lot of changes to fashion that reflected their rebellious feelings (Askin, 2015). Popular jeans among the youth were tight through the top, high waisted, mostly in a light wash and had a flared or bell bottom pant. It was common for some jeans to come with embroidery patches on them or for young people to sew on their own patches. Levi's came out with Lady's Levi Stretch jeans which is what allowed for tighter jeans to be made and to be comfortable to wear. Young women part of these protests across America wanted to stand out from their parents' generation, and they could do this partly through their fashion choices.

Another key moment for women's jeans in the 70's was when they were finally accepted into the high fashion world and featured on a runway show for Calvin Klein in 1976 (Bass-Krueger, 2019). These jeans had a more refined mature look compared to the jeans many young people were wearing at the time. They were somewhat tight, came in dark blue washes, were high waisted, and cuffed at the bottom. Calvin Klein's designer jeans were extremely popular and would set off a craze for designer jeans in the 70's and for years to come. The major reason why this was such an important moment for jeans was because they were finally being accepted into the world of high fashion. Jeans had come a long way from being a heavy-duty work pant for men, to being featured on a fashion runway for a major brand.

Jeans in the 1980's had a very contrasting look to what was being worn through the 60's and 70's, flared bell bottoms were now a dated look and the "mom jean" was now in style. Most jeans at the time had a straight leg, were high waisted, acid wash had become popular, have some rips along the legs and to be slightly cuffed on the bottom (Vivinetto, 2017). The release of designer jeans from the 70's continued into the 80's where designer jeans were in high demand. Jeans became a mainstream piece of casual clothing and now people from Madonna to Princess

Diana were wearing them and looking fashionable doing so. By the 80's jeans had finally become a must have item not only for young people but also for adults

By the 1990's hip hop had really taken off and, along with the popularity of the music came the popularity of streetwear clothing. These clothes were often extremely baggy, so brands such as JNCO who sold extremely oversized jeans became very popular. The jeans of the 90's reflected the look of street wear and hip hop, where clothes were exaggerated and very loose fitting especially in the fit of the legs. A popular feature to have on your pants that came along with the popularity of hip hop was having designs or your name airbrushed painted along the leg of your jeans (Jenkins, 2015). Another popular look that came out of the 90's was the grunge style, jeans associated with this look weren't as baggy as JNCO jeans. These jeans had a loose fit, were high waisted, and had a straight leg. No matter which look women associated with it's clear that loose fitting jeans were a major part of 1990's fashion.

Women's baggy jeans basically disappeared with the start of the 2000's, now women were wearing jeans that were low waisted, tight through the top and were boot cut at the bottom. Many jeans would have embroidered designs on the back pockets or had bedazzled designs on them. It was also common for women to style their jeans with a flashy belt, this can be seen on celebrities such as Britney Spears and Paris Hilton. Brands such as True Religion and Abercrombie & Fitch became popular for selling these styles of jeans. But more recently in the 2010's jean trends moved away from the over the top bedazzled jeans of the 2000's to a much simpler high waisted skinny jean. Although, a popular trend was having jeans in a variety of washes from light blue to black and even some that were colorful. Ripped jeans had returned which was reminiscent of the 1980's where this was also a very popular look for women. This was a big contrast to the jeans of the previous decade that were embellished, yet that tight fitting look was still popular.

As far as the 2020's go it's still hard to say what changes we will see in the style of jeans, but many people are predicting that skinny jeans are going to become less popular and women will turn towards looser fitting styles. The 2020's have only just started so trends are bound to change, and we will soon be able to see what style of women's jeans sticks around to define this decade. But after looking at these previous decades and seeing just how much the current events influence fashion, it makes me wonder how much the pandemic will impact new styles. I believe that with people going out less comfort is becoming important to women so we may turn to a looser more comfortable fit of jeans. Yet there is still the possibility of a completely new style of jeans coming out or even the return of a popular look from the past.

To conclude, women's jeans have come a long way since Levi's created the first pair in 1834. With each new decade the political and economic issues in America would impact the role of women and along with that changed what was acceptable for women to wear. Through the years women's jeans became more widely accepted and the styles continuously evolved through the details. Features like color, embellishments, widths of the leg, and rises have changed through the years but the denim fabric remains constant. Clothes often struggle with remaining in style but with the way that jeans can be changed and re-designed through their details keeps them looking trendy and fashionable. These pants have become an item that practically every woman in America owns, despite age or socioeconomic status and are an important part of American fashion.

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