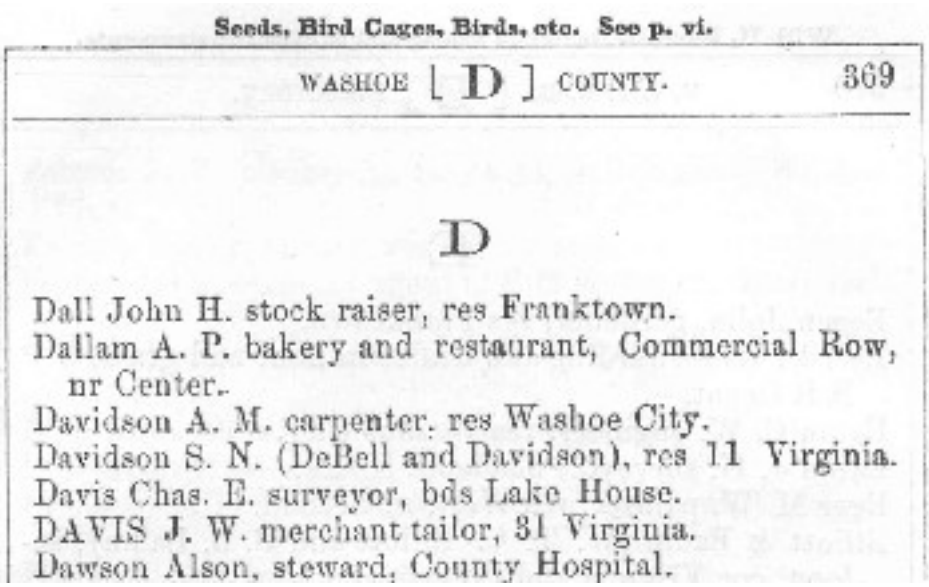
by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

An Associated Press (AP) story--datelined San Francisco, January 11, 1999- noted that Levi Strauss & Co.'s president had just stepped down. The news article also gave Levi Strauss credit for inventing the prototype for 501 jeans. "San Francisco-based Levi's, founded in 1853 by a Bavarian entrepreneur who designed the riveted work jeans for Gold Rush miners," the news report stated, "increasingly has been looking outside the company to fill its management positions."

The reporter failed to do his history homework. While Levi Strauss sold work jeans, it was an obscure, Jewish tailor working at 31 Virginia Street in Reno who added the rivets. A federal patent-infringement case filed in February 1874 in the U.S. Circuit Court of California (*Levi Strauss, et. al. vs. A.B. Elfelt, et. al*
.), and housed in the National Archives regional branch in San Bruno, south of San Francisco, contains the facts.

Born in 1831, Jacob Youphes was a native of Riga (now the capital of Latvia) near the Baltic Sea. The German Jew changed his name to Jacob W. Davis after immigrating to the United States in 1854 and operated a tailor shop in New York City and Augusta, Maine. In 1856, he arrived to San Francisco and shortly thereafter moved north to Weaverville to work as a tailor. With the gold rush to Fraser River in 1858, he left California for western Canada where he lived for nine years, married, and started a family.

Davis returned to San Francisco by ship from Victoria, British Columbia, in January 1867. He soon traveled to Virginia City, Nevada where he first opened a cigar store, but within three months he again turned to his trade as a tailor. In June 1868, he relocated once again, this time to the fledgling railroad town of Reno. Investing in a brewery, he lost virtually everything. By 1869, he had opened a tailor shop on the town's main thoroughfare, Virginia Street. He began fabricating wagon covers and tents from a rugged off-white duck cloth sold by San Francisco's Levi Strauss & Co.


Seeds, Bird Cages, Birds, etc. See p. vi.

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Dall John H. stock raiser, res Franktown.
Dallam A. P. bakery and restaurant, Commercial Row, nr Center.
Davidson A. M. carpenter, res Washoe City.
Davidson S. N. (DeBell and Davidson), res 11 Virginia.
Davis Chas. E. surveyor, bds Lake House.
DAVIS J. W. merchant tailor, 31 Virginia.
Dawson Alson, steward, County Hospital.

Events in January 1871 changed Jacob Davis' life forever and made him a wealthy man. His trial testimony told of a woman who needed a sturdy pair of pants for a husband too big to wear ready-made clothes. "She, his wife, said she wanted to send him to chop some wood," Davis testified, "but he had no pants to put on." The wife, claiming her enormous husband was too ill to visit the shop to be measured, tied knots in a piece of string provided by Davis and took the requisite waist and inseam measurements and brought them to the tailor.

Davis went on to testify that he was paid three dollars in advance for the pants which he made of white duck purchased from Levi Strauss & Co. The woman wanted the trousers made as strong as possible. There were copper rivets in the tailor's shop used to attach straps to horse blankets made for local teamsters. "So when the pants were done--the rivets were lying on the table--and the thought struck me to fasten the pockets with rivets," Davis recounted. "I had never thought of it before."

As word of the new pants began to spread, orders first trickled in, but soon Davis was deluged with requests. In the following eighteen months, he made and sold 200 pairs to persons in need of heavy work clothing. Some of the pants were made of denim. Concerned that his idea might

be pirated, Davis asked Levi Strauss to help him with a patent application. A preliminary application was approved in July 1872 and the full patent granted on May 20, 1873. By then, Davis had been named the San Francisco production manager. (The Davis family still lives in the Bay Area, owns the Ben Davis Company in Novato, and maintains a web site.) Davis sold his tailor shop property to Levi Strauss on May 27. The frame building was destroyed on October 29, 1873 in Reno's first great fire.

The truth in this story lay undiscovered for 100 years until Ann Morgan Campbell, chief of the San Bruno branch of the National Archives, brought it to light in an article in the *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*
in 1974. For over thirty years now, the story has received considerable attention in Nevada appearing in newspapers, books, and other historical journals. Davis is also mentioned in a brief biography of Levi Strauss in the World Book Encyclopedia. Actually all the AP reporter in San Francisco needed to do was call the corporate headquarters of Levi-Strauss & Co. Historian, Lynn Downey, would have set the record straight.

Just the same, there are persons other than the AP reporter in 1999 that have added to the confusion. Journalist Wells Drury, in his book *An Editor on the Comstock Lode* (1936), wrote that "legend" had it that Levi Strauss in "about 1872" learned of the use of copper rivets from the colorful, Carson City stage coach driver Hank Monk, and went on to make a fortune. According to Drury, "When on the road, Hank Monk was wont to mend his clothing with copper-harness rivets in lieu of buttons" (p. 139).

Anyway, we now know the facts thanks to a federal court case. The next time you look at your Levi 501 blue jeans, think of Jacob Davis and Reno, Nevada.

On May 20, 2006, an historic marker sponsored by the Reno Historic Resources Commission was dedicated at 211 N. Virginia Street at the historic location of Jacob Davis' tailor shop.

NOTE: For further information, see "In Nineteenth Century Nevada: Federal Records as Sources for Local History", by Ann Morgan Campbell, *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly* (Fall 1974).

Photo: Photo before July 4, 1905, courtesy of the Nevada State Museum

Listing for Jacob W. Davis' tailor shop in Reno from Storey, Ormsby, Washoe and Lyon Counties Directory, 1873-1874. From left to right: Nellie the delivery horse, A.J. Jack Loftus, C.C. Charles Brown, Clyde (Doc) Legg with bucket. Later the General Merchandise was the Quick Service Garage and then the Corner Bar. The old "Corner Bar" still stands on the corner of Pike and Main in Dayton. Levi Strauss & Co. repainted the historic sign in March 1999.

http://www.bendavis.com/
http://www.levistrauss.com/about/history/jeans.htm

(Original version in *Sierra Sage*, Carson City/Carson Valley, Nevada, March 1999 edition)