

# *A Thread In Time*

Newsletter of the  
**National Association of Textile Workers of America, Inc.**  
Volume I Issue 5      November, 2012

## *President's Message*

This is a time of Thanksgiving and I for one, am thankful for the sacrifices of our predecessors who worked so hard to bring this nation to its world status through the American Industrial Revolution. The textile workers who moved us from an agrarian society to a major manufacturing giant during the 20<sup>th</sup> century have given us the lifestyle which we enjoy today. We have emerged from our first permanent colony in Plymouth with 51 individuals surviving that first winter to a nation of millions.

You are encouraged to read The Most They Ever Had by Rick Bragg. This 2009 book reveals the life in the industrial southern United States. It is riveting and revealing as the chapters take us through the lives of the mill workers from post Civil War factory development to present day lives after the mills closed. Each story told in the 156 page book is a revelation that our indebtedness to our textile legacy is very much a contemporary as well as historical legacy. I recommend this book to all of our members and their families. Your comments and feedback are welcome and can be included in our next newsletter.

I invite you all to plan to attend our 2013 annual meeting which will be held March 10, 2013 at the Willimantic Brewing Co. in Willimantic, CT. More details will be sent after the beginning of the year. We continue to review our progress and plan our next goals for the growth of this society.. If you cannot attend, but have some concerns, ideas, suggestion, or comments, please send them to us for consideration and possible implementation.

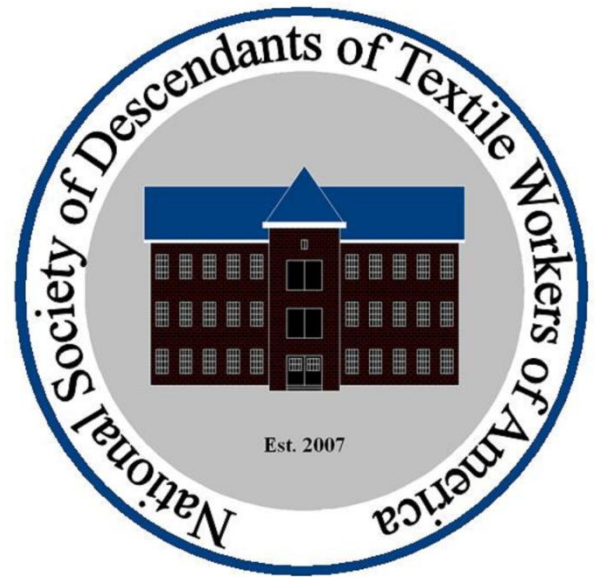
I invite you all to contribute to our newsletter. Please send me your articles, information, bulletins, etc.

Regards,  
Mary Brown

## *Calendar of Events*

**March 10, 2012-** Annual Meeting 12:30 p.m.  
Willimantic Brewing Co., Willimantic, CT

## *Insignia*



You may order our insignia pin for \$45 including shipping and handling. Send a check made out to NSDTWA to William A. Warner, P. O. Box 232, Thompson, CT 06277. All proceeds from the sale of this medal are placed in the dedicated scholarship fund.

## *Membership Notice:*

The opportunity to enjoy life membership is now offered at:

Under age 50 - 30 times the annual dues

Age 50 and older - 20 times the annual dues

Currently, the annual dues are \$10. We know that we can't keep them at that level for long, so it may behoove you to purchase a life membership now. If you have already paid your 2012 dues, deduct them from your life membership check. Checks should be made out to NSDTWA and mailed to: Gail Rebello, treasurer, 4 Village Hill Rd., Lebanon, CT 06249.

## Way Out West With Levi's

By Michael Steinberg

When people think of the textile and apparel industries, where many of our ancestors worked, the Northeast and Southeast regions of the US come to mind. The history of earlier centuries in those regions certainly was closely entwined with those industries.

But so is the history of the Western US and much of that can be recalled with the mention of just one word: Levi's.

Levi's denim riveted blue jeans have become a symbol of all that is cool about this country. Though produced by a company that still is privately owned, they somehow also seem to belong to all of us as an American icon.

Company founder Levi Strauss came to the US from Bavaria in 1847. His family had already started a wholesale apparel business in New York City. Levi opened a western branch of the business in 1853 in San Francisco. Levi Strauss Co. became successful and its owner got rich through this venture as well as real estate investments.

Twenty years later Strauss and a fellow Jewish immigrant, tailor Jacob Davis received a patent for a brass rivet Davis had developed to strengthen men's work pants, and a legend was born. Strauss put up the money to cover the patent costs. Levi's blue jeans initially became popular because of the durability the rivets brought to them. They were popular with miners, cowboys, lumberjacks and railroad workers.

The hard working jeans were largely confined to the West, until a dude ranch craze in the 1930s introduced them to visiting Easterners, who wore them home. But it wasn't until the 1950s and 1960s that the "blue jean craze" took off and Levi's sales rocketed. They became the official un-uniform of rebels of all stripes, with or without a cause, the alternative to the corporate gray flannel suit of the time.

Ironically, this turned the All American company into a super successful multinational corporation with operations all over the world, which it remains today, though challenged by competitors and ever changing global market conditions.

By the way, in the original Levi's design, there was a rivet at the bottom of the zipper. However, this rivet was eliminated after a Levi's president wearing a pair of Levi's jeans on a camping trip experienced extreme discomfort after that rivet overheated while the prez was sitting around a campfire.

## Working For Levi's

According to Karl Schoenberger in his 2000 book *Levi's Children*, "The company's earliest factories evidently employed young girls under the age of 14 in the early part of the (20<sup>th</sup>) century, not an unusual practice in those days." Those of us whose ancestors worked in such places "in those days" can testify to that. My grandfather, Francis Joseph Donahue, was working in a woolen mill in Buckland, CT, at age 14 in 1890. His brother William, 16, had been working there for two years.

Author Karl Schoenberger includes quotes from another book (Ed Cray's *Levi's*) from former Levi's metal button machine operator Hortense Thompson. Schoenberger wrote that her work was long—"a basic six day, 57 hour workweek...with overtime until as late as 10 p.m." And, he wrote, "The machine she operated was dangerous," "with the typical hazards of the factory floor, the kind that were rampant in early industrial America."

Hortense Thompson told that story best herself, seven decades after her employment at Levi's, in Cray's book:

"You used to feed buttons for the riveted clothes one by one...I almost put a button on my finger one time. One girl did—punched a button right in her finger. She just didn't get her finger out...One time a lady's hair got caught in a machine. Her scalp was taken off. She didn't die but she was in the hospital a long time. People sometimes sewed their fingers. When people were hurt on the job, the company didn't pay medical expenses."

Despite such dangers, Thompson worked for Levi's for over half a century.

Over the years Levi's has developed a reputation as a benevolent business, and promoted itself as such. After the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco, it kept workers on its payroll, even though its factory had been destroyed. And during the Great Depression, in at least one instance, the

company found its employees other work to do in its otherwise idled factory.

## **The Global Sweatshop**

In more recent times sweatshop workplaces, child labor and unsafe conditions on the job have become outlawed. But even Levi's, the cool guys, (all its owners are still descendants of its founder) have been implicated in overseas operations that continue to inflict the same harmful conditions on workers there that our ancestors had to deal with.

Here are a few examples from Wikipedia:

“By the 1990s, the (Levi's) brand was facing competition from other brands and cheaper products from overseas, and began accelerating the pace of its US factory closures and its use of offshore subcontracting agreements.

“In 1991, Levi Strauss faced a scandal involving pants made in the Northern Mariana Islands (a US territory), where some 3% of Levi's jeans sold annually with the Made in the USA label were shown to have been made by Chinese laborers under what the US Department of Labor called 'slavelike' conditions. Today, most Levi's jeans are made outside the US...

“Cited for sub-minimum wages, seven-day work weeks with 12-hour shifts, poor living conditions and other indignities, Tan Holdings Corporation, Levi Strauss' Marianas subcontractor, paid what were then the largest fines in US labor history, distributing more than \$9 million to some 1200 employees. Levi Strauss claimed no knowledge of the offenses, then severed ties to the Tan family and instituted labor reforms and inspection practices in its offshore facilities.

The activist group Fuerza Unida (United Force) was formed following the January 1990 closure of a plant in San Antonio, Texas, in which 1150 seamstresses, some of whom had worked for Levi Strauss for decades, saw their jobs exported to Costa Rica. During the mid and late 1990s, Furza Unida picketed the Levi Strauss headquarters in San Francisco and staged hunger strikes and sit ins in protest of the companies labor policies.”

And so our ancestor's workplace issues live on. Levi Strauss maintains that these labor practices are still in place. But with its operations so far flung, how effective can they be?

And of course with all those jobs sent overseas, a likewise number lost their jobs in this country. Now, at a time when we at home need jobs so badly, Levi Strauss is no longer available to help rivet our social fiber together.

Editor's note: Thank you for this timely article, Michael. If you have an article you would like to submit, please send it to: [mbrown@ct.metrocast.net](mailto:mbrown@ct.metrocast.net)

### *Scholarship*

A goal of our Society is to provide scholarships to Vocational School students. The scholarship does not have to be used for college. It can be for licensing fees, tools, etc. The student must meet the following criteria:

1. Exemplary work ethic
2. Respect for self, family, peers, and persons in authority
3. Strong background and interest in American History
4. Good academic performance
5. Attendance record indicates no suspensions or unexcused absences

This program will soon be opened to Vocational School students in other states. Please support our scholarship endowment fund to make this possible.

### *Website*

Once again, I invite you to visit our outstanding website at [www.textileworker.com](http://www.textileworker.com). This website was designed and is maintained by Tracy Crocker. You will notice that some of the honor roll members have special attachments with anecdotes about their life. You are welcome to submit material about your ancestor. Please contact or Tracy Crocker at [Tracy@tracycrocker.com](mailto:Tracy@tracycrocker.com) or Mary Brown at [mbrown@ct.metrocast.net](mailto:mbrown@ct.metrocast.net) for submission of this material.

### *Officers:*

#### *President*

Mary F. Brown  
218 Green Hollow Rd.  
Danielson, CT 06239

#### *Secretary*

Dawn M. Darche  
27 Apple Hill Dr.  
N. Scituate, RI 02857

#### *Vice President*

Gregory E. Thompson  
67 S. Main St. Unit 21  
Branford, CT 06405

#### *Treasurer*

Gail L. Rebello  
4 Village Hill Rd.  
Lebanon, CT 06249