

Annick LIVEBARY: Season #2, Spring 2008

SUBJECT: World History AGE RANGE: 12-15 GRADE LEVEL: 7-10

TOPIC: The Jeans Scene ERA: 20th Century American History

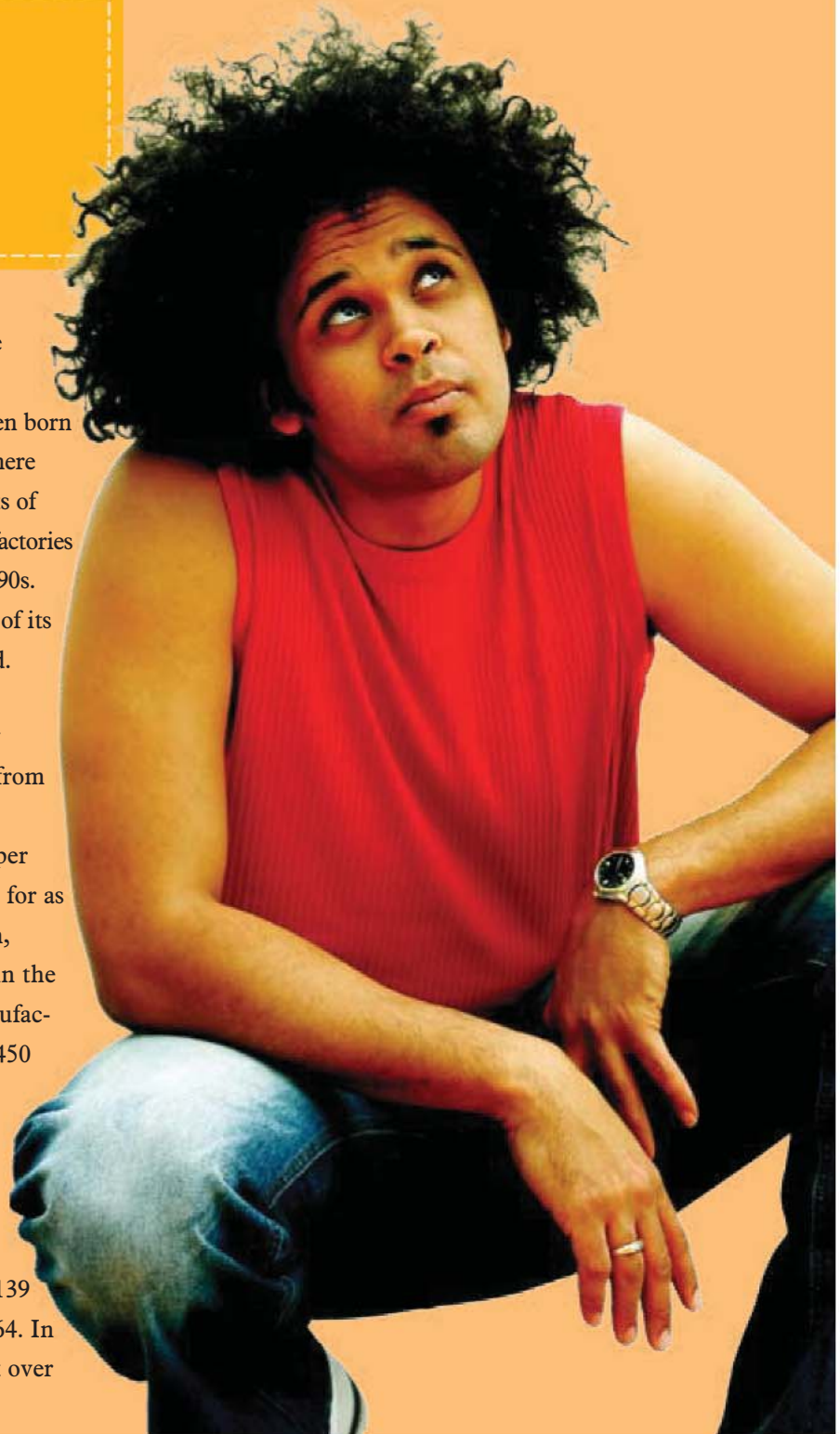
THE JEAN SCENE

BEHIND THE SEAMS

Check the labels on your blue jeans. Were they sewn in the United States? Canada? Britain? Probably not. Jeans may have been born in North America, but they aren't made there much anymore. Because of the rising costs of labor, many jeans companies moved their factories to developing countries in the 1980s and 90s. Australia used to produce more than half of its own jeans. Now, it makes less than a third.

Some American jeans companies simply moved their factories across the border from California to Mexico. While workers in California had been making \$10 or \$12 per hour, workers in Mexico could be found for as little as \$7 per day. The city of Tehuacan, Mexico, has the lowest minimum wage in the nation and is home to 700 clothing manufacturing companies. The industry earns \$450 million each year and blue jeans are the most popular product made there.

Wages are just as low — or lower — in other countries. In Honduras, a woman sewing clothes for export might make \$139 a month, and in parts of China, about \$64. In Bangladesh, a similar worker makes just over \$18 each month.





Sometimes, overseas production means not only lower wages, but lower workplace standards. An American delegation that went to the island of Saipan in the South Pacific to investigate factory conditions found some people there working almost as slaves. Recruiters had charged these people up to \$7,000 to get them a factory job, then forced the people to work in bondage until the “debt” was paid off. Companies buying clothes made at these questionable factories included at least two major American jeans makers.

In 2003, a New York-based labor group brought a worker from a Honduran sweatshop to Manhattan. They staged a protest outside the store of a popular designer jeans maker, claiming that the jeans inside were made in sweatshops where workers were treated unfairly.

People who had arrived to shop stayed outside on the sidewalk instead, listening as the 19-year-old girl described her factory, where workers were limited to two bathroom breaks a day and were forced to work overtime without pay. They weren't allowed to talk to each other, in case they slowed down or tried to start a union. They were also regularly tested for pregnancy and HIV. Workers who tested positive were fired.

WOULD YOU COUGH UP THE CASH?

Would you be willing to pay extra for your jeans to guarantee they weren't sewn in a sweatshop? A survey of Canadians in 1995 showed that shoppers would be willing to pay 10 percent more if their clothes were made by well-treated and well-paid workers.

As the young woman continued to speak, reporters began to join the crowd of would-be shoppers. By the next day, the worker's story had made newspaper headlines and the company was rethinking the way it handed out contracts.

SWEATSHOP SHOCK

Sweatshops don't operate only in developing countries. In 1995, police raided an apartment complex in El Monte, California, where they found 72 Thai immigrants sewing clothes for 69 cents an hour. The workers had been smuggled into the country and threatened with murder if they quit working or escaped before they “repaid” the smugglers for their journey to the United States. Some of the immigrants had been held there for more than two years.

Many Americans were shocked by the news of sweatshops operating in their own country, but a 1994 government study found that half of clothing factories in Los Angeles paid less than minimum wage, and more than 90 percent broke health and safety laws.



This protester in London, England, was speaking out for people half a world away. Workers at a Levi's subcontractor in Haiti were threatened by their bosses and beaten by armed guards when they tried to form a union in March 2004. By April, Levi Strauss & Co. had met with labor activists and the factory owners had agreed to recognize the workers' rights.

JEANS AND THE POWER OF TEENS

By the year 2000, 13- to 17-year-old shoppers became the number one buyers of denim. Jeans makers depend on millions of young shoppers choosing to buy their jeans every day. That gives teens the power to influence how these companies operate.

How can you be sure you're buying jeans made in respectable factories? You can't tell whether jeans were made in India or Mexico by holding the denim up to a light, but you can start by reading the label, and you can often check the company website.

- Does the company supervise its contractors?
- Does it ban the use of child labor?
- Does it make unannounced visits to its factories to monitor safety standards?
- How does it deal with contractors that break the rules?

You won't find the answers to these questions on all company websites. If you can't find the information you're looking for, try e-mailing or writing the company's public relations department.

When enough people write letters about their concerns, companies will listen. After all, teenagers are these companies' biggest market. Indirectly, teens control the blue jean world!



THE BLUE JEAN BOOK **The Story Behind the Seams** by Tanya Lloyd Kyi

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ASSIGNMENT

CLOTHING CONUNDRUMS

Jeans companies have made big efforts to convince buyers that clothing manufacturing is a fair and balanced business. Have they succeeded?

Your assignment is to research where your clothing is made and decide whether you support the labor and environmental practices involved.

First, work with a partner to read the labels on your clothing. Was it made in America? Mexico? Overseas? Using tacks or sticky notes, mark your findings on a world map.

Once your entire class has marked the map, note the countries that seem to produce the majority of your clothing. Then, see what you can discover about those places. What is the minimum wage? What are the working conditions like?

Next, break into groups and choose one of the following topics to research. Larger classes may want to assign each topic to more than one group.

Topic One: You're an environmental organization. Can you find out how making jeans impacts pesticide use, irrigation, and water pollution? Are there eco-friendly jeans options available to teens? What are they?

Topic Two: You're a labor union representing American workers. What concerns would you have about the wages and working conditions at clothing factories? How can you make shoppers in North America more aware of sweatshop practices? How can American workers compete for jobs against low wage workers in developing countries?

Topic Three: You're a child advocacy group, concerned about child labor in clothing factories. Can you find out how widespread this problem is? What are American clothing companies doing to stop it? What more could they do?

Topic Four: You're a manufacturer's trade group, interested in bringing the lowest prices to American shoppers. What is the best way to mass produce cheap jeans? Do you think most shoppers care whether their clothes are ethically or environmentally produced? What can you do to support jeans manufacturers and retailers who make a commitment to fair trade?

You can find more information on pages 56-65 of *The Blue Jean Book*. You can also ask your teacher or librarian for assistance finding relevant books and magazines. Here are some useful Internet sources for information:

The Center for Sustainability: <http://tinyurl.com/3wyn3q>

Good Environmental Choice Australia: <http://tinyurl.com/47etfj>

Maquila Solidarity Network: <http://tinyurl.com/6awt56>

Don't forget to name your group! When you've finished your research, present your group's views to the class.

QUIZ

NOTE: Quiz answers are available on the next page.

1) **Multiple Choice**

What is the main reason jeans companies site for moving their factories to developing countries?

- A. lower taxes
- B. lower labor costs
- C. less government oversight
- D. disagreements with labor unions

2) **Multiple Choice**

Which of the following groups spends the most money on blue jeans?

- A. cowboys
- B. farmers
- C. teenagers
- D. Hollywood celebrities

3) **Multiple Choice**

Factories with poor labor practices, known as “sweatshops,” exist in which places?

- A. China and Bangladesh
- B. Honduras and Saipan
- C. America and Canada
- D. All of the above

4) **True or False**

You can always tell where jeans have been made by reading the labels?

5) **True or False**

Consumers have little control over where their jeans are made.

QUIZ

1) Multiple Choice

What is the main reason jeans companies site for moving their factories to developing countries?

- A. lower taxes
- B. lower labor costs
- C. less government oversight
- D. disagreements with labor unions

Answer: B. Lower labor costs. Workers in many developing countries work longer hours for less pay than their American counterparts.

2) Multiple Choice

Which of the following groups spends the most money on blue jeans?

- A. cowboys
- B. farmers
- C. teenagers
- D. Hollywood celebrities

Answer: C. Teenagers have huge spending power. According to a profile from the National Labor Committee (nlcnet.org), U.S. teens will spend over \$200 billion in 2008!

3) Multiple Choice

Factories with poor labor practices, known as “sweatshops,” exist in which places?

- A. China and Bangladesh
- B. Honduras and Saipan
- C. America and Canada
- D. All of the above

Answer: D. Many consumers are surprised to discover that factories in North America have been charged with paying below minimum wage and breaking health and safety laws.

4) True or False

You can always tell where jeans have been made by reading the labels?

Answer: False. Even if jeans say “Made in America” on the label, many of the stages in making the jeans, from weaving and dyeing the fabric to cutting and assembling pieces, may have been done in different countries. You have to ask to find out how and where your jeans are made. A good place to start asking is at the jean company's website.

5) True or False

Consumers have little control over where their jeans are made.

Answer: False. Any large clothing company depends on its image and reputation to attract buyers. Bad publicity hurts business. By expressing their concerns through letters, phone calls, and emails, teen buyers have caused many companies to change where and how they manufacture clothing.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Do you think American shoppers know where their clothes are made? Do they care? Why or why not?
- Jean companies are always trying to find out what teenagers think is cool. What do you think is the next thing in jeans? What is the most interesting thing you've seen someone do with a pair of blue jeans?
- If you were going to launch your own clothing company, what kind of jeans would you manufacture? Would they be high fashion? Eco-friendly? Cheap or expensive?
- Would you change the brand of jeans you buy if you found out the manufacturer was using underpaid child labor or violating environmental laws? How can you find out whether the company who made your jeans is engaging in fair trade?
- When teens protested against companies using unfair labor practices, it caused Live Strauss & Co., Nike, and other clothing companies to change the way they do business and monitor subcontractors more closely. Can you think of other ways teens have used their purchasing power to change corporate or government behavior?

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