

Who Should You Thank When You Zip It Up?

It was in late August 1893 that American inventor Whitcomb Judson first received the patent for his “clasp-locker.” Today, after years of struggle for acceptance, few of us could survive without the zipper.

by Alison Pion

When you think of all our miraculous modern gadgets, the zipper, surprisingly, does not come readily to mind. But the zipper’s struggle for recognition is a courageous tale, full of hope, tragedy, and profit: not to mention utility, you could not zip up your pants, seal your pencil case, or snuggle into your sleeping bag without it.

In its beginning, the zipper was conceived as a replacement for the long button-hooked shoelaces of the 1890s by a prominent mechanical engineer in Chicago, Whitcomb Judson. His idea for the zipper was not the stroke of sudden genius but a thirty year experiment, one full of as many failures as successes.

Judson—who had already proven himself as an inventor of motor and rail brakes—was awarded a patent for the “clasp-locker” on August 29, 1893. Prior to this, the patent office held no records even remotely resembling Judson’s prototype.

His bizarre creation of sequential hook-and-eye locks was intimidating enough, but the gadget went unnoticed and unappreciated. Even an attempt by Judson to interest people in his invention at the 1893 Chicago’s World Fair was a flop.

Nevertheless, in the same year, the United States Postal Service did order twenty “zipper” mail bags from Judson, but the clasp-locks jammed frequently and the order was eventually rescinded. Though Judson continued to improve his prototype over the years, acceptance and

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fame remained out of reach. Our hero died in 1909, quite unaware of his clasp-locker’s legacy.

In 1913, a Swedish-American inventor, Gideon Sundback, adopted Judson’s dream. By abandoning the hook-and-eye design, Sundback was able to create a smaller, simpler, more reliable fastener. These changes improved the appeal and the popularity of the zipper.



The first requests for Sundback’s fasteners were from the U.S. Army. They ordered zippers for use on clothing and equipment during World War I and for the fastening of boots, money belts, and tobacco pouches. In the 1920s zippers made their widespread debut on civilian

clothing.

Still, all was not yet a bed of roses. Garments with zippers were difficult to care for in the early stages of their development. Because the metal zipper rusted easily, it had to be unstitched before a garment was washed and restitched afterward.

The concept of a zipper was initially so difficult to master that each garment came with a small instruction manual detailing its operation and maintenance. But the craze for gadgetry in the early part of the century gave the awkward zipper a chance to fasten itself onto the popular consciousness.

The term “zipper” was not coined until 1923, when the B.F. Goodrich Company developed rubber galoshes with the new “hookless fasteners” and renamed them “Zipper Boots”. Mr. Goodrich himself is credited with the name, based on the “z-z-zip” sound made when using the hookless fasteners to close his boots. The unusual name along with improvements in the zipper’s durability secured its place in mechanical history.

By the late 1920s, the zipper was a common fastener on clothing. Then in 1935, the famous designer Elsa Schiaparelli transformed the zipper into a fashion accessory with the introduction of a spring line of clothes that *The New Yorker* described as “dripping with zippers.”

And though the 1980s brought a new nemesis—velcro—and the rebirth of an old one—“button fly jeans”—the survival of the zipper attests to our loyalty. A century after its shaky beginnings in the Chicago patent files, the zipper’s hard-won fame is a victory for all of us who zip up without a second thought. ●