

Welcome to A Deep Dive I'm Reggie. In this bonus episode a brief history of the zipper. This utilitarian closure rejected when first introduced revolutionized the way we all dress and undressed.

Thank you for joining me for Sex and the Zipper.

I sew all of my clothes and when you make your own clothes things like buttons and zippers come in for particular consideration.

Like a lot of sewing folk I have a minor obsession with buttons in all sorts of materials from Bakelite to shell and bone but when it comes to zippers, other than the size and color or whether it's plastic or metal I never gave them much thought which is pretty dopey because the story of the invention and gradual popularization of the zipper is interesting.

Among the revelations about the zipper's invention for me is how late in the 20th century it made its entrance.

Elias Howe, who invented the sewing machine received a patent in 1851 for an 'Automatic, Continuous Clothing Closure.' The first prototype for a zipper was introduced forty-two years later on August 29 1893 by Whitcomb Judson. He had invented a row of hooks and eyes used to close shoes but it never worked well the closure would constantly pop open.

After 15 years of trying to make a working zipper, Judson failed. But as **Robert Friedel**, author of *Zipper: An Exploration in Novelty* says, *the next person to pick up the cause of trying to make a more functional zipper benefited from Mr. Judson's trial and error.*

Around 1915 electrical engineer Gideon Sundback invented the zipper that we know of today. Sundback finally solved the pulling-apart problem by...attaching the metal teeth to a cloth strip. He called it the "Hookless Fastener No. 1". His invention had two facing rows of teeth that pulled into a single piece by a slider and increased the opening for the teeth guided by the slider. By adding a locking mechanism this new zipper ensued It would remain closed.

In 1914 Gideon Sundback developed a version based on interlocking teeth, the "Hookless No. 2", which was the modern metal zipper as we know it. So, Sundback did it, he took Judson's idea and created a functional working closure but guess what, no one was interested. That's not quite true, almost nobody wanted to use it. After all the hook and eye was a fairly new invention that had changed how closures were used on bras, some clothes, and shoes only 10 years or so before the zipper's introduction.

The hook and eye closure has a long history beginning in the 14th century England there's even a recorded purchase of hooks and eyes for 10 pounds by a woman in the Maryland colonies in 1643. The hook and eye didn't become a mass-produced item in the USA until 1902-1903 only a few years before the introduction of Judson's zipper in 1914-15.

On top of bad timing, the zipper was an expensive addition to a garment. One of the first ideas was to put zippers children's jumpers a one pc. suits. It sounds like a great idea easy access on and off for diaper changes and depending on the age of the child they could put the jumper on themselves. But the cost was prohibitive. The zipper would cost \$1 and so would the jumper, doubling the price.

So cleverly Sundback sought out a niche and he found one in the military. Money belts were followed by the tobacco pouch and rubber shoes in the 1920s. It's a perfect example of niche marketing.

By the way, the name zipper was created in 1923 when B.F. Goodrich introduced an overshoe for the military that used Sundback's zipper as a closure. They called the overshoe the Zipper using onomatopoeia to echo the sound of the zipper closing, ZIP. The name was so popular that it became the way the closure was referred to elsewhere.

B.F. Goodrich sued claiming they had the trademark but a court ruled the trademark only applied to the overshoe and so the zipper had a new name. Much better than the hookless fastener which has no sex appeal.

In his book, Robert Friedel talks about the importance of the image of an object in its popularity.

In the early 1900s manufacturers and some consumers were just not ready for this mechanical device or the idea of something modern it didn't appeal to most advertisers, newspapers, or many of the rich and well connected who were still enthralled with the romantic nostalgia of the Gilded Age.

By the 1920-30s well into the jazz age and lots of social upheaval many people felt they were living in a brave new world where trying new things was a sign of sophistication making the zipper seem as fresh, modern and sexually provocative as owning a Bessie Smith.

There's some debate about the exact article of non-military clothing that first sported a zipper in the 1920s. In my searches, I find a 1928 ad for a boy's mackinaw jacket with a zipper as well as a men's shoe with zippers. There were women's manufacturers that used zippers in a few dresses as a marketing ploy.

In 1934 when the Prince of Wales visited the USA and he caused quite a fashion stir. It wasn't just his plus fours that people were bowled over by. It was rumored and confirmed by his tailor that his natty trousers had a zippered fly and with that many high-end tailors changed their minds and decided a zipper wasn't vulgar but instead the subtle sign of refinement and zippered trouser sales boomed.

The use of the zipper in women's clothes took off in the 1930s after the fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli chose to use zippers in her one of her 1935 collections. Schiaparelli used zippers even in places where no fastener was needed. She also used exposed zippers dyed to match the fabric or as a contrast. She was particularly fond of using plastic zippers which she thought were extremely modern. Photo.

In 1937, zippers began to appear widely in high-fashion lines. Edward Molyneux's pencil-slim coat used zippers to emphasize the sleek silhouette.

The Battle of the Fly which was a debate between fashion industry folks about the superiority of the button or fly was settled by Esquire magazine in 1937 when its editors declared the zipper the superior idea in men's fashion, both for style and for its potential to avoid, "the possibility of unintentional and embarrassing disarray."

The real battle between the button and the zipper was real. The button folk used the exaggerated male fear of penis exposure and the early history of the zipper's failure to close as the reason why the zipper was unreliable.

The zipper folks used gapolis. What is gapolis you ask?

Gapolis is the gap or series of gaps, as between the fastened buttons or snaps on an overly tight garment. I know what you're thinking, that's not the buttons problem.

Soon the combination of a reduction in prices and the growing association of the zipper with modernity and fashion overcame the long-standing resistance of garment makers and buyers and finally, the zipper was popular in the ready-to-wear market.

Soon the zipper would be ubiquitous and with that came the erotic and the fetishized.

By the 1950s, the zipper was the default fastener for everything from skirt plackets and trouser flies to backpacks and that symbol of sex and danger of the 1950s and beyond, the leather motorcycle jacket.

From the moment the zipper began to be widely used in the late 1920s and 1930s it was regarded as a sign of moral decline and an aide in the sexual licentiousness that the puritans and most religions guarded against.

Earlier in the episode, I used the expression Brave New World to describe the attitudes of young people in the 1920s. In Aldous Huxley's dystopian novel Brave New World published in 1932 Huxley uses the zipper a lot. Both as metaphor and symbol of the totalitarian death of intimacy and the depersonalization that accompanies mechanization carried right through the most intimate encounters humans can experience.

As a metaphor and symbol, Huxley used the newly popularized zipper pretty effectively to illustrate the loss of human connection and intimacy but as a writer, Huxley was a man with his feet firmly settled in the 1900th century. He seems to be harkening back to a time when getting dressed for women was more exhausting than romantic.

For a woman in the 1900th century, getting dressed meant a struggle with buttons and hooks from her bodice to her skirt. Her boots alone might require negotiating 20 to 30 buttons. Think about it. 20-30 buttons gone by choosing a shoe with a side zipper, or a corset that zipped.

The zipper was another step in liberating women from their outerwear and though the zippered corset freed up the time it took to get dressed the battle for undergarment freedom was still to be won and that would take another 30 years from the zipper's introduction, the women's movement to burn the bra, and a sheer braless blouse designed by Yves Saint Laurent to give women any true freedom of choice.

Once you start to notice or take on board the idea of the zipper as an erotic element you discover it's everywhere. We've discussed it's use in the novel Brave New World.

It crops up from Broadway to Hollywood as a tool of seduction or licentiousness. In one of the most spectacular, and I mean that as in spectacles, is Busby Berkeley's use of something that looks like a zipper in the number Waterfall in the 1933 musical *Footlight Parade*. Scantly clad women, of course, swim around creating all sorts of shapes, technically brilliant but completely bananas. I watched just before I recorded this and it's kinda creepy. I'll add a link to the video on the Deep Dive website.

In the Rodgers and Hart 1940 musical *Pal Joey*, there's a well-known patter number called Zip about a brainy stripper modeled after Gypsy Rose Lee with lines like, "Zip, Walter Littman wasn't clever today, Zip I think Dali's latest work is passé." In the 1946 movie *Gilda*, Rita Hayworth's character uses the zipper as she pulls her clothes on in a seductive way that nearly stops the picture.

The author Erica Jong coined the expression, the zipperless fuck in her 1973 novel *Fear of Flying* as an expression of sexual liberation sex with borders or boundaries, not even the zipper.

Then of course there's the famous Andy Warhol album cover for the Rolling Stones album *Sticky Fingers*. The photo is a shot of a man's tight jeans and his pronounced bulge. If that weren't enough enticement each album cover had a functioning zipper that you could zip and unzip. One of the first times popular culture objectified as man's anatomy in that way.

Probably the most erotically connected version of the zipper is its role in fetish wear and BDSM. Often skintight jumpsuits, shirts, skirts, and underwear use the zipper for access to skintight PVC and leather clothing too tight to climb into otherwise. More often than not the zipper is used to allow or limit access to parts of the body on in the case of face masks to the mouth. Then there's the zipper string a BDSM toy made up of string or clothesline with clothing pins attached. I'll let you work how it's used.

Thinking about which article of clothing that's given the zipper most of its sensual allure it has to be the black leather motorcycle jacket.

Popularized and some might say erotized by Marlon Brando in the film *The Wild Ones* the motorcycle jacket wouldn't have had the same impact without the zipper. The zipper allowed the jacket to be closed without overlapping to accommodate a button. The exposed metal zipper sewn into the leather of the jacket gave it the sleek appearance of something soft and hard.

By the end of the 1950s, schools across the US were banning students from wearing the jacket, which of course only cemented its status as a fashionable symbol of rebellion.

I'll post the famous picture of Brando on the Deep Dive website. It's amazing how modern and sexy of course he looks wearing a white t-shirt and a leather jacket.

When Elisa Schiaparelli introduced her sleek avant-garde gowns with zippers up the back magazines joked, "Another reason to keep the husband around." Or "Honey, can you help me with this?" Yea, I know. Consolation for a culture that thought women were becoming a little too independent.

Just a few years ago Jane Fonda posted a picture of herself the morning after one of those red carpet events. The photo pictures Fonda still dressed in the same gown from the night before because she couldn't reach the zipper in the back.

Truth is, zippers in the backs of expressive gowns where the problems of wealthy women who often as not had “help” to help them get in and out of those clothes. For most women, the struggle was a fight for freedom from what was under their clothes and that would take several more decades to win the fight. It wasn’t until the 1960s when feminists started to reject the confinement of corsetry and bras resulting in the burning of bras in protestation. Suddenly women had a few choices in what to and what not to wear.

Women were ridiculed for burning their bras but when you think of the history of women’s undergarments particularly the ravages of the corset which caused so much bodily harm to so many women that corsets were marketed with a “doctor’s” seal of approval. Then the girdles

and brassieres of the 1950s. In that light burning bras doesn’t seem so loopy after-all if it finally gave women a choice and it did.

By the way, around the time of those bra burnings, Yves Saint Laurent created a sheer braless blouse that got fashionistas on board, and suddenly going braless was the thing to do.

Remember how I said one of the fears button manufacturers used to discourage male zipper users and buyers was to emphasize the risk of injury. Well, as it turns out according to a study published by the British Journal of Urology International, zippers are the most common cause of serious genital injury for men. Bicycles are number two if you’re curious. At least 17,616 people in the U.S. suffered zipper-related genital injuries between 2002 and 2010 that were bad enough to land them in hospital.

I just love exploring something so seemingly innocuous as the zipper only to discover its hidden depth. The next time I put a zipper into a pair of pants I’ll give it a little more respect.

I also love the story of its invention especially the failures. If it had only a middling success in the 1900s and 19-teens it wouldn’t have been seen as such a modern invention that helped catapult it to success when it’s time had finally arrived. A pretty good lesson and it came from the life and times of the zipper.

If you want to see photographs of the zipper as it was developing in concept or the overshoe from which it got its name, or ads that extolled it as the new modern invention that everyone needs.

You can find them all at the Deep Dive website at www.reggiedeepdive.com or you can search for the Deep Dive website by or search for Reggie deep dive zipper.

Thanks to Joshua Rich for the podcast’s theme song Rain.

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Sex and the Zip was researched and written by me Reggie thanks for joining me, see you next time.