Selvage DENIM

Learn to make jeans from this sought-after textile

BY JENNIFER STERN-HASEMANN

When denim fabric entered the ready-to-wear market in the mid-19th century, it was used to make durable work pants. The textile was woven on narrow, 32-inch shuttle looms. This gave selvage denim a tight weave and distinctive strong, clean edges. In 1915, Levi Strauss partnered with Cone mills in Greensboro, North Carolina, to produce fabric for the company’s signature jeans at Cone’s White Oak mill. This type of denim is today called “selvage denim,” because the selvages are fully finished with no loose threads; often, they include white and red or blue warp threads, yielding an attractive stripe.

As jeans became more popular in the 1950s, companies looked for less expensive ways to manufacture denim. The new denim developed then, and still manufactured, is produced on projectile looms that are twice as wide as a shuttle loom. While this denim still has selvage edges, they are not as clean or strong as those created on a shuttle loom (see “Recognize your selvages,” p. 43).

Cone Denim closed its White Oak facility in 2017, ending an American tradition of selvage denim production. Japanese manufacturers started producing denim in the 1960s and chose shuttle looms to craft their denim. The selvage edges became a signature, identifying the manufacturer by the color of the threads that were woven in.

Sew a classic for yourself—jeans in traditionally woven selvage denim.

RECOGNIZE YOUR SELVAGES

Selvage denim is woven on shuttle looms, which produce fabric by weaving one continuous weft yarn through the warp yarns that are stretched on the loom. The warp yarns make up the straight grain; the weft yarn forms the cross-grain. Because the weft yarn travels back and forth, at each selvage it reverses direction and wraps the fabric’s edges, creating a strong, ravel-resistant edge.

On a projectile loom, the warp yarns are similarly stretched on the loom. However, the weft yarns are woven one by one through the warp, so each weft yarn leaves a loose end at the selvages, resulting in a frayed appearance. These looms can produce wider fabric at higher speed, but the selvages aren’t especially sturdy or attractive.

A CULT CLASSIC

Men’s jeans made of selvage denim have become a favorite fashion item. They are rugged and stiff when new. However, with wear, selvage jeans develop a signature creased and faded pattern unique to each wearer. Typically, the side seams are cut on the woven edge, so a turned-up cuff displays the fabric’s bona fides to raw denim initiates.

If you want to incorporate this distinctive material into your wardrobe, think beyond jeans. Look for any patterns that include some straight, on-grain seams, and place those along the selvage. With a lapped, flat-felled, or other unconventional seam, you can bring the decorative selvages to the garment’s right side.

I’ll tell you more about how to craft a pair of custom selvage jeans, and how to care for them so they age beautifully and with individuality.

Jennifer Stern-Hasemann designs J Stern Designs patterns, and teaches fitting and sewing techniques online and across the country.

FABRIC SOURCES

Because this fabric is no longer produced in the United States at an industrial scale, it can be difficult to find. A Google search on terms such as “selvage denim,” “Cone mills,” “Japanese denim,” or “raw denim” may turn up retailers with yardage to sell. The narrow width means you’ll need nearly twice as many yards to sew a pair of jeans. This may increase the cost of making jeans, but selvage denim’s dense, tough weave ensures a long-lasting garment.

Huston Textile Company of Mather, California, is a family-owned mill that manufactures small-batch selvage denim. The company uses local, sustainably sourced fibers for all its textiles, and weaves them on vintage narrow shuttle looms. Huston Textile Company of Mather, California, is a family-owned mill that manufactures small-batch selvage denim. The company uses local, sustainably sourced fibers for all its textiles, and weaves them on vintage narrow shuttle looms.
Patterns, fitting, and layout

To make a traditional pair of selvage jeans, you’ll need the right pattern, some fitting tips, and a special layout.

SUITEABLE DESIGNS

To take advantage of the selvage edge, a jeans pattern must have straight side seams that run parallel to the grainline. That means the leg must fall straight down from the widest part of the hip. All the fitting happens along the crotch seam, the back yoke seam, and the inseams. The only available women’s jeans pattern currently on the market that is designed specifically for selvage denim is the J Jeans from J Stern Designs (JSternDesigns.com).

To determine if your figure can successfully be fitted in this style, compare your waist, full hip, and thighs (measured together) measurements. If they are within 2 inches of each other, your shape is compatible with a selvage pattern.

If you have more waist definition or a curvy figure, you may not be able to get the fit you prefer in this jeans style. It is possible to reduce the waist circumference by a few inches, by pinning fitting darts in a muslin, then transferring them to the yoke or center seams. A contoured waistband is another option that provides shaping at the waistline.

If traditional jeans are not the right option for you, explore other styles such as wide-leg trouser jeans. As long as the side seams are parallel to the straight grain from the hip down, you can place them on the selvage.

Compare your waist, hip, and thigh measurements to determine if classic selvage-cut jeans are a good choice for you.
FITTING TIPS
Even on a straight-seamed pattern, you can make adjustments for a more personalized fit.

**Raise and take in the waistline**
On the back, raise the waistline on the yoke, and angle the yoke’s side and center-back seams. On the front, slash horizontally across the leg below the pocket opening, and spread by the amount you raised the back yoke. Angle the center-front edge slightly to reduce the waist circumference.

**Increase sitting room**
“Scooping” the crotch curve creates more space for the seat. Begin by scooping the back crotch curve. If this isn’t sufficient, scoop the front and back curves, and lower the inseams equally. Finally, if you need more room in the upper thigh as well, extend the crotch points.

**Narrow the legs**
On a test garment, measure how much you want to take in at knee level. On the pattern front and back, mark this amount at the knee and draw a new inseam from there to the original crotch points. Complete the inseam by extending it from the knee to the hem. Bear in mind that you can’t drastically taper the legs at the inseams only, without risking grain distortion.

**Widen the legs**
On the front and back patterns, measure out from the knee by the desired increase in width. Redraw the inseam from this point up to the original crotch points, then complete the inseams from the knee to the hem.
How to sew selvage denim

The main concerns when sewing denim are preventing frayed edges along seams and choosing tools and supplies that can stand up to this rugged fabric.

**EDGE FINISHES**

Serge the cut edges with a narrow three-thread overlock stitch before you start construction to save time. I like to add character to the interior with contrasting thread in the upper and lower loopers. If you plan to flat-fell some seams, you may opt not to serge.

**STITCHING METHODS**

For construction seams, install a size 14/90 or 16/100 denim or jeans needle, and thread the machine with good-quality all-purpose thread. To topstitch, use a size 16/100 topstitching needle and jeans-stitch or topstitching thread. If the machine can’t stitch through thick seam allowances, pound them gently with a rubber mallet.
Create and maintain the authentic fade

Most people like raw denim because of the unique, wear-specific fade patterns that occur over time. You can maximize that effect by handling this rugged fabric with care.

RECONSIDER PREWASHING

Although you can pretreat selvage denim like other denim types by laundering and drying it to avoid future shrinkage, it’s not recommended if you want to establish and maintain the ideal fade. Raw denim may shrink up to 10 percent, unless your fabric is Sanforized (mechanically preshrunk). If you’re uncertain, wash and dry a 10-inch square to determine how much the fabric shrinks. Machine-washing selvage denim has another disadvantage: It can abrade and redistribute the indigo dye unevenly over the fabric surface, creating a crinkled, marbleized surface pattern.

WEAR IN THE JEANS

True selvage denim aficionados limit how often they wash their jeans. You can wear them for several months before the first washing. The jeans soften and develop faded creases that are individualized to your body’s shape. The best fade is usually considered to be one with high contrast between the darkest and lightest areas, and distinct linear creases at the front thighs, back knees, ankles, pockets, and elsewhere, depending on how you wear them.

WASH CAREFULLY

When you decide it’s time to wash the jeans, don’t throw them into the washing machine. The best method, for maintaining the sought-after fade and avoiding unwanted wrinkle patterns, is to wash by hand. Fill the bathtub with enough lukewarm water to cover the jeans, add a tablespoon of detergent, and stir to mix it. Use a nonbleach detergent, such as Woolite Dark. Turn the jeans inside out and submerge them. Agitate by hand, then leave the jeans to soak for 45 minutes. Gently scrub dirty areas. Drain the tub and refill with cold water; soak the jeans for 10 minutes to rinse. Finally, roll the jeans in a towel to absorb extra water and hang to dry.

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