

[M] ...and your mom did them on the sewing machine
[M] ...I mean she did some free hand but...I can't
[M] ...The back is just this like...how many different layers
[M] ...that's interesting
[M] ...that was your
[M] ...So that's...I don't
[M] ...No...that's a whole
[M] ...And it's a whole
[M] ...and your mom did it
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[M] ...The back is just
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...And it's

G Uhh. I have told people I never...I could hardly wait until
the bales. And it was that dirtiest place because you had
back. And every time he came back, there was an opening he
my face.

D How old do you think when grandpa
G Oh, I would imagine I probably was
Oh, I don't know.

D So, 1944 1945
J Yeah...

G Too young to join the army....so I
D They waited to do that later.

to go to church, she...
then when I came home from church, then I would take off
dressed up then and then, but leave on the white shirt, so co
and a pair of jeans. But I don't know whether others did that,
because the time I came up, I would, I would have worn
he out of...people don't wear ties anymore. I think
thing to do with the jeans here, but I think
he teachers! who were a tie and
shirt or a sweater

there?
- "Jesus!"

Unraveled, Untold, Untitled

The stories of my family jeans and me

Josh Jensen

MDes Fashion and Textiles

2,509 words

December 11, 2024

Design Research Methods, 24/25



Introduction to a Family Patchwork

I have a pair of jeans that my grandpa once wore. They were just another pair of jeans. Worn again and again, patched again and again by my great-grandma who I never knew. In the 1980's a tattered pair of jeans became my dad's when he was in college. My grandma would have fixed them then and later my mom. Now they are mine. What untold stories do these pants hold and what could they say about me and my family? What started as just another pair of jeans is now a family patchwork and a story about us through the inseparable threads of wearing and mending.

Wearing

In *Worn Worlds: Clothes, Mourning and the Life of Things* Peter Stallybrass (1993, p. 38) writes rather simply that "cloth is a kind of memory." Generations of memories are woven deep into this faded fabric. The first ones they held were those of my grandpa as a young adult working in the fields of rural Iowa. Jeans were work pants, chore pants. This is what he would have worn when bailing hay.

Dad: ...grandpa said sometimes when he was bailing that jeans is the only thing he was wearing [laughter]...no gloves, no shirt, no shoes...no goggles.

A durable uniform for someone expected to help out on the family farm from a young age. I'm not sure when my grandpa would have first worn this pair, but it would have been sometime in the 1940s when he was in his teens.

Grandpa: I could hardly wait until your great-grandpa would let me tie the bales. And it was the dirtiest place, because you had the plunger on the on the baler coming back. And every time it came back, there's an opening here and so then it would shoot this dust out in my face. [laughter]

Dad: How old do you think, when grandpa let you be there?

G: Oh, I would imagine I probably was 10 then...[Mom: Jesus]...moving right up in age...Maybe 11, I don't know.

D: So, 1944, 1945.

Josh: Yeah.

G: Too young to join the army...so...

D: They waited to do that later.

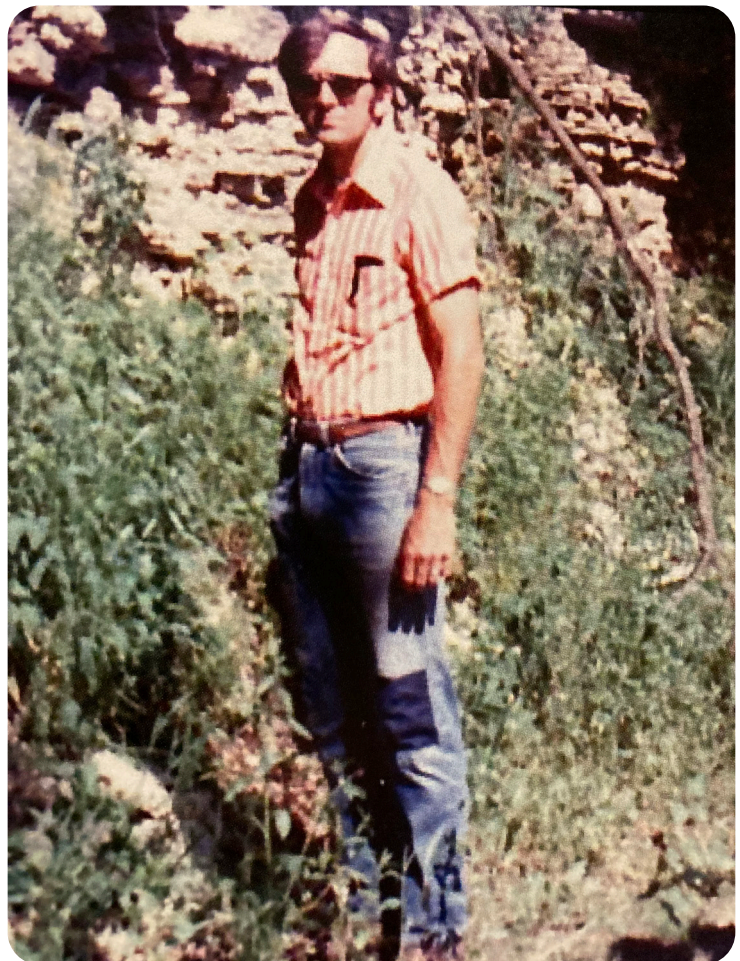


fig. 1: My grandpa wearing the jeans

A single pair of Lee Riders from Humbolt, Iowa are a link to a version of my grandfather I never met. This conversation with my grandpa, dad, and mom over FaceTime in October of 2024 brought out stories that I had never heard before. Little did I know that my grandpa had been chomping at the bit at 10 to bale hay and join the army.

They continued to be worn for several decades but by the time they made their way to my dad, they were a seemingly unwanted commodity.

Dad: I found them in some of in some of Dad's stuff, and he wasn't wearing them.

...

Mom: I can almost hear your mom's voice. "Oh, you don't want thooose!" [laughs]. Something like that.

Dad: Yeah. She did say that...



Ripped tattered jeans, perhaps unsurprisingly held appeal for a college student in the 80s. I can't say it was much different for me 30 years later when I too acquired them in college. These well-loved pants were worn no longer for work but for comfort and perhaps their rebellious appearance.

Dad: I have one specific memory of wearing them. I was...to a biology lab when I was a sophomore and, and talking, somebody commenting on them and striking up a conversation about them...

Deep patterns of wear created an aesthetic value that resonated with my dad and I without needing to know their exact history. What carried them to where they are today is not that they were a precious artifact but rather the fact that they could be worn.

Mending

While it was the men who imprinted memories through wear, it was the women of my family who held them together. My grandpa's mother, Ella Jensen, a Danish orphan born in the United States, would have been the first to add a patch to these jeans that are now a chaotic mess of patches and frayed edges. The repair work that now covers the entire front, rear, knees, and crotch of these jeans would have started with a single tear. She would have repaired

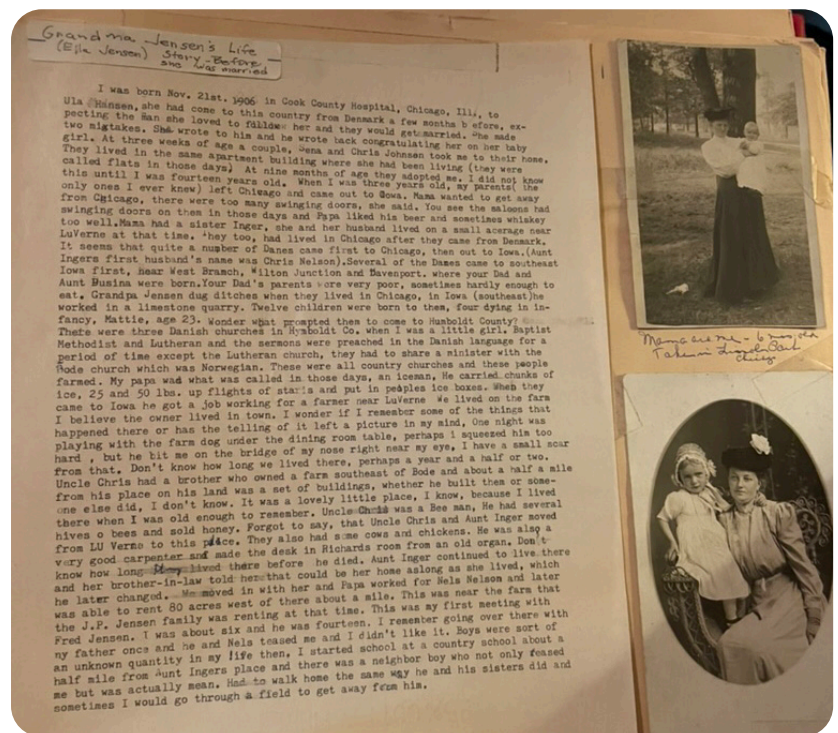


fig. 3: Autobiography of Ella Jensen (my great-grandma)

them by hand but also with a mechanical sewing machine.

Josh: ...it would have been your mom that would have fixed these if something got a rip in them, and she would have just done it by hand...is that right or?

Grandpa: Well, I don't know she, she would have done certainly that, but, but, of course, she had an old Singer pedal-operated sewing machine. So you...was not an electric machine. Down at the bottom of it, you had this pedal that you go back and forth on to operate the machine...

As holes wore through those patches, the layers and shades of blue and white overlapped and blended. Times changed and so did their repair. A smaller foldable electric sewing machine would have been used by my grandma to add or reinforce patches from 1955 through the 2000s.

Grandpa: But see, Grandma, has, it's here in this house now, has the sewing machine that, that is one of the things that she brought to our marriage...



fig. 4: Grandma and grandpa at their wedding, 1957

She would have fixed them first for my grandpa and later for my dad. Despite my grandma questioning why my dad would want to wear them, she kept them alive even when things might have been a bit hopeless.

Dad: ...they were borderline wearable [laughter] at the time, maybe not wearable actually...in public.

My mom had a hand in keeping them together after that. It is not clear to what extent that was and I don't think she quite knows either. At this point it may have been more important to make sure they didn't fall apart completely; reinforcing stitches as both patches and original fabric tried to come apart.

Originally I intended to look more closely at the specific patches and tears. I thought I could deconstruct them in a sense to understand better who made which patch, how, and when.



fig. 5: My mom and dad

Dad: Do you know what Grandma would have used for patching material? Just another pair of jeans?

Grandpa: Yeah, they got so worn out and you just keep them, cut it up and pick out areas that were uh...better than others.

Although one day I may explore this deeper, I realized that these specifics were less interesting to me than the overall process of mending and what it signified. Megan Sweeney writes in *Mendings* (2023, p. 184) that “With fixing, the goal is to repair and then forget about the state of brokenness... While fixing can happen from an emotional distance, mending requires emotional proximity and introspection...mending involves close-range, ongoing emotional engagement, an extended process of coming to terms with what is broken.” I like to think that my great-grandma, my grandma, and my mom inherently knew this about mending. Their emotional proximity to these jeans and therefore to my dad and grandpa is what helped them survive. Their labor carried a deep love and care that held tattered threads together - this is what was important for me to understand.



fig. 6: Cutting corn in New Hampton, Iowa, September 2014

Additionally, “cloth is able to carry the absent body, memory, genealogy, as well as literal material value” (Stallybrass, 1993, p. 45). For that reason, these jeans also carry more than just the physical memories of their wearers and menders. The fabric holds the smell of cooked sweet corn in my grandmother’s kitchen every August when we would shuck, cut, cook, and freeze bushels of corn to eat throughout the year. It holds the sounds of ice skating at Christmas, the feel of warm loud dinners, and the taste of sticky sweet canned pears. Legacies of a family that worked the land wearing jeans like these.

The Present

These jeans are also a story of the present. They were a reason for me to talk to my grandpa and grandma. To talk to my parents too. To have another chance to listen to them in depth as I have



fig. 7: My sisters and grandma, Decorah, Iowa, August 2024

done since I was a kid. My grandpa is 90. My grandma, who was 89 when I first started writing this, passed away in November less than a week from her 90th birthday. When my grandma died, I was unable to make it home for her funeral which my family held the weekend after. I had calls with my parents, siblings, and relatives; and I had these pants. They were the only physical link to my family an ocean and continent away. They were almost preparing me for this moment. I felt those stitches held me together when nothing else could.

Although it wasn't possible to interview my grandma about these jeans, I'm not left without her voice in this story. It is held within them and told through the words of others.

Dad: Grandma, my mom, had a different patching technique than Grandma Jensen [my great grandma] did. So, I could recognize which patch is which.

...

I think some of the sort of more dark blue denim that's used, I think would have been what Grandma Jensen did, sort of that would have been from work pants. I think most of the, most of the denim that...that my mom, your grandma, used, would have been, would have been a more of a more faded denim.

It exists in how my dad could identify her handiwork and how she shared her skills of care with my Mom.

Mom: I think we asked my mom [Grandma Suzie] because at that point I didn't really patch things. And then, actually, Grandma Jensen is the one that taught me how to patch and mend things. And darn socks, so it all came from Grandma Jensen.

While I didn't learn to sew from my grandma, I like to think that she passed on to me some of what she exemplified. I can clearly remember when I shared with her the first pair of pants I sewed. Her surprise, appreciation, love, and a bit of confusion as to why in the world I decided to do that. When I think about embodying the resilient spirit of my grandma while simultaneously mourning her loss Sweeney's (2023, p. 184) words on mending again become relevant. "Sometimes this coming to terms looks like repair. At other times it looks like learning to live with fragments that will never add up to a whole." That is what I must



fig. 8: A photo of my grandma that my grandpa keeps in his wallet

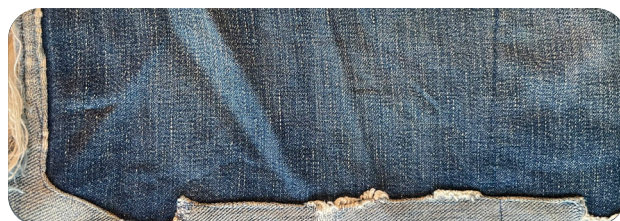


fig. 9: Great-grandma's denim?



fig. 10: Grandma's denim?



fig. 11: My first pair of pants, 2019

do and that is what these jeans help me with; to patch up my tattered emotions and learn to live with only memories. But Stallybrass (1993, p. 38) also says “When a person is absent or dies, cloth can absorb his or her absent presence.” I feel the presence of both my grandparents in these jeans. The warmth of their welcome and farewell hugs; a collective embrace that encapsulates all our pasts and presents and helps to keep me moving forward.



fig. 12: My dad, my grandpa, me on FaceTime, November 3rd, 2024

Even before my grandma died, as I listened to my grandpa speak, I realized this would be one of the last, if not the last time I would get to talk to him and my family in this way. It made me think of countless times sitting around the dinner table or living room to my grandparents, parents, aunts, and uncles talk while we, the grandkids, listened (sometimes) patiently. This time I had my phone set up to record the conversation and I also quickly started recording my screen as well. I have almost no doubt that this is the only video of my grandpa speaking like this, even if only half his head and coffee cup are visible. Maybe this 30-minute clip will become a way to hear and see the original owner when they are passed on to the next. A way to relive stories like this:

Grandpa: I remember, I guess, when I was in college on Sundays...when I came home from church, then I would take off all my dress clothes, because I was dressed up then, and then, but leave on the white shirt, so combination of a white dress shirt and a pair



fig. 13: Grandpa telling stories, August 2024

of jeans ... I remember doing that and...I guess it's probably one of the cool things, maybe...

As I watched and listened, I thought about how my parents once were in my place and a not-too-distant future where I am in theirs. Every precious moment and story adds to a growing timeline within our family patchwork. One day I will have to care for my parents too. For now, though, my responsibility for care takes on the form of these jeans.

Conclusion - In My Hands

Unlike the people before me, I don't have any specific memories attached to these jeans yet. Although I've moved with them from Iowa to New York and now to Glasgow, I have never felt like they are truly mine. It is almost like I am borrowing them from my dad and grandpa. Despite this significance, whenever I've worn them they feel like just another pair of jeans. Wearing them feels like the best way to embody their long-worn history and make me feel as if I am a part of it. Before I can continue to do that though, I need to move from wearing to mending. Like with my dad before me, they are borderline wearable and a few safety pins are helping to maintain this facade. Mending them is not a simple task and at first, I was nervous about how to fix them.



Josh: I've just been terrified to fix them because where do you even start and how do you even start?

fig. 14. Currently the only photo I have of me wearing the jeans

But the process of understanding these jeans has removed that pressure. I am no longer worried about doing it right because I know the act of mending is neither straightforward nor perfect. I have



fig. 15. Imagining the Jensen family jeans in the style of Lee

also realized that I want the stories uncovered about this fabric and my family to be incorporated physically into the fabric. Sweeney (2023, p. 177) says “Each mender must devise and enact their own processes.” Looking over transcripts of conversations and family photos, I wished for a new way to bring those stories to life. And so, I plan to screen print some of that text and imagery onto the denim that I will eventually use to repair them. Just like my dad can recognize my grandma and great-grandma’s fabric choices, I want something that will be recognizable as me: the first-generation wearer and mender.

In a way, I don’t think their physical form is necessary anymore. They are no longer just a pair of jeans but a collection of memories. They bear the imprint of multiple lifetimes. Even if they were never fixed or worn again that would be fine because you could say they have already been through enough. However, I want them to be worn. I want to wear them. Who wears them after me? I don’t know. For now, they are *my jeans*, and it is my turn to add to their story.

--

Indented text is quoted directly from two conversations.

1. October 11, 2024 – In-person. Glasgow, Scotland. Dad, Mom, Josh.
2. November 3, 2024 – FaceTime call. Glasgow, Scotland and Decorah, Iowa, USA. Grandpa, Dad, Mom, Josh, Anni (sister).

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Images

All images used are my own.



Cover: Digital collage, 2024



Inside cover: Photograph, 2024



Fig. 1: Photograph, date unknown



Fig. 2: Photograph, date unknown

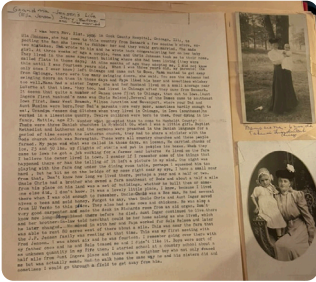


Fig. 3: Photograph, 2024



Fig. 4: Photograph, 1957



Fig. 5: Photograph, date unknown



Fig. 6: Photograph, 2014



Fig. 7: Photograph, 2024



Fig. 8: Photograph, 2024



Fig. 9: Photograph, 2024



Fig. 10: Photograph, 2024



Fig. 11: Photograph, 2019



Fig. 12: Computer screenshot, 2024



Fig. 13: Photograph, 2024



Fig. 14: Photograph, 2024



Fig. 15: Digital collage, 2024

Design Research Methods

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