

National Zipper Day

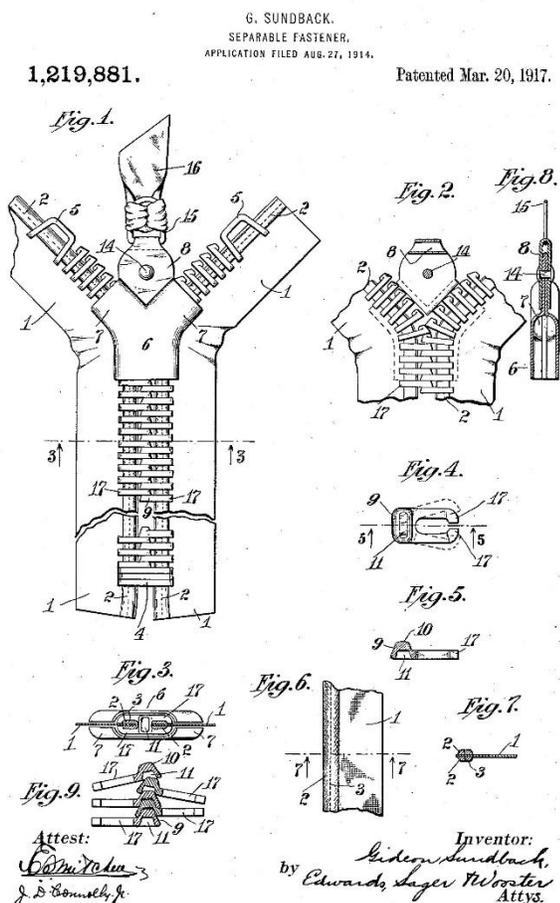
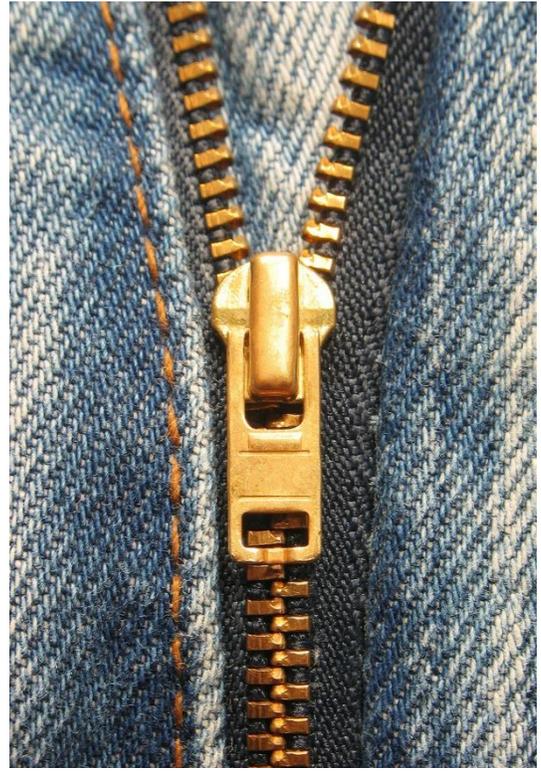
By Linda Butler

Today is National Zipper Day! Zippers are celebrated every year on April 29. Zippers are great for keeping our sweaters and jackets fastened, our pants firm around our waists, and our dresses from falling off our shoulders.

We can understand and appreciate zippers more when we know a little bit about how people throughout the years, have used fasteners to help keep their clothing on.

As you know, it's hard to keep a blanket draped around you while you're moving around. Earliest clothes were held on with ties. Clothes were made from natural elements—animal skins, fur, grass, leaves, bone, and shells. People made coverings from skins and wove fabrics from plant fibers. Early people used bones and wood to make needles to sew clothing together and buttons to fasten clothing together.

Around 5000 years ago people began to use buttons made from shells. These buttons fit into a loop to hold the garment closed. The ancient Romans used metal to make buttons as well as pins to close their garments. For centuries, buttons were used on clothing that needed to be closed and reopened.



Buttons were lumpy and likely quite uncomfortable if you leaned on them. Imagine the feeling of a line of lumpy metal buttons on the back or side of your dress or the front of your shirt or jacket. Buttons were also used on pants and skirts to fit them around the waist. By the late 1800s and early 1900s buttons were used to fasten nearly all clothing—even shoes!

In 1851 Elias Howe, Jr., the man who invented the sewing machine, received a patent for an "Automatic Continuous Clothing Closure." However, he never manufactured or marketed his invention. Forty years later, inventor Whitcomb Judson marketed a "Clasp Locker" similar to Howe's clothing closure at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, but it met with little success.

It was Gideon Sundback, a Swedish-born electrical engineer, who helped make the zipper we know and use today. As a worker at the Universal Fastener Company, he worked on improving Judson's Clasp Locker. In 1917 he received a patent for the "Separable Fastener."

Sundback also invented a machine to manufacture the new fastener. Sundback's machine could produce several hundred feet of the fastener each day. This

new fastener was used on money belts. The new fastener kept the pouch closed and secure. In 1918 the US Navy ordered the fasteners for 10,000 flying suits.

The name “Zipper” actually came from a rubber company! In 1923 the B. F. Goodrich Company decided to use Sundback’s fastener on a new type of rubber boots or galoshes. It would be a great improvement over having to fasten a dozen hooks or buttons per boot! They named the boot with the new closure the “Zipper” and the name took off from there.

By the Great Depression of the 1930s the Zipper Boots were no longer in fashion, but the name Zipper became the name for the hookless fastener. In the later 1930s a sales campaign began for children’s clothing featuring zippers. They advocated zippers as a way to help children dress themselves. It’s much easier—and faster—to zip a zipper than to button a half-dozen buttons!

By 1937 zippers beat out buttons on men’s trouser fly. Fashion designers promoted zippers because they’d exclude “The possibility of unintentional and embarrassing disarray.” Zippers aren’t perfect, though, because occasionally people need a reminder to “XYZ.”

The double opening jacket zippers were a boon to the jacket industry, making jackets and coats easy and quick to put on—and to prevent drafts that could blow between buttons.

Zippers are used for many things today! They are used on clothing--pants, dresses, jackets. But zippers are also found on suitcases, tents, backpacks, sleeping bags, and shopping bags. A plastic version of a zipper is found on plastic sandwich and food storage bags. Where else can you find zippers? Go on a zipper hunt! How many different kinds of zippers can you find in your home? How would your life be different without zippers?

Zip a large coat zipper up and down slowly and look carefully at how all the little “teeth” line up and how they lock and unlock when you pull the tab. A 31 second video shows how the inside of a zipper works to zip the two sides together <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OomSfvaJ2Z8>

The world’s longest zipper was presented in March 2017 by Talon International at Los Angeles Fashion week—it was 3.1 miles long!

Here’s another zipper secret! Look closely at the little pull tab of a zipper. Do you see some letters there? A vast majority of zippers manufactured today come from a zipper company known as YKK. YKK stands for Yoshida Kogyo Kabushikikaisha (Yoshida Company Limited), a Japanese company that makes about 90% of all zippers used in the world. The company has 206 zipper factories in 52 countries. The largest factory is in Macon, Georgia, and produces over 7 million zippers per day!

Some books about zippers: “Mrs. Toggle’s Zipper” by Robin Pulver, “I Wonder Why Zippers Have Teeth” by Barbara Taylor, “100 Greatest Science Inventions of All Time” by Kendall Haven, “How Things are Made: from Automobiles to Zippers” by Sharon Rose and Neil Schlager, “The Evolution of Useful Things” by Henry Petroski.