

This Article Fitted with Guaranteed...

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"1... 2.. 3... and she's dressed herself. The completely buttonless garments are easily fastened... even by a two-year-old...because of the tiny Talon Fastener" began one of the advertisements, directed at mothers for their children, by Hookless Fastener Company (p178).

Introduction

Zipper: An Exploration In Novelty by Robert Friedel begins his story of the zipper's evolution in September 1893 through to modern day America. All the while, Friedel touches on the technical and socioeconomic circumstances involving this new fangled invention, which was eventually to be known as the zipper.

The aspect that Friedel seems to want to clear up with his readers tends to be, more than just, as most historical books evaluate circumstances, (albeit an important aspect of the story), but. Why did this invention take off? Friedel says that in order to formulate an answer to that question we must first try and understand the incorporation of the novelty to necessity.

Friedel attempts to demonstrate the various managerial, and marketing strategies along with the whole hearted efforts of all parties involved. The tracing of how the new fastener was incorporated into the world of the twentieth century begins with its original concept designer Whitcomb Judson circa 1893 (p5). Friedel continuously states how clever Judson is and how his inventions clearly show his originality, and practicality. It becomes evident that he thinks highly of Judson and his ingenuity, although is quite frank about Judson's inventions and most of their usefulness. By equating Judson and Thomas Edison, Friedel implies that Judson may have been as good as or better than Edison in his inventions. However, the only difference between Edison and Judson was the fact that Judson had been old enough get drafted into the civil war (which may have hampered his creative possibilities during the war).

Friedel is also quick to note, however, that Judson was not unlike many others of his time. There many patents given from the time of the industrial revolution through the early part of the century. It was commonplace that some unknown bloke from the local mill would create a product that would make a common task much easier (or harder if it didn't work well.) Others would get the idea in his/her head and patent it but would never manufacture even a prototype. For example, in June of 1911, two individuals, Katharine Kuhn-Moos and Henri Forster (from Zurich, Switzerland), filed a patent, from most of the European patent offices, for a garment fastener which very much resembled the modern zippers (both in operation and in design). Despite the wide spread patenting efforts taken by Kuhn-Moos and Forster, their version of the zipper was never manufactured.

The Manufactories and Their Marketing Strategies

When Judson finally has his patents for the first slide fasteners (as they were called)

they looked and operated nothing like modern zippers. Harry Earle a good friend and colleague of Judson has visions of this practical product. However, the world was not ready for the slide fastener (nor was the slide fastener ready for the world). They created the Universal Fastener Company. This company was doomed from the beginning. The author tends to attribute its failure to finding technologically and economically successful applications.(p23) Based on the author's later findings I concluded something different.

Although this failure to seek and obtain uses for the fastener may be true to a certain extent at the time (later it would be the sole reason,) it seemed that the quality of these hook and eye fasteners were nil. The Universal Fastener Company under the direction of Harry Earle had no basic marketing strategy.

The company was dissolved and a new one formed. This new company, Fastener Manufacturing and Machine Company, was headed by Earle for a short period but handed over to a Lewis Walker when the going got tough. This new company, with more money, was able to get what they needed to start a basic marketing scheme. Judson's final design for a fastener was the C-curity. This fastener was no different than before, other than the fact that it could actually be mass produced, albeit using man-power versus machines (which would eventually prove a major difficulty). The marketing strategy used for the C-curity, although it worked at first but would produce tremendous problems later, was a basic super-saturation of this novelty to an unsuspecting homeowner. Yes, door-to-door salesmen. The basic problems with this model is that it rusted, and busted under wear and laundering conditions; it was difficult to close; and opening was far too easy (just rip apart). Needless to say, the company folded. Earle and Judson himself, left the crusade which they had fought so hard to enter.

Round three? Yes. However, at the helm was Colonel Lewis Walker. He would not give up so easily. With the hiring of an actual engineer, Gideon Sundback, they were able to produce a semi-competent fastener. This new company, Automatic Hook & Eye Company was to release this new semi-competent fastener. Actually there was nothing new about it; it still suffered from the same problems as the original. The marketing strategy, as unwise as it was before, was intensified and repeated. This new fastener (Plakto) and its troubles became renown. Friedel recounted many a story of salesmen's failures in the field upon introducing the Plakto. Some would, upon the salesman's utterance of the word automatic fastener, get chased with weapons from these small town stores! (p57)

Round 4! Last round?! Well, not really. Although from then on it was clear to Sundback that a reevaluation in the basic concepts of Judson's automatic fastener had to take place. Friedel, quite cleverly, was able to see that something was big was in the works from Sundback, as the company's research and development expenditures rose from US\$50 to US\$500 over a span of a few Summer months. And presto, like something out of a Frankenstein movie, Sundback came up with a version of the fastener which was clearly identical to the modern day zipper. Walker, quietly and without telling his investors, but when they inquired giving them, according to Friedel, the "You never got the letter I sent?" excuse, dissolved the company and formed the Hookless Fastener Company in Meadville, PA, his hometown.

Walker, learning from his previous marketing strategies, treated this Hookless fastener (Hookless #2), with care. He knew that if his fastener was to gain the widespread use of Americans that he had to go for the garment manufactories. He sent his sons out to New York City to the bustling garment industry. Walker would not let this one fall into the hands of his door-to-door salesman. He also held a very tight grip on who would sell this

product. This strategy proved successful. He targeted the government (as many of these new inventions were done) in such products as mailbag closures (p22). Eventually during WWI, his product became used in air pilots' vests to keep them warm. The zipper held up but the machinery in the coats themselves deteriorated and did not work very well. So the government seeing that the zipper was reliable, used it on the soldiers money belts. This was also another successful win for Hookless.

Walker was still unsatisfied; he knew that if his product was to stay around for a while, he had to find a long term use for it. Passing fads and the such, were not stable grounds. Hence, he still targeted the garment industry and held tight reins on whom he would give his zipper for production in other products. The zipper passed as a fad from boots, Goodrich's Zipper Boots, where the term zipper first was introduced into widespread use, to tobacco pouches, to children clothes. Walker still needed solid ground (in the meantime, however, he was making lots of money based on even its limited use in these products.

The world finally accepted the zipper when one of the most prominent fashion designers, (upon seeing the zipper) Elsa Schiaparelli, used it all over her clothes. Soon it began incorporating itself into every aspect of modern life. Very much like the cell phone (as discussed in class earlier) was a novelty several years ago, now it seems, a necessity to business people, this zipper has moved on from being a novelty.

Colonelism Vs. Taylorism

Walker's management techniques during the boom of Hookless, renamed to Talon at this point, was impeccable. Where the standard Tayloristic point of view would have made many differing levels of middle management and allow changes in production to be done from top to bottom, the Colonel went with a different approach with his workers. This may be due in part to his being used to working at eye level with the ones who worked for him at the beginning of the business. His constant conversations and close connections with what was going on within the business was key with what his next move was going to be. This last statement was especially true when he made the move from Universal Fastener to Hookless Fastener Co., and with the new marketing tacticts that this Hookless #2 would necessitate.

To increase communication throughout the company that these various new technicians (machinists and engineers) had developed while on the job, along with pep talks, news about the myriad of girls working for the Colonel in his Meadville factory he produced the Hookless Scoop. This was a newspaper especially designed to keep all up to date and in touch with the many aspects of the company. Christmas Bonuses were issued by Walker to his employees, Christmas bonuses which would have been frowned upon by the Tayloristic point of view that you should only give incentives to a job well done. There was no evidence given by Friedel that the Walker imposed rushed and timed working conditions to his employees. There were no competitions for increased work as was done in Soviet industrial management and incentive systems.

Hence the image was a sense of benevolent paternalism that Colonel Walker and his associates worked hard to make part of Hookless's public image.(p165) Since Meadville was a small town and the company employed such a large percentage of its population (over 3,000 in a town of 16,000) and the Colonel was seen as this paternal figure, the factory retained a sort of familial atmosphere, as Friedel put it, folksy style.

Social Implications of the Zipper!

Friedel, in one of the last chapters of the book, goes into the zipper's social values. One which predominately stood out was the technological view of the zipper from contemporary literary figures. In particular, the book, *Brave New World*, struck my interest (p210). At the time that the book was published the zipper was not an integral part of our life (as it is now). Hence when the Controller responded with "You might as well ask whether or not it is natural to do up one's trousers with zippers" in a rhetorical question whose answer at that time was:

"Now, it is natural for us to do up our pants with zippers."

It was at this point when I was struck with a kind of newfound awe in this little machine we all commonly use and call the zipper. Friedel then went into the sexual implications of the zipper. The word zip came from speed, or quickness, as in a bullet zipping by. This word does not (much to my surprise) come from the noise that a zipper makes as it is operation. In fact, the noise was associated with the word, not vice versa.

Hence, the sexual implications are obvious. The zipper is a quick and easy way to have sex. It takes away the complications involved with having to undo buttons or snaps. After all of the examples he gives for its sexual implications he finally says it best: "no 1932 reader could fail to get Huxley's message." (p211)

In several final notes Friedel goes through two more examples of the zipper's social implications: masculinity, and unity. Where masculinity stemmed to the leather jackets with lots of zippers and the motorcycle types because of the original pilots jackets, being made with zippers, had to withstand the elements extremes. And unity for the zipper's mysterious behavior in joining and disjoining two entirely separate parts into one.

What does it all mean? Are we doomed to being the Controlled?

Well, I highly doubt that we will be subject to being one of those soma sex raved feelies addicts of Huxley's book. But it is quite evident that something which we use everyday along with the object's image, as its importance increases, changes over time. Where the zipper was seen as new fangled technology in the 30's and nothing but a rusty strip in the 90's, it came a long way with a major push by the Colonel. Friedel is quick to acclaim the zipper's success to Colonel Walker and Gideon Sundback along with their persistence that this technology will be at the centre of everyone's life.

What held them back for a long time was that the zipper had uses beyond the image of its inventor. When Judson first took out his patent back in 1891, his only intention was for it to be used as a shoe fastener. Unfortunately, as was true with the zipper, the final uses of the invention are very different from what the inventor had in mind. Based on the information by Friedel, the zipper may have caught on much sooner had it been directed to various markets from the start. Now, however, the zipper is such an integral part of society that it has moved on from necessity to novelty. Actually, a Jean company was advertising button-fly jeans as brand new. These jeans were selling at novelty price. Personally I currently have in my wardrobe (due in whole to this historical recounting of the zipper's history by Robert Friedel) a singular pair of khakis with a button fly. The zipper in its various manifestations (spiral, standard, nylon, plastic, etc...) is here with us to stay!