

Zipper



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The story of the zipper is the triumph of an ingenious novelty over the practical world. It is almost impossible to imagine modern life without this device; yet, for the first thirty

years or so, from its patent in the late nineteenth century, it represented no real advantage over traditional fasteners like the hook-and-eye or the old-fashioned button. The zipper was mechanically awkward, liable to rust, liable to fail (i.e. snag or burst open), and so expensive that it doubled the retail price of a skirt or a pair of pants. But from the beginning the zipper had an allure, a mystery, a kind of sex appeal that would be echoed in songs, poems, and popular novels. Robert Friedel has written a fascinating history of this signature gadget of the twentieth century, and the cast of characters is wonderfully appropriate to a story so full of strange twists and paradoxes. Like many inventions, and not a few great works of literature, the zipper was the work of a man who thought he should have been doing something else. Only a couple of Whitcomb Judson's many patents pertained to the "Hookless Fastener"; the others had to do with a doomed undertaking known as the Pneumatic Streetcar. Friedel takes us into the machine shop where a brilliant Swedish engineer named Sundback wrestled with Judson's invention, and into the correspondence between Colonel Lewis Walker (booster and financial supporter of the zipper for forty years) and Wilson Wear, aptly named chief salesman for this interesting but impractical item. This is a story full of unexpected pleasures for the reader, and along the way we learn much about the roles that invention and novelty play in our lives. There are many reasons why the zipper should have failed: instead, it has become one of the most potently symbolic artifacts of our society.

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