Zipper History Has Ups and Downs

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How long does it take you to dress in the morning? Far less time than it took your grandmother, you can bet. And much of this twentieth century speed is the direct result of a nineteenth century invention.

Leap year, 1948, is the 55th anniversary of the device that eliminated the “leap” in plackets—the slide fastener.

Invented in 1893 by W. L. Judson of Chicago, production of the fastener never got past a small trickle until the early 1920’s. Known in the trade by the name slide fastener, the original patents on the device were held by the Talon Hookless Fastening Company. The B. F. Goodrich Company, who gave the industry its first boost in 1925 with a substantial order for slide fasteners to be used on galoshes, owns the trade mark “Zipper.”

Quick Closure

Demand for this fast fastener has increased in leaps and bounds as new uses are found for Judson’s brainchild. Fifteen million of them were sold in 1928; 440 million were snapped up by manufacturers in 1941. No longer merely a quick closure for galoshes, the slide fastener now functions efficiently on jackets, sweaters, slacks, skirts, coats, lingerie, handbags, gloves, girdles and—well, what do you think keeps a strapless formal up where it belongs?

Tina Leser, New York designer, last year featured a strapless evening slip, boned from waist to top, and stoutly “zippered” up one side. Bathing suits, wallets, briefcases, flyers’ suits, jodhpurs and tennis racket covers are often slide-fastened. Plastic refrigerator bags can be used to keep succulent vegetables crisp, and the efficient slide fastener keeps moisture within the bag. One famous hotel in New York City keeps its rugs “zip-shape” with strips of carpet held together by heavy slide fasteners. These were specially made to facilitate removal of the rugs when the floor was to be used for dancing.

Gaposis Research

Gaposis on a national scale threatened the country in 1941 as metals marched to war. Although 2 million dollars was spent on research, no satisfactory substitute could be found for the necessary nickel, zinc and copper used in slide fastener manufacture. Bakelite had been tried several years before World War II but failed to stand the wear and tear of everyday use. The new plastics did not appear to be much more satisfactory.

In a last-stand attempt to stay in operation, the industry turned to war production. Soldier’s and sailor’s uniforms, sleeping bags, tents, gun coverings and bail-out kits became neatly slide-fastened. The B. F. Goodrich Company developed a rubber-lipped
zipper to seal liquids and gases under pressure, and new uses sprang up. Dark room tents, sealed from light and moisture, were developed. Watertight, airtight doors for ships and airplanes became standard equipment. The Goodrich Zipper remains pliable and in good condition over a temperature range from minus 70 degrees F. to 150 degrees F., and operates perfectly in divers' suits, stratosphere planes or carrying cases in the Sahara Desert.

Slide fasteners are now available in nearly every color, either plain or covered so that no metal can be seen when the placket is closed. The size of the fastener has been reduced so that seams are smooth, narrow and flexible.

The "new look" may resemble grandmother's wardrobe, in appearance, but it doesn't in fasteners. Hooks and eyes and snaps are a rare sight these days. And it's a safe bet that more and more uses will be found for the slide fastener in the near future.

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