
New England Mill Girls

Source 1

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EARLY FACTORY GIRLS. By Harriet Robinson

Harriet Robinson worked in the Lowell Mills intermittently from 1835 to 1848. She was 10 when she started at the mills and 23 when she left them to marry. She married a newspaper editor. She published her memories in 1898.

At the time the Lowell cotton-mills were started, the factory girl was the lowest among women. In England, and in France particularly, great injustice had been done to her real character; It was to overcome this prejudice that such high wages had been offered to women that they might be induced to become mill-girls. . . . At first only a few came; But in a short time the prejudice against factory labor wore away, and the Lowell mills became filled with blooming and energetic New England women.

In 1831 Lowell was little more than a factory village. Several corporations were started, and the cotton-mills belonging to them were building. Help was in great demand; and stories were told all over the country of the new factory town, and the high wages that were offered to all classes of work-people,-stories that reached the ears of mechanics' and farmers' sons, and gave new life to lonely and dependent women in distant towns and farmhouses. . . . The widow came with her little flock and her scanty housekeeping goods to open a boarding-house or variety store, and so provided a home for her fatherless children. Many farmers' daughters came to earn money to complete their wedding outfit, or buy the bride's share of housekeeping articles.

But the early factory girls were not all country girls. There were others also, who had been taught that "work is no disgrace." There were some who came to Lowell solely on account of the social or literary advantages to be found there. They lived in secluded parts of New England, where books were scarce, and there was no cultivated society.

Except in rare instances, the rights of the early mill-girls were secure. They were subject to no extortion, if they did extra work they were always paid in full, and their own account of labor done by the piece was always accepted. They kept the figures, and were paid accordingly. This was notably the case with the weavers and drawing-in girls. Though the hours of labor were long, they were not overworked; they were obliged to tend no more looms and frames than they could easily take care of, and they had plenty of time to sit and rest. I have known a girl to sit idle twenty or thirty minutes at a time.

Their life in the factory was made pleasant to them. In those days there was no need of advocating the doctrine of the proper relation between employer and employed. *Help was too valuable to be ill-treated.* If these early agents, or overseers, had been disposed to exercise undue authority, or to establish unjust or

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Source 1 (continued)

arbitrary laws, the high character of the operatives, and the fact that women employees were scarce would have prevented it.

The life in the boarding-houses was very agreeable. These houses belonged to the corporation, and were usually kept by widows (mothers of mill-girls), who were often the friends and advisers of their boarders.

The boarding-houses were considered so attractive that strangers, by invitation, often came to look in upon them, and see for themselves how the mill-girls lived. Dickens, and his "American Notes," speaks with surprise of their home life. He says, "There is a piano in a great many of boardinghouses, and nearly all the young ladies subscribed to circulating libraries." . . . Books were exchanged, letters from home were read, and "pieces," intended for the Improvement Circle, were presented for friendly criticism.

This mutual acquaintanceship was of great advantage. They discussed the books they read, debated religious and social questions, compared their thoughts and experiences, and advised and helped one another. And so their mental growth went on, and they soon became educated far beyond what their mothers or their grandmothers could have been. The girls also stood by one another in the mills; when one wanted to be absent half a day, two or three others would tend an extra loom or frame apiece, so that the absent one might not lose her pay. At this time the mule and spinning-jenny had not been introduced: two or three looms, or spinning-frames, were as much as one girl was required to tend, more than that being considered "double work."

In order to show how far the influence of individual effort may extend, it will be well to mention the after-fate of some of them. One became an artist of note, another a poet of more than local fame, a third an inventor, and several were among the pioneers in Florida, in Kansas, and in other Western States. A limited number married those who were afterwards doctors of divinity, major-generals, and members of Congress; and these, in more than one instance, had been their work-mates in the factory.

And in later years, when, through the death of the bread-winner, the pecuniary support of those dependent on him; fell to their lot, some of these factory-girls carried on business, entered the trades, or went to college and thereby were enabled to practise in some of the professions. They thus resumed their old-time habit of supporting the helpless ones, and educating the children of the family.

Some of the mill-girls helped maintain widowed mothers, or drunken, incompetent, or invalid fathers. Many of them educated the younger children of the family, and young men were sent to college with the money furnished by the untiring industry of their women relatives.

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Source 1 (continued)

ONE of the first strikes of cotton-factory operatives that ever took place in this country was that in Lowell, in October, 1836. When it was announced that the wages were to be cut down, great indignation was felt, and it was decided to strike, *en masse*. This was done. The mills were shut down, and the girls went in procession from their several corporations to the "grove" on Chapel Hill, and listened to "incendiary" speeches from early labor reformers.

Cutting down the wages was not their only grievance, nor the only cause of this strike. Hitherto the corporations had paid twenty-five cents a week towards the board of each operative, and now it was their purpose to have the girls pay the sum; and this, in addition to the cut in wages, would make a difference of at least one dollar a week. It was estimated that as many as twelve or fifteen hundred girls turned out, and walked in procession through the streets. They had neither flags nor music, but sang songs

My own recollection of this first strike (or "turn out" as it was called) is very vivid. I worked in a lower room, where I had heard the proposed strike fully, if not vehemently, discussed; I had been an ardent listener to what was said against this attempt at "oppression" on the part of the corporation, and naturally I took sides with the strikers. . . . and I marched out, and was followed by the others. [I was then eleven years and eight months old.]

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Source 2

Who Was Lucy Larcom?

Lucy Larcom wrote *A New England Girlhood Outlined from Memory* in 1889. By this time she was in her sixties and felt positively about her life as a mill girl. Her father died when she was ten, leaving her mother to support eight children below the age of eighteen.

To provide for her family, Mrs. Larcom sold the house and small piece of land inherited from her husband and moved to Lowell, Massachusetts to operate a “corporation-house,” a corporate-owned boarding house, for mill-girls hired from the countryside and brought to Lowell to work. Mrs. Larcom was paid by the corporation for each boarder. Originally, Lucy helped with sewing, cooking and other chores around the boarding house, but soon more money was needed, so she went to work in the mills. Lucy had a talent for writing and was a contributor to the literary magazine, *Lowell Offering*, created by the mill girls and supported by the corporation.

Lucy worked in the mills for over a decade before moving to St. Louis with her sister and brother-in-law. Although she had little formal education, she had learned from her mother, sisters, and by her own initiative. She began teaching in Illinois, wrote poetry, and saved enough of her salary to attend Monticello Female Seminary in Godfrey, Illinois. After graduating, she returned to Massachusetts to teach. Befriended by the poet John Greenleaf Whittier, her poetry was published in all the leading magazines of the day. She was an abolitionist, but did not support the growing women’s rights movement. She remained a single woman, thus preserving control of her wages and property. She died in Boston in 1893.

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Source 3

Observations of Lowell Mill Girls - 1845 - 1846

Are the Operatives Well Off?

Mr. Editor:

We are told by gentlemen both in this country and abroad that the Lowell factory operatives are exceedingly well off. Good wages, sure pay, not very hard work, comfortable food and lodgings, and such unparalleled opportunities for intellectual cultivation, (why, they even publish a Magazine there!!) what more can one desire? Really gentlemen! Would you not reckon your wives and sisters fortunate if they could by any possibility be elevated into the situation of operatives? When in the tender transports of first love, you paint for the fairest and fondest of mortal maidens a whole life of uninterrupted joy, do you hope for her as the supremest felicity, the lot of a factory girl? The operatives are well enough off! – Indeed! Do you receive them in your parlors, are they admitted to visit your families, do you raise your hats to them in the street, in a word, are they your equals?

– Olivia, Lowell, Sept. 16, 1845

Source: *Voice of Industry* online at <http://www.industrialrevolution.org/industrial-revolution--featured-content.html>

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Source 4

Observations of Lowell Mill Girls - 1845 - 1846

The Voice of the Sufferers

It is a subject of comment and general complaint, among the operatives, that while they tend three or four looms, where they used to tend but two, making nearly twice the number of yards of cloth, the pay is not increased to them, while the increase, to the owners is very great. Is this just? Twenty-five cents per week for each week, additional pay, would not increase the cost of the cloth, one mill a yard; no, not the half of a mill.

Now while I am penning this paragraph, a young lady enters my room with "Oh dear! Jane, I am sick and what shall I do? I have worked for three years, and never gave out, before. I stuck to my work, until I fainted at my loom. The Doctor says I must quit work and run about and amuse myself; but I have nowhere to go, and do not know what to do with myself." I have given the language, as it struck my ear; the conversation going on behind me. It is but the feelings of a thousand homeless, suffering females, this moment chanting "the Voice of Industry in this wilderness of sin."

- One of the Vast Army of Sufferers, *Voice of Industry*, March 13, 1846

Source: *Voice of Industry* online at <http://www.industrialrevolution.org/industrial-revolution--featured-content.html>

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Source 5

Observations of Lowell Mill Girls - 1845 - 1846

The "Beauties of Factory Life"

Mr. Editor:

Those who write so effusively about the "Beauties of Factory Life," tell us that we are indeed happy creatures, and how truly grateful and humbly submissive we should be. Can it be that any of us are so stupefied as not to realize the exalted station and truly delightful influences which we enjoy? Pianos, teachers of music, evening schools, lectures, libraries and all these sorts of advantages are, says he, enjoyed by the operatives. (Query—when do they find time for all or any of these? When exhausted nature demands repose?) Very pretty picture that to write about; but we who work in the factory know the sober reality to be quite another thing altogether.

After all, it is easier to write a book than it is to do right. It is easier to smooth over the plaster up a deep festering rotten system, which is sapping the life-blood of our nation, widening and deepening the yawning gulf which will ere long swallow up the laboring classes in dependent servitude and serfdom, like that of Europe, than it is to probe to the very bottom of this death-spreading monster.

- Juliana, *Voice of Industry*, June 12, 1846

Source: *Voice of Industry* online at <http://www.industrialrevolution.org/industrial-revolution--featured-content.html>