

Note: 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. Presumably, she wrote this account in the 1890s, for it was published in her *Loom and Spindle; or, Life among the Early Mill Girls* in 1898.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EARLY FACTORY GIRLS.

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; she was represented as subjected to influences that could not fail to destroy her purity and self-respect. In the eyes of her overseer she was but a brute, a slave, to be beaten, pinched, and pushed about.

It was to overcome this prejudice that such high wages had been offered to women that they might be induced to become mill-girls, in spite of the opprobrium that still clung to this "degrading occupation" At first only a few came; for, though tempted by the high wages to be regularly paid in "cash," there were many who still preferred to go on working at some more genteel employment at seventy-five cents a week and their board.

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.

. . . Troops of young girls came by stages and baggage-wagons, men often being employed to go to other States and to Canada, to collect them at so much a head, and deliver them at the factories.

. . . A very curious sight these country girls presented to young eyes accustomed to a more modern style of things. When the large covered baggage-wagon arrived in front

of a block on the corporation, they would descend from it, dressed in various and outlandish fashions, and with their arms brimful of bandboxes containing all their worldly goods. On each of these was sewed a card, on which one could read the old-fashioned New England name of the owner. And sorrowful enough they looked, even to the fun-loving child who has lived to tell the story; for they had all left their pleasant country homes to try their fortunes in a great manufacturing town, and they were homesick even before they landed at the doors of their boarding-houses. . . .

These country girls had queer names, which added to the singularity of their appearance. Samantha, Triphena Plumy, Kezia, Aseneth, Elgardy, Leafy, Ruhamah Lovey Almaretta, Sarepta, and Florilla were among them. . . .

Their dialect was also very peculiar. On the broken English and Scotch of their ancestors was ingrafted the nasal Yankee twang; so that many of them, when they had just come *daown*, spoke a language almost unintelligible. But the severe discipline and ridicule which met them was as good as a school education, and they were soon taught the "city way of speaking."

Their dress was also peculiar, and was of the plainest of homespun, cut in such an old-fashioned style that each young girl looked as if she had borrowed her grandmother's gown. Their only head-covering was a shawl, which was pinned under the chin; but after the first payday, a "shaker" (or "scooter") sunbonnet usually replaced this primitive head-gear of their rural life.

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. They had comfortable homes, and did not perhaps need the money they would earn; but they longed to see this new "City of Spindles," of which they had heard so much from their neighbors and friends, who had gone there to work. . . .

And the fame of the circulating libraries, that were soon opened, drew them and kept them there, when no other inducement would have been sufficient. . . .

The laws relating to women were such, that a husband could claim his wife wherever he found her, and also the children she was trying to shield from his influence; and I have seen more than one poor woman skulk behind her loom or her frame when visitors were approaching the end of the aisle where she worked. Some of these were known under assumed names, to prevent their husbands from trusteeing their wages. It was a very common thing for a male person of a certain kind to do this, thus depriving

his wife of *all* her wages, perhaps, month after month. The wages of minor children could be trusted, unless the children (being fourteen years of age) were given their time. Women's wages were also trusted for the debts of their husbands, and children's for the debts of their parents.

It must be remembered that at this date woman had no property rights. A widow could be left without her share of her husband's (or the family) property, a legal "incumbrance" to his estate. A father could make his will without reference to his daughter's share of the inheritance. He usually left her a home on the farm as long as she remained single. A woman was not supposed to be capable of spending her own or of using other people's money. In Massachusetts, before 1840, a woman could not legally be treasurer of her own sewing-society, unless some man were responsible for her,

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. They were not driven, and their work-a-day life was made easy. They were treated with consideration by their employers, and there was a feeling of respectful equality between them.

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

The agents and overseers were usually married men, with families of growing sons and daughters. They were members, and sometimes deacons, of the church, and teachers in the same Sunday-school with the girls employed under them. They were generally of good morals and temperate habits, and often exercised a good influence over their help. The feeling that the agents and overseers were interested in their welfare caused the girls, in turn, to feel an interest in the work for which their employers were responsible. The conscientious among them took as much pride in spinning a smooth thread, drawing in a perfect web, or in making good cloth, as they would have done if the material had been for their own wearing. And thus was

practised, long before it was preached, that principle of true political economy,-the just relation, the mutual interest, that ought to exist between employers and employed.

Those of the mill-girls who had homes generally worked from eight to ten months in the year; the rest of the time was spent with parents or friends, A few taught school during the summer months.

When we left the mill, or changed our place of work from one corporation to another, we were given an "honorable discharge." Mine, of which I am still quite proud, is dated the year of my marriage, and is as follows:--

"HARRIET J. HANSON has been employed in the Boott Cotton Mills, in a dressing-room, twenty-five months, and is honorably discharged."

(Signed) J. F. TROTT. LOWELL, *July 25, 1848.*"

The chief characteristics of the early mill-girls may be briefly mentioned, as showing the material of which this new community of working-women was composed. A few of the girls were interested in phrenology; and we had our heads examined by Professor Fowler, who, if not the first, was the chief exponent of this theory in Lowell. He went about into all the schools, examining children's heads. Mine, he said, "lacked veneration;" and this I supposed was an awful thing, because my teacher looked so reproachfully at me when the professor said it.

A few were interested in Mesmerism; and those of us who had the power to make ourselves *en rapport* with others tried experiments on "subjects," and sometimes held meetings in the evening for that purpose. ∴

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.

Each house was a village or community of itself. There fifty or sixty young women from different parts of New England met and lived together. When not at their work, by natural selection they sat in groups in their chambers, or in a corner of the large dining-room, busy at some agreeable employment; or they wrote letters, read, studied, or sewed, for, as a rule, they were their own seamstresses and dressmakers.

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." There was a feeling of *esprit de corps* among these households; any advantage secured to one of the number was usually shared by others belonging to her set or group. Books were exchanged, letters from home were read, and "pieces," intended for the Improvement Circle, were presented for friendly criticism.

There was always a best room in the boarding-house, to entertain callers in; but if any of the girls had a regular gentleman caller, a special evening was set apart each week to receive him. This room was furnished with a carpet, sometimes with a piano, as Dickens says, and with the best furniture, including oftentimes the relics of household treasures left of the old-time gentility of the housemother.

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."

The inmates of what may be called these literary house. holds were omnivorous readers of books, and were also subscribers to the few magazines and literary newspapers; and it was their habit, after reading their copies, to send them by mail or stage-coach to their widely scattered homes, where they were read all over a village or a neighborhood; and thus was current literature introduced into by and lonely places.

From an article in *The Lowell Offering*, ("Our Household," signed H.T.) I am able to quote a sketch of one factory boarding-house interior. The author said, "In our house there are eleven boarders, and in all thirteen members of the family. I will class them according to their religious tenets as follows: Calvinist Baptist, Unitarian, Congregational, Catholic, Episcopalian, and Mormonite, one each; Universalist and

Methodist, two each; Christian Baptist, three. Their reading is from the following sources: They receive regularly fifteen newspapers and periodicals; these are, the *Boston Daily Times*, the *Herald of Freedom*, the *Signs of the Times*, and the *Christian Herald*, two copies each; the *Christian Register*, *Vox Populi*, *Literary Souvenir*, *Boston Pilot*, *Young Catholic's Friend*, *Star of Bethelhem*, and *The Lowell Offering*, three copies each. A magazine, one copy. We also borrow regularly the *Non-Resistant*, the *Liberator*, the *Lady's Book*, the *Ladies' Pearl*, and the *Ladies' Companion*. We have also in the house what perhaps cannot be found anywhere else in the city of Lowell,-a Mormon Bible."

Novels were not very popular with us, as we inclined more to historical writings and to poetry. But such books as "Charlotte Temple," "Eliza Wharton," "Maria Monk," "The Arabian Nights," "The Mysteries of Udolpho," "Abellino, the Bravo of Venice," or "The Castle of Otranto," were sometimes taken from the circulating library, read with delight, and secretly lent from one young girl to another.

Our religious reading was confined to the Bible, Baxter's "Saints' Rest," "The Pilgrim's Progress," "The Religious Courtship," "The Widow Directed," and Sunday-school books.

It was fortunate for us that we were obliged to read good books, such as histories, the English classics, and the very few American novels that were then in existence.

There were many representative women among us who did not voice their thoughts in writing, and whose names are not on the list of the contributors to *The Offering*. This was but one phase of their development, as many of them : have exerted a widespread influence in other directions. They graduated from the cotton-factory, carrying with them the results of their manual training; and they have done their little part towards performing the useful labor of life. Into whatever vocation they entered they made practical use of the habits of industry and perseverance learned during those early years, and they have exemplified them in their stirring and fruitful lives.

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.

These women were all self-made in the truest sense; and it is well to mention their success in life, that others, who now earn their living at what is called "ungenteel" employments, may see that what one does is not of so much importance as what one is. I do not know why it should not be just as commendable for a woman who has risen to have been once a factory-girl, as it is for an ex-governor or a major-general to have been a "bobbin-boy." A woman , ought to be as proud of being self-made as a man; not proud in a boasting way, but proud enough to assert the fact in her life and in her works. . . .

Of their literary and studious habits, Professor A. P. Peabody, of Harvard University, gives his opinion in an article written not long ago in the *Atlantic Monthly*. He says, During the palmy days of *The Lowell Offering* I used every winter to lecture for the Lowell Lyceum. Not amusement, but instruction, was then the lecturer's aim. . . . The Lowell Hall was always crowded, and four-fifths of the audience were factory-girls. When the lecturer entered almost every girl had a book in her hand, and was intent upon it. When he rose, the book was laid aside, and paper and pencil taken instead; and there were very few who did not carry home full notes of what they had heard. I have never seen anywhere so assiduous note-taking. No not even in a college class, . . . as in that assembly of young women, laboring for their subsistence."

It may be added here, that the majority of the mill-girls made just as good use of their money, so newly earned, and of whose value they had hitherto known so little. They were necessarily industrious. They were also frugal and saving. It was their custom on the first day of every month, after paying their board-bill (\$1.25 a week), to put their wages in the savings-bank. There the money stayed, on interest, until they withdrew it, to carry home or to use for a special purpose. It is easy to see how much good this sum would do in a rural community where money, as a means of exchange, had been scarce. Into the barren homes many of them had left it went like a quiet stream, carrying with it beauty and refreshment. The mortgage was lifted from the homestead; the farmhouse was painted; the barn rebuilt; modern improvements (including Mrs. Child's "Frugal Housewife"-the first American cook-book) were introduced into the

mother's kitchen, and books and newspapers began to ornament the sitting-room table.

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.

Indeed, the most prevailing incentive to our labor was to secure the means of education for some *male* member of the family. To make a *gentleman* of a brother or a son, to give him a college education, was the dominant thought in the minds of a great many of these provident mill-girls. I have known more than one to give every cent of her wages, month after month, to her brother, that he might get the education necessary to enter some profession. I have known a mother to work years in this way for her boy. I have known women to educate by their earnings young men who were not sons or relatives. There are men now living who were helped to an education by the wages of the early mill-girls.

The early mill-girls were religious by nature and by Puritan inheritance, true daughters of those men and women who, as some one has said, "were as devoted to education as they were to religion;" for they planted the church and the schoolhouse side by side. On entering the mill, each one was obliged to sign a "regulation paper" which required her to attend regularly some place of public worship. They were of many denominations. In one boarding-house that I knew, there were girls belonging to eight different religious sects.

The morals of these girls were uniformly good. The regulation paper, before spoken of, required each one to be of good moral character; and if any one proved to be disreputable, she was very soon turned out of the mill. Their standard of behavior was high, and the majority kept aloof from those who were suspected of wrong-doing. They had, perhaps, less temptation than the working-girls of to-day, since they were not required to dress beyond their means, and comfortable homes were provided by their employers, where they could board cheaply. Their surroundings were pure, and the whole atmosphere of their boarding-houses was as refined as that of their own homes. They expected men to treat them with courtesy: they looked forward to becoming the wives of good men. Their attitude was that of the German *Fraulein*, who said, "Treat every maiden with respect, for you do not know whose *wife* she will be."

But there were exceptions to the general rule,-just enough to prove the doctrine of averages: there were girls who came to the mill to work whom no one knew anything about, but they did not stay long, the life there being "too clean for them."

The health of the girls was good. The regularity and simplicity of their lives, and the plain and substantial food provided for them, kept them free from illness. From their Puritan ancestry they had inherited sound bodies and a fair share of endurance. Fevers and similar diseases were rare among them; they had no time to pet small ailments; the boarding-house mother was often both nurse and doctor, and so the physician's fee was saved

By reading the weekly newspapers the girls became interested in public events; they knew all about the Mexican war, and the anti-slavery cause had its adherents among them. Lectures on the doctrine of Fourier were read, or listened to, but none of them were "carried away" with the idea of spending their lives in large "phalanstries," as they seemed too much like cotton-factories to be models for their own future housekeeping.

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.

One of the girls stood on a pump, and gave vent to the Feelings other companions in a neat speech, declaring that. it was their duty to resist all attempts at cutting down the wages. This was the first time a woman had spoken in public in Lowell, and the event caused surprise and consternation among her audience.

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, a favorite (but rather inappropriate) one being a parody on "I won't be a nun."

"Oh! isn't it a pity, such a pretty girl as I--
Should be sent to the factory to pine away and die?
Oh! I cannot be a slave,
I will not be a slave,
For I'm so fond of liberty
That I cannot be a slave."

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. When the day came on which the girls were to turn out, those in the upper rooms started first, and so many of them left that our mill was at once shut down. Then, when the girls in my room stood irresolute, uncertain what to do, asking each other, "Would you?" or "Shall we turn out?" and not one of them having the courage to lead off,

I, who began to think they would not go out, after all their talk, became impatient, and started on ahead, saying, with childish bravado, "I don't care what you do, *I* am going to turn out, whether any one else does or not;" and I marched out, and was followed by the others.*

As I looked back at the long line that followed me, I was more proud than I have ever been since at any success I may have achieved, and more proud than I shall ever be again until my own beloved State gives to its women citizens the right of suffrage.

The agent of the corporation where I then worked took some small revenges on the supposed ringleaders; on the principle of sending the weaker to the wall, my mother was turned away from her boarding-house, that functionary saying, "Mrs. Hanson, you could not prevent the older girls from turning out, but your daughter is a child, and *her* you could control."

It is hardly necessary to say that so far as results were concerned this strike did no good. The dissatisfaction of the operatives subsided, or burned itself out, and though the authorities did not accede to their demands, the majority returned to their work, and the corporation went on cutting down the wages.

And after a time, as the wages became more and more reduced, the best portion of the girls left and went to their homes, or to the other employments that were fast opening to women, until there were very few of the old guard left; and thus the *status* of the factory population of New England gradually became what we know it to be to-day.

*I was then eleven years and eight months old. H.H.R.