

REPRINT EDITION

EARLY FACTORY LABOR
IN
NEW ENGLAND

[FROM THE FOURTEENTH ANNUAL REPORT OF THE
MASSACHUSETTS BUREAU OF STATISTICS
OF LABOR, FOR 1883.]

PREPARED UNDER THE DIRECTION OF
CARROLL D. WRIGHT,
CHIEF OF THE BUREAU OF STATISTICS OF LABOR,
BY
BY HARRIET H. ROBINSON

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EARLY FACTORY LABOR IN NEW ENGLAND.

The life of a people or of a class is best illustrated by its domestic scenes, or by character sketches of the men and women who form a part of it. The historian is a species of mental photographer ; he can present only views of the life and times he attempts to portray. He can no more give the whole history of events than the artist or photographer can in detail bring a whole city into his picture. And so, in this brief record of a life that is past, I can give you but a few views of that long-ago faded landscape, – taken on the spot.

When I look back into the factory life of forty or forty-five years ago, I do not see what is called “ a class” of young men and women going to and from their daily work, like so many ants that cannot be distinguished one from another, – I see them as individuals, with personalities of their own. This one has about her the atmosphere of her early home. That one is impelled by a strong and noble purpose. The other, – what she is, has been an influence for good to me and all womankind.

Yet they were a class of factory operatives, and were spoken of (as the same class is spoken of now) as a set of persons who earned their daily bread, whose condition was fixed, and who must continue to spin and weave to the end of their natural existence. Nothing but this was expected of them, and they were not supposed to be capable of social or mental improvement. That they could be educated and developed into something more than mere work-people, was an idea that had not yet entered the public mind. So little does one class of persons really know about the

thoughts and aspirations of another. It was the good fortune of these early-mill girls to teach the people that this sort of labor is not degrading ; that the operative is not only “capable of virtue,” but also capable of self-cultivation.

In what follows, I shall confine myself to a description of factory life in Lowell, Massachusetts, from 1832 to 1848, since, with that phase of Early Factory Labor in New England, I am the most familiar, – because I was part of it.

In 1832, Lowell was little more than a factory village. Five “corporations” were started, and the cotton mills belonging to them were building. Help was in great demand and stories were told all over the county of the new factory place, 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 farm-houses. Into this Yankee El Dorado these needy people began to pour by the various modes of travel known to those slow old days. The stage-coach and the canal-boat came every day, always filled with new recruits for the army of useful people. The mechanic and the machinist came, each with his home-made chest of tools and his wife and little ones. 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. Troops of young girls came from different parts of New England, and from Canada, and men were employed to collect them at so much a head, and deliver them at the factories.

Some of these were daughters of sea captains (like Lucy Larcom), of professional men or teachers, whose mothers, left widows, were struggling to maintain the younger children. A few were the daughters of persons in reduced circumstances, who had left home “on a visit” to send their wages surreptitiously in aid of the family purse. And some (like the writer) were the granddaughters of patriots who had fought at Bunker Hill, and had lost the family means in the war for independence. There were others who seemed to have mysterious antecedents, and to be hiding from something ; and strange and distinguished looking men

and women sometimes came to call upon them. Many farmers' daughters came to earn money to complete their wedding outfit, or buy the bride's share of housekeeping articles.

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 (some of the dresses, perhaps, having served *best* during two generations) and with their arms brimful of handboxes containing all their worldly goods. These country girls as they were called, 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. They soon learned the ways of the new place to which they had come, and after paying for their transportation they used their earnings to re-dress themselves, and in a little while they were as stylish as the rest. Many of them were of good New England blood, and blood tells even in factory people. They had always been taught that "work is no disgrace."

At the time the Lowell cotton mills were started the caste of the factory girl was the lowest among the employments of women. In England and in France, particularly, great injustice had been done to her real character. She was represented as subjected to influences that must 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 ; others followed, and in a short time the prejudice against factory labor wore away, and the Lowell mills became filled with blooming and energetic New England women. They were naturally intelligent, had mother wit, and they fell easily into the ways of their new life. They soon began to associate with those who formed the community in which they had come to live, and were invited to their houses.

They went to the same church, and sometimes, perhaps, married into some of the best families. Or, if they returned to their secluded homes again, instead of being looked down upon as “ factory girls,” by the squire or the lawyers’ family, they were more often welcomed as coming from the metropolis, bringing new fashions, new books and new ideas with them.

The early mill-girls were of different ages. Some (like the writer) were not over ten years of age ; a few were in middle life, but the majority were between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five. The very young girls were called “ doffers.” They “ doffed,” or took off, the full bobbins from the spinning-frames, and replaced them with empty ones. These mites worked about fifteen minutes every hour and the rest of the time was their own. When the overseer was kind they were allowed to read, knit, or go outside the mill-yard to play. They were paid two dollars a week. The working hours of all the girls extended from five o’clock in the morning until seven in the evening, with one half-hour each, for breakfast and dinner. Even the doffers were forced to be on duty nearly fourteen hours a day. This was the greatest hardship in the lives of these children. Several years later a ten-hour law was passed, but not until long after some of these little doffers were old enough to appear before the legislative committee on the subject and plead, by their presence, for a reduction of the hours of labor. *

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. 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 illtreated.* If these early agents, or overseers, had been disposed to exercise undue authority, or establish unjust or arbitrary laws, the moral strength of the operatives, and

*In 1847, or about that date, on invitation of William Schouler, a member of the legislature from Lowell, several mill girls went before the Legislative Committee on the Hours of Labor, then sitting at the State House, to represent the interests of the Lowell operatives on this question.

the fact that so many of them were women, would have prevented it. A certain agent of one of the first corporations in Lowell (an old sea captain), said to one of his boarding-house keepers : “ I should like to rule my help as I used to rule my sailors, but so many of them are women I do not dare do it.”

The knowledge of the antecedents of these operatives was the safeguard of their liberties. The majority of them were as well, if not better born, than their “ overlookers,” and they were also far better educated.

Except in rare instances, the rights of the mill-girls were secure. They were subject to no extortion, and if they did extra work they were always paid in full. Their own account of labor done by the piece was always accepted. They kept the figures, and they were paid accordingly. * Though their hours of labor were long, yet 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 twenty and thirty minutes at a time. They were not driven. They took their work-a-day life easy. They were treated with consideration by their employers, and there was a feeling of respectful equality between them. The most favored of the girls were sometimes invited to the houses of the dignitaries of the mills, and thus the line of social division was not rigidly maintained.

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 men of moral and temperate habits, and exercised a good influence over the help. The feeling that the agents and the overseers took an interest 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 practiced, long before it

*This was notably the case with the weavers and drawing-in girls.

was preached, that principle of true political economy, – the just relation, the mutual interest that ought to exist between employers and employed.

At first the mill-girls had but small chances to acquire book learning. But evening schools were soon established, and they were well filled with those who desired to continue their scant education, or supplement what they had learned in the village school or academy. Here might often be seen a little girl of ten puzzling over her sums in Colburn's Arithmetic, and at her side another "girl" of fifty poring over her lesson in Pierpont's National Reader. In 1836 or thereabouts, a law was made by several corporations which compelled every child under fourteen years of age, to go to school three months in the year. And then the little doffers (and I was one of them) had another chance to nibble at the root of knowledge.

Some of these evening schools were devoted entirely to one particular study. There was a geography school in which the lessons were repeated in unison in a monotonous, sing-song tone. There was also a school where those who fancied they had thoughts were taught by Newman's Rhetoric to express them in writing. In this school the relative position of the subject and the predicate in a sentence was not always well taught by the master ; but never to mix a metaphor or to confuse a simile was a lesson he firmly fixed in the minds of his pupils.

Life in the boarding-houses was very agreeable. These houses belonged to the corporation, and were usually kept by widows (mothers of some of the 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. They wrote letters, read, studied, or sewed, for, as a rule, they were their own seamstresses and dressmakers.

These 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, in his *American Notes*, speaks with surprise of their home-life. He says, "There is a piano in a great many of the boarding-houses, and nearly all the young ladies subscribe to circulating libraries." There was a certain class feeling 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 for home were read, and "pieces," intended for the Improvement Circle, were presented for friendly criticism. They stood by each other in the mills. When one wanted to be absent half a day, two or three others would tend to 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, and two or three looms, or spinning-frames, were as much as one girl was required to tend. More than that was considered "double-work."

The society of one another was of great advantage to these girls. 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. It may be well to mention here that there were a few of the mill-girls, 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 intelligent society. They had comfortable homes, and did not perhaps, need the *money* they would earn, but they longed to see

"This wonderful city of spindles and looms,
And thousands of factory folks."

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. I knew one who spent her winters in Lowell for this very purpose. She was addicted to novel-reading and read two to four volumes a week. While she was at her work in the mill, the children of the family where she boarded were allowed to

read the books. It was as good as fortune to them. For six and a quarter cents a week the novels of Richardson, Madame D'Arblay, Fielding, Smollett, Cooper, Scott, and Captain Marryatt could be devoured by four hungry readers.

The early mill-girls were omnivorous readers of the few magazines and newspapers. From an article on this phase of the subject in the *Offering* – “Our Household,” 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 Bethlehem* and the *Lowell Offering*, three copies each. A magazine [perhaps the *Dial*] one copy. We also borrow regularly the *Non-Resistant*, the *Liberator*, the *Ladies' 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.”

It is well to consider, for a moment, some of the characteristics of the early mill-girls. We have seen that they are necessarily industrious. They were also frugal and saving. It was their custom the first 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. In 1843 over one-half of the depositors in the Lowell Institution for Savings were mill-girls, and over one-third of the whole sum deposited belonged to them, – in round numbers, \$101,992. It is easy to see how much good such a sum as this 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*) were introduced into the mother's kitchen, and books and newspapers began to ornament the sitting-room table.

Young men and women who had spent their two or three years of probation in the Lowell Mills, often returned to the old place, bought land, built their modest houses, and became new and prosperous heads of families. 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.

The most prevailing incentive to 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 the better class of 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 young men by their earnings, who were not sons and relatives. There are many men now living who were helped to an education by the wages of the early mill-girls. *

It is well to digress here a little, and speak of the influence the possession of money had on the characters of some of these women. We can hardly realize what a change the cotton factory made in the status of the working women. Hitherto woman had always been a money *saving* rather than a money earning, member of the community. Her labor could command but small return. If she worked out

*Mr. T. W. Higginson has given evidence to this fact in one of his articles, in which he said : " I think it was the late President Walker who told me that in his judgment one quarter of the men in Harvard College were being carried through by the special self-denial and sacrifices of women. I cannot answer for the ratio, but I can testify to having been an instance of this myself ; and to having known a never-ending series of such cases of self-devotion."

as servant, or “ help,” her wages were from 50 cents to \$1.00 a week ; or, if she went from house to house by the day to spin and weave, or do tailoress work, she could get but 75 cents a week and her meals. As teacher her services were not in demand, and the arts, the professions, and even the trades and industries, were nearly all closed to her.

As late as 1840 there were only seven vocations outside the home into which the women of New England had entered. * at this time women had no property rights. A widow could be left without her share of her husband’s (or the family) property, an “ 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.

The law took no cognizance of woman as a money-spender. She was a ward, an appendage, a relict. Thus it happened, that if a woman did not choose to marry, or, when left a widow, to re-marry, she had no choice but to enter one of the few employments open to her or become a burden on the charity of some relative.

In almost every New England home could be found one or more of these women sitting “ solitary” in the family ; sometimes welcome, more often unwelcome ; leading joyless, and in many instances, unsatisfactory lives. The cotton factory was a great opening to these lonely and dependent women. From a condition of almost pauperism they were placed at once above want. They could earn money and spend it as they pleased. They could gratify their tastes and desires without restraint and without rendering an account to anybody.

At last they had found a place in the universe, and were no longer obliged to finish out their faded lives a burden to their male relatives. Even the *time* of these women was their own, on Sundays, and in the evening, after the day’s

*According to the Census of 1880 the women of Massachusetts are now employed in 284 branches of industry, including the arts and professions.

work was done. For the first time in this country the labor of woman, as a class, had the money value. She had become not only an earner and producer, but also a spender of money ; a recognized factor in the political economy of her time.

The history of Lowell gives a good illustration of the influence of women, as an independent class, upon the growth of a town or community.

As early as 1836, ten years after its incorporation, Lowell began to show what the early mill-girls and boys could do towards the material prosperity of a great city. It numbered over 17,000 inhabitants, – an increase of over 15,000 during that time.

The old Middlesex Canal, opened in 1797, had long since ceased to accommodate the growing traffic. The stage-coach could not fetch and carry fast enough, and, in 1835, the Boston and Lowell Railroad, the first enterprise of the kind in the United States, went into operation. Churches and schoolhouses were building, and the new-made city showed unmistakable signs of becoming, what is has since been called, the “ Manchester of America.” But the money of the operatives alone could not have so increased the growth and social importance of a city or a locality. It was the result, as well, of the successful operation of the early factory system, managed by men who were wise enough to consider the physical, moral, and mental needs of those who were the source of their wealth.

The early mill-girls were religious by nature and by Puritan inheritance. On entering the mill, each was obliged to sign a “ regulation paper,” which required her to attend regularly some place of public worship. They were of many creeds and beliefs. In one boarding-house, that I knew, there were girls belonging to eight different religious sects.

In 1843, there were in Lowell, fourteen regularly organized religious societies. Ten of these constituted a Sabbath School Union, which consisted of over five thousand scholars and teachers ; three-fourths of the scholars, and a proportion of the teachers, were mill-girls. Once a year, every fourth of July, this Sabbath School Union, each section, or division, under its own sectarian banner, marched in procession to the grove on Chapel Hill, where a picnic was held, with lemon-

ade, and long speeches by the ministers of the different churches. The mill-girls went regularly to meeting and Sabbath School, and every Sunday the streets of Lowell were alive with neatly-dressed young women, going or returning therefrom. Their fine appearance on the Sabbath was often spoken of by strangers visiting Lowell.

Dr. Scoresby, in his *American Factories and their Operatives*, holds up the Lowell mill-girls as an example of neatness and good behavior to their sister operatives of Bradford, England. Indeed, it was a pretty sight to see so many wide-awake young girls, in the bloom of life, clad in their holiday dresses.

It is refreshing to remember their simplicity of dress ; they wore no ruffles and very few ornaments. It is true that some of them had gold watches and gold pencils, but they were worn only on grand occasions. As a rule the early mill-girls were not of that class that is said to be " always suffering for a breast-pin." Though their dress was so simple and so plain, yet it was so fitting that they were often accused of looking like ladies. And the complaint was sometimes made that no one could tell the difference in *church*, between the factory girls and the daughters of some of the first families in the city.

The morals of the early mill-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 at once 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. 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 toward the other sex was that of the German *fräulein*, who said, " Treat every maiden with respect, for you do not know whose *wife* she will be."

The health of the early mill-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, and 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. There was, at the time, but one *pathy* to be supported by the many diseases "that the flesh is heir to."

Their reformatory spirit is worthy of mention. They were subscribers to the newspapers, and it was their habit, after reading their copies, to send them by mail to their widely scattered homes, where they were read all over a village or neighborhood.

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, and some of them were familiar with, and discussed the Brook Farm experiment.

Mrs. Bloomer, that pioneer of the modern dress reform, found followers in Lowell ; and parlor meetings were held at some of the boarding-houses to discuss the feasibility of this great revolution in the style of woman's dress.

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

One of the girls stood on a pump and gave vent to the feelings of her 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. One of the number (the writer), a little girl eleven years old, had led the turn-out

from the room in which she worked. She was a "little doffer," and they called her a ring-leader.

It is hardly necessary to say that, so far as practical results are concerned, this strike did no good.

The corporations would not come to terms. The girls were soon tired of holding out, and they went back to their work at the reduced rate of wages. The ill-success of this early attempt at resistance on the part of the wage element seems to have made a precedent for the issue of many succeeding strikes.

It seems to have been the fashion of the early mill-girls to appear in procession on all public occasions. Mr. Cowley, in his *History of Lowell*, speaks of President Jackson's visit to that city in 1833.

He says : " On the day the president came, all the lady operatives turned out to meet him. They walked in procession, like troops of liveried angels clothed in white [with pink parasols], with cannons booming, drums beating, banners flying, handkerchiefs waving, etc. the old hero was not more moved by the bullets that whistled round him in the battle of New Orleans than by the exhilarating spectacle here presented."

This is but the brief story of the life of a class of common every-day work people ; such as it was then, such as it might be to-day. The Lowell mill-girls were but a simple folk, living in Arcadian simplicity as was the fashion of the times. They earned their own bread, and often that of others. They eked out their scant education by their own efforts, and read such books as were found in the circulating libraries of the day. They sought to help one another. They tried to be good, and improve their minds. They were wholly untroubled by conventionalities or thoughts of class distinctions, dressing simply, since they had no time to waste on the entanglements of dress. Such were their lives. Undoubtedly there must have been another side of this pic-picture but I give the side I knew best – the bright side!

It now remains for me to speak of the intellectual tendencies of a portion of the early mill-girls. Their desire for self-improvement had been to a certain extent gratified, and they began to feel the benefit of the educational ad-

vantages which had been opened to them. They had attended lyceum lectures, learned what they could at the evening schools, and continued their studies during their yearly vacations, or while at their work in the mill. I have known one girl to study Greek and Latin, and another algebra, while tending her work. Their labor was monotonous and done almost mechanically, but their thoughts were free, and they had ample time to digest what they learned, or think over what they had read. Some of these studious ones kept notebooks, with abstracts of their reading and studies, or jotted down what they were pleased to call their "thoughts." Many of the pieces that were printed in the *Lowell Offering* were thought out amid the hum of the wheels, while the skilful fingers and well-trained eyes of the writers tended the loom or the frame. It was natural that such a studious life as this should bear some fruit, and this leads me to speak of the *Lowell Offering* just mentioned, a publication that may be called the natural outgrowth of the mental habit of the early mill-girls. The first number of this unique magazine was issued in October, 1840, the last in December, 1849. There are seven volumes in all. The story of its publication is as follows : The Rev. Abel C. Thomas and the Rev. Thomas B. Thayer, pastors of the first and second Universalist Churches in Lowell, had established improvement circles composed of the young people belonging to their respective parishes. These meetings were largely made up of young men and women who worked in the mill. They were often asked to speak, but as they persistently declined, they were invited to write what they desired to say, and send it, to be read anonymously at the next meeting. Many of the young women complied with this request, but it is recorded that the young men were of "no great assistance." These written communications were so numerous that they very soon became the sole entertainment of what Mr. Thomas called "these intellectual banquets." *

*In 1842, *The Factory Operative Magazine*, a sort of rival publication, was started by some persons of a different religious sect, who were in spirit opposed to the Universalist editors of the *Lowell Offering*. It was edited by two factory girls, Abby A. Goddard and Lydia S. Hall, who were also writers for the *Offering*. It lived one year, and not being successful, was then consolidated with the original magazine.

It may be said, that these improvement circles were not the first formed among the early mill-girls. In 1836 there was one composed entirely of young girls who worked on the Lawrence corporation, who thus, according to their constitution, “desired to improve the talents God had given” them. This may, perhaps, be called the first woman’s club on record. In 1843 there were at least five of these improvement circles, composed entirely of mill-girls.

A selection from the budget of articles read at their circles, was soon published by Mr. Thomas and Mr. Thayer in pamphlet form and called the *Lowell Offering*. These gentlemen conducted the *Offering* two years, and then it passed into the hands of Miss Harriet Farley and Miss Harriot F. Curtis, both operatives in the Lowell mills. Under their joint editorship it lasted until it was discontinued for want of means, and perhaps new contributors. All the articles in the *Offering* were written by mill-girls. In speaking of this matter, its first editor, Mr. Thomas says : “Communications much amended, in process of training the writers, were rigidly excluded from print, and such articles only were published as had been written by females employed in the mills.” He continues, “and thus was published not only the first work written by factory girls, but also the first magazine or journal written exclusively by women in all the world.”

The *Offering* was a small, thin magazine, with one column to the page. The price of the first number was six and a quarter cents. Its title-page was plain, with a motto from Gray, – the verse beginning :

“ Full many a gem of purest ray serene.”

This motto was used for two years when another was adopted :

“ Is Saul also among the prophets?”

In January, 1845, the magazine had on its outside cover a vignette, a young girl simply dressed, with feet visible and sleeves rolled up. she had a book in one hand and her shawl and bonnet were thrown over her arm. She was represented as standing in a very sentimental attitude, contemplating a bee-hive at her right hand. In the back-

ground, as if to shut them from her thoughts, was a row of factories, and the motto was :

“ The worm on the earth
May look up to the star.”

This rather abject sentiment was not suited to the independent spirit of most of the contributors, who did not feel a bit like worms, and in the February number it was changed to one from Bunyan :

“ And do you think that the words of your book are certainly true?
Yea, verily.”

It finally died, however, under its favorite motto :

“ Is Saul also among the prophets?”

The *Lowell Offering* was welcomed with pleased surprise. It found subscribers all over the country. The *North American Review*, who literary *dictum* was more autocratic than it is to-day, endorsed it, and expressed a fair opinion of its literary merit. It said : —

“ Many of the articles are such as to satisfy the reader at once, that if he has only taken up the *Offering* as a phenomenon, and not as what may bear criticism and reward perusal, he has but to his own error, and dismiss his condescension as soon as may be.”

Other leading magazines and journals spoke favorably of its contributions. It made its way into lonely villages and farm-houses and set the women to thinking, and thus added its little leaven of progressive thought to the times in which it lived. It found subscribers in England. Dickens read it and praised its writers. * Harriet Martineau prompted a fine review of it in the *London Athenaeum*, and a selection from its pages was published, under her direction, called *Mind Among the Spindles*.

*When Dickens visited this country, in 1842, he went into the Lowell factories and a copy of the *Offering* was presented to him. He speaks of it as follows : — “ They have got up among themselves a periodical, called the *Lowell Offering*, whereof I have brought away from Lowell four hundred good solid pages, which I have read from beginning to end. Of the merits of the *Lowell Offering*, as a literary production, I will only observe — putting out of sight the fact of the articles having been written by these girls after the arduous hours of the day — that it will compare advantageously with a great many English annuals.”

It is not necessary to speak here of the literary merits of the articles in the *Lowell Offering*. They are the crude attempts of those who were but children in literature, and the wonder is that what they wrote is half so good as it is.

These factory-girl writers did not confine their talents within the pages of their own publication. Many of them wrote for the literary newspapers and magazines. One sometimes filled the poet's corner in *Zion's Herald* ; another took that envied place in the *Ladies' Casket* ; a third sent poetic effusions to the *Lowell Courier and Journal*. *

In 1848, seven books had been published, written by contributors to the *Lowell Offering*. †

Though the literary character of these writings may not rise to the present standard of such productions, yet still at that season of intellectual dearth they must have had a certain influence on the literature of the land. And without claiming too much credit for the authors, it is but fair that some attempt be made, as another has said, "to reveal the halo which should extend to us from this representative body of New England women."

These authors represent what may be called the poetic element of factory life. They were the ideal mill-girls ; full of hopes, desires, aspirations ; poets of the loom, spinners of verse, artists of factory life.

The names of the *Lowell Offering* writers, so far as I have been able to gather them, are as follows : Sarah Bagley, Josephine L. Baker, Adeline Bradley, Fidelia O. Brown, M. Bryant, Alice Ann Carter, Eliza J. Cate, Betsey Chamberlain, L. A. Choate, Kate Clapp, Louisa Currier, Maria Currier, Lura Currier, Harriot F. Curtis, Catherine Dodge, M. A. Dodge, Harriet Farley, Margaret F. Foley,

* William Schouler, of the *Lowell Journal*, published the *Offering* in 1845, and his young sub-editor, William S. Robinson, afterwards well known by his *nom de plume* of "Warrington," wrote favorable notices of the magazine, and when he could do so without letting "the editor step aside to make way for the friend," sometimes admitted its writers into the columns of that leading Whig newspaper. It may be added here, that this gentleman, in his zeal for the writers of the *Lowell Offering*, went so far as to take one of the least known among them as his companion for life.

† They were *Lights and Shadows of Factory Life*, and *Rural Scenes in New England* by Eliza Jane Kate ; *Kate in Search of a Husband*, *Jessie's Flirtations*, and *S. S. Philosophy* by Harriot F. Curtis, *Domestic Sketches* by Abby A. Goddard, and *Shells from the Strand of the Sea of Genius* by Harriet Farley.

A. M. Fosdick, Abby A. Goddard, M. R. Green, Lydia S. Hall, Jane B. Hamilton, Harriet Jane Hanson, Eliza Rice Holbrook, Eliza W. Jennings, Hannah Johnson, E. Kidder, Miss Lane, Emeline Larcom, Lucy Larcom, L. E. Leavitt, Harriet Lees, Mary A. Leonard, Sarah E. Martin, Mary J. McAfee, E. D. Perver, E. S. Pope, Nancy R. Rainey, Sarah Shedd, Ellen L. Smith, Ellen M. Smith, Laura Tay, Abby D. Turner, Elizabeth E. Turner, Jane S. Welch, Caroline H. Whitney, A. E. Wilson, and Adeline H. Winship. Many of the writers signed fictitious names, – such as Ella, Adelaide, Dorcas, Aramantha, Stella, Kate, Oriana, Ruthe Rover, Ione, and Annaline. Lucy Larcom, M. Bryant, Harriet Farley, Margaret Foley, and Lydia S. Hall were the poets of the magazine. Lucy Larcom published her first poem in the *Offering*, in 1842. It was called *The River*. It is almost superfluous to say that Miss Larcom and Miss Foley long since became celebrated : one as a poet and the other as a sculptor of rare merit.

Miss Larcom has published, in all, ten volumes of prose and verse, and in her poem, *An Idyl of Work*, she tells the story of her life as a Lowell factory girl. Harriot F. Curtis was a prolific writer for newspapers and magazines (notably N. P. Willis' *Home Journal*) under the *nom de plume* of "Mina Myrtle." She was the author of several novels, and published two, – *Kate in Search of a Husband*, and *Jessie's Flirtations*. The last still holds its original place in the advertising list of Harper's Select Library of Novels, and in 1882 was republished. Harriet Farley wrote and published several books. Eliza Jane Cate published eight books of stories and sketches, and was a contributor to Peterson's and other magazines. Among the published writings of Harriet H. Robinson are : *Warrington Pen Portraits*, *Massachusetts in the Woman Suffrage Movement*, and *The New Pandora*, a drama, published in 1889.

But there were representative women among the mill-girls who were not writers for the *Offering*. This was but one phase of their development. Many of them have exerted a wide-spread influence in other directions. They went forth from their *Alma Mater*, the Lowell Factory, carrying with them the independence, the self-reliance taught

in that hard school, 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.

Skilled labor teaches something not to be found in books or in colleges. Their early experience developed their characters, and, like good blood, told in them, and helped them to fight well the battle of life.

In order to show how far the influence of individuals belonging to such a class of work-people may extend, it will be well to mention the after-fate of some of the early mill-girls. One became an artist if not, another a poet of more than local fame, a third an inventor, a fourth one of the foremost advocates of woman's rights ; a fifth, the founder of a free public library in her native town. * a sixth went to Mexico as wife of a major-general in the army of that republic. It is said that this officer was at one time acting president of the republic, and that his factory-girl wife reveled for a space " in the halls of the Montezumas." A few became teachers, authors, and missionaries. A great many married into the trades and professions. Some went West with their husbands, took up land, and did their part towards settling that vast region. A limited number married those who were afterwards doctors of divinity, major generals, and members of congress. It may be said here that at one time the fame of the *Lowell Offering* caused the mill-girls to be considered very desirable for wives ; and young men came from near and far to pick and choose for themselves, and generally with good success.

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 " ungenteeled" employments, 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 higher employments, to have been once a factory-girl, as it is for an ex-governor and major-general to have been a " bobbin-boy." A woman ought to be as proud of being self-made

*Sarah Shedd, of Washington, N. H.

as a man, – not proud, in a boasting way, but proud enough to assert the fact in her life and in her works.

In this brief sketch of early factory life I have tried to show that it was the means of education to a large class of men and women, who, without the opportunity thus afforded, could not have become developed, and their influence on modern civilization would have been lost. In short, that New England itself, and perhaps the whole country, would not have been what it is to-day, but for the influence of these early cotton mills, managed as they were by an enlightened factory system. Thousands of unknown men and women who once earned their living in this way, have settled in different sections of the country. These old factory girls and old factory boys are to be found everywhere, in all classes and in all vocations, and they ought to be as proud as their dear old *Alma Mater* as the Harvard graduates are of their college.

It is often said that the life described cannot be repeated, and that the modern factory operative is not capable of such development. If this is a fact may there not be a reason for it? The factory of to-day ought to be as much of a school to those who work there as it was to the operative of forty years ago. The class may be different, but the chances of education should correspond to its needs. The same results, perhaps, cannot be reached, because the children of New England ancestry had in them some germs of intellectual life. But is it not also possible that the children of the land of Thomas Moore, or Racine and of Goethe may be something more than mere clods? I do not despair of any class of artisans or operatives. There is among them all some germ of mental vigor, some higher idea of living, waiting for a chance to grow. The same encouragement on the part of employers, the same desire to lift them to a higher level, would soon show of what the present class of operatives is capable.

Last winter, 1881, I was invited to speak to accompany of the Lowell mill-girls, and tell them something about my early life as a member of this guild. I was the more willing to do this, as I was desirous of forming some estimate with regard to the status of the successors of the early mill-girls.

About two hundred of them assembled in the pleasant parlors of the People's Club, and listened attentively to my story. When it was over, a few of them gathered around and asked me many questions. In turn I questioned them ; about their work ; their hours of labor ; their wages ; and their means of improvement. When I urged them to occupy their spare time in reading and study, they seemed to understand the necessity of it, but answered sadly : " We will try ; but we work so hard, we tend so much machinery, and we are so tired." It was plainly to be seen that these operatives did not go to their labor with the jubilant feeling that the old mill-girls used to have, that their work was drudgery, done without aim and purpose, that they took no interest in it beyond the thought that it was the means of earning their daily bread. There was a tired hopelessness about them that I am sure was no often seen among the early mill-girls.

The wages of these operatives are much lower, accordingly, than of old, and though the hours of labor, are less, they are obliged to do a far greater amount of work in a given time. They tend so many looms and frames that they have no time to think. They are always on the jump. They have no time to improve themselves, nor to spend in helping others. They are too weary to read good books, and too overworked to digest what they have read. The souls of these mill-girls seem starved, and looked from their hungry eyes, as if searching for mental food.

Why are they not fed? The means of education are not wanting. Public libraries are provided, but *good* books remain unopened, and are not read by them. They have more leisure than the mill-girls of forty years ago, but they do not know how to improve it. Their leisure only gives them the more time to be idle in ; more time to waste in the streets, or in reading cheap novels and stories. They are not almost worse off than if they worked more hours or did not know how to read, since they can use to advantage neither their extra time nor the means of education provided for them. Let it not be understood that I would take from the operative or the artisan, one of the chances of education.

But I would have them taught how to use wisely those privileges, forced, we might almost say, on them and their children. I would also have them taught how to inwardly digest what they are made to learn.

The factory population of New England is made up largely of American-born children of foreign parentage. As a rule, they are not under control of the church of their parents, and they adopt the vices and follies, rather than the good habits of our people. It is vital to the interests of the whole community, that this class should be kept under good moral influences ; that it should have the sympathy, the help of the employers. This class needs better homes than it finds in too many of our factory towns and cities. It needs a better social atmosphere. It needs to be lifted out of its mental squalor into a higher state of thought and feeling.

“ Labor is worship,” says the poet. Labor is education, is the teaching of the wise political economist.

If factory labor is not a means of education to the operative of to-day, it is because the employer does not do his duty. It is because he treats his work-people like machines, and forgets that they are struggling, hoping, despairing human beings. It is because, as he becomes rich, he cares less and less for the wellbeing of his poor, and beyond paying them their weekly wages, has no thought of their wants or their needs.

The manufacturing corporation, except in comparatively few instances, no longer represents a protecting care, a parental influence over its operatives. It is too often a soulless organization, and its members forget that they are morally responsible for the souls and bodies, as well as the wages of those whose labor is the source of their wealth. Is it not the time that more of these Christian men and women, who gather their riches from the factories of the country, should begin to reflect that they do not discharge their whole duty to the operatives when they see that the monthly wages are paid ; and that they are also responsible for their unlovely surroundings, for their barren and hopeless lives, and for the moral and physical destruction of their children?

Would it not be wise for more employers to consider, seriously, whether it is better to degrade this class of people to a level with the same class in foreign countries, or to mix a little conscience with their capital, and so try to bring the “lost Eden” I have tried to describe, back into the life of the factory operative of to-day?