

A DESCRIPTION OF FACTORY LIFE



The account below was written in 1846 by a group of men called the Associationists who were traveling around New England to investigate the lives of workers in factories. They wanted to know about the worker's conditions—where they worked, where they lived, how they were treated. This excerpt discusses the group's trips to Lowell, Massachusetts, and Manchester, New Hampshire.

"We have lately visited the cities of Lowell and Manchester, and have had an opportunity of examining the factory system more closely than before. We had distrusted the stories; we could not believe the comments about the exhausting nature of the labor in the mills, and to the manner in which the young women, the mill workers, lived in their boarding-houses, six sleeping in a room, poorly ventilated.

We went through many of the mills, talked particularly to a large number of the mill workers, and ate at their boarding-houses, so that we could personally inspect the facts.



In Lowell live between seven and eight thousand young women, who are generally daughters of farmers of the different States of New England.

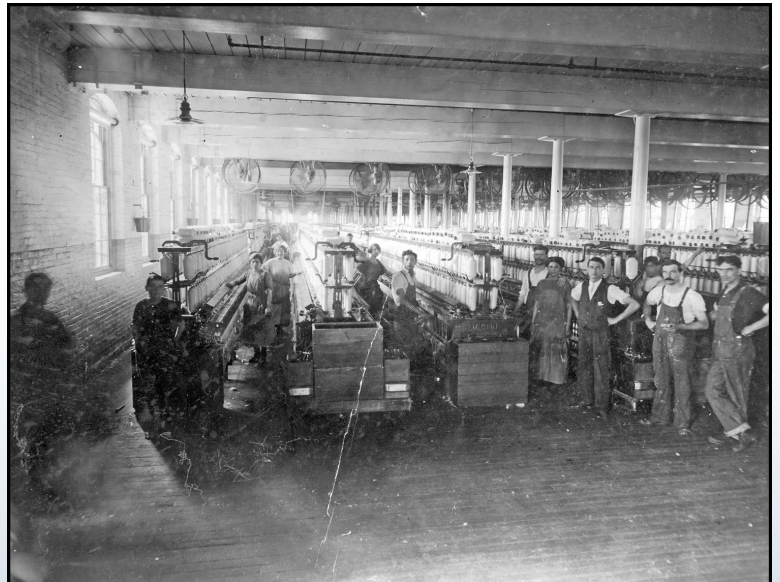
The mill workers work thirteen hours a day in the summer time, and from daylight to dark in the winter. At half past four in the morning the factory bell rings, and at five the girls must be in the mills. A clerk watches those who are a few minutes late. At seven the girls are allowed thirty minutes for breakfast, and at noon thirty minutes more for lunch. At seven o'clock in the evening the factory bell sounds the close of the days' work.

Thus thirteen hours per day of close attention and repetitive labor are taken from the young women in these factories. So exhausted and worn out are the girls, that they go to bed soon after their evening meal and try to sleep a long time to get ready for the next day.

Now let us examine the nature of the labor itself, and the conditions under which it is performed. Enter with us into the large rooms, when the looms are at work. The largest that we saw is in the Amoskeag Mills at Manchester. There are five hundred looms, and twenty-one thousand spindles in it. The noise of these five hundred looms under full operation is frightful and violated the sense of hearing. After a while we became somewhat used to it, and by speaking quite close to the ear of an mill worker and quite loud, we could hold a conversation, and ask the questions we wanted to ask.

The girls take care of an average three looms; many attend four, but this requires a very active person. However, a great many do it. This gives us some idea of the energy and attention required during the thirteen hours of work. The air in the room has cotton filaments and dust throughout, which, we were told, are very harmful to the lungs. On entering the room, although the day was warm, we remarked that the windows were down; we asked the reason, and a young woman answered very naively, that "when the wind blew, the threads did not work so well." After we had been in the room for fifteen or twenty minutes, we found ourselves sweating quite a bit.

The young women sleep upon an average six in room; three beds to a room. There is no privacy, no resting here; it is almost impossible to read or write alone, as the living room is full and so many sleep in the same chamber. A young woman told us there was not space for a table and she had trouble finding a place to write a letter. So live and work the young women of our country in the boarding-houses and factories.



Note: This selection has been edited to make it easier to read.

Notice & Wonder

1. Look up in a dictionary any words you don't know.
2. Why do you think young women were willing to live and work in these conditions? Would you?
3. Which parts of their lives do you think were the most difficult?