

Lowell textile mills and mill girls



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Lowell was among the largest city in America in mid-1800s. It was well known for its accomplishments most notably the establishment of power loom and the combination of the cotton cloth manufacture process in one single mill. Additionally, the technological innovation from Europe was first implemented in Lowell mills in America. Other technological and infrastructure developments that contributed to Lowell city industrialization were Lowell canal, steam locomotive, Lowell and Boston railroad and waterpower. By 1828, Lowell was thriving as a hub of industrialization. At this time women were surged at Lowell mills seeking employment.

Over eighty five percent of Lowell textile factory workforce was girls aged 15 to 25 years. These were the young, unmarried, and women who were considered to be superfluous in farm labour. Most of these girl were farm girls from the outskirts of Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Vermont. The mill girls signed a contract of one year which upon completion they were relieved to get married or join other working field such as teaching. As far as many girls were concerned, the working experience as mill girls, though tough, was a taste of self-reliance and freedom from home.

Some of the girls often used part of their wages to pay for their brothers' school fees and others could save a portion of their earning for their marriages and houses. It was really a big deal for young girls to work away from their homes and earn cash wages. Apart from wages, factory recruiters assured parents that their girls would enjoy other privileges such as education, access to libraries, food, accommodation at company owned boarding houses as well as they would enforce high morals uprightness to their daughters. This ensured that the policy of hiring young girls did not face

opposition from the society that was conservative and perceived women as nothing more than domestic workers.

The work in the mills was toilsome. The girls had to endure working in the power looms which were poorly aired, dusty, very hot and smoky for 70 hours a week. The working hours was between 5 am and 7 pm with meals break in between. Time between 7 pm and 10 pm was used for communal supper, writing, attending classes, shopping and washing. After 10 pm a curfew was imposed by house mothers. Mill girls also faced a challenge of living in an unsanitary congested boarding houses. This fuelled spread of hygiene and communicable diseases such as cholera, dysentery, tuberculosis which claimed lot of lives.

Despite the harsh working condition and stringent rules in Lowell mills, the overall handling of girls in the factories was fair compared to other fields. The cash wages paid to the mill girls enabled them to showcase their social and economic independence. The wages offered by Lowell was the highest in America for women. This was contrary to the long hours of unpaid labour in rural areas which the girls were accustomed to. Lowell cotton goods label painted a well groomed young lady in her loom. This was first in American history for a woman to represent excellence and elegance of a product. Apart from wages, the mill girls also benefited from superior education and self-development.