

# Spin Sisters: Works and Lives of “Lowell Girls” in Early 19th Century America\*

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## I. Introduction

American historians have become increasingly aware of the need to expand the vision of history to incorporate the experiences of ordinary people who have therefore found scant representation. To limit history to the study of leading figures is not only incomplete but is also a kind of distorted history in some ways. In this light, the study of the mill factory girls in the early 19th century takes on particular significance. These girls were neither famous nor influential in their

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\*\* Associate Professor of General Education and water rights and a nearby canal along the Merrimack River, and began to build a major textile manufacturing center. In 1823, the first factory employed young girls recruited from the nearby the countryside.

own time; as a result, the history of the mill girls has been previously ignored by historians. There are several factors, however, that rescue them from total obscurity; they all worked in New England textile factories before the Civil War period; they exchanged letters with their friends and family back homes; and, their letters have survived to the present, offering rare glimpses into the everyday lives and experiences of rather ordinary American women.

The transformation of agriculture in northern New England promoted migration to the growing mill towns in the early 19th century. Many young single women left their hill country farms and sought employment in the expanding factory towns between 1830 and 1860. The rise of textile manufacturing along the major rivers of Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Maine created work for a female labor force in the early 19th century. The factory girls worked in the red brick mills of Lowell, Chicopee, Holyoke and Lawrence in Massachusetts, of Manchester, and Dover in New Hampshire, to name only the largest of the mill towns that emerged in these years. Of them, the Lowell in Massachusetts was the most popular destination. (Appleton 43) In 1821, a group of Boston capitalists purchased land. By taking new jobs in Lowell, young girls chose not only to work outside their homes, but also to leave their families and live in a radically different environment. They worked in the factories for a few years and then returned to their childhood homes, moved west or married and settled in growing urban centers. They were typically daughters of self-respecting farmers, and mill employment was simply one of the options open to them. They shifted readily from one occupation to another. In the early 19th century women's employment was generally restricted to the years before marriage, and there were few paid jobs for married women. The mill girls became a part of the urban working-class community while they stayed in the mill town. They came to form a close-knit community

and the subsequent growth of this community contributed, in turn, to the rise of the labor movement. Their lives and experiences in the early textile industry provided a glimpse into somewhat new aspects of the American women's lives. The experiences of the mill girls can be examined in several ways, including their home backgrounds, motivations to enter the By taking new jobs in Lowell, young girls chose not only to work outside their homes, but factory, and the process of assimilation into the urban setting of the factory life. What kind of the home backgrounds did the girls have? What would be the main reasons for these girls to come to the mill factory? What sort of world did these girls enter when they left their rural homes and began work in the cotton textile mills? How did the labor movement begin in the mill? What did the new urban, industrial experiences of the New England factory girls mean to their lives? What did these changes mean to the lives of the 19th Century American women in general? Finding the answers for these questions is the main purpose of this paper which will provide rare glimpses into the nature and the transformation of the mill factory girl's community in Lowell, Massachusetts, a leading textile center in the nation during the pre-Civil War period. It will also show the everyday lives and experiences of rather ordinary American women, including their values and attitudes.

## **II. The Home Backgrounds of the Mill Girls**

New coming factory girls were typically daughters of self-respecting farmers in the New England area. Young girls recruited from this area predominated the work force of the early Lowell mills. In July 1836, for example, 74 percent of the work force of the Hamilton Manufacturing Company in Lowell was female and 96

percent native-born. More than four-fifths of these women were between the ages of fifteen and thirty. Almost three-fourths of these women at Hamilton resided in company-owned boardinghouses while working in the mill. (Dublin 42)

The most important aspect of New England farming in the early nineteenth century was that it provided work for all members of the family throughout the year. Men worked in the fields, transported and marketed farm products, and handled repairs and construction. Women, on the other hand, took care of poultry and dairy stock, and made such products as butter and cheese. They provided food and clothing for family consumption and use. In the early 19th century, there was the expansion of agriculture in northern New England onto marginal farming lands of the rocky hill country. The decline of exports to Europe combined with the enactment of the embargo and Non-Intercourse Acts undermined the short-lived prosperity. Farmers found themselves overextended and were hard-pressed to meet mortgage obligations. As markets shrunk and prices of agricultural products declined farmers found it difficult to make a living on the less productive marginal hill lands that they had purchased. (English 6)

The increasing proportion of New England resident in cities created an urban market for various foodstuffs grown in the surrounding countryside. Farmers fed the city-dwellers and they also provided a share of the raw materials processed by the urban industry. In particular, the expansion of woolen textiles in these years stimulated farmers to shift much of their focus to raising sheep. Although the sales of wool to Massachusetts mills benefited farmers, the expansion of pastures devoured family farms and reduced the demand for agricultural laborers, hence contributing to the rising tide of emigration out of northern New England in the 1830s. The expansion of the factory output of cotton and woolen clothe, undermined the role of women in farming families. Before 1820

spinning and weaving had been the primary domestic occupations of farmers' daughters. With the expanded output of the new mills, however, the production of cloth became increasingly unprofitable. As daughters in farming families found themselves without this domestic occupation, they looked elsewhere for employment. The predominant response to the dramatic changes of this period was the migration of women from northern New England. Increasingly, the daughters of farmers left the homestead, heading to cities and mill towns of central and southern New England. (Dublin 15-17)

The motivations for coming to mill factories have produced several theories. Some scholars have argued that the majority of the girls began to work in factories in order to support their families back home, while the others have insisted that personal motives strongly drove the girls to the factories. A careful examination of primary sources, however, reveals that both motivations--working for the benefit of their families as well as for their own edification. There are several stories related to the mill girls' motivations for factory work. In one story, a girl complained that the sudden death of her parents had forced her to come to the mill in order to support her sick brother. According to a letter from another mill girl, the factory girls brought home some hard cash which in many cases went to help lift the mortgage on a farm, or buy some necessities for their folks back home. (Appleton 23) Some of the mill girls helped maintaining widowed mothers, or drunken fathers. Indeed, the most prevailing incentives to work in the mill factory were to secure the means of education for some male member of the family. To make a gentleman out of a brother, was the dominant thinking in the minds of a great many of these provident mill-girls. Many girls gave every cent of their wages to their brothers for education. (Robinson 47)

Many girls also came to the factory because of personal incentives, including social, economic and educational benefits. Girls

who lived in secluded parts of New England, where books were scarce, came to Lowell seeking the social and educational advantages that could be found there. They also came to Lowell because of the so-called "Lowell fever." Their curiosity was aroused by a series of various opportunities that they heard from their neighbors and friends who had gone there to work. Lowell, in fact, provided the girls working with several educational opportunities. These included the library that began in 1825 with a contribution of 500 dollars by the corporation, the Lyceum, which provided twenty-five lectures per season for the price of fifty cents as well as night school courses.

Personal economic factors also sent young women into the mills. For some girls, their earnings provided for wedding expenses, including the money for the wedding dress, bride's share of housekeeping articles, and additional dowry items. In such cases, employment in the mill offered girls with savings for future emergencies. One factory girl, Mary Paul, experience clearly explained such a case. She had first worked as a domestic servant away from home before finally deciding to become a factory girl at the age of fifteen in 1845. In a letter to her father asking for his permission, Mary said that she wanted to go to Lowell in order to have new job opportunity. (Foner 19)

The young girls who lived in northern New England in the early nineteenth century seemed destined to play a passive role in the society. They helped with the farm chores or earned their keep as house servants for prosperous neighbors and assumed that eventually they would have a home of their own. That was what society expected of them. Marriage prospects were limited and work on the farm was no longer meaningful for them. Under these circumstances, however, many farm girls decided to leave their hometowns for new opportunities in their lives.

### **III. New Experiences in an Urban Setting**

The mill girls experienced a new urban setting which was in sharp contrast to the farming communities in which they grew up. They came to recently erected factory towns dominated by the textile corporations that owned much of the land and employed a substantial fraction of the local population. In Lowell, for instance, textile firms employed more than 8,000 workers, fully 38 percent of the city's population in 1840. Among female residents, this portion exceeded 47 percent. (Dublin 56) Massive five-to six-story brick structure mills employed 250 to 300 young workers. The ten major Lowell firms consisted of 32 such mills valued at more than \$100 million in 1840. Each floor of the mill was devoted to a different task, such as carding, spinning, dressing, and weaving. An elevator connected the different floors to move materials from one step in the production process to another. (Sheldon, 34)

Segregation at work and in housing coupled with the predominance of girls in early Lowell, contributed to the growth of a distinct working girl community. Mill girls were not only separated from their families while working in the mills, but were relatively isolated from boys as well. In the factory, men held all supervisory positions and worked in a number of skilled departments while women were confined principally to machine-tending jobs. A typical workroom had two male supervisors, eighty working girls, and a couple of children assisting the others. Women and men had little contact outside the formal overseer-operative relation. Patterns of residence further reinforced this separation. Married men lived in company tenements, while single men resided in all male boardinghouses. And all single girls stayed at the boardinghouses that were just for women.

Along with the cultural conflicts, mill girls had to face up to the

adjustments of the new setting in their lives. They were mostly farmers' daughters who came from all parts of the rural districts of New England. The farm girls were usually recruited by agents of the companies. The accommodation of these girls was one of their major concerns. They needed to establish more effective ways of assimilation for the working girls in order to avoid objections from the girls' parents. Clearly American-born farmers would not send their daughters into the factories in the cities if these were thought to be breeding places for sin and vice. To protect the young girls from such conditions was a major factor in establishing the boardinghouse system. The paternalistic controls established by the boardinghouses replaced the strict controls previously exercised by the mill girls' yeoman fathers.

The central institution in the female community was the corporation boardinghouse. Across from the mills stood rows of brick boardinghouses for single girls and tenements for the families of married men in the work force. The boardinghouse system was introduced at Lowell by the Boston Associates. The community of factory girls centering on the boardinghouse developed into a setting in which women worked, relaxed, and lived together twenty-four hours a day. (Dublin, 6) The system played a very crucial role in the initial integration of newcomers into industrial life. Upon first leaving her rural home for work in Lowell, a girl entered a new setting that was very different from anything she had previously known. The factory boardinghouse seemed something dreadful to the new comers. The rooms looked strange and comfortless and when an incoming girl sat down to the supper table, she could not eat a mouthful. (*Lowell Offering* 1840, 69) In the boardinghouse, mill girls escaped from the noise, cotton dust, and relentless pace of work in the mills. Relationships among girls, which were usually cultivated within the mills were reinforced in a more relaxed setting. The boardinghouse,

with an average of twenty-five female boarders sleeping four to six in a bedroom, was above all, a communal living situation. In many ways, the boardinghouse served as a mediating structure in the transformation from farm girl into mill factory girl. Life in the boardinghouse was ultimately very agreeable. It was usually kept by mature Christian women, frequently widows who themselves were themselves mothers of mill girls. The regulation of behavior in the boardinghouse was very strict. The doors were locked at ten o'clock each night and attendance at church was mandatory. Each house was a village or community in of itself in which many young girls from different parts of New England lived together.

The boardinghouse provided the social context in which newcomers to Lowell made their first adjustment to urban, industrial life. Many farm girls generally did not come to Lowell entirely on their own. Usually young girls came because they knew someone--an older sister, cousin, or friend-- who already worked in Lowell. A newcomer was usually directed to a specific address, and her first contact with fellow girls generally came in the boardinghouse, not at the mill. A factory girl named Susan, conveyed the feeling of the first day at the boardinghouse in a letter to her cousin. She said that she could hardly think how her heart beat when she heard the bells ring for the girls to come to supper, and then the doors began to slam. There were three common-size dining tables in the hall. The girls thickened around her until she was almost dizzy. (*Lowell Offering* 1842, 47)

The mill girl's first day in the boardinghouse was a new experience away from her parents' home. It was the first step toward developing a sense of self-reliance and of enduring her independence from her parents. The first day in the work place, mill factory, was an even more surprising experience. Susan described the adventurous experiences on the first day in the factory.

You cannot think how odd everything seemed to me,  
I want to laugh at everything... At first the hours seemed very  
long, but I was so interested in learning that I endured it very well.  
(*Lowell Offering* 1840, 52)

Through the job training system, the textile corporations contributed to the development of community among working girls. During the most difficult period in a factory girl's career, the first months in the mill, she relied upon other mill girls for training and support. And for every spearhead whose adjustments to mill work was aided in this process, there was an experienced mill girl whose work was also affected. They were relaxed and comfortable with one another during the work process and did not simply tend to their machinery. When the new girl could handle the normal complement of machinery, two looms for weavers and when a regular worker departed, leaving an opening, the spearhead moved into a regular job.

The noise from the factory was very unfamiliar to the young girls who were accustomed to hearing only to the sound of nature. Working at the factory was also accompanied by physical pain. The mill girls wrote in their letters that it made their feet ache and swell to stand so much. However, they would be able to get accustomed to standing for a long periods of time. The factory girls who had worked for a year or two had to procure shoes a size or two larger than what they wore before they started working. The right hand, which was the one used in stopping and starting the loom, became larger than the left. This means that working in the mill was very painful. (*Lowell Offering* 1842, 52) Factory work was repetitive, the machinery loud and cumbersome, and the workrooms were filled with the flying dust of cotton fibers. The young girls stood or sat at their machines for 12 hours a day, six days a week, breathing in unhealthy dust. The work was also dangerous. One account relays a terrible accident that

happened one day: a factory girl caught her hair in the machine, seconds later she lay writhing in agony on the floor, part of her scalp torn off. Her co-workers salvaged the piece of scalp and took her to a doctor. Fortunately, she survived. (Sigerman 103)

The "confusion" of the working place was one of the more shocking experiences of the factory girls. Catherine B. and her younger sister had learned of the pecuniary advantages of factory life from their young friends who had been employed in a cotton mill. But when they arrived in the city, the noise and confusion of Lowell stood in sharp contrast from their quiet country-home. Facing the confusion, Catherine said that she would like to find herself alone for a brief moment when she could hold her breath. (*Lowell Offering* 1843, 53)

"Homesickness" was another feeling that the mill girls had to deal with. It was usually combined with nostalgia for their past and childhood and the experience of a sense of loss such as the lost contact with family and friends. An article in the "Lowell Offering," reveals this feeling:

I once had a house. Home! It thrills my frame like an electric shock.  
Yes, I once had a home; but now I have none. (Dublin 42)

It was a strong-willed individual who could work and live among her fellow girls and not conform to the customs and values of this community. In addition to the pressure to conform to group patterns of speech and dress, the women enforced an unwritten code for moral conduct. Henry Miles, a minister in Lowell, described the way in which the community pressured those who deviated from accepted moral conduct. According to him, if a girl was suspected of immoralities, her fellow boarders severely criticized her, and her

fellow boarders would at once leave the house, if the keeper did not dismiss the offender. In order to protect herself, the patron was obliged to expel the offender.

Kinship and family ties played a major role in the young girl's adaptation to the urban economic setting. The continuing bonds with family and relatives were strengthened by an active correspondence. The mill girls continuously sought support and advice from her parents and relatives whenever they faced problems in the new urban setting. In a letter to her father, Sarah Hodgkin, for example, asked for his advice about church affiliation. She wrote that she could not decide whether she should choose a Baptist church or a Methodist church. In addition to seeking parental advice, kinship ties proved particularly important for newcomers. The factory girls who came to Lowell in the company of another family member or who joined a family member already in Lowell were more easily able to adjust to the new setting and enjoyed more advantages over those who came to the mill entirely by themselves. Supportive family members helped newcomers cope with their difficulties in many ways. They resided in the same boardinghouses and often managed to work together in the mills. These kin-networks helped the newcomers in many ways. These ties in particular eased the shock of adjustment to the new urban setting. The presence of an older, more experienced and supportive member of the family or relative also eased parents' thinking about letting a second child go to a new place. A letter from a father to his daughter in Lowell made this point clearly. Referring to a younger daughter, the father noted that he would not send his younger daughter if his elder daughter were not already there. And, the father asked his elder daughter to take good care of her younger sister. (Foner 32)

In the new urban setting of Lowell, the boardinghouse was the center of the lives of the mill girls. After more than twelve hours a

day in the factory, the mill girls spent most of their remaining hours in their boardinghouses. In this setting they ate meals, rested, talked, sewed, and wrote letters, and read books and magazines. From within this setting, they found friends who accompanied them to shops, to evening lectures, or to church events. On Sundays or holidays they often went out together for walks along the canals or into the nearby countryside. The community of mill girls developed in a new setting in which girls worked and lived together twenty-four hours a day.

#### **IV. The “Lowell Offering” and the Sisterhood of the Mill Girls**

The female friendships of the nineteenth century, the long-lived, intimate, loving friendship among women are the one special aspects of the female experience. An abundance of manuscript evidence suggests that nineteenth century women routinely formed emotional ties with other women. Indeed, a female world of varied and yet highly structured relationships appears to have been an essential aspect of American society. (Smith-Rosenberg 2) The close living and working arrangements created strong friendships among the mill girls in Lowell. Most of them eagerly wanted to improve their minds and their lives. Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, they organized and attended lectures, language classes, sewing groups, and literary improvement circles after working a 12-hour day. The “Lowell Offering” was born in this environment.

The “Lowell Offering” was the natural outgrowth of the mental habits of the early mill-girls. The idea of an organization for literary and educational purposes was first proposed in 1837 by Miss Harriet F. Curtis, who was the most progressive of all the mill girls at the time. Along with her close friends she was concerned with the idea of forming a small society for mental improvement. At the first meeting,

Miss Curtis delivered an inspiring address, in which she stated the object and scope of the organization, and the urgent need that existed for all working women to make an effort to improve their minds. (Robinson 60) The organization of the “Lowell Offering” had the magazine under the same name.

The mill girls’ magazine, the “Lowell Offering” was published under the supervision of Reverend Charles Thomas, a pastor of the Second Universalistic Church. It was a small thin magazine of about thirty pages with one column to the page. The price of the first number was six and a quarter cents. Its title page was plain, with the motto of “Full many a gem of purest ray serene.”(Eisler 33) There were about seven volumes of the magazine in all: five of the “Lowell Offering,” and two of the “New England Offering.” The prospectus of the “Lowell Offering,” as issued by its women editors in 1845, is as follows:

Our magazine is the only one which America has produced,  
of which no other country has produced the like. The offering  
is prime evidence, not only of the American “factory girls,”  
but of the mass of our country. (Robinson 66)

The objective of the magazine’s editors was has been the object of the editor to encourage the cultivation of talent, and thus open and enlarge the sources of enjoyment in the midst of a toilsome life. In this way were able to do something toward modifying the privations and other evils incident to employment in the Mills. It had four small quarters of sixteen pages each, containing the literary efforts between the intervals of 1840 and 1845. The major emphasis in these issues was to dispel the notion that factory work was degrading and that the mill girls were exploited.

The pre-conditions for the labor unrest in Lowell before 1850

may be found in the study of the daily work life of the working girls. In their everyday, relatively conflict-free lives, mill girls created a sisterhood which made possible united action in times of crisis. The existence of a tight-knit community among them was the most important element in determining the collective nature of this response. The mill girls in Lowell in the mid-1830s formed a community based on this sisterhood. The sisterhood of girls in early Lowell was rooted in the structure of the mill work itself. Newcomers to the mills were particularly dependent on their fellow factory girls, but even experienced hands relied on one another for considerable support. New factory girls generally found their first experiences difficult, even harrowing, though they may have already done considerable hand-spinning and weaving in their own homes. Their experiences in Lowell were not simply similar or parallel to one another but they were inextricably intertwined.

The strong friendships among the mill girls also played a crucial role for easing the cultural shock and making the adjustment to urban life. New girls worked together in the mills with experienced factory girls who taught them work skills. In addition they lived together in company-owned boardinghouses adjacent to the mills. The boardinghouse provided good opportunities to make friends among the mill girls. In the boardinghouse the newcomer took the first steps that transformed her from an outsider into an accepted member of her peer group. From among fellow residents of the boardinghouse the mill girls found suitable companions who accompanied them to Lyceum lectures, or church and church-sponsored events. These friendships provided great advantages. The young women discussed the books they read, debated religious and social questions, as well as shared their thoughts and experiences. Furthermore they advised and helped one another. At least in the early days in the mills, when a girl needed to be absent for half a day, two or three others would tend

an extra loom, so that the absent one might not lose her pay. (Bailey 102)

The peer groups with which the mill girls spent most of their time exerted strong pressures on those who did not conform to group standards, including patterns of speech and dress. New recruits to the mills experienced a change in their way of the life. Newcomers spoke a dialect that was regarded as almost unintelligible by the other girls. But the severe discipline and ridicule that met them was as good as any school education, and they were soon taught the “city way of speaking.” Their dress was also not acceptable, and was of the plainest homespun material, cut in such an old-fashioned style that each young girl looked as if she had borrowed her grandmother's gown. However, within several months those young girls changed their style into a city way of dressing. (Davis 86) Harriet Robinson described her experience in the factory. As a daughter of a carpenter who died when she was six, she began to work in a Lowell textile mill at the age of ten. She was only eleven when she first participated in the strike of 1836. Such strikes against wage-cutting were the first manifestation of a collective protest by women. Robinson was one of the few links between such labor militancy and the later feminist movement. After the Civil War, Harriet Robinson became a feminist leader, working closely with Susan B. Anthony in the National Woman Suffrage Association(NWSA). (Robinson 40)

Friendship with neighbors also eased cultural conflicts and helped the assimilation into life in Lowell. The prejudice against factory girls that neighbors had exhibited at first exhibited usually changed into genuine friendship in a short period of time. Factory girls soon began to associate with their neighbors who formed the main group of the community. Sometimes they were invited into neighbor's houses that also went to the same church. Sometimes the factory girls married into their neighbor's families.

There are several points of significance of the experiences of the factory girls. First of all, the regular cash wage provided an economic and social independence for the factory girl. When girls left home and entered the mills they ceased to be dependents in the traditional sense. They supported themselves while at work and used their saving to maintain a certain level of independence even if they lived at home. One Lowell factory girl, Elizabeth Hodgsons, reflected about her newfound economic independence in her letters, an important element to the lives of girls in the early mills- their newfound economic independence. (Dublin 40) In addition, the life pattern in the boardinghouses and working patterns in the factory offered a new “sense of order” that the girls had not experienced before. Some of the factory girls spent and saved their earnings as they chose, while others contributed at least part of their earnings to their families at home. A letter written by a mill girl to her sister back home revealed a sense of economic independence. She said that she earned 14 and a half dollars, and felt independence at every moment. (Lowell Offering 1840, 19) Rural girls who had rarely seen money of their own could enjoy the fruits--such as personal finery, and growing savings bank deposits--reflecting their labor in the mills. This offered a sense of “economic independence.” Furthermore, the girls also experienced the social independence, accepting considerable separation--both in distance and time—while they resided with their peer-group in the boardinghouse. Under these circumstances, the girls began to develop more individualistic attitudes as they escaped from strong parental pressures.

## **V. The Labor Movement in the Lowell Factory**

As Lowell became the nation's largest textile manufacturing

center, the experiences of the factory girls changed as well. The increasing number of firms in Lowell and in the other mill towns brought the pressure of competition. Overproduction became a problem and the prices of finished clothing decreased. The high profits of the early years declined and so did the conditions of the mill girls. Wages were reduced and the pace of work within the mills was stepped up. (Fielden 24) In Lowell, working girls shared three problems: low pay, long hours, and changes in standards and methods of work. Although they had always worked long hours, the factory system imposed the hardships even more. Most striking, factory girls had no control over the rates they charged for their work or the hours they worked; they received a wage determined by a boss, and they were expected to work fixed hours. (Beechey 48)

In 1851, most urban workers barely made \$10.37 a week. Female textile workers made average about \$3.50 while male workers made \$6.50. In order to make ends meet, entire families went to work in factories or did piecework at home. Female workers often worked 12 to 16 hours a day, earning a dollar a day. They especially suffered from economic hardships. Although their wages did not rise, their cost of living did. According to the *New York Tribune*, the average female factory worker made \$2 a week, but room and board cost about \$1.50 to \$1.75 a week, leaving only 50 cents for clothing, medicine, church dues, leisure activities, and savings. Even a brief period of unemployment could be disastrous because it could use up all of a worker's savings. Until 1847, women worked 12 hours a day, six days a week. That year, they received an extra half-hour for dinner, reducing the work day to about 11 hours. The working day usually started at 5:00 A.M. and ended at 7:00 P.M. Workers had a 35-minute break for breakfast at 7:00 A.M., and a 45-minute dinner break at noon. In 1853, the workday was cut again, to 11 hours, six days a week. (Sigerman 103)

The major factor in the rise of a new consciousness among factory girls was the development of a close-knit community among women in the mills. The existence of community among the girls, in turn, was an important element in the continuing labor protest of this period. The kinds of peer pressure that existed also applied to the women who did not participate in the strikes. It would have been hard to go to work when one's roommates were marching about town and attending strikes. The ten-hour petition campaigns of the 1840s were similarly aided by the existence of a tightly knit community factory girls living in dense neighborhoods of boardinghouses. To the extent that women could not have entirely private lives within the boardinghouse, they probably had to conform to group norms, whether these involved speech, clothing, relations with men, or attitudes toward the "Ten-Hour Movement." (Bartlett 38)

The strength of the working girls' community was revealed in the rise of labor protests in early Lowell. Between 1834 and 1836, large numbers of factory girls struck to protest wage cuts as well as to reduce working hours. The early strikes-or "turn-outs" as they were called at the time, were above all strikes by factory girls. In 1836, approximately 180,000 Lowell girls went on strike to protest a proposed reduction in their wages. They marched to numerous mills in an effort to induce others to join them and at an outdoor rally, and they petitioned others to discontinue their labor until the terms of reconciliation were made. (*Boston Evening Transcript*, February 17 and 18, 1834)

One of the major strikes of cotton-factory girls took place in Lowell in 1836. 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 vented to the feelings of her companions in a speech, declaring that it was their duty to resist all

attempts at cutting down wages. This was the first time a woman had spoken in public in Lowell, and the event caused surprise and consternation among her audience. The girls comprised three-fourths of petition signers in 1845. The Lowell Female Labor Reform Association (FLRA) spearheaded the "Ten-Hour Movement" in Lowell. (*Voice of Industry*, December 5 and 19, 1845, July 24, 1846.)

The company boardinghouses were the focal points of the female labor protests in this period. In the mid-1830s, boardinghouse residents predominated among strikers who participated in the workouts. At the Hamilton Company in October 1836, more than 95 percent lived in boardinghouses. Among female boardinghouse residents, 28 percent went on strike; among those living at home, only 12 percent did so. (Moran 35-36) In other words, women living in boardinghouses were more than twice as likely as those living at home to take part in the strike. Similarly, the ten-hour petition campaigns of the 1840s were promoted in numerous meetings held in company boardinghouses. During these meetings, organizers from the Female Labor Reform Association recruited new members and secured additional signatures for their petitions to the state legislature. The boardinghouses thus provided both the participants and the organizational structure of the labor movement in Lowell during these years. (Blewett 39)

Although these protests did not culminate in union organization the strikes were nevertheless collective actions. The mass departure of girls to their rural homes was not simply the sum of hundreds of individual decisions of factory girls who preferred to leave Lowell rather than submit to wage cuts. The works and actions of these working girls make this point clear. In February 1834, eight hundred striking women paraded in Lowell and endorsed the following demands at a mass outdoor rally.

Resolved, That we will not go back into the mills to work  
unless our wages are continued... as they have been.

Resolved, That none of us will go back, unless they  
receive us all as one.

Resolved, That if any have not money enough to carry them  
Home, they shall be supplied. (*Boston Evening Transcript*,  
February 17, 1834)

The strike proved to be brief and failed to reverse the proposed wage reductions. This first strike in Lowell was important not because it failed or succeeded, but simply because it took place at all. In an era when women had to overcome opposition simply to work in the mills, it is remarkable that they would further overstep the accepted middle-class bounds of female propriety by participating in a public protest. The agents of the textile mills certainly considered the turnout as unfeminine thing to do. William Austin, an agent of the Lawrence Company, described these factory girls as “Amazons” in a letter to his company treasurer in Boston.

The factory girls had two principal reasons for the strike. First, the wage cuts undermined the sense of dignity and social equality that was an important element to their Yankee heritage. Second, these wage cuts were seen as an attack on their economic independence. Certainly a prime motive for the strike was outrage at the social implications of the wage cuts. In a statement of principles accompanying the petition, which was circulated among factory workers, girls well expressed their sensibilities that prompted them to protest the wage cuts. Under the title of the “Union is power,” the factory girls circulated a paper. Their present objective, they insisted, was that they wanted to protect their unquestionable rights.

The oppressing hand of avarice would enslave us,

and to gain their object, they gravely tell use of the pressure of the time... If any are in want of assistance, the Ladies will be compassionate and assist them. (*Boston Evening Transcript*, February 18, 1834)

In October 1836, women formed committees within each of the mills to provide strike assistance for those in need. Employers acknowledged the organization and tactical skill of the mill girls. The demand for amnesty, the concern for the welfare of fellow operatives, and the effort to bring out workers in key departments are all indications of the organized, collective nature of these strikes.

In their protest, factory girls gave expression to new values and attitudes, which were clearly the product of their industrial experience. In 1834, for example, a strike leader gave a “flaming Mary Wool stonecraft(sic) speech on the rights of women and the inequities of the marriage.”(*Boston Evening Transcript*, February 17, 1834) Some girls came to see a relation between their treatment as workers and the dominant bourgeois paternalism that affected all women. This understanding was expressed in an open letter to a state legislator who had opposed the enactment of a ten-hour law. In this letter, the mill girls insisted that they at least learned the lesson of being independent human beings. And it was a very satisfying experience being independent rather than being dependent on men. (*Voice of Industry*, March 13, 1846) Factory girls had learned to rely on one another in their daily lives and so came to depend on each other during their labor struggles as well.

The decades during 1800-1840 provide the clues to an understanding of the institutional shape of the later women's organizations. Such organizations were led by middle class women whose self-image, life experiences, and ideology had largely been fashioned and influenced by these early transitional years. The

concerns of middle class women--property rights, franchise and moral uplift--would dominate the women's rights movement. Yet, side by side with it, and at times cooperating together, would grow a number of organizations serving the needs of working women. The Lowell girl's labor union was one of them.

## **VI. Conclusion**

The period 1800-1860 is one in which decisive changes occurred in the status of American women. This era offers essential clues to an understanding of later institutional developments, particularly the shape and nature of the women's rights movement. In the early 19th century, increasing numbers of New England young single women found employment outside the home. Lowell, Massachusetts, a cradle of the American Industrial Revolution, was born in the rush of the waters of the Merrimack River and the froth of its falls. The river provided the necessary waterpower for the 19th century textile mills in Lowell.

Lowell factory owners began to recruit young, single women from the neighboring countryside. The corporations erected boardinghouses to accommodate these recent migrants and established a system of paternalistic regulations to oversee the working girls while they were employed in the mills. The first working experience by the early cotton textile factory girls stemmed from a variety of reasons. Some of the young women sought work in order to contribute to supporting their families, especially for the education of male members, while others worked for personal edification, including further their own education and for personal economic benefits. The mill girls experienced a various conflicts between the two worlds and cultures as they moved from the farming

communities where they grew up to the new urban setting of the mill towns. Facing a new urban economic setting along with the new boardinghouse system, the factory girls experienced cultural conflicts and the necessity of personal adjustment. Confusion, homesickness and sense of loss were serious factors that the factory girls had to overcome in order to survive in the new urban, industrial way of life. The boardinghouse system was particularly important in the initial integration of networking among factory girls. The structure of factory work and the nature of the boardinghouse contributed to the growth of this community. Family and kinship ties as well as friendship among the factory girls and with their neighbors also played a crucial role in overcoming their hardships.

Although young women had worked long hours doing chores on the family farm, millwork was a far cry from the pace and rate of work at home. Millwork also should not be viewed as simply an extension of the traditional family economy as work for women moved outside the home. The mill offered individual self-sufficiency, and enabled women to enjoy urban amenities not available in their rural communities. Throughout this whole process of assimilation, the factory girls as wage earners became more economically and socially independent human beings. The mill factory girl's experience of adaptation in the new urban, industrial setting was both exciting and difficult, satisfying and frustrating. For many who made the choice, it was not the best of both worlds; however, it offered a sense of independence and freedom. Under these new circumstances, the girls began to develop more individualistic attitudes as they escaped from strong parental pressures.

The experiences of the Lowell girls prior to the 1850s presented a fascinating picture of the contradictory impact of industrial capitalism. In the mill factories, women workers shared three problems: low pay, long hours, and changes in the standards and methods of work.

Although women had always worked for long hours, the factory system imposed new hardships. Most striking, women had no control over the rates they charged for their work or the hours they worked; they received a wage determined by a boss, and they were expected to work fixed hours. Mill girls organized themselves into labor-reform groups to crusade for better working conditions and shorter workdays. As technological innovations enabled women to work faster and produce more, mill owners assigned more machines to workers—without raising wages. Repeated labor protests reveal that Lowell factory girls felt the demands of mill employment to be oppressive. At the same time, however, the mills provided girls with work outside of the home and family, thereby offering them an unprecedented opportunity. That they came to challenge employer paternalism was a direct consequence of the increasing opportunities offered to them in these years. The Lowell mills both exploited and liberated women in ways unknown to the pre-industrial political economy. In general, the lives and experiences in the mill town opened up new directions for ordinary American women in early 19th century America.

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Abstract

**Spin Sisters: Works and Lives of “Lowell Girls” in  
Early 19th Century America**

**Chang-Shin Lee**

This study examines the nature and the transformation of the Lowell textile factory in early 19th century America. In New England, the rise of textile manufacturing along the major rivers of Massachusetts created work for a predominantly female labor force. Increasing numbers of young single women migrated into Lowell to participate in the workplace. There were various motivations for young girls to come to the mill factories. Some girls began to work in factories in order to support their families back home, while others had the personal motives, including social, economic and educational benefits. By taking these new jobs the girls chose not only to work outside their homes, but also to leave their families and live in a totally different environment. The mill girls experienced a new urban setting in sharp contrast to the farming communities where they grew up. Along with cultural conflicts, they had to adjust to the new boardinghouse system. In many ways, boardinghouse life provided the social context in which newcomers to Lowell made their first adjustment to urban, industrial life. The “paternalistic controls” established by the boardinghouses replaced the strict controls previously exercised by the mill girls’ yeoman fathers.

Kinship and family ties also played a major role in the young girl's adaptation to an urban economic setting. The continuing bonds

with family and relatives were strengthened by an active correspondence. The mill girls also experienced a sense of sisterhood with the other working girls who shared the happiness and sorrows of their factory lives. The experiences at the mill factory provided a contrast to the impact of industrial capitalism. Factory girls suffered from the exploitation of labor, including long working hours and low pay as well as changes in the standards and methods of work. At the same time, they experienced economic and social independence. These working girls came to form a close community and contributed to the rise of collective labor protesting. The Lowell factory women’s lives and experiences in the textile industry provide a somewhat new perspective in early 19<sup>th</sup> century American society.

**Key words:** Labor Movement, Lowell Girl, New England, Sisterhood, Textile Industry