This photograph of a “doffer girl” was taken about 1915 in the Pacific Mills in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Doffer girls removed sets of bobbins from a machine and put on new empty bobbins. This kind of work would be given to girls considered too young to run a spinning frame or similar device.

Courtesy of the American textile History Museum, Lowell, Massachusetts.

Recollections of a mill worker

Anne Bugbee

Several years ago a small photocopied booklet fell into my hands, with the overwhelming title: *Recollections of a Mill Worker: An Interesting and Comprehensive Review of the Cotton and Woolen Industry of New England for a Period of Nearly Fifty Years, Showing the Development and Growth of these Important Factors in Our History - also Facts and Figures Relating to Hours of Labor, Wages, Cost of Living, etc., of Factory Operatives Since 1859 – compiled and Written by One Who Has Had Practical Experience as a Mill Worker from Childhood.* There was no author listed but scrawled in pencil on the top of the title page was: *Written by my great Grandmother, Mary Palmer.*

Published in 1906, *Recollections of a Mill Worker* is a first-person account of a girl who worked in the mills of North Bennington, where she also lived. In the beginning life in the mills was not so bad – there was a sense of freedom and of mutual respect between owner and laborer. But that all changed in the early 1860s, even in North Bennington, when the mills were no longer locally owned. “Increase production and make more money”
was the new motto, and Mary Palmer does not hesitate to express her opinion on the changes she sees. Her voice is strong and clear.

Here is her story, much of which had to be researched anew because her written account is often oblique and she made few references to herself and her family.

Mary Palmer was born in Ireland about 1846. Her maiden name was Six cotton mills can be counted on this map of North Bennington, a detail from the 1835 Joseph Hinsdill map of the town of Bennington. The map's cartographer prominently labeled his own neighborhood, Hinsdillville. The “burying ground” at lower right is also called the Hinsdillville Cemetery and adjoins the campus of today’s Bennington College.

*Walloomtsack Review* 24
Dundon, which was discovered only from the record of her marriage in Bennington to William Palmer in 1866. The 1880 census discloses that they had three children: John, 13, Willie, 10, and Nellie, 7. At some point Mary and William moved from North Bennington to Pittsfield, Mass., where they were buried.

Throughout her narrative Mary Palmer never mentions the names of the mills in which she worked. She does dedicate her “Recollections” to five of her former employers: Truman Estes, who built and ran the Stone Mill on Paran Creek; P.L. Robinson, treasurer and principal of the Vermont Mills at the headwaters of Paran Creek; Irving Jackson, Nathaniel and Henry Hall, also on Paran Creek below the Stone Mill; and Jeremiah Essex at Irish Corners. All these mills made print cloth and were in North Bennington.

Mary Palmer came to North Bennington with her parents in 1859 and at about the age of 13 she began work in the North Bennington cotton mills. Her parents may have responded to an ad like the one that appeared in the Vermont Gazette on October 13, 1821:

Wanted in the Bennington Cotton Factory several families that can furnish a number of children each. To such constant employ will be given wages paid to the ability of the children.

Children were needed to do the easy unskilled work, and by employing whole families the parents would see to it that the youngsters were diligent and that there was no nonsense. Children could start as young as 6 but the average starting age was 8.

Their hours were 5 a.m. to 6 p.m. At 4:35 a.m. the first bell rang to awaken the workers. The next bell at 5 a.m. called them inside the factory door. At 7 a.m. the bell rang for breakfast, often consisting of bread, molasses, and water. The workers went home to eat and returned at 7:35. At noon the dinner bell rang and the workers went home, to return at 12:35. The last bell rang at 6 p.m. for dismissal, or 7 p.m. in the summer. If these hours sound grueling, remember that most of these workers grew up on farms where the hours were just as long, the work just as hard; but now they were getting paid. This was important, especially for the women and girls who, perhaps for the first and only time in their lives, earned their own money and could spend it as they wished.

Mary’s first job was as a spooler. This meant that she tended a spooling machine that wound the spun thread around the bobbin. It usually took 2 1/2 hours. The spooler started the thread on the bobbin and her job was to make sure it was winding smoothly and evenly.

The girls who did the spooling, each had to spool the yarn spun
by a certain number of frames. It would take two and one half hours to fill the bobbins, and if the girl spooler was expert she could spool it in one hour and a half. She then had one hour to herself and could go out and do as she pleased. There was no asking the boss, either; but when her work was done she was free. . . We read books, wrote letters, crocheted, sewed, tied fringe etc., while at our work. The overseer sometimes spoke to us about it, but if we were good workers, we paid no attention to him.

After a couple of days of learning, Mary was on her own. She was paid $2.75 a week. All the girls in the carding and spinning room were paid the same. The young men who were piecers on mules and card strippers were paid $4 to $4.50 per week. The weaving in a cotton mill was done by older girls and women, who ran four looms and averaged $1 per loom a week. Sometimes if a pair of looms next to them was vacant they would run them during the weaver’s absence.

The weavers were looked upon with admiration by everyone in the mill as it was considered astonishing for a girl to earn a $1 a day.

The mills would shut down on the least occasion. If a holiday occurred on a Thursday they would close for the rest of the week. If the circus came to town the mill would close, mainly because the workers would

This stone mill in North Bennington was originally that of Truman Estes (seen as T. Estes’s Cotton Factory on the map on page 24, where mill girl Mary Palmer worked. Later it became the H. T. Cushman furniture factory, where this photo was taken in 1898, with workers assembled, including several children. Note the water faucet and pail in the center. This is a copy of an older picture. Bennington Museum collection
take off anyway and there were not enough hands to run it. If a long-time employee died the owner was expected to close and if he didn’t he was called “in the language of the help an Old Hog.” The mills always closed for two or three days for a cattle show or county fair. If the owner did not close on the first day then the adult workers would “take him by storm” and demand the time until he gave in, Mary wrote.

**We did not appoint a committee, as is done now to ahem and aha and then bear all of the blame. But all of us went and made a demand for what we wanted, and usually got it.**

Mary remembers many times after the bell had called them to work the girls and boys would go coasting on the hill or slide on the mill pond. In summer they would take off for the fields or go rowing on the pond. They were never discharged for any of those pranks.

**In fact it would have to be something very serious, such as willfully breaking machinery, or destroying the stock or public immorality that a fairly good worker or family of workers would be discharged for.**

In spite of the hard work and low wages the workers were, in Mary’s words, treated with humanity. If it snowed 5 or 6 inches then the factory team of horses was hitched and the women and children were taken to their homes. The workers were not expected to come in after a heavy snowfall until after the roads had been plowed (rolled). It was seldom that a man with

*This postcard view shows the Old Stone House, originally the residence of Truman Estes (1798-1864), located across the road from Estes’s stone mill. During the era of Cushman furniture manufacture, the stone house became a showplace for the Cushman Colonial style, and each room was decorated with sales in mind. Bennington Museum collection*
a family of small children or a homeless man would be dismissed in winter
time. If a worker needed time off they just took it and did not need to ask
permission

In another Mill where I was employed both members of the firm
were non-residents, but one of them was there three or four days
every week and knew the circumstances of every family employed
in the mill. It was a first class, well-equipped cotton mill, contain-
ing, I think, nearly 200 looms. He was very particular with fami-
lies living on his ground; would not permit drunken, immoral or
low families to live there if he knew of it. While he was not at all
familiar with the help he was always willing to assist an honest,
struggling family – especially where there was an invalid father or
widow who had small children. I have personal knowledge of his
going to the overseer where the children were employed and tell-
ing him at the first opportunity to advance those children to some
work in order that they could earn more money.

Mary stresses the honesty and fairness of her employer:

In those days the overseer could not send to the Old Country
for his relatives to put them on to the pet jobs. Neither could he
work his sister-in-law, his brother-in-law, his cousins, his uncles
and his aunts into all of the good paying easy jobs. The mill
owner gave the preferences to his old, faithful, employees if they
were capable.

Mary was fully aware that mill workers of the present day (1906) will
say that the situations she describes may have been true in one or two mills
but Mary insists that it was true in all mills at that time prior to 1859 and
until 1862, especially small mills in small towns. The manufacturer was
interested in his employees and treated them as equals. He was satisfied with
reasonable profit and didn’t need the luxuries that are desired today.

. . . the manufacturers and businessmen of today are ambitious
to become multimillionaires – own yachts, maintain one or two
lady friends in luxury and buy husbands for their daughters
from the dissipated, debauched nobility of Europe. Their “am-
bitions” in other directions do not allow them time to become
interested in their employees, who have and are creating all their
wealth. If we express dissatisfaction, why, we are told that labor
is noble, and man was made to earn his bread by the sweat of his
brow. That is, of course, the working people who have to do so.
It surely has no reference to them.
It is not only the change in the mill owners’ attitudes that Mary decries but it is the change she sees in the attitude of the workers themselves. When she started in the mills in 1859 the workers were proud of their work and skills but by 1906 the workers lost that pride and felt inferior.

By the way, what has become of that good class of people – the old time Yankee who cringed to no man because he happened to have more money than he had? He, of course, had to give his strength or skill in exchange for money, but he considered it a fair deal and never for a moment looked upon himself as an inferior. . . . I find none of that class of people in the mills at the present day. . . . The writer is not surprised at their absence, as they were too independent to submit to the tyranny that is practiced in the mills now.

Mary Palmer’s narrative does not concentrate only on life in the mills. In great detail she discusses how the workers lived comfortably in spite of small wages. A single man or woman, without family, boarded out with local families. They were provided with board, washing and supper. The men paid $2.25 per week and the women paid $1.50, both including washing. Mary does not say why the women paid less but perhaps they were expected to help serve the supper or help with the washing up. The mill owners built small houses on their “grounds” which they rented to the workers.

The houses for working people were not built to ape the houses of the wealthy that can afford servants to keep them in order – with parlor, sitting room, dining room all opening on from each other and a large useless hall and it takes a small fortune to keep them warm and comfortable in winter time.

The workers’ houses, in the 1850s, were single dwellings one and a half or two and a half stories. They were solidly built with the front door opening into a living room or sometimes a small hall called an entry. The living room provided plenty of light and measured about 15 by 18 feet:

It was used as a kitchen in winter with stove pipe going through upstairs, which would contain three or perhaps four good size rooms. They were comfortably warmed from the kitchen stove. Every house had a summer or back kitchen, with shed attached. The stove was placed in the back kitchen during the summer, and the front room was kept cool for dining, sitting and general living room. The floor was always painted with good, durable paint and with a braided rug or two on it. I assure you it was very comfortable and nice looking. On one side was a stairway and
cellarway and one or nearly always two rooms opening from the other side, which were used as bedrooms.

If there were grownup children in the house, the front room was used as a parlor to allow them to entertain suitors in privacy. It was simply furnished with a rag rug, a table displaying the family's treasured books, the Bible center stage, a couple of rocking chairs and maybe one or two pictures on the wall. Mary states that people in 1910 would find such a house very poor looking. But you could get the whole inside whitewashed for $1. The mother would wash the windows and floor and the house would be clean.

There were no carpets or lumbering upholstered furniture for the house mother to be obliged to take outside and beat the dust out of every few weeks. The mother of a family of workers is far more overworked now than she was then. With all their big wages and stylish furnishings of the present day I find none, or very few of the working people who can afford a servant to assist their mother in her declining days.

This simple house had plenty of living and sleeping space for a family of eight adults, all heated with one stove. The rent for such a house would be from $2.50 to $3 a month, and smaller homes rented for $1.50 a month. Mary assures the reader that she is not quoting the prices for one town but for all country towns. Wood was the chief fuel and could be bought for $1 to $3 a cord for the best. Doctor’s fees were 50 cents a visit, including medicine that he carried in his valise. In 1906 the patient goes to the drug store and pays $1 for the prescription and another $1 for the medicine.

I cannot see but we were doctored and cured, too, as well as we are now. At any rate, we were and are as healthy and strong as people of the present generation. We did not imagine we must have a trained nurse, but nursed our families through typhoid fever or any other sickness. There was always kind neighbors who were perfectly willing to assist and would feel offended if offered anything in payment for their services, as we were supposed to reciprocate when affliction came to our neighbors’ homes.

A death in the family would bring relatives and neighbors to prepare the body. Only then would the undertaker be called to measure the body for a coffin, which would be lined in mull cotton or silk. A burial plot large enough for four or five graves could be purchased for $10 or $15. The family would ride in carriages ($2 each) to the cemetery and the rest of the mourners in wagons. If the deceased was a long-time and respected resident
of the town or long employee of a mill, the owners and merchants would provide and pay for the carriages for the mourners. Funeral expenses were the responsibility of the family, there were no insurance agencies or benevolent societies. Only in extreme cases, like the death of the bread winner, would a collection be taken up by the mill workers to help the family.

Quite in contrast to the present time [1906] when with comparatively good wages it is not unusual to take up a collection to assist the household at this time. It is certainly astonishing to see the nicely furnished homes where the parlor furniture alone cost perhaps $200 so ill-prepared to meet the expenses of sickness and death.

In those days clothing was made to last. In summer women wore shoes called “Congress gaiters,” high-heeled soft leather with elastic inserts at the ankles. In winter and wet weather morocco leather high-laced shoes were worn. Both types of shoes would last at least two seasons and cost $1.25. Boys and girls went barefoot in the summer, and in the winter wore durable calfskin shoes, with heavy hand-knit wool socks. These shoes shed water if walking in the rain or snow. With a little mending, the shoes were expected to last two or three years or were passed on to the next child to wear. They cost $1.50. For warmth, double shawls, costing between $5 to $10, took the place of coats. In the summer silk shawls or mantillas were the vogue. These cost between $3 and $5 and with care would last many years.

Clothing was more expensive than now, but styles did not change so often and when a good article was purchased it lasted for years if properly cared for. A heavy silk cost $4 per yard or more, still I knew several mill girls that would save their wages and buy a silk dress at that price. Then by having a nice hat or bonnet occasionally, she was a well-dressed girl for the next five years at least.

Children under 14 wore simple dresses. Boys had sturdy pants from material purchased at the mill by the yard and made at home, with a blouse-like top. Mothers also made the little girls’ dresses – no trim, which was expensive – out of cotton. Both boys and girls whose parents could afford the cost of education wore large gingham aprons with sleeves to school. At the age of 8 when they went into the mills these aprons were shed. Boys did not wear vests or jackets until they were 17.

Small girls went to church in white sun bonnets or flats that were somewhat like the sailor hat of today [1906], but a larger brim to shade them from the sun. There was no trimming on the hat and a narrow band encircled the crown. . . Ladies wore bonnets.
for church or social gatherings. In those days they were expensive, too, costing from $2 to $10, but they were annually cleaned and retrimmed and were as good as new at little expense. The author is unable to quote prices on men’s clothing, but knows that the sterner sex had respectable suits for Sunday and holiday occasions; in fact it was a matter of note that mill workers were better dressed than were persons employed in other pursuits at that time.

The cost of provisions was, Mary admitted, not something she paid attention to because she was too young. She quotes the prices of only those things she can remember:

Flour could be bought for $4 or $4.50 per barrel. Potatoes sold from 20 to 35 cents per bushel. Good butter was obtained for from 16 to 35 cents per pound. Eggs ranged in prices from 12 to 18 cents per dozen. Beef could be bought for $3 per hundred weight, either by the carcass or quarter, which was the usual way of buying meat for the families use during the winter. . . .I know that our family always had plenty of good wholesome food and my parents were able to save a little money each year out of our wages.

There was plenty for the young people to do. Kitchen dances were often held. The young people would gather at a house, the kitchen table would be removed and dancing would commence, the music provided by a local fiddler. The boys would pay the fiddler any amount from 50 cents to $1 for the evening. Dances ended before midnight because the workers had to be at the mill at 5 a.m. the next morning. Public balls were attended by young men and their “best girls.” Tickets were $1 and supper was included. To invite a young woman to a ball meant that the young man’s intentions were serious.

We attended picnics, festivals and the county fair, but they were not expensive. Sleigh ride expenses were always borne by our employer, besides being treated to free lectures, and having a debating club or lyceum at the academy. Many thriving towns maintained a free library.

Weddings were very simple. The bride had a new outfit but it was serviceable so she could wear it many times for Sunday best and other important occasions. Mary finds fault with:

“the expensive and flimsy wedding gown that nearly all brides of today expect to have costing $50 or more and entirely useless
after the wedding except to wear to a ball, which she seldom att-
tends after becoming a wife.”

The minister came to the bride’s house and her family and one or two
close friends witnessed the ceremony. After the ceremony the cake, made
by the bride or her mother, was passed around. Wedding guests did not
bring presents nor were they expected. There were no presents except from
the parents. The bride's parents would give bedding and the groom's a cook
stove and kitchen utensils. Household furniture was purchased piece by
piece as they could afford it:

Some there were who had not saved money enough to furnish
their new homes, but there was no installment houses and they
had to get along with little until they could pay for things.

If there was a honeymoon, it was spent at a friend’s house. Get mar-
rried on Saturday and go back to work on Monday was the usual course of
events. No one wanted to lose a day's pay.

Such was the mode of living of all mill workers and laboring
people in general in 1861, the beginning of the great Civil War. I
was a mill worker then and have thus been employed at intervals
since I am a mill worker still. I often ask myself the question: Is
our condition much improved? I am fully aware that there are
more educational advantages for young men and women in the
country than there was then. I know that labor’s hours are short-
er, too. I also know that in order to keep our work and make a
living wage we are in a perpetual grind from the time we begin
in the morning until the mill closes at night.

The outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 made life difficult for the mill
workers in North Bennington. Some of the mills closed when the call went
out for troops and others ran out of what stock they had on hand and had
to close. Wages dropped and the workers were forced either to look for jobs
on farms, and by autumn:

Many of them were compelled to enlist in order to maintain
their families. In the town where I lived . . . the First Vermont
Cavalry was composed of many of these men, several of whom
deserved promotion for bravery, but they had no education to fit
them for it, having worked in the mills since they were children.

By December of 1861 many of the mills reopened. Because of the war
the manufacturers anticipated a demand for woolen and cotton goods to
outfit the Union Army. The increased demand, however, did not benefit the
workers. Wages were cut and were at their lowest. Cotton weavers who formerly were paid 15 to 25 cents per cut of 45 yards were paid 8 to 10 cents for cuts of 50 or more yards.

Labor was cheap. I think it was in the winter of 1863-4 that we realized that we were not getting our share, as we had been working for starvation wages during the past two years. The manufacturer was getting rich out of our toil, so our pay was gradually increased. In 1864-5 a good weaver could earn from $36 to $55 per month . . . ordinary laborers $2 or more a day.

Wages were good in the mid-1860s but the hours were still long and the manufacturers made a great deal of money. In 1864-5 the workers in the Massachusetts mills of Andover, Lawrence, and Lowell agitated for fewer hours and the 11-hour day came into being. But this was a double edged sword. The hours were shorter and the amount of work doubled.

For instance: Weavers were compelled to operate each others’ looms during the dinner hour; that is, a four or six loom weaver would have to run the next weaver’s four or six looms while she took her dinner or half hour off. When she returned she had to do the same, in order to give the other weaver her time for dinner.

The humanitarianism of the mill owner toward his workers was gone. The mills were owned by strangers who did not live in the towns where their mills were located. They did not know their workers nor did they care how they lived. These owners did not become involved in the running of the mills, that was left to the supervisor. Most of the mills ran until 9 or 10 o’clock at night. Young children had to stay as well. Overtime was paid, which circumvented the 11-hour day rule and kept within the law. But the overtime pay was minimal and not the time and a half of the twenty-first century.

If an employee refused to work, discharge followed. As wages had been high for some time, emigrants from other countries came flocking to the United States. Skilled and unskilled labor from England, Scotland and Wales, Ireland and Germany, to say nothing of the influx that came from Canada, in order to get a slice of the big wages (which they had a right to do) made help plenty.

During the Civil War years and for several years afterwards the manufacture of cotton was so profitable that many factories were built in the
hopes of getting in on the boom. It was just a matter of time for the market to glut and mills closed and wages dropped. But the price of rent, food, and fuel did not decline.

There was no other way for the mill worker to make living wage except operating more machines, cotton weavers on print cloth running from six to eight to ten looms, where formerly they had earned a good living operating but four. Warper-tenders who for the past few years had received $5.00 or more per week for running one warper, was now obliged to run two for $6.00 or $6.50 per week. It was the same for spoolers, spinners, piecers and all operatives.

Mary Palmer ends her narrative by placing the blame for the low pay and poor working conditions squarely on the mill owners’ shoulders. The new breed of owners were, she says, out for profit and get-rich-quick ideas. If they found they were running out of money their solution was to reduce wages and increase production. As a result, skilled workers left the mills and looked for jobs in more remunerative fields. It is little wonder that the textile workers and skilled mechanics of all kinds, formed unions to protect their well being and rights.