

Bells, Boardinghouses, and Backwater: A Millhand's Glossary

If you were a young woman going to Lowell, Massachusetts, to work in a cotton mill, what would it be like? You would be entering a different world from that of your Vermont home. Milltowns like Lowell would probably be larger than your home town. The mill buildings might be the biggest you had ever seen.

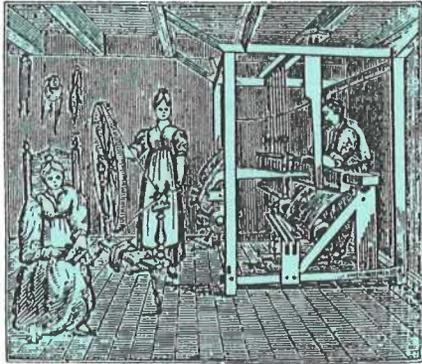
At home, you probably lived with a father and brothers. In the boardinghouse, there would be a matron to run things and many young women like yourself, but no men.

At work, you would always hear the deafening clatter of the looms. The fast movements of workers and machines might confuse you at first. At home you knew about hand spinning and weaving, but in the mill you would see rooms of women running machines that combed or spun or wove cotton. They did the same task, day after day. And so would you.

The bells you heard would be factory bells, calling you to work or eat, not the church bells of your Vermont village. Also, some words you heard would be new to you.



Cotton mills in Lowell. Large windows let in the light. The narrow towers on the outside hold stairs. Look for the belfry with the mill bell. Courtesy of the Museum of American Textile History.



Before the mills, cloth was made at home.

Millhand - Any person, male or female, who did physical labor in a mill. Women worked the machines. Men unloaded raw cotton from the trains and repaired machines.

Mill - A building with machinery for making things. A cotton mill had machines for carding or combing cotton fiber. Other machines spun these fibers into yarn. Looms then wove the yarn into cloth. Each was done on a separate floor of the mill.

A cotton mill was powered by water and so was built along a river. A mill was hot in the summer, cold in the winter, and noisy all the time. Dust from the cotton fibers filled the air.

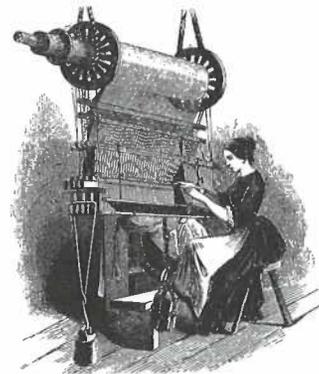
Doff - To remove a full spool or bobbin of yarn from a spinning machine, and put an empty one in its place. Younger women often worked as doffers.

Spare Hand - A part-time worker who took the place of one who was sick. Spare hands earned less than full-time workers. In mill slang, a “spare hand’s chance” meant a poor chance or no chance at all.

Turn Out - To leave the mill in protest. This was one way that workers showed they were unhappy with work and wanted changes. Workers might protest lowered wages or the firing of another worker. When they “turned out,” they risked losing their jobs.

Backwater - When rivers rose in the spring, water often backed up against the waterwheel that powered a mill, bringing it to a stop. When this happened, the mills were closed until the water level fell again.

The Ten Hour Movement - Millhands worked twelve or thirteen hours a day, six days a week, all year long. They had only three holidays: the Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, and a spring fast day. For many years, they tried to get mill owners to cut their workday to ten hours. Finally, in 1873, a ten-hour work day became law.



Weaving on a power loom. Courtesy of the Museum of American Textile History.

Blacklist - A worker who caused trouble or complained might be fired and put on a blacklist. This was a list of people whom mill owners would refuse to hire.