

from
P L E A S U R E S O F F A C T O R Y L I F E
1 8 4 0

----- *Sarah G. Bagley* -----

Sarah Bagley arrived in Lowell, Massachusetts from her small New Hampshire hometown in 1836, to work in the Lowell textile mills. This essay was her first contribution to the *Lowell Offering*, a newspaper produced by the young female workers. Increasingly outspoken in her view of the mills, she was later the editor of a labor newspaper and active in the first labor unions.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY : Drawing Conclusions

How does this essay suggest the ways in which the “factory girls” created a sense of community among themselves? Why might such a sense of community have been important?

Pleasures, did you say? What! pleasures in *factory* life? From many scenes with which I have become acquainted, I should judge that the pleasures of factory life were like “Angels visits, few and far between”—said a lady whom fortune had placed above labor...I could not endure such a constant clatter of machinery, that I could neither speak to be heard, nor think to be understood, even by myself. And then you have so little leisure—I could not bear such a life of fatigue. Call it by any other name rather than pleasure.

But stop, friend, we have some few things to offer here, and we are quite sure our views of the matter are just,—having been engaged as an operative the last four years. Pleasures there are, even in factory life; and we have many, known only to those of like employment. To be sure it is not so convenient to converse in the mills with those unaccustomed to them; yet we suffer no inconvenience among ourselves. But, aside from the talking, where can you find a more pleasant place for contemplation? There all the powers of the mind are made active by our animating exercise; and having but one kind of labor to perform, we need not give all our thoughts to that, but leave them measurably free for reflection on other matters.

The subjects for pleasurable contemplation, while attending to our work, are numerous and various. Many of them are immediately around us. For example: In the mill we see displays of the wonderful power of the mind. Who can closely examine all the movements of the complicated, curious machinery, and not be led to the reflection, that the mind is boundless, and is destined to rise higher and still higher; and that it can accomplish almost any thing on which it fixes its attention!

In the mills, we are not so far from God and nature, as many persons might suppose. We cultivate, and enjoy much pleasure in cultivating flowers and plants. A large and beautiful variety of plants is placed around the walls of the rooms, giving them more the appearance of a flower garden than a workshop. It is there we inhale the sweet perfume of the rose, the lily, and geranium; and, with them, send the sweet incense of sincere gratitude to the bountiful Giver of these rich blessings. And who can live with such a rich and pleasant source of instruction opened to him, and not be wiser and better, and consequently more happy.

Another great source of pleasure is, that by becoming operatives, we are often enabled to assist aged parents who have become too infirm to provide for themselves; or perhaps to educate some orphan brother or sister, and fit them for future usefulness. And is there no pleasure in all this? no pleasure in relieving the distressed and removing their heavy burdens? And is there no pleasure in rendering ourselves by such acts worthy the confidence and respect of those with whom we are associated?

Another source is found in the fact of our being acquainted with some person or persons that reside in almost every part of the country. And through these we become familiar with some incidents that interest and amuse us wherever we journey; and cause us to feel a greater interest in the scenery, inasmuch as there are gathered pleasant associations about every town, and almost every house and tree that may meet our view.

Let no one suppose that the 'factory girls' are without guardian. We are placed in the care of overseers who feel under moral obligations to look after our interests; and, if we are sick, to acquaint themselves with our situation and wants; and, if need be, to remove us to the Hospital, where we are sure to have the best attendance, provided by the benevolence of our Agents and Superintendents.

In Lowell, we enjoy abundant means of information, especially in the way of public lectures. The time of lecturing is appointed to suit the convenience of the operatives; and sad indeed would be the picture of our Lyceums, Institutes, and scientific Lecture rooms, if all the operatives should absent themselves.

And last, though not least, is the pleasure of being associated with the institutions of religion, and thereby availing ourselves of the Library, Bible Class, Sabbath School, and all other means of religious instruction. Most of us, when at home, live in the country, and therefore cannot enjoy these privileges to the same extent; and many of us not at all. And surely we ought to regard these as sources of pleasure.

Source: "Pleasures of Factory Life" by Sarah Bagley in *Lowell Offering*, December 1840 (Lowell, Mass., 1840).

THINK THROUGH HISTORY : ANSWER

Students may answer that the essay shows how the “factory girls” created a sense of community for themselves in a number of ways. The girls, many of whom were from rural areas, derived pleasure from meeting new people and learning about other places. They derived satisfaction from earning money, which also helped their family members. They participated in religious activities and public lectures together.

Students may argue that this sense of community was important for young women who were away from home, working at dull and sometimes dangerous industrial jobs. Students may also argue that this sense of community was important for the girls as workers, so that they could exercise collective influence to improve their working conditions and wages. They may note that this account is overly rosy; “mill girls” had to work long hours for low wages.