Factory Life in the 19th Century

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*The primary author is the individual who drafted the first version of this section; a section that could have been modified since it was originally published.*

**Women and Children vs. Men**

Many books, plays, and even some movies have been created to show how horrible life working in factories were for women and children. Why is it that you don't hear much about how horrendous factory life was for men? The answer is quite simple. There were more women and children who worked in factories than there were men. Women and children were cheap labor. They did not have to be paid as much as men and were, therefore, more likely to get hired by the factory owners. Men were still hired by many factories, but women and children were usually preferred.

Urbanization was a big part of this time period. Many families who had worked on the fields and helped the country agriculturally picked up and moved to the cities. This was because the cities provided more job opportunities, and therefore, more money to be made by the growing population. Many parents would send their children off to work in factories even though they knew how the working conditions were in the factories. A child at the factories would have food and clothing provided for them, more income to support the child's family, and one less mouth to feed.

**Meals**

The type of meals that the workers in factories would receive depended on the workhouse they worked for and also the time period at which they were employed. With time, the meals, on the whole, tended to get better. At some factories, workers would only get two very meager meals a day with a thirty minute break to eat these meals. Only two of the seven meals would have a source of meat. At other factories, the workers would be provided with three meals a day and six days of the week meals would contain meat. Some factories even let the workers have an hour break to consume their meals, but this was usually for supper. Bread, cheese, tea, and gruel (another word for porridge, though usually watered down) were staples on many factory menus. Though some factories provided more food, it usually wasn't much more. One consistent factor in factory meals was that a worker's portions were measured out. They would receive no more than what they were allotted for the day. Most of the time, the allotted amount of food wasn't very high in quality.
Working Hours

In the late 18th and early 19th century, many workers had to work a twelve hour day with breaks few and far in-between. Many days began at either six or seven o’clock with the working hours ending at six or seven o’clock at night with an hour free before the workers must be in bed. Some factories, however, made their employees work up to 14, or even 16, hours a day. Many workers dreamed of the 8-8-8 schedule. Eight hours of work, eight hours of leisure, and eight hours to sleep. This did not come true in the 19th century, but in 1847 the Ten Hour Act came into place making sure that women and children only had to work ten hour days. At the following link you can find a daily schedule of workers after the Poor Law: [http://www.workhouses.org.uk/life/routine.shtml](http://www.workhouses.org.uk/life/routine.shtml)

Protests

During the 19th century, many protests were made in America about the working conditions of those working in factories. Protests were had that children should have to be of a certain age before being allowed to work in the factories. Many young children would injure themselves working with the machines. Sometimes these injuries would be fatal. The Factory Act (1833) prohibited factory work by children under the age of nine, provided two hours of daily education, and effectively created a 12-hour day in the mills until the Ten Hours Act (1847). Some other Acts that were achieved by successful protesting was the Mines Act of 1842 which banned children and women from working in the mines.

In 1836 there was a strike in Lowell by the Lowell factory girls. Many of the women who worked there refused to work because their wages were lowered about a dollar a week, which in those times, was a pretty big deal. Sadly, this particular protest did not increase the women’s wages back to what they were, and in fact were still being cut down, nor did the protest better their working conditions. The leaders of this protest were punished, some were even made to move out of the boarding house that was provided for the workers to live in.

Punishment and Precautionary Measures

If it was not bad enough that workers had to work up to sixteen hour days, finishing their work or risk not being paid, but they were also encouraged in a brutal manner to do their work quickly. Lashings were given to those who worked to slow. A worker who looked too tired would be dunked in a vat of cold water. If a window was broken, or if someone tried to run away, they could be put in prison for a time. Talking was not permitted in many factories, and those caught doing so would often be whipped or beaten as discouragement to others. Those who looked like they might run away had irons placed around their ankles. At some factories, the punishments were not this severe.
Works Consulted


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Photo Caption: Tintype of two workers from the Lowell, Massachusetts fabric mill, c. 1870.


