

Thomas Dublin has recently published book "Women at Work"

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Women leaving home to seek work, earn income and live an independent life is a phenomenon as current as today's front page, but the trend actually began more than 150 years ago according to a University of California, San Diego historian.

Thousands of farm girls packed their bags and went off to seek their modest fortune in the budding textile mills of New England ~s long ago as the late 1820's, says Thomas Dublin in his recently published book "Women at Work" (Columbia University Press, 1979).

As agriculture in the New England States waned, the daughters of middle class farmers would head for the excitement of city life in the huge, mechanized new mills in cities such as Lowell, Massachusetts, where Dublin researched countless records, letters and documents for his book.

"The women who worked in Lowell did so because they wanted to earn their own money and be part of the culture and excitement of city life, not because they had to support their families back on the farm," says Dublin.

The working conditions were harsh by today's standards-12 hour workdays, six days a week, for 60 cents a day. The women, many in their late teens, were expected to live in company owned boarding houses, attend church on Sunday, and conduct themselves within the limitations of the era's strict moral code.

"Nevertheless," Dublin points out, "They seemed delighted with their freedom and economic independence. They seldom complained about their jobs in the letters I read."

There were some differences between the women millworkers and today's working woman, however. None of the women in the mill were married. They were almost all young women who would work for a couple of years or so then find a husband. Also, there was no hope for advancement into managerial positions. These were held exclusively by men.

And though the women were accepting of the arduous working conditions of the day, they were not docile when they believed they had legitimate grievances. When they felt their wages were being reduced, either through company fiscal decisions or by the influx of immigrant Irish women who would work for lower pay, the women went out on strike.

"The sporadic strikes of the 1820s and 1830s gave way to continuous and coordinated efforts throughout New England in repeated campaigns to petition for the reduction of the hours of labor in the mills," writes Dublin. "Women played a leading role in this broader labor struggle, and only in this movement did the full implications of the changing consciousness of women workers become evident."

Writing about "Women at Work" in the magazine "The Nation" reviewer Milton Cantor said: "Women at work" is not simply one more study of mill operatives in pre-Civil War Lowell. ...Of the many books about Lowell's operatives, only Dublin's perceives the indissoluble relationship of consciousness and material reality. He has explored this history with better judgement and more sensitivity toward the common life of Lowell's female labor force than any other scholar of our day."

Dublin is an assistant professor of history who has been at UC San Diego since 1976. He graduated from Harvard in 1968 and earned his Ph.D. from Columbia in 1975.

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