

# Lucy Larcom, Working in a Lowell Mill



**ABOUT THE READING** Workers in the Lowell, Massachusetts, textile mills were mostly young women. One of these young women was Lucy Larcom, who began working in the mills at age 11. Later in her life Larcom wrote about her years in Lowell. Below is an excerpt from her autobiography, *A New England Girlhood*.

## VOCABULARY

**bobbins** thread holders

**frolicking** playing

**ploughed** plowed

**evaded** avoided

**unceasing** unending



*As you read think about how Larcom adapted to the regulations of mill work.*

I went to my first day's work in the mill with a light heart. The novelty of it made it seem easy, and it really was not hard just to change the **bobbins** on the spinning-frames every three-quarters of an hour or so, with half a dozen other little girls who were doing the same thing. When I came back at night, the family began to pity me for my long, tiresome day's work, but I laughed and said, "Why, it is nothing but fun. It is just like play."

And for a while it was only a new amusement; I liked it better than going to school and "making believe" I was learning when I was not. And there was a great deal of fun mixed with it. We were not occupied more than half the time. The intervals were spent **frolicking** around the spinning-frames, teasing and talking to the older girls, or entertaining ourselves with games and stories in a corner, or exploring, with the overseer's permission, the mysteries of the carding-room, the dressing room, and the weaving-room.

The newness of the job made it seem fun to Larcom at first.

Source: *A New England Girlhood* by Lucy Larcom. Peter Smith Publishers, 1889.

I never cared much for machinery. The buzzing and hissing of pulleys and rollers and spindles and flyers around me often grew tiresome. . . But in a room below us we were sometimes allowed to peer in through a sort of blind door at the great water-wheel that carried the works of the whole mill. It was so huge that we could only watch a few of its spokes at a time, and part of its dripping rim, moving with a slow, measured strength through the darkness that shut it in. . .

**In some mills, one huge water-wheel powered all the machines in the mill.**



*After working in the mill for a while, Larcom returned to school.*

When I took my next three months at the grammar school, everything there was changed, and I too was changed. The teachers were kind and thorough in their instruction, and my mind seemed to have been **ploughed** up during that year of work, so that knowledge took root in it easily. It was a great delight to me to study, and at the end of the three months the master told me that I was prepared for the high school.

But alas! I could not go. The little money I could earn—one dollar a week, besides the price of my board—was needed in the family, and I must return to the mill. . .

**The girls lived on company property. Part of their pay was kept by the company to pay for their lodging.**

The printed regulations forbade us to bring books into the mill, so I made my windowseat into a small library of poetry, pasting its side all over with newspaper clippings. . .

**Doing the same kind of work again and again could become boring, so many girls would paste reading materials up on the walls around them.**

Some of the girls could not believe that the Bible was meant to be counted among the forbidden books. We all thought that the Scriptures had a right to go wherever we went, and that if we needed them anywhere, it was at our work. I **evaded** the law by carrying some leaves from a torn Testament in my pocket. . .

Still, we did not call ourselves ladies. We did not forget that we were working girls, wearing coarse

aprons suitable to our work, and that there was some danger of our becoming drudges. I know that sometimes the confinement of the mill became very wearisome to me. In the sweet June weather I would lean far out of the window, and try not to hear the **unceasing** clash of the sound inside. Looking away to the hills, my whole stifled being would cry out, "Oh, that I had wings!"

**WHAT DID YOU LEARN?**

1. How did Larcom feel about mill work at first?

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2. In general, do you think that Larcom was pleased that she had worked in a mill? Explain your position and provide examples from the text to support it.

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