

Lucy Larcom was lucky. They didn't chain children to machines where she worked. But such things did happen in the United States! And that's one reason why certain jobs aren't open to young people today. Child labor laws forbid hiring children under fourteen. Why?

The answer goes back to the 1800s, when children often worked long hours in factories and on farms. In some factories children were even chained to their machines.

By today's standards, such practices seem barbaric. But in those days, most people lived on farms and were used to working long hours. Small children were expected to do their share as soon as they were able.

One of those children was Lucy Larcom, born in Beverly, Massachusetts, in 1824. The death of Lucy's father forced her mother to look for work. She decided to move the family to Lowell, a textile mill town.

*The mill owners in Lowell were trying something new—a factory town where workers would be both well-treated and well-educated. There was something else unusual, too, about the “Lowell experiment.” All the workers were girls. While at Lowell, they were offered a free education. But let Lucy tell it in her words, from her book, *A New England Childhood*. The year is 1835.*

It was not in my mother's nature to closely calculate costs, and in this way there came to be a continually increasing leak in the family budget. The older members of the family did everything they could, but it was not enough. I heard it said one day, in a distressed tone, “The children will have to leave school and go into the mill.”

There was much discussion between my

mother and sisters before this was positively decided. The mill-agent did not want to take us two little girls, but consented on condition that we attend school the full number of months prescribed each year. I, the younger one, was then between eleven and twelve years old.

I listened to all that was said about it, afraid that I should not be permitted to do the work. . . . I thought it would be a pleasure to feel that I was not a burden or expense to anybody. So I went to my first day's work with a light heart. The novelty of it made it seem easy. I just had to change the bobbins on the spinning-frames every three quarters of an hour, with half a dozen other girls who were doing the same thing. . . . I never cared much for machinery. The buzzing and hissing and whizzing of pulleys and rollers and spindles and flyers around me often grew tiresome. It was not the right sort of life for a child, but we were happy in the knowledge that our employment was only to be temporary.

At the end of the three months the master told me that I was prepared for high school. But 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. It was a severe disappointment.

I began to think about life rather seriously for a girl of 12 or 13. What was I here for? What could I make of myself? Must I allow myself to be carried along with the current, and do just what everybody else did? No: I knew I should not do that.

In the older times it was seldom said to little girls, as it always had been said to boys, that they ought to have some definite plan—

what to be and do when they were grown up. There was usually but one path open before them: To become wives and housekeepers.

But girls, as well as boys, must often have been aware of their own special talents. They too must have desired to make use of their individual powers. When I was growing up, girls had already begun to be encouraged to do so. We were often told that it was our duty to develop any talent we might possess, or at least to learn how to do some one thing which the world needed.

Lucy Larcom was fortunate. The girls and women at Lowell were encouraged to develop their talents. They wrote and published their own magazines. It was at Lowell that Lucy decided she would become a writer.

In 1846 Lucy moved west to Illinois where she graduated from college. Upon her return to Massachusetts in 1852, she taught, edited magazines for young people, and published poetry.

The Lowell experiment lasted only until the 1840s. Elsewhere, child workers seldom had the chance to go to school. With no education, they faced a lifetime of working at unskilled jobs.

CHECK YOUR READING

- 1. Today's child labor laws forbid children**
 - A with incomes to work
 - B with handicaps to work
 - C under fourteen to work
- 2. In the early 1800s people thought that children working long hours was**
 - A only sensible
 - B barbaric
 - C humiliating
- 3. Lucy's mother had to look for work because she**
 - A had lost her husband
 - B had to support her parents
 - C needed expensive medicines
- 4. The mill owners in Lowell wanted their workers to**
 - A work longer hours
 - B be well educated
 - C stop striking for more pay
- 5. Lucy felt that by going to work she'd be**
 - A pulling her own weight
 - B getting out of housework
 - C looked up to by her friends
- 6. When Lucy went to work she was almost**
 - A ten years old
 - B fifteen years old
 - C twelve years old
- 7. Even as a child, Lucy sensed the injustice done to girls by**
 - A not encouraging their talents
 - B forcing them to be so polite
 - C not letting them work more
- 8. When Lucy couldn't go to high school she decided to**
 - A give up school forever
 - B accept a better factory job
 - C give her life some direction
- 9. While she was at Lowell, Lucy decided to become a**
 - A weaver
 - B writer
 - C lawyer
- 10. The Lowell experiment was unique. Elsewhere child workers**
 - A were given no education
 - B worked at unskilled labor
 - C Both A and B

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