The Women in the Mills

They seldom saw a sunrise, a sunset, or daylight.

The women who worked in the mills of Fall River in the 19th century, spent long days in the shadows of the granite structures. Their hours were from 7 in the morning until 7 at night, six days a week, without holidays.

Their lives were dominated by the mills.

The factory bells signaled them to wake up, to work, to sleep. Many lived in tenement property owned by the mills, and their wages came in the form of trade at the company owned variety stores.

Their husbands often worked in the mills, too, and in many instances they brought their children with them for "small help" was needed, also.

The women worked not through choice but necessity.

While one in every five women throughout the country was employed as this century began, the ratio in Fall River was 45 out of every 100.

The textile industry River representative mocked "enlightened Massachusetts for failing to respond to the plight of unorganized women who worked longer hours within the mills than the men who constructed them."

The official "company view" was that children were not desired in the mills. An agent of the Troy Mill had observed in response to a question that "Young children are unprofitable in almost every branch of labor. It is the practice to keep them out of factories as long as the importunities of parents can be resisted."

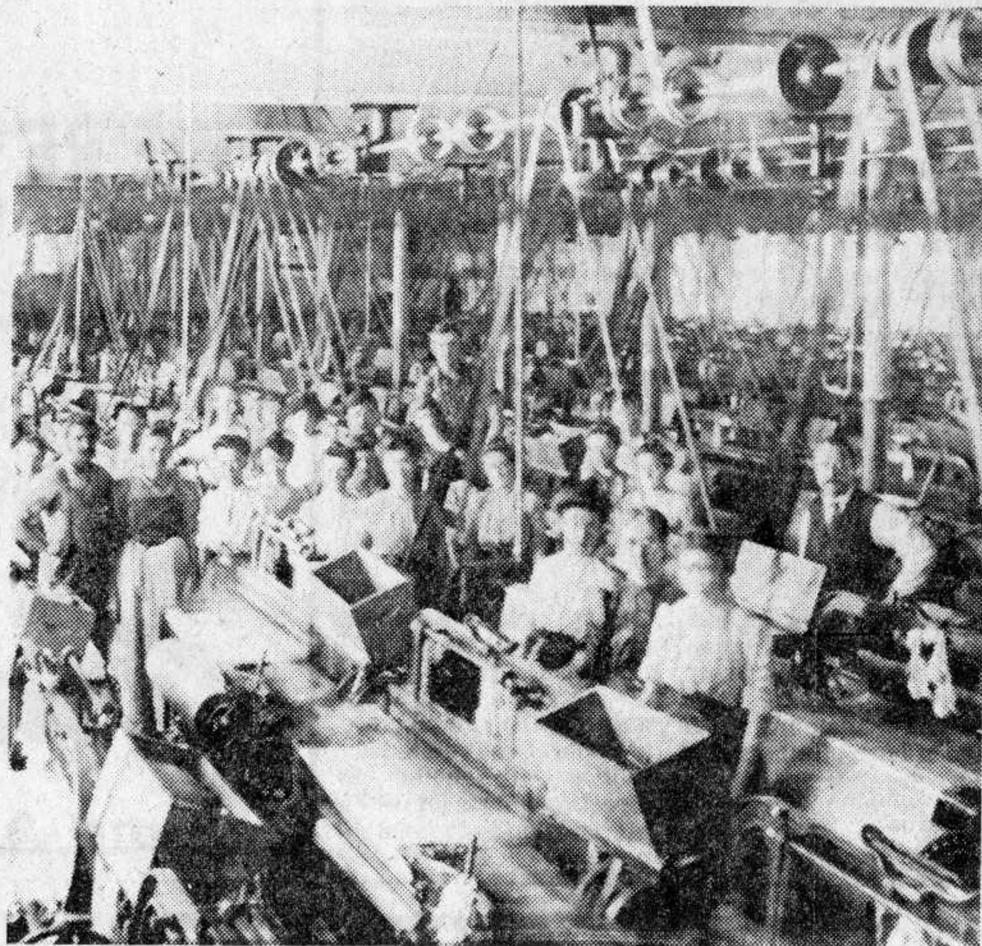
Nevertheless testimoney given at hearings of a special committee of the State Legislature indicated that actions were to the contrary.

In order to subsist, parents frequently brought their children with them into the mills where they helped to tend the looms and do other work. However, their names did not appear on rosters and statistics are few before the 1870s.

It was a period when women actually forced a strike here.

unsung, they helped to build a city, to make its products and its profits, but because of some of them, the new American dream became the opposite of what it had been orginally.

Their dream was to ensure that their descendants would "never go into the mills."



This was their life. Women weavers are surrounded by looms in the Tecumseh Mill Number 1.

The textile industry employed the highest proportion of women in the nation; out of a total of 128,000 workers in 1911 this city's cotton firms employed nearly one-tenth of them.

Cotton mill work was initially women's work; an outgrowth of the spinning and weaving that, farmers' wives did at home. It was not until this century that more men than women were so employed.

Employment statistics in Massachusetts for the cotton industry show that in the 1830s more than 75 percent, or some 15,000 workers were women; by the 1890s, more than 40,000, or 50 percent, of the workers were female.

Wages were never high. Weavers who were among the best paid, received fluctuating salaries. Records show that women-weavers in Massachusetts in 1842 were averaging $3.66 a week, reached a high of $7.44 in 1872, and by 1891 had leveled off to $6.33. In most instances, they made half as much as men doing the same work.

A U.S. Senate committee, concerned with women and child wage earners, studied the family budget of the typical cotton mill workers in 1911 and found "not an individual whose earnings were sufficient to support a normal family, according to fair standards."

At the same time more babies were dying here in proportion to the population than anywhere else in the country early in the 20th century — 203.3 per thousand. And, even more appalling, more children under 5 per 1,000 were dying in this city than in New York or Chicago. The death rate for youngsters was 80 percent higher than the national average.

strike here.

As was customary, when prices dropped, the mills announced a reduction in pay for workers; ten percent for weavers. The men agreed to accept it; but at an all-female meeting of weavers on Jan. 16, 1875, the women argued that "now was the time to strike" because manufacturers had orders they must fill.

"The hard headed logic" of the women prevailed, according to Silvia, and eventually 3,000 operators were out in the mills. The New York Times reported that starvation was at the door.

An improvement in the market prices of cloth finally broke the impasse, The mills reopened on March 18 and the ten percent cut was restored, at least for a time.

"The strike to maintain wages was launched by a group of determined female workers," Silvia wrote, but he added that despite their moral victory, the total picture made it difficult to avoid the conclusion that "from the very beginning life was never easy for most of the Fall River mill workers."

Advertisements for family labor were not uncommon; five to eight children were most desirable.

And if families failed to produce, they faced eviction from the tenements that were usually owned by the company.

Such an eviction notice from the Pocasset Company in 1842 read as follows:

"As you have failed to furnish the help which we expected when we let you the tenement which you

It's a grim picture.

As Dr. Philip Silvia of this city pointed out in his doctoral thesis, "The Spindle City: Labor, Politics and Religion in Fall River 1870-1905," it is impossible to avoid seeing the corollary between low cotton mill wages, female labor and child deaths."

"The normal family life was the exception in Fall River," he observed.

The lure of available jobs in the mills drew waves of immigrants here from different countries, but there was no utopia to be found.

And, in few places was it possible to see such a dramatic example of women and child labor.

In the early 1870s, when, because of the proposed 10-hour day maximum, investigations were conducted into the women and child labor market, a Fall

the tenement which you now occupy, we feel bound to give you notice, that we shall be looking for a family to occupy it, who will furnish help when we want it."

One immigrant wave succeeded another, and while the Irish had to prove themselves against the twin labels of immigrant and Catholic, those who came after them had the added handicap of not being able to speak the language. As a result, some lost their identities. A Polish born woman, whose surname was a difficult one, became "Mary Smith" at the mill where she worked.

The legions of Mary Smiths, laboring in the mills, delivering babies who often died and bringing their surviving children to join them at their work, are listed only in the "labor books" of the mills.

Largely unknown and

unsung, they helped to build a city, to make its products and its profits, but because of some of them, the new American dream became the opposite of what it had been orginally.

Their dream was to ensure that their descendants would "never go into the mills."