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Excerpts from:

OLD TIME FACTORY LIFE IN NEW ENGLAND

By A. K. Fiske (1898)

1 ...vividly remind me of my own child life in a factory village of southern New Hampshire at the beginning
2 of the decade before the war--that period which to the younger generation seems so far off and severed,
3 as by a deep chasm, from the modern time. This is no fancy sketch, but a faithful effort to recall actual
4 experiences and observations in a factory village nearly forty-five years ago.

5
6 Domestic changes which are not relevant to the purpose of this narrative, led my family to move in the
7 midst of winter, from a farm in the hill country to the bottom of a picturesque valley through which flowed
8 one of those streams that furnished the motive power for the first factories as well as the motive for
9 locating them so far from the supply of raw material and the markets for finished goods...

10
11 Nearly all the houses in Falls belonged to the corporation and pertained to its manufacturing
12 establishment. The Company was the general landlord and rented only to its own employes, at a very low
13 rent, \$20 to \$30 a year for a tenement. A few houses above the bridge were owned by their occupants,
14 who were mostly overseers in the mill. One, finer than the rest and isolated upon a slope in the midst of a
15 garden, belonged to the Company and was occupied by the superintendent, rent-free...He was always
16 finely dressed compared to the rest of the community, and looked aristocratic, with his side-whiskers and
17 a visible gold filling in his teeth...

18
19 Most of the operatives lived in a row of double houses, below the factory, which had their back yards
20 along the riverbank...

21
22 Into one of these tenements, near the middle of the row of houses with brick ends, my family moved in
23 that cold January, 185_. It was to be a new and strange life... But in the spring, just before I had reached
24 the age of ten, I was initiated into the art and mystery of the roping boy or back boy...

25
26 Let us consider that tenement in the house with the brick end, in its double capacity of residence and of
27 boarding house. Behind the dark green door there was a little entry, right at the foot of a flight of stairs
28 leading to the floor above, and from it opened a door into a general sitting room. Back of that was a dining
29 room, and beyond that a kitchen in a little rear ell (sic); and somewhere on the same floor, mysteriously
30 stowed near the head of the cellar stairs, was a family bedroom. The second floor was divided into four
31 sleeping rooms, each occupied by two girls or an occasional married couple who worked in the mill; and
32 the attic was divided into two sections, in each of which were two beds for boys or men. Here was the
33 possibility of sixteen occupants, members of the family and boarders, and there were seldom vacancies
34 in these tenements. The rent, as I remember it, was \$20 a year, paid to the company, or retained from
35 what was due from it to the head of the family, every two months; for then wages, rent and board were
36 paid only once in two months. The price of board I remember distinctly was \$1.25 a week for men, and
37 \$1.00 for women and for boys under sixteen. Wages, of course, were correspondingly low, and as roping
38 boy I received \$1.00 a week beside an equal allowance for board... From that level wages ranged upward
39 to the overseers \$1.50 a day, assistant overseers getting \$30 a month, and certain operatives whose work
40 could not be measured by the piece, getting from \$5 to \$25 a month. Mule spinners, who did work by the
41 piece, that is, the pounds of yarn spun, could earn nearly as much. The girls and young women who
42 tended such machines as the drawing frames, speeders and fly frames, received from \$1.00 to \$2.25 a
43 week besides board; and the women spinners (who tended warp-spinning frames) and weavers, both
44 paid by the piece, could earn from \$2 to \$3 a week above their board, and a few weavers even more than
45 that...

47 I have spoken of wages and the price of board. How about the hours of work? There was no law
48 restricting the hours of labor in factories more than on farms, or interfering with the employment of
49 children; and labor unions had not yet been heard of at Falls...

50
51 In summer the old factory bell--I hear it now--rang at half past four in the morning to rouse the village from
52 its sleep and five minutes before five began a tolling summons to work. At five o'clock sharp, the "speed
53 was on", and every operative was expected to be in his or her place to set the separate machines agoing.
54 At half past six there was a shut down of half an hour for breakfast, and the denizens of the mill poured
55 out and scattered to their boarding places, and in a few minutes began gathering more slowly and
56 gradually back. At seven o'clock the machinery was going again and active figures moved constantly
57 about, and lively fingers plied the many operations necessary to keep the processes in motion, which
58 converted raw cotton into finished cloth. At half past twelve there was another half hours stop for dinner,
59 at the end of which the relentless bell tolled the scattered forces of industry back to go through the same
60 round until 7 o'clock at night. In winter the mill was not started and we did not have to be at work until six
61 o'clock; but we had breakfast before going into the mill, and we went out at half past five in the afternoon
62 to supper and returned at six to work an hour and a half longer.

63
64 Here was thirteen hours actual labor per day in summer, and twelve hours and a half in winter. At the
65 beginning and end of the winter days, of course, the work was by lamplight...

66
67 Scarcely was one through supper when he felt like going to bed, and few were rash enough to sit up after
68 nine o'clock. Long before one naturally woke he was aroused by that dreadful bell, and yawning and
69 wearily feeling that it was impossible to stir out of the bed, he finally spurred himself to action and hurried
70 into his clothes...

71
72 That was, indeed, a precious time, for most of the social and domestic life during the week had to be
73 crowded into that little hour or so before the early bedtime. No one who has not experienced it can
74 appreciate the keen enjoyment of that scanty leisure. It was spent in social converse or games or brief
75 visits to neighboring houses, or along the street in warm weather, and there was in it a brisk alertness and
76 making the most of the time, which was perhaps bred of the habit of a quick and constant tending of
77 machinery in motion. In winter card playing was a favorite pastime in houses where it was not frowned
78 upon as sinful, and the sentiment was more tolerant of such flagrant iniquities in the factory village than in
79 the farming districts. Even dancing was tolerated as comparatively harmless. But late hours were out of
80 the question, save on Saturday night, when the most was made of the extra privilege. Saturday afternoon
81 in the mill was a time for general cleaning up...every operative had to give the machinery in his charge a
82 thorough cleaning on Saturday afternoon...

83
84 Ah! How Saturday night was looked forward to! The getting out early, the long evening, and the restful
85 Sunday! There was but one store at the Falls, and that belonged to the Company and had little besides
86 groceries and articles of provision. It was not much of a loafing place. Saturday night most of the men and
87 many of the women went down to the lower village, where there were stores and churches, a tavern and
88 a saloon. Very few were addicted to going to the tavern or the saloon, which were indeed comparatively
89 stupid and innocuous haunts for the foolish in those days. Mostly the expedition was just for looking round
90 and doing a little shopping, if anything was left from the last pay day. Just going to the lower village, which
91 had a gay appearance at night, and knocking around a few hours, was dissipation enough. In winter
92 perhaps there was a dance on Saturday night, or a lecture or some wandering show of minstrelsy or
93 panorama. And there were acquaintances to be met at this village, which had two factories larger than
94 that at the Falls. There was no real revelry or squandering of health or money on those Saturday nights,
95 for the factory people were after all sedate New England folk.

96
97 Sunday was for the most part a day of rest. In the hill country whence our family had come, it was hardly
98 reputable to stay away from church, and there was little excuse for it; but here comparatively few felt like
99 going, and small blame to them! It was almost their only chance to be outdoors, to climb the high bill that
100 shut in the valley on the side opposite the steep bluff beyond the river, to wander up or down the river, to
101 get into the woods, to loaf and invite the soul. Some families went regularly to church and observed the
102 Puritan Sabbath strictly, and some devout souls away from home doubtless found comfort in conforming

103 to the practices in which they had been brought up. But on the whole there was a laxness in Sabbath
104 keeping which I was not permitted to share as freely as I wished, but which was a great refreshment to
105 the body if not to the soul. The most dreadful time of all was when after that Saturday night of pleasure
106 and that long Sunday rest, the bell rang again at an unearthly hour and began a new week of toil.

107
108 Who were the people that in that time long past “worked in the mill,” and what really was their condition in
109 life, physically, morally and otherwise? They were nearly all natives of the region round about; but not
110 many of the men came from farms. The farmers boy, unless set at the work very young, was too clumsy
111 and slow to become adept at tending machinery where a quick and deft use of the hands was required, or
112 even where he had to get about lightly and quickly on his feet. But there were men working about the
113 factory yard and in a part of the mill who had been farmers... The overseers and older men at the
114 machines were mostly old settlers in the place, who had grown up with the factory village, and the young
115 fellows were generally village boys. Some had come from other manufacturing towns. The greater
116 number did not consider this a life work, and looked forward to getting out of it. Some were earning
117 money to go to school, or possibly to college; some were on the lookout for a chance to learn a trade or
118 get a place in a store; some were anxious to go out West or to get to Boston. Few remained year after
119 year and gave up hope of anything else, and there was a good deal of changing in the force of workmen
120 from time to time.

121
122 The girls were more largely from the farms and there were many more of them than of men and boys. The
123 village girls were apt to scorn the factory life, while the farmers' daughters preferred it to what they were
124 used to at home. It gave them an unwonted chance to earn money for themselves and to dress
125 becomingly; and the board, cheap as it was, was better than they were accustomed to. They had a
126 certain social life, and often became stylish before they returned to the farm, when, no doubt, they had a
127 greater distaste than ever for dairy work and the toil of the kitchen.

128
129 There is little doubt that, hard as the conditions were, most of the operatives who came from farms
130 preferred the factory life. I recall more than one young woman who went away to teach school in summer,
131 and at least one who left after earning money to attend a distant normal school; and I have in mind a
132 young man who afterwards graduated at a medical college. There was not very much child labor, though
133 there were a few places where children of ten or twelve could do useful work. The same ones seldom
134 stayed through the year, and there was a general feeling that the boys and girls should go to school in
135 summer. My child experience was rather a hard one; but I was out [in school] two summer terms in a
136 factory life of three years, and they were periods of happiness and recuperation such as few school
137 children enjoy.

138
139 There is no manner of doubt that the hours of labor were too long. My uncle, the overseer, was broken in
140 health and died soon after sixty, and there were few long-lived people among those who spent practically
141 all their days in the mill. I have spoken of the light eating at the boarding-house tables, and there was a
142 general lack of flesh and of color among the workpeople. They were lank and pale, and the women got
143 nervous and weary looking, and sometimes broke down and went home from overstrain. To recall my
144 own experience once more, I know from what my elders were wont to say, that I was chubby and rosy
145 cheeked when I came from the farm, and I know from my own recollection that when I went back I had
146 grown tall and thin and pale, and was covered with pimples. I think my digestive apparatus and nervous
147 system were affected for life. Certainly the hours were too long, but nobody then demanded a compulsory
148 shortening of the workday. I do not think it is true of factory work, in tending machinery in motion, that as
149 much can be done first and last in ten hours a day as in twelve or thirteen, but I have no doubt that more
150 can be done in the same persons lifetime.

151
152 As to the moral quality of that factory life I do not think it was greatly different from that of the village life
153 where there were no factories... I do not remember any tainted reputation or scandalous conduct among
154 the factory girls, and those are things which one remembers, if anything... Profanity, indeed, was so much
155 the common everyday talk among boys that I acquired a habit that has given me much annoyance since,
156 and will still assert itself under slight provocation. Of gambling and drunkenness I am sure there was
157 practically none...

158

159 An illiterate person was unknown and would have been a curiosity. In fact, shortly before we moved
160 away, an Irish woman by the name of Rooney appeared on the scene, with a rich brogue and no
161 knowledge of reading and writing, and was looked upon as a queer novelty.

162
163 There was a little collection of books in one end of the cloth-room building, which had been originally
164 supplied by that governor who built the mill, and they were a good deal read. There was a town library at
165 the other village, up over the drug store, and it was open Saturday evening, and books were taken from
166 there...

167
168 I am afraid stories more or less sensational in the weekly papers were the favorite reading. I made the
169 acquaintance at that time of sundry thrilling tales of pirates of the Spanish Main, and the trappers and
170 Indians of the Western border...I have never seen anything equal to the gorgeousness and dazzling
171 delight of the circus to which I went once, and which did not get out until ten o'clock at night. I remember
172 the clowns' jokes and songs at the present moment, though I have not the least idea of those of the last
173 clown I saw at Barnum's...

174
175 Those people were not miserable or unhappy. None of them were wretchedly poor or conscious of being
176 the victims of special hardship. There were many harmless frolics in the short evenings, much innocent
177 skylarking in the moments of leisure, and as much content as is generally vouchsafed to people who earn
178 their living by unremitting labor. When I look back upon it, it seems like a hard life, and I am sure it was
179 taking the vitality out of me; but at the time I had as much sense of having good times and as little
180 concern about hardship as I have ever had since. I think the principal hardship that I recall being
181 conscious of at the time is that of getting up in the morning, especially in cold weather.

182
183 Several years after this episode in my early life I visited relatives who continued to live at Falls. A second
184 and larger mill had been built farther up the stream, and its main motive power was steam... The mill
185 started up at 7 o'clock in the morning, and shut down at 6.30 at night, and there was the same interval of
186 half an hour for dinner in the middle of the day. This gave eleven hours of work, which was a great
187 improvement. Whether it was due to legal restriction I am not sure, but it was after the ten-hour agitation
188 in Massachusetts, and I think after the ten-hour law took effect there...But the old kind of factory life has
189 disappeared in the North, or lingers only in comparatively secluded places.

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