

## The Lowell Experiment

*Tobias Picker's opera Emmeline, presented by New York City Opera in its New York premiere, is based on the true-life tragedy of Emmeline Mosher, a farm girl whose life becomes a mirror of late-19<sup>th</sup>-century New England. Kathleen Watt explores her historical context and the ties that bind Emmeline to her place and times*

THE HEARTRENDING STORY of Emmeline Mosher, told and retold by the townsfolk of her native Fayette, Maine, has by now become folklore, its details blurred in the mists that hang between legend and history. Yet even the barest outlines of her story can provide us with a clear window on the kind and quality of life Emmeline must have known. For she lived in unusual, even unique times, in the decades before the Civil War, in the infancy of the American Industrial Revolution, at the very center of the American transition from family farming to urban manufacturing as a way of life.

Emmeline was one of those New England farm girls who migrated from Maine to Massachusetts to become a mill girl, taking with her all the idealism and pride of her patriot forebears. Lowell, Mass., the city she migrated to, was for a time the most famous city in America—an industrial miracle to some, a thriving utopian experiment to others. The story of how Lowell came to be, and what happened there, is very much Emmeline's own story.

The Industrial Revolution had been slow to cross the Atlantic. Agrarian New Englanders had read of women and children hopelessly enslaved at the looms of England's "dark Satanic mills" (in the words of poet William Blake). They took deserved pride in living by the land, above the degradation of those machines. But by 1812, New England family farms were foundering for want of cash, and eager industrialists, like Boston merchant Francis Cabot Lowell, realized that America was ripe for change. Lowell knew that there was a fortune in untapped water power in Massachusetts, and that textile mills would be the way to make use of it. Eventually he managed to pirate the jealously guarded secrets of British textile manufacturing and reproduce its all-important machinery in Massachusetts—with improvements.

Lowell also developed a plan for the integration of all textile processes under one roof, ensuring unprecedented efficiency of production, with a permanent on-site work force. And Lowell was determined to avoid the abysmal plight of mill workers abroad, first by starting with a “better quality” of human resource, and then, by treating them well.

For this resource, he looked again to New England. The proud, devout Yankee farm girl was of irreproachable stock, but she had very few options for achieving an economically viable life. She was expected to marry, and if she did not, or if she were widowed, she became an adjunct to her original family, referred to in legal documents as a “relict” or an “incumbrance” upon the family estate.

Lowell’s financial partners, the Boston Associates, saw in this population an ideal source of cheap, steady labor—if only high-minded Yankee parents could be persuaded to allow their daughters to become mill girls. So in 1822 the Boston Associates set out, in a calculated display of paternal benevolence, to recreate in the mill a hierarchical family environment where New England’s girls would be safe. They designed a town around the mill, and named the town after the man who first conceived it. This became known as the “Lowell Factory System.”

Most importantly, the Lowell System included proper boarding houses, with parlors and sitting rooms, sometimes even a piano. Here the mill girl would share a bedroom with four to six other girls, two to a bed, all working in the mill, all from New England. Boarding houses would be strictly regulated and kept by a Corporation employee, usually a native-born New England widow herself, often with her own children. (Almost everyone in the Corporation was native-born, except the Irish—the “Lords of Shovel and Spade”—who had arrived even before the mill girls, to dig the canals and build the mills. But they kept to themselves with their families in shanty towns outside the mill yard walls.) The mill girl would be boarded and chaperoned, even shepherded, for the Corporation required her to pursue religious devotions. The rent for her room (and sometimes for her church-pew as well) would be deducted from her pay, but the rate would be nominal, thanks to Corporation subsidies.

To sweeten the recruitment effort, the Lowell mills offered the highest wage a young woman could earn. At 35 cents - 50 cents a day it was higher than in any other mill town, and six times what she could earn as a teacher. Moreover, it was cash, not company scrip. The girls would know the thrill of money in their own hands.

The mill itself was an assemblage of massive red-brick buildings five and six stories high, laid out evenly along the river or canal, at right angles to the matching boarding houses, creating an enclosed and gated mill yard. The Corporation office building was topped by a white cupola and bell tower, and overlooked the yard. The first paved walkways in Lowell were laid in the mill yard, so the girls would not have to wet their feet in winter. The Corporation even provided a dispensary and free vaccinations. As an investment at least, mill girls were undeniably well protected.

In the town were a school, churches of a dozen denominations, and a circulating library. Like Emmeline in the opera, the mill girls were hungry for books, and even took their reading with them to the mill, to “improve” every free moment. There were lectures at the famous Lowell Lyceum, delivered by such luminaries as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Horace Greeley, and William Lloyd Garrison. Mill girls subscribed to all the periodicals of the day, which they shared and discussed voraciously. There were even several literary publications written, edited, and published entirely by mill girls themselves. Most notable was *The Lowell Offering*, which gained worldwide renown, first for the high caliber of its poetry and prose, and later for its activist journalism.

When the railroad came to America, the first tracks ran from Boston to Lowell. Not only did the erstwhile farm girl now have the intoxicating prospect of easy access to Boston, but Lowell became a required stop on the itinerary of visiting dignitaries, drawing international praise, as much for the quality of its work force as for the spanking-new luster of its establishments.

In the beginning, few of the girls came from real destitution. A mill girl’s wages might help pay the family mortgage, finance a brother’s education, or fund her own dowry. But sometimes the girls migrated for the sheer exhilaration of independence, for access to books, fashion, or religious and philosophical currency. They were even allowed to leave with two weeks’ notice and later return to work, for whatever reason—a summer vacation, a hiatus to recover from illness or to tend to family matters, perhaps a wedding. For some who returned to life among their sister workers year after year, it became what one called “Lowell fever.” In the beginning the mill girls were not prisoners of their circumstances.

By the early 1840s, when the opera takes place, however, mill life was changing. These New England farm girls had always been accustomed to long hours, but the 14-

hour factory days were gruelling because of their regimentation, which the girls considered “unnatural.” What began to rankle was the system of relentless bells which compelled workers to stations eight times each day, every day, beginning at 4:30 a.m.

On the factory floor, the din of 800 to 1200 mechanical monsters clanging at once further threatened a mill girl’s peace of mind (listen as Tobias Picker’s score pounds out the rhythms of various weaving machines). Sometimes the rhythm of the machines would fall into synchronization and work would have to cease, to save the building from the seismic thunder. Later, motivated by bonus premiums, overseers began to speed up the machines to increase production while holding down wages. Children lost fingers and limbs in the hazardous machinery, a woman could be scalped if her hair were caught, an errant shuttle might fly off the loom to be embedded six inches into the factory’s brick wall. In the opera, Emmeline’s coworker Sophie is frantic and anxious at her work, and with good reason.

To raise humidity (which some overseers thought protected the cotton thread from breakage) steam was introduced, and grimy windows were nailed shut in factory rooms where 115-degree air hung brown with cotton dust. To eke out an extra hour’s productivity in winter, overseers lit whale-oil lamps, adding their fumes to the filthy air and contributing to the early incidence of brown lung disease.

What’s more, the Corporation Regulation Paper (the list of rigid company rules which governed the lives of mill workers outside the mill walls as well as within) became an instrument of tyranny. Any accusation of infraction, especially moral infraction, even if unfounded, would be disastrous. Failure to attend church or to return home in good time became grounds for severe penalties. Under the salacious eyes of an unscrupulous supervisor a young mill girl would be helpless. A trespass as serious as Emmeline’s, naive and accidental though it may have been, would have meant ostracism and certain discharge. Some even suspected boarding house mothers of spying for the Corporation. Mill girls were beginning to feel that they were more a part of the machinery than of the Corporation.

If they had been sophisticated in the ways of pragmatic industrialists, the mill girls might not have been so unprepared for the devolution of the mill life they had known, nor so disillusioned by it. For the Boston Associates, always absentee landlords, were quite willing to solve financial problems quickly—by cutting mill workers’ wages, raising rents,

eliminating amenities and subsidies. When workers' complaints were met with firing (and blacklisting from every other mill), it became clear that the mill girl's signature on the Corporation Regulation Paper ceded all power to mill agents and overseers, whatever their designs. Opportunities for abuse were everywhere.

When devastating economic depressions throughout the 1840s and 1850s shut down production for long periods of time, New England girls began to go home, never to return to the mills. They moved on with their lives, and many of them were ambitious indeed. Some went West, some became missionaries or teachers, some wrote or became politically active, and many married. Her wanderlust satisfied and her dowry fattened, a mill girl was then considered a superior prospect.

Meanwhile, conditions in Europe had sent swelling waves of immigrant families to the American Northeast. These would become the mill's next pool of cheap labor. It was unlikely that any of these would be able to work his way up to supervisor, as does Maguire in the opera, in an earlier day. These were desperate people who had little choice but to work for whatever wage they might be offered. These families would not be able to "go home to Pa" when life in the mill became unbearable. These workers, men, women, and children alike, would be easy to indenture. And from this point, the mills began the long decline into abuses out of which grew the volatile American labor reform movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The "paternal benevolence" of the founders of the Lowell System had *always* been rooted in capitalism. Lowell, a community founded for textile manufacturing, only incidentally became a utopian experiment. The success of any aspect of the System depended on the success of textile manufacturing. And the dream of a model industrial community could become real and prosper only as long as it was willing to adapt to the necessities of its single industrial purpose.

But in the beginning, for a short time at least, and due largely to the idealistic and highly motivated young women of the mills, something very nearly utopian actually was achieved in Lowell.