

The Workers' Lives

Document #1: Millworker by James Taylor (1979)

This song was written by James Taylor for the musical Working, which was based on the groundbreaking work of the same title by Studs Turkel, provides a stark look at life as a millworker from the late 19th and early 20th century.

Now my grandfather was a sailor
He blew in off the water
My father was a farmer
And I, his only daughter
Took up with a no good millworking man
From Massachusetts
Who dies from too much whiskey
And leaves me these three faces to feed

Millwork ain't easy
Millwork ain't hard
Millwork it ain't nothing
But an awful boring job
I'm waiting for a daydream
To take me through the morning
And put me in my coffee break
Where I can have a sandwich
And remember

Then it's me and my machine
For the rest of the morning
For the rest of the afternoon
And the rest of my life

Now my mind begins to wander
To the days back on the farm
I can see my father smiling at me
Swinging on his arm
I can hear my granddads stories
Of the storms out on Lake Erie
Where vessels and cargos and fortunes
And sailors' lives were lost

Yes, but its my life has been wasted
And I have been the fool
To let this manufacturer
Use my body for a tool
I can ride home in the evening
Staring at my hands
Swearing by my sorrow that a young girl
Ought to stand a better chance

So may I work the mills just as long as I
am able
And never meet the man whose name is
on the label

It be me and my machine
For the rest of the morning
And the rest of the afternoon
Gone for the rest of my life

Source: James Taylor. Millworker. Rec. 1979. Peter Asher, 1979.

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Document #2: The Working Girls of Boston (1884)

The average weekly income from all sources whatever for 544 girls was \$5 per week or less, while 435 received a total average weekly income of from \$5 to \$10, there being only 53 receiving a total average weekly income of over \$10 per week. *Brought into specific averages, we find that the average weekly income for the year was in personal service \$5.25, in trade \$4.81, in manufactures \$5.22, or the general average for all involved for the whole year was \$5.17 per week. This latter figure must stand as the total average weekly income from all sources, earnings, assistance, and other work, of the working girls of Boston.* It should be remembered that the average weekly earnings from occupation only, distributed over the whole year, was but \$4.91; the total average yearly income from all sources was \$269.07; for the different departments, \$273.02 in personal service, \$250.63 in trade, and \$271.41 in manufactures. . . .

In some cases girls testify that their work is worth more than they receive for it, and think they ought to have better wages. But as others always stand ready to take their places at even less pay, they have to be satisfied with what they get. . . .

One table girl in [a] restaurant says she is required to pay for all crockery broken. In stores, one girl says they are obliged to pay one half of the selling price for broken crockery or ware; one other girl who accidentally broke a show-case, left because the price was to be taken from her pay; she was working at the time on 3 per cent commission sales (with no other pay), and one stormy day she made 5 cents. Two machine operators on cloaks were required to pay 25 and 35 cents respectively for the use of machines; two operators on gossamers were required to pay for needles and thread, in one case 25 cents for a spool of thread and 15 cents a half-dozen for machine needles; they were forbidden to buy them outside; the wages in both cases were reported as \$5 a week. . . .

It was seen that a very large proportion of them were living at home with parents and friends. In addition to this we found that in nearly all the cases where a girl was called upon in the evening and found to be out, her parents or the friends with whom she was living, knew of her whereabouts, and would oftentimes send for her to come home and give the information sought by the agents. This evidence in itself is very emphatic in establishing the moral surroundings at least of the girls involved. A few of the girls testify to ill treatment by friends or relatives, but as a rule, they were surrounded by such home influences that it is entirely unreasonable to believe them to be guilty of walking in evil ways. . . .

Another girl says her employer is good natured according to his mood; if he does not like the way the work is done, he is apt to take it rudely from her hands and tell her to leave; on the other hand, he might feel good natured enough to pay her in advance if he thought she needed money.

In some places, during working hours, no one is allowed to call upon the girls employed; even on the occasion of the death of a friend who was killed, the girl was notified after much trouble, and then only through a speaking tube. This girl says she was absent two and three-quarter hours, and her employer, although knowing the circumstances, would not allow her the time; he also fails to pay for overwork when done. Other girls speak of the bad language used by employers, and in some cases say they had left for this reason.

Source: Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Fifteenth Annual Report* (Boston: 1884). History Matters <<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5753>>.

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Document #3: Slumming Among the Unemployed (1893)

*Even before the 1890s depression struck with devastating force in 1893, large numbers of jobless men and women competed in tight labor markets and faced homelessness. One of the best first-hand descriptions of "what it is to look for work and fail to find it" comes from political economist Walter Wycoff's two-volume study of *The Workers: An Experiment in Reality*, first published in 1899. Wycoff had abandoned his studies at Princeton to seek a more concrete appreciation of social problems. His record of his two years spent as a common laborer became an early classic of sociological writing.*

Saturday Evening, December 5, 1891.

. . . Now I am in the heart of a congested labor market, and I am learning, by experience, what it is to look for work and fail to find it . . .

That, at all events, is pretty much as it appears to-night to Tom Clark and me. Clark is my "partner," and we are not in good luck nor in high spirits. We each had a ten-cent breakfast this morning, but neither has tasted food since, and to-night, after an exhausting search for work, we must sleep in the station-house.

We are doing our best to pass the time in warmth and comfort until midnight. We know better than to go to the station-house earlier than that hour. Clark is in the corner at my side pretending to read a newspaper, but really trying to disguise the fact that he is asleep. . .

We are tired and very hungry, and not a little discouraged; we should be almost desperate but for one redeeming fact. The silver lining of our cloud has appeared to-night in the form of falling snow. From the murky clouds which all day have hung threateningly over the city, a quiet, steady snow-fall has begun, and we shall be singularly unfortunate in the morning if we can find no pavements to clean.

In the growing threat of snow we have encouraged each other with the brightening prospect of a little work, and for quite half an hour after nightfall we stood alternately before the windows of two cheap restaurants in Madison Street, studying the square placards in the windows on which the bills of fare are printed, and telling each other, with nice discriminations between bulk and strengthening power of food, what we shall choose to-morrow.

Source: Walter A. Wycoff, *The Workers: An Experiment in Reality*. New York: Charles Scribner, 1905, 1-39. [History Matters](http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/48). 27 Jul 2008 <<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/48>>.

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Document #4: Work, Wages, and the Cost of Living (1910)

Margaret Byington was a social worker who came to Homestead in 1907 to study the living conditions of the mill town's immigrant workforce. Byington was born in 1877 and attended both Wellesley College in Massachusetts and Columbia University in New York City. She was recruited by Paul F. Kellogg, the head of the Pittsburgh Survey, to compile research on Homestead. The survey was part of a national Progressive reform movement at the turn of the century. In 1910, Byington's findings were published by the Russel Sage Foundation as part of the six volume Pittsburgh Survey.

The conditions under which the work is carried on seem to an outsider fairly intolerable. The din in the great vaulted sheds makes speech hard. Men who have worked near the engines, though their organs of hearing remain in physically good condition, sometimes become almost oblivious to ordinary sound. Some work where the heat is intense; and before the open doors of furnaces full of white-hot metal they must wear smoked of furnaces full of white-hot metal they must wear smoked glasses to temper the glare. This heat, exhausting in summer, makes a man in winter doubly susceptible to the cold without. While for the men directing the processes the physical exertion is often not great, most of the laborers perform heavy manual toil. And everywhere is the danger of accident from constantly moving machinery, from bars of glowing steel, from engines moving along the tracks in the yard. The men, of course, grow used to these dangers, but a new peril lies in the carelessness that results from such familiarity, for human nature cannot be eternally on guard; men would be unable to do their work if they became too cautious.

The nature of the work, with the heat and its inherent hazard, makes much of it exhausting. Yet these men for the most part keep it up twelve hours a day. It is uneconomical to have the plant shut down. In order that the mills may run practically continuously, the twenty-four hours is divided between two shifts. The greater number of men employed in making steel (as distinct from the clerical staff) work half of the time at night, the usual arrangement being for a man to work one week on the day and the next on the night shift. At the request of the men, the night turn is made longer, so that they can have the full evening to themselves the other week. Their hours on the day turn, therefore, are from 7 a. m. to 5:30 p. m.; this leaves thirteen and one-half hours for the night shift. In certain departments the regular processes are continued straight through Sunday and the crews work the full seven days out of seven; this is the case, for instance, in the blast furnaces, such as the Carrie group which are practically a part of the Homestead plant. The officials claimed in 1908 that in the rolling mills only necessary labor, such as repairing, was done on Sunday. Yet my colleague, Mr. Fitch, estimated that for Allegheny County as a whole one steel worker out of five worked seven days in a week. Moreover, a majority of the men have to be on duty either Saturday night or Sunday night, thus breaking into the day of rest.

Source: Byington, Margaret F. Homestead: The Households of a Mill Town. New York: Charities Public Committee, 1910; 35-37. Google Books. <<http://books.google.com/books?id=3EEAAAAYAAJ>>.