

“HARD WORK TO MAKE ENDS MEET”: VOICES OF MAINE’S WORKING-CLASS WOMEN IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY

BY CAROL TONER

*In 1887 the Maine legislature responded to pressures from the Knights of Labor and an increasingly agitated industrial labor force by instituting the Bureau of Industrial and Labor Statistics. The bureau's job was to examine the state's work places and provide information to guide the legislature in making labor law. Reflecting the ideals of the popular Knights of Labor, the bureau initially focused its investigations on female as well as male workers. When the bureau requested that workers fill out questionnaires about their work, hundreds of women responded, leaving a rare first-hand account of women's attitudes toward their working and living conditions. With the decline of the Knights between 1888 and 1895, working women's voices disappear from the records. Although the bureau's effort did little to ameliorate hard work and low wages, the information they collected provides valuable clues to understanding the women who worked in Maine's late nineteenth-century shops and factories. Carol Toner is Coordinator for the Certificate in Maine Studies Program and Research Associate in History at the University of Maine. She is the author of *Persisting Traditions: Artisan Work and Culture in Bangor, Maine, 1820-1860* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995) and several articles on Maine labor history.*

IN 1888 Maine's Commissioner of Labor hired Flora Haines of Bangor as a "special agent" to assess working conditions for women in the state's shops and factories. Haines visited women workers all over the state, inspecting work places and talking with workers in "Bangor, Belfast, Lewiston, Auburn, Waterville, Eastport, Portland, Freeport, Cumberland Mills, Saccarappa, Biddeford and Saco."¹ She also distributed questionnaires that queried the women about their working and living conditions, asking them about such things as wages and hours at work, health and safety issues at the workplace, sanitary conditions in the boarding houses, and other matters. The questionnaire ended with:



The women in this Portland hat factory were probably paid by the piece, a practice that pushed them to work very quickly. This working space appears cramped, but the absence of deafening machines might have made it a more pleasant place to work than most factories. *Courtesy Maine Historical Society.*

"Make any suggestions that you think will tend to improve your conditions at work."² Hundreds of laboring women responded to this prompt, leaving first-hand accounts of women's attitudes toward their work. While we know much about working women in this period from census statistics, business records, labor commissioners, middle-class reformers, and even novelists, rarely do we hear from the workers themselves. Representing what David Zonderman has called "working-class intellectual history," these "voices"—responses to the questionnaires—have been preserved in the Annual Reports of the Maine Bureau of Industrial and Labor Statistics, and are a rich source for women's labor history.³

The Origins of the Bureau of Industrial and Labor Statistics

The Maine Bureau of Industrial and Labor Statistics was established in 1887 and reflected the rapid changes experienced by Maine's late nineteenth-century working population. Working women increased from 14.5 percent of the workforce in 1880 to nearly twenty-one percent just thirty years later. During the same years, the number of foreign-born workers tripled, from 11.6 to thirty-five percent of the work force. Occupations were also changing. The percentage of women in the two most common female jobs—domestic service and millwork—decreased by ten percent over the thirty-year period. The next most common occupations for women—boot and shoe workers, seamstresses, and milliners—remained steady, while new occupations were opening up. Nurses, clerical workers, and telephone operators, occupations not even listed in 1880, comprised nine percent of women workers by 1910.⁴

With these rapid changes in the work place came increasing labor unrest. In the six years prior to the 1887 establishment of the bureau, Maine experienced seventy-three strikes involving 6,826 workers. Of these striking workers, more than 2,000 were women, most of who worked in the textiles mills and boot and shoe shops.⁵ This strike activity mirrors widespread labor agitation in the United States at a time when oppressed wage earners organized in hopes of improving their working conditions. Some strikes were spontaneous worker uprisings, but many others were led by the Knights of Labor, a nationwide labor union that enjoyed a strong following in Maine during the 1880s. The Knights of Labor welcomed all workers into their organization—women as well as men, skilled as well as unskilled workers, and laborers of all races and ethnicities. Under the national leadership of Terence Powderly,

the Knights of Labor claimed between 500,000 and 700,000 members in 1886.⁶ In Maine some 28,000 workers had joined the Knights by January of 1887.⁷

In an effort to bring governmental attention to poor working conditions, the Knights advocated establishing state agencies to collect information and statistics on workers and the workplace. The “Declaration of Principles” adopted by the Knights in 1869 called for “the establishment of bureaus of labor statistics, that we may arrive at a correct knowledge of the educational, moral and financial condition of the laboring masses.”⁸ When some 13,000 Maine workers joined the Knights in 1886, the state legislature prudently voted to support the Knights’ recommendation to establish a Bureau of Industry and Labor Statistics.⁹

In Maine, the bureau’s founding legislation instructed it to collect statistical information about the state’s laboring people and to investigate the conditions under which they worked.¹⁰ The sponsor of the bill later explained that the statistics would provide “reliable information that could be used at any time as a barrier of defense when requesting of employers an increase of wages, reduction of hours of labor or other improvements in working conditions, and as a basis for legislation when it should be desired.”¹¹ As a result of this legislative directive, the bureau’s *Annual Reports* contain a rich collection of data on workers’ age, gender, hours of work, occupation, nativity, wages, and other valuable information. In addition to these statistics, the *Annual Reports* also include evaluations written by the Labor Commissioner, the Deputy Labor Commissioner, and occasionally by special agents such as Flora Haines.

While all of the bureau’s *Annual Reports* include women in their statistical tables, actual comments written by working women appear in only three reports – these were the reports of 1888, 1891, and 1892.¹² The 1888 report states that because many women and girls work in Maine, it is the duty of the bureau “to make special and distinct inquiries into the conditions which surround the female wage workers of the State.”¹³ No doubt this special emphasis on women was a result of the inclusive philosophy of the Knights of Labor.

The Voices of Working Women

The working women’s remarks reflect a wide range of attitudes about their work and their lives. Some criticize their employers while others seem quite satisfied. Some sound tired and oppressed; others seem energized and liberated by work. Some point out work place dangers, some

provide suggestions for change, and others analyze class and gender inequality. Perhaps more than any other topic, the women complained of conditions affecting their health and safety, such as fire hazards, contaminated water, offensive odors, and extreme temperatures. Another concern was the lack of proper ventilation and sanitary “water closets.” One packer in a gum factory remarked, “there is no separate closet for females. Girls are obliged to go out of the building, and to quite a distance. This is an important matter, and I am glad that you are calling public attention to it.”¹⁴ A shirt-maker complained:

The work room where I am employed is very pleasant, with one exception. In winter it cannot be properly ventilated, the windows being directly behind some of the girls, which makes it impossible to have a free circulation of air without its blowing directly on some one. The water closet is on one side, about midway of the room. From the top of the door to the ceiling, it is open, and sometimes the odor is almost unendurable. I think there should be a law prohibiting such nuisances in any room where persons are obliged to stay.¹⁵

Other women commented on working long hours. In 1887 the state had passed a law which limited women’s workday to ten hours, but it left open the possibility for women to work longer under certain circumstances. For example, women could work more than ten hours “when it is necessary to make repairs to prevent the interruption of the ordinary running of the machinery.”¹⁶ Employers often used the loopholes to pressure the women to work longer hours, prompting a clerk in a publishing house to comment:

Where one sits ten hours out of a day and works with brain and hand, they need a good room, properly warmed and ventilated. All large establishments have about the same faults, and we that have to work for a living, have to put up with them, cold feet, poor ventilation, drafts, insufficient light and too long hours.¹⁷

A worker in a woolen mill seemed resigned to her fate when she wrote, “I do not know of any suggestions that I could make to improve my condition, unless it be a less number of hours, which we cannot reasonably expect.”¹⁸

While some people continued the struggle to enforce the ten-hour day, others began calling for an eight-hour day in the 1880s. Supporters argued that workers needed more time for leisure, an idea pronounced in the popular slogan, “Eight hours for work, Eight hours for rest, Eight

hours for what we will.”¹⁹ A gusset girl in a shirt factory who alternated between teaching and factory work listed a number of arguments for the eight-hour day in 1888:

I have found . . . that in eight hours as much work can be accomplished in the shop as in ten, with less fatigue, the confinement and constant application for a longer time so wearing upon the system as to unfit it for energetic effort. I have, therefore, concluded that an eight-hour law would improve the condition of those thus employed. I am now a school teacher (this being my vacation), and working six hours a day, with a holiday each week, I find much better for my health than working each day in the week eight or ten hours. I think that if Saturday afternoons were given to the working women for recreation the amount of good done would more than compensate for the loss of labor or money. Considering the various demands upon the working woman’s time outside of work hours, in caring for her room and clothes and numerous other duties, it seems that this provision should be made for her.²⁰

But more often workers complained of not being able to work enough hours. In an age when owners simply shut down their mills when production ran ahead of sales, workers frequently faced the problem of no work and no pay. As many women lived close to the edge of destitution and few were able to save anything from their pitifully low pay, the lack of steady work contributed to many working women’s problems. “If I could have ten hours’ work a day,” suggested a lining maker in a shoe factory, “I could make a dollar and a half, but as my work runs I don’t make over 65 cents a day.”²¹ Meeting basic living expenses such as housing was a struggle without steady work. One clerk calculated, “I board in a private family, pay \$3.00 per week and washing extra. Could I have work the year round, could do well enough, but as it is, have hard work to make both ends meet.”²² Many fell back on family support during slack time. “The great trouble here,” lamented a shoe factory worker, “is lack of steady work. The prices paid are good but there is so little work that if I had not a father’s house to go to when out of employment, I should have been barely able to meet my expenses.”²³

In many jobs, employers paid workers by the piece, and here again when demand was low, suppliers gave the women less work. Piecework paid poorly anyway, but when work was not steady, these laborers suffered. A seamstress in a tailor’s shop described the problem this way:

Nearly all of us work by the piece; the machine girl is hired by the week. Those who work by the piece have to work very hard to pay our



Auburn Shoe Shop. Wages for shoe workers varied, depending on skills. While an “eyeleter” averaged only \$4.50 per week, a “vamper” might earn as much as \$12.00 per week. One shoe worker wrote, “I wish there was some organization which would uphold working women.” *Courtesy Maine Historic Preservation Commission.*

board and dress decently. There are about sixteen girls employed where I work, all but two paid by the piece. The prices paid are 85 cents for a pair of pants, 85 for a vest, \$2 for a sack coat, \$2 for a frock coat and \$3 for an overcoat, custom made clothes, and the girl who makes two overcoats a week spends no idle time but does her best. We do not think that we get paid enough for our work. I could not pay my board and have decent clothes the year round, as in dull seasons we do not have as much work as we can do. I have not been working very long in the shop and the best I can do is to make \$4 a week, and the board here for girls is \$2 and \$2.50 per week. As we do not have steady work our average wages will not exceed \$3 and \$4 per week.²⁴

Women in many different work settings complained about low wages and the difficulty of living on their meager earnings. But for women who were the sole wage earners in their families, the struggle was even more difficult. A worker in a slipper shop detailed these hardships:

My part of the work in the factory is wheeling the slippers with hot wheels, for which I am paid 18 cents per dozen. I have always had a hard row to hoe through life, being one of the unlucky ones. Two years ago I was burned out, losing my home and all I had. With a light insurance I have started me a home here, by hiring \$100. I hire a girl, when I can get one, to do my house work, and work in the shop myself, and when I cannot hire a girl, I leave my four children, the oldest a boy, eleven years old, alone.²⁵

Many women depended on their children to add to the family wage when adult earnings were insufficient to sustain the family. Their troubles were corroborated by a cloth inspector at a cotton mill:

The operatives of these factories labor, some of them from year to year, and have but very little—hardly enough—to live on. Scores of women with families to raise and support have but barely enough for their work to keep hunger from their doors. But a little way from my door has lived a poor family, husband, wife, and three small children, the oldest fourteen years old and the others younger. The father has just died, and the oldest and next oldest children have been put in the mill to work to defray back expenses. They have earned \$3.50 per week, but have recently been cut down to \$3.00 If those who never knew hard work, and have a home of comfort, could but look into the homes and faces of the poor, if they have hearts, it would bring tears to their eyes.²⁶

State law allowed children twelve years and older to work in factories. Between the ages of twelve and fifteen, they could work during school vacations, provided they attended school for sixteen weeks during the year.²⁷ Despite the law, some employers hired children under the age of twelve because they could pay them less, and some desperate parents were willing to lie about their children's age in order to generate needed income for the family. Few children recorded their reflections on work, but one young girl, a fish curer, did write about her experience in the fish canning industry. "I am 13 years old, and live at home. I get 2 months' work at drying fish and earn \$1.80 per week. I put the fish on flakes and get 5 cents a dozen flakes of 120 to 150 fish to a flake. I can do six dozen in 9 or 10 hours and when I get that number done I go home. In hot

days when the fish are soft it takes longer. I get very tired and the odor often makes me sick.”²⁸

Finding and retaining housing for working women and their families was a constant struggle and boarding houses were of particular concern. The *Annual Reports* indicate that many unmarried workers lived with parents or other relatives to help make ends meet, but this was not an option for all working women, many of whom lived in privately-owned or company-owned boarding houses. A cursory look at Lewiston's nominal census from this period reveals large numbers of young women, most likely migrants from rural areas, living in boarding houses.²⁹ The boarding houses varied greatly, from clean and comfortable to dirty and dreary. Alarmed by her housing conditions, one web drawer in a cotton mill asked:

Do you not think there should be fire escapes on the corporation boarding houses? Many operatives are up four flats, with only one way to get out, unless by jumping from the windows. And what of the water we drink? Are the great tanks in the top of the tower containing the water kept as clean as they should be? I do not wish to be fault-finding but I think water standing open to the dust and dirt of a factor, and exposed to rats, mice, and cockroaches, should be looked after pretty often.”³⁰

While the women's observations provide us with vivid images of their living and working conditions, their analyses of such issues as poor working conditions and low pay give us even greater insight into their lives, and many women located the root of their problems in gender inequality. Women earned far less than men did at this time. The *First Annual Report* tabulates returns from workers in various industries. These tables show that in 1887 the weekly wages for women in the cotton mills ranged from \$4.62 to \$9.27, depending on the job, skill level, and experience. The range for men's wages in cotton mills was \$5.53 to \$26.51. In the shoe industry, women earned \$5.80 to \$15.20, while men received \$6.80 to \$19.80.³¹ This pay inequity did not go unnoticed by a machine worker in a tailor's shop:

There is no doubt that the conditions of the working women can and should be improved. Why should men receive from \$2.00 to \$3.00 per day, and women doing the same quantity and in many cases a better quality of work, receive but half the wages It seems to me that if I work nine hours a day and a man does the same work in the same number of hours, that we both should receive equal pay. The argument



Boarding House, Biddeford. Many working women lived in company-owned boarding houses, with dormitory-style rooms and community dining areas. While there are men in this photograph, some boarding houses were sex segregated. *Courtesy Maine Historic Preservation Commission.*

is sometimes used against this that a man has more expenses than a woman. This may be true. But while a single man hires his washing, mending, and making of all garments, a woman generally has this to do herself in her spare hours while men are resting. It is no wonder that women grow old faster than men.³²

Another worker, a dressmaker, rejected outright the notion that men had higher expenses. She argued, “women are poorly paid for their work; still, they have the same rent to pay as men, and about the same for board, more washing to pay for, and it costs them more for clothes. I think women have a poor chance in the world.”³³ Others claimed that

pay equity would improve society by giving women greater control over their lives. An operator at the Wigwam Slipper Shop pointed to the benefits of giving women economic sufficiency:

If girls that have to work were paid as well as men and boys, I think that it would be better for our state, and there would be less sin and crime. For the same amount of labor, we are paid less per week in all occupations. Give us the same rights, privileges and pay, as the men have, and I believe there would be less foolish marriages and fewer divorces. Girls would not be so anxious to get married, and would be more careful in the choice of husbands. I believe women are as smart and capable as men and should be paid as much for their work.³⁴

Not all women saw gender inequality as the root of their problems. Some brought a class analysis to their view of work and blamed their low wages on women who entered the work force not out of economic necessity but out of a desire to earn some money for their own sense of independence and enjoyment. Some workers' comments reveal a tension between those who had to work and those who worked for "pin money." If a woman worked for "pin money" only, some argued, she would probably be willing to work for lower wages and thus lower the pay for all women. A dressmaker complained:

Women's wages are small and there is one cause I can point out and that is, because there are so many girls with parents able to keep them at home, who are working for a trifle. A large proportion will work for small pay to get money for dress or pleasure, and only work to get away from home restraints. This causes many others to accept small wages, when they have large families dependent upon them, and they also make it hard to secure employment.³⁵

One book bindery worker pointed out the irony that women who did not rely on a wage were often able to secure the best positions:

A great many girls whose fathers are able and willing to support them work in shops for the sake of getting a few more dollars for pin money to buy themselves extra finery, etc. They nearly always get the best situations as clerks in stores or anything of that kind, because they can dress nicely and do not require so much pay, as they do not have to pay board or work for the necessities of life. Of course when girls can be hired for three or four dollars a week, those who have to pay that much for board and perhaps have to help to support others, stand a hard chance. I know a widow lady with five children who works in the shoe

shop. She can scarcely average six dollars per week. In the same shop are girls who are paid almost twice as much, who do not have to pay a cent for board, and who can dress in the height of fashion; and they are no more capable of doing the work than the widow lady.³⁶

Other workers saw work-related problems through an ethnic lens, blaming immigrant workers for the lack of jobs and low pay. One cotton weaver railed, "I want to tell you that an American stands no sight at all to get employment, there are so many foreign people in this city. The foreigners have the very best work."³⁷ Maine's foreign-born population included many ethnic groups, but Canadians outnumbered other immigrants, constituting seventy-two percent of Maine's immigrants by 1900.³⁸ Faced with severely declining economic opportunities in Canada in the mid-nineteenth century, many Canadians came to Maine looking for work, especially in the decades following the Civil War, and found work in the state's textile industry. In 1888, of 5,521 employees in the cotton mills of Lewiston, Waterville, Biddeford and Saco, 3,005 were French-Canadian women. Native-born laborers often resented these immigrant workers.³⁹ A button hole worker in a shoe factory declared:

There would be more work for our American women if there were not so many foreigners here. We should look out for our own, first. I am in favor of restricting foreign immigration until there is work enough for those here. My sister once called at a mill in search of employment and was told, "We do not hire Yankees here."⁴⁰

In 1888, the factory inspector commented on the nativism among the workers, stating "the strong race feeling, particularly against the French girls, is much to be regretted."⁴¹ Cultural barriers between French-Canadian and native-born workers fractured potential labor solidarity along ethnic lines.

Despite this ethnic conflict, some female workers, both native-born and immigrant, saw the need to organize in order to improve wages and working conditions in Maine's factories and mills. The shoe workers were the most vocal, both in Maine and elsewhere in New England. One leather sorter in a shoe factory who quit her job to protest low wages called for organized labor, declaring, "I wish there was some organization which would uphold working women. Such an organization is much needed."⁴² Of course the Knights of Labor *had* upheld working women by welcoming women into the organization and by advocating equal pay for equal work; but the union that came afterwards, the Amer-

ican Federation of Labor, was not interested in organizing women. Nationwide, women made up ten percent of the Knights' membership, a percentage only slightly less than women's proportion of the workforce.⁴³ In Maine, women were members of at least five local assemblies of the Knights of Labor. But just as the Knights peaked in 1887, the organization entered a period of rapid decline.⁴⁴ Some workers commented on the lack of unions for women, noting particularly the ways in which workers could be exploited by wage rates:

All the help in our shop are employed at day pay; there is no piece work. I get \$1.25 per day and am expected to do fifteen twelve-pair cases for a day's work. If I stitch more than fifteen cases I get no more wages, but if I fall short because the work fails to come to me, why, I am docked at the rate of eight and two-thirds cents per case. I think this is a great injustice, and I think we ought to have a union here so we can get fair pay for our work. I had a friend who did the same work with me in this shop but she could only do twelve cases a day and earned only \$1.00 per day. She got dissatisfied and went to work in another town in a union shop on same quality of work, and now she earns from twelve to sixteen dollars per week, and works no harder.⁴⁵

Another shoe worker was equally adamant:

I like my employer very much but think he could pay better wages for female labor, and if we should organize I believe we could get it. Where there are unions the wages are always better, I have noticed that, and I would join a union the first one [even] if I lost my place for it. The women have got to organize.⁴⁶

Despite the American Federation of Labor's lack of interest in organizing women, some workers put their sentiments into action and organized work stoppages. The 1904 report lists all of the strikes in Maine between 1881 and 1900, and, according to this record, there were 172 strikes during those years, only eighty-seven of which were ordered by labor organizations. More than 16,000 workers were involved in these strikes. Those left unemployed during the strikes included 22,703 men and 11,258 women.⁴⁷ It is not clear how the strikes were organized—most likely many were simply spontaneous uprisings. But the record of labor unrest suggests that women were far from satisfied with their wages and working conditions.

The comments of women workers recorded in the bureau's *Annual Reports* give voice to a wide range of concerns: low wages, erratic work

schedules, uncomfortable working temperatures, unsanitary and unsafe conditions. The reports include the working women's requests for more and better boarding houses, cleaner drinking water, more and safer fire escapes, private and sanitary bathroom facilities, higher wages, equal pay for equal work, and unions to represent women's interests. What was the response of the bureau to the concerns and suggestions made by the women?

Reaction and Response

Inspector Flora Haines, hired by the bureau in 1888, was the first to respond to women's concerns, and she did so with empathy and practical suggestions for change. Her detailed report corroborates much of what the women workers had written, elaborating on life in the boarding houses and work in the mills, factories, and shops. She deplored the low wages and poor working conditions, though she also credited many workplaces for good conditions, in some cases praising workers and owners alike for a clean and safe environment. Haines was especially concerned about the discrimination she observed directed toward the French-Canadian immigrants, and noted with concern that the French-Canadian workers could not speak English while their supervisors could not speak French. "I do not know that a single agent, overseer or section-hand speaks French."⁴⁸ Despite the inclination of most French-Canadian immigrants to retain their language, some apparently were interested in gaining English skills, and Haines reported that of the 200 women of all nationalities registered at the Bates Street Evening School in Lewiston, over 100 of them were French Canadian.⁴⁹ Though it seems out of place in a labor report, Haines recommended that the state legislate the teaching of French and English in the schools so that the French-Canadian immigrants might be more inclined to attend public schools—an insightful, if surprising, recommendation.⁵⁰

Haines also pointed out health and safety hazards at work places. She cited locked doors, unsanitary conditions, unsafe machinery, the absence of fire escapes, and other workplace hazards that could lead to accidents and illness. An example of her careful inspection is her review of the Portland Match Factory where a number of female workers suffered damage to their teeth and jawbones as a result of handling phosphorous. She reported:

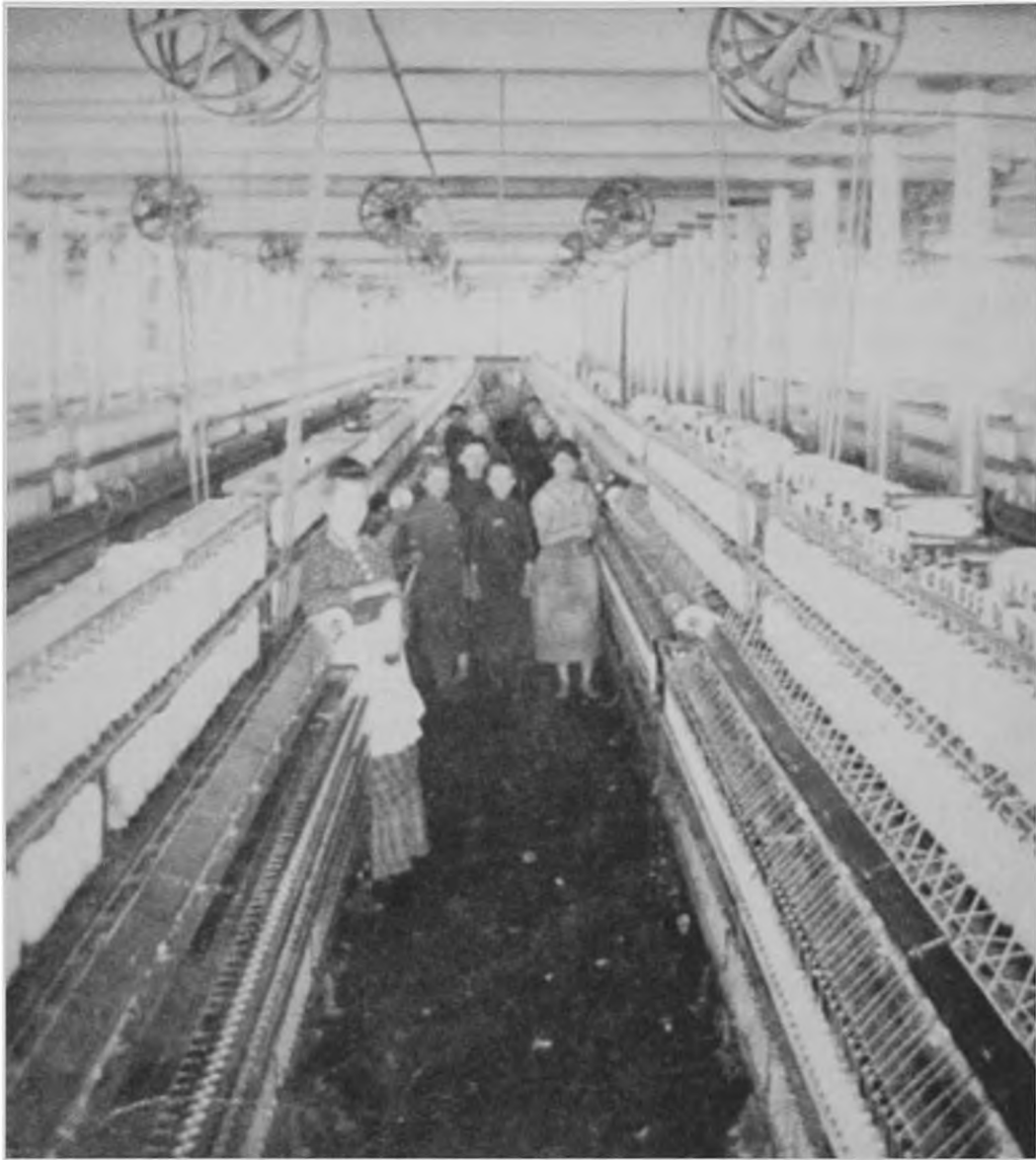
I noticed one girl who had two very badly decayed teeth in the lower jaw, and I was so uneasy on her account, that I went a second time to

the factory and was very kindly allowed to ask her into the office, and warn her personally of the danger she was incurring. She said she knew the risk, but the dentist had assured her the teeth were too far gone to be filled.⁵¹

Flora Haines took her job to heart, as evidenced by the concern shown in her return trip to the match factory, but she was limited in what she could do. Her report was thorough, compassionate, and persuasive, but she could not legislate for the women. She could only hope to influence the politicians. As she herself stated, "it is *the duty of the men who represent them*" to legislate on behalf of the women.⁵² She concluded by declaring her solidarity with Maine's working women. "I could go into almost every place where our women work, and walk blindfolded to the most devoted daughters under the sun. I am thoroughly in love with the working women of the State of Maine."⁵³

The State Labor Commission had a mixed reaction to Haines's report. On a positive note, the Deputy Labor Commissioner, L. R. Campbell, made several recommendations for legislation to improve working conditions for women. Among his suggestions were laws that would require shops and factories to supply clean water closets, seats for women, and adequate fire escapes. However, he reported rather extensively on the difficulty of enforcing the new ten-hour law, which regulated the work of women and children. He argued that it was difficult to enforce the law for women, referring to a manager who reported, "the women in my shop want to work at times more than ten hours a day as they work at piece-work."⁵⁴ Unfortunately, despite Haines's input, Campbell did not share her empathy with the working women. He did not mention the low wages that drove women to work such long hours, an issue clearly articulated in the workers' comments and the inspector's report.

In the 1892 report, the commissioner of the bureau does address the problems of gender inequality and women's low wages. His summary states, "In very few instances were women found in responsible positions who are paid adequate wages. The highest wages reported, twenty dollars per week, were to a woman in command of an established trade . . . and the lowest, ninety cents to \$1.20 per week, to an old woman at work as a rag sorter."⁵⁵ The commissioner also points out that women often earn "from a third to a half the pay" of men, and he makes this surprising recommendation for equal pay: "A man's work done by a woman, should receive a man's pay."⁵⁶ But after 1892, as the influence of the Knights waned and the American Federation of Labor became established, the bureau did very little to examine working women's issues.



Spinning Room, Continental Mill, Lewiston. This Lewiston mill employed native-born women as well as immigrants from Ireland and French Canada. Spinners in the 1880s worked approximately sixty hours per week and earned \$4.50 - \$5.00 per week. *Courtesy Maine Historic Preservation Commission.*

The reports continued to include women in the statistics, but the bureau never investigated working conditions or advocated for their improvement. The reports instead reveal the bureau's focus on gathering statistics, and their lack of interest in using those statistics to bring about change for women workers.

At the legislative level, the state was initially responsive to workers in the late 1880s. The strength of the labor movement in this era encour-

aged both political parties to endorse labor, resulting in a flurry of labor legislation.⁵⁷ In 1886 the state passed labor legislation that established the bureau and put in place the ten-hour law for women and children. Additionally, the legislature passed a law directing employers to pay wages at least every two weeks, a measure that was badly needed in some industries (especially the granite industry) and they responded to labor by eliminating imprisonment for debt, thereby allowing debtors to continue working in order to repay creditors. Further, in 1891 the legislature passed a bill setting Labor Day aside as a state holiday, an idea the Knights had advanced for many years. And in 1893 the legislature passed a bill supporting the union label, but this bill did little for women, the overwhelming majority of whom were not members of unions.⁵⁸ But by the mid-1890s the legislature was far less responsive to labor in general and to women in particular. While the bureau rarely mentions the conditions under which women worked, the legislature did nothing to improve working women's lot.

It is clear that efforts on behalf of working women declined as the influence of the Knights of Labor diminished after 1888. The Knights had been strong supporters of women—they welcomed women into the membership, they called for equal pay for equal work, and they also supported women's suffrage. Though more research is needed to determine the actual numbers of Maine women who were members of the Knights, shoemakers and textile workers—among the most common jobs for Maine women—made up the largest number of women Knights nationwide.⁵⁹ Women strengthened the power of the union. According to Terence Powderly, “[women] are the best men in the Order.”⁶⁰ Arguing that the Knights were ahead of their time on women's issues, labor historian Robert Weir says that the union was “historically precocious in its views on gender. It took the late 1960s women's movement to elevate most unions to the paltry levels achieved by the Knights in the 1880s.”⁶¹

The coming of the American Federation of Labor, which replaced the Knights in Maine and nationwide, meant the end of women's participation in organized labor for nearly eighty years. Ileen Devault argues succinctly that “with the rise of the AFL, women increasingly found themselves defined out of the nation's union movement. The craft union model constructed in these years thus left a legacy of exclusion that reverberated into the twentieth century.”⁶² While women had constituted about ten percent of union membership in the Knights, by 1900 women constituted only 2.2 percent of union membership nationwide.⁶³ Despite the decline in women's union membership, historians studying la-

bor in other states have found that women often participated in labor actions with men, even when they were not represented by the union.⁶⁴

A look into the bureau reports of the early twentieth century shows renewed interest in women's work as Progressive Era reformers pointed out dismal conditions for women and children in Maine's mills and shops, but a significant difference is that this later impulse came from middle-class reformers, while the 1880s agitation came from the workers themselves. No working women's voices appear in the bureau reports during the 1900-1910 era. Neither the bureau, nor the legislature, nor the unions queried the women about their work experiences. During this decade the Labor Commissioner did send special agent Eva Shorey to investigate women's workplaces in several of the state's industrial cities. While most of Shorey's reports consist of predictable problems in safety and sanitation, combined with praise for good efforts by most employers, one gently phrased sentence suggests larger problems. "If some arrangement could be devised to leave a larger margin between the amount of wages received and the price paid for living expenses, the problem of the women wage earners of Portland would be greatly simplified."⁶⁵ In sum, however, Shorey implied that all was well for Maine's working women, as long as they worked hard and lived prudently.⁶⁶ Also in these years, the bureau pointed out that some workplaces posed dangers for women. In 1902 the report made reference to poisonous materials that might lead to miscarriage for women and called for protective legislation.⁶⁷ As other historians have pointed out, such legislation may have protected women from certain dangers, but the same laws could also be used to exclude women from many jobs.⁶⁸

To counter the American Federation of Labor's lack of interest and support for women workers, some Maine women found other avenues to bring attention to their plight. Led by Mamie Bilodeau in 1907, some 225 textile workers in Skowhegan went on strike. Among the striking women's demands were an increase in wages, the dismissal of an overseer they accused of sexual harassment, the abolition of fines for workers, and workers' representation on an arbitration committee. Standing firm for several months, they successfully shut down the mill and eventually won their demands. Although the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) gave the women support after the strike began, the American Federation of Labor opposed the women's efforts, joining with the mill owners in an attempt to stop the strike.⁶⁹

The voices captured in the bureau's reports provide us with an important entry into the lives of working women in the late nineteenth



Lewiston Mill. Some textile mill operatives reported that tending multiple machines was both tiring and dangerous. In addition, the noise of the machines could cause hearing loss. One inspector wondered "how much the occasional deafness noticed among [the operatives] was from the noise of the machinery." *Courtesy Maine Historic Preservation Commission.*

century, and indeed, as with most historical documents, they raise as many questions as they answer. For example, did the workers actually feel free to make critical comments, or did their economic dependence and fear of losing their jobs silence many women? And why did so few of the women comment on unions and strikes? Did the *Annual Reports* include all comments submitted by the women, or did the Commissioner censor or edit them in some way? What comments would immigrant women, many of whom could not speak English, have contributed? Despite the many questions still left unanswered, the voices expressed

through the *Annual Reports* nevertheless provide us with a unique, personal view of the largely hidden lives of working women in the 1880s.

NOTES

1. *Second Annual Report of the Bureau of Industrial and Labor Statistics for the State of Maine, 1888* (Augusta, ME: Burleigh & Flynt, Printers, 1888), 114 (hereafter *Bureau Annual Report*).

2. *Ibid.*, 66.

3. David A. Zonderman, *Aspirations and Anxieties: New England Workers and the Mechanized Factory System, 1815-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 4. Mary Blewett also examines working women's writings in her book, *We Will Rise in Our Might* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

4. U.S. Bureau of Census, 1880 and 1910.

5. *Bureau Annual Report*, 1887:130-143. In a conversation with the author on May 1, 2001, Maine labor historian Charles Scontras stated that he believes the numbers in the bureau's *Annual Reports* to be conservative estimates, as he is aware of many strikes that are not listed in these tables.

6. Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 86. Kessler-Harris says 500,000 is a "conservative estimate" of the Knights' membership. Charles Scontras puts the membership at 700,000, "The Rise and Decline of the Knights of Labor and the Rise of the AFL in Maine," in *Maine, A History Through Selected Readings*, eds. David C. Smith and Edward O. Schriver, (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt, 1985), 234. The Maine Bureau's *First Annual Report* (1887:155) claims the Knights had 1,000,000 members in 1886.

7. *Bureau Annual Report*, 1887:57.

8. *Ibid.*, 156.

9. The state also responded to the Knights' recommendation to form a Joint Standing Committee on Labor, which was established in 1887. Charles A. Scontras, *Two Decades of Organized Labor and Labor Politics in Maine, 1880-1900* (Orono, Maine: The Bureau of Labor Education, 1969), 89-90. In founding the bureau, Maine followed the lead of fifteen other states with bureaus by this date, including nearby Massachusetts where the first state bureau was established in 1869.

10. See the full text of the legislation in *Bureau Annual Report*, 1887:11-12.

11. Thomas J. Lyons, sponsor of the bill and later Commissioner of Labor. *Bureau Annual Report*, 1907:5.

12. The 1892 report (1892:5,6) also refers to a request from the Woman's Labor Committee of the World's Congress Auxiliary, a group involved in planning the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893. This group requested information on

the labor of women and children for inclusion in the library of the Woman's Building at the fair. For more on women and the 1893 fair, see Jeanne Madeline Weimann, *The Fair Women* (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1901).

13. *Bureau Annual Report*, 1888:64.

14. *Ibid.*, 109.

15. *Ibid.*, 98.

16. E. Stagg Whitin, *Factory Legislation in Maine* (New York: Columbia University, 1908), 76. Maine was one of only nine states with laws restricting hours of work for women. Scontras, *Two Decades of Organized Labor*, 100, fn. 81. The 1887 ten-hour law did not include men, despite the efforts of the Knights of Labor to have men covered by the legislation.

17. *Bureau Annual Report*, 1888:104.

18. *Ibid.*, 100.

19. Two books that have informed my understanding of the Knights are Kim Voss, *The Making of American Exceptionalism: The Knights of Labor and Class Formation in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993) and Robert E. Weir, *Beyond Labor's Veil: The Culture of the Knights of Labor* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

20. *Bureau Annual Report*, 1888:101.

21. *Ibid.*, 144.

22. *Ibid.*, 106.

23. *Ibid.*, 106.

24. *Ibid.*, 106.

25. *Ibid.*, 102.

26. *Ibid.*, 95.

27. For more on Maine's child labor laws, see Whitin, *Factory Legislation in Maine*. A recent look at the topic is Charles Scontras, *In the Name of Humanity: Maine's Crusade Against Child Labor* (Orono, ME: Bureau of Labor Education, 2000).

28. *Bureau Annual Report*, 1892:157.

29. U.S. Bureau of Census, 1880.

30. *Bureau Annual Report*, 1888:98.

31. *Bureau Annual Report*, 1887:124-125.

32. *Bureau Annual Report*, 1888:109.

33. *Ibid.*, 95.

34. *Ibid.*, 111. The argument that greater pay would protect working women's morality resonated with widespread ideas at the turn of the century when reformers often argued for changes not from the point of view of law, justice, health, or welfare but from a moralistic point of view. Some historians see this focus on morality as a reaction to the increased numbers of women in the

workplace, “adrift” without the traditional support and protection from family. See Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1800-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), Ch. 1, and Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, 102.

35. *Bureau Annual Report*, 1892:155.

36. *Bureau Annual Report*, 1888:105-106.

37. *Ibid.*, 107.

38. U.S. Bureau of Census, 1880 and 1900.

39. *Bureau Annual Report*, 1888:131.

40. *Ibid.*, 108.

41. *Ibid.*, 129.

42. *Ibid.*, 111.

43. Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, 86.

44. For more on the history of the Knights of Labor in Maine, see Scontras, *Two Decades of Organized Labor*. For the nationwide decline of the Knights, see Robert E. Weir, *Knights Unhorsed* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000).

45. *Bureau Annual Report*, 1892:153.

46. *Ibid.*, 153.

47. *Bureau Annual Report*, 1904:176-177.

48. *Bureau Annual Report*, 1888:129.

49. *Ibid.*, 130.

50. *Ibid.*, 130.

51. *Ibid.*, 139.

52. *Ibid.*, 133 (italics in the original).

53. *Ibid.*, 146.

54. *Ibid.*, 8.

55. *Bureau Annual Report*, 1892, 10.

56. *Ibid.*, 10. The Commissioner’s statement is also recorded in Charles Scontras, *Time-Line of Selected Highlights of Maine Labor History: 1636-2003*, (Orono: Bureau of Labor Education, The University of Maine, 2003), 24.

57. Whitin, *Factory Legislation in Maine*, Chaps. 5 and 6.

58. *Ibid.*, 92.

59. Philip S. Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement: From Colonial Times to the Eve of World War I* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 188.

60. David Montgomery, “Workers’ Control of Machine Production in the 19th Century,” *Labor History* 17 (Fall, 1976): 500. Quoted in Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*, 197.

61. Robert Weir, *Knights Unhorsed*, 143. Weir reminds us to distinguish between the Knights’ philosophy and that of twentieth-century feminism. “In an ideal

society, they still believed that men should make a wage capable of supporting families so women could stay at home.”

62. Ileen A. Devault, “To Sit Among Men,” in *Labor Histories: Class, Politics, and the Working-Class Experience*, ed. Eric Arnesen, Julie Greene, and Bruce Laurie (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 262.

63. Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, 86.

64. Devault, “To Sit Among Men,” 272-273. This research has not been done in Maine.

65. *Bureau Annual Report*, 1907:167.

66. Eva Shorey is best known for her 1907 report on child labor in the Eastport sardine canneries written in response to John Spargo’s book, *The Bitter Cry of Children* (New York: Macmillan, 1906). Spargo argued that one of the nation’s worst examples of child labor could be found in the Eastport canneries. Eva Shorey’s report largely attempted to refute his claims, saying the children were not really abused. *Bureau Annual Report*, 1907:121-137.

67. *Bureau Annual Report*, 1902:199.

68. For a thorough discussion on protective legislation, see Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, chap. 7.

69. Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*, 419-421. More research is needed to determine what other efforts to organize Maine’s working women took place in the early twentieth century.