

CHAPTER IX

TYPE STORIES OF WORKERS

The serious side of the effort to get better working conditions is told in the following accounts, written by young women operatives, aged from twenty to thirty. They were asked to tell where they had worked and at what jobs.

No. 1

My Work

My father, who was an overseer on a big farm, died when I was about two and a half years old, leaving me and five other children, three of whom were afflicted, to be cared for by an aunt, my mother's sister. My mother had died about a year before and her dying request was, that my aunt keep us together if she could.

My aunt was not married and so she could not make a living on the farm. She was forced to move to town where she could find work of some kind in the mill. The oldest child, a girl, was not quite twelve, but went to work in the factory with my aunt. When she took charge of us she had \$5.00 in money and a small farm which consisted of only a few acres.

The town we moved to was W-----, N. C. and the good people wanting to help her, wanted to adopt me, and my oldest sister and the third oldest child which was a boy, and leave her with the other three. (I might say here that two of the children, a girl and a boy had bad eyes. So bad that later they attended the Institute for the Blind at Raleigh. The other girl was paralyzed in her whole right side, being left in this condition from a spasm when a baby. She has never been able to earn her living.) My aunt would not consent to separate us, so one good brother a member of the same order, or lodge, which my father

belonged to, thought he would have me anyway. He came to our home from my grandmother's burial, which was two months after my father died, and begged for me to go home with them and spend the night. Finally, my aunt consented, with the understanding that he was to bring me back the next day. The next day was rainy, and my people waited till night for him, then decided that he would come the next day. The next day went by and he did not show up. That night my aunt hired a horse and buggy and went after me. (The man lived about nine miles from town.) When she arrived, she was informed that they were going to keep me. That they had as much right to me as she had, that she had not been appointed a guardian by law, and if she got me it would "be by the end of the law".

This with the other trouble my aunt had just had, almost killed her. But she held up under it and proceeded by the law to get me. She was about three months getting me and she had to sell her land to pay lawyers. She couldn't even get the money from the lodge to which my father belonged, until I was twenty-one.

She worked there in W-----in the shirt factory from 12 to 14 hours a day for fifty cents a day, doing her washing, scrubbing, and everything else at night. The only dependence she had was the oldest girl, now about twelve.

She got a widowed sister of hers to come and stay with us children till she could go elsewhere and find work that she could make a living at. She went to T---, N. C., and got work in the hosiery mill. As soon as she could she sent for us. We got along better there. But we had a hard time. We lived about a mile and a half from the factory, and she had to work twelve hours a day. Later we moved nearer the mill and another one of the children was old enough to help work. (The two blind children were in Raleigh now.) We lived there till I was eleven years old, then we moved to D----. I went to work soon after we came here, before I was twelve. The kind of people I had always been used to, went to work as soon as they were of age, I mean as soon as the law would allow them to, and naturally I thought it a fine thing to be able to make money. I worked in the summer and went to school in the winter till I finished the sixth grade, then I had to go to work regular. By this time I realized what it meant to have an education, but I had to continue working.

* The first work I did was topping in a hosiery mill. They paid me \$1.89 a week to learn. In three weeks I was put on piece work and the first day, I remember, I made nine cents. I was paid what I made the \$1.89 the first week I was on piece work, then each week twenty-five cents was deducted until the \$1.89 was made up. By this time I was making about that much. It was a horrible place as I look back at it now. We worked eleven hours a day, the stools we sat on had high small tops with no backs, and everybody that used snuff and tobacco (and nearly everybody did) had to spit on the floor, for there was nowhere else to spit. Later, I remember, when the Health Department made them put spittoons in, negro men took tools like shovels and scrapped the snuff up from the floor. Only those who saw it can imagine what it looked like. In topping, one has to keep up with the knitter, and if you let a machine wait, of course he loses as well as you. I have sat half days at a time without even getting off my stool for water or anything, in order to keep my machines from waiting. The toilet was not large enough for the number of folks who had to use it, and often when the toppers would go in there would be so many waiting ahead of them, that they would have to go back and then maybe not catch up with their work any more till stopping time.

I kept this up for about three and one-half years. I had never worked in any place before, but I became dissatisfied and longed many times to be able to do something else besides work in a factory. I thought they were all alike. I often wondered how anyone could be content, as some seemed to be, to keep on working like that. I got so I could make about as much as any of the others (about \$3.00 a week). But I hated to hear the whistle blow to go to work, and the only glad moment of the day was when it blew to go home. I began to ask other girls in other places about their work and found that conditions were not so bad in other places. I got a job in a bag factory. Here I operated a machine, and I really enjoyed my work. We worked eleven hours, but I had a chair to sit in (low enough so my feet could touch the floor) and if I wanted to work hard I could, and if I felt bad I didn't have to work hard. I went for water when I wished and had no one rushing me. I began making over four dollars a week, and soon I was making from eight to ten. The sanitary conditions were much better. I worked there several years, and when there came a shortage in work which lasted several months, I went to work in another hosiery mill, this time operating a seaming machine. I liked that as well as I had making bags. I liked it so well that I have continued seaming till now.

All during these years there was a longing to go back to school but it was impossible for me to go. I did, however, attend night school some, which helped, and later I was accepted for two terms at Bryn Mawr Summer School. This was a wonderful experience and did me more good than I could even imagine before. It made things possible for me which seemed impossible before. Now at the age of 27 I am back in high school, and I hope to finish next year. Then I don't know what I will do, but I hope to do something for industrial workers which will help them have a more abundant life.(1)

No.2

My Work

I went to work in a hosiery mill at the age of twelve, there were children even younger than I was working in the same mill. Child labor laws were unheard of things. We went to work at 6:30 in the morning, had forty minutes for dinner, then worked until six o'clock in the evening. The superintendent of this particular plant was very kind and considerate towards his help and especially toward the "children". We never worked very hard, my average weekly wage at that time was about \$2.50. The sanitary conditions were certainly not very good, just a few cuspidors scattered about and when they were not convenient one generally spit on the floor. Out door toilets were in use; at that time there wasn't any sewerage in the town. In 1914 and 1915 things began to improve, we moved into a

-
- (1) The writer does not state that she is now supporting the aunt who took care of her when she was a child. The aunt is now old and sick. The writer has helped to pay for their home, and all during the winter before she attended the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women in Industry, she milked two cows, took care of chickens, helped prepare meals for several boarders, worked nine or ten hours a day in the mill except Saturday half-holiday, and attended night school two nights a week. She now goes to High School in the morning, works in the mill in the afternoon, and runs a small grocery store in one room of their house at odd times. Her foreman and superintendent say she is one of the best and quickest workers in the mill, and help her all they can in letting her work part time. "If I hadn't been as strong as a horse, I could never have done it all;" she said, "but now I'm tired all the time and I have the rheumatism in my knees from the machine work."

larger and more modern building, sanitary conditions were improved very much. I was then making an average of \$8.50 per week which was considered a very good wage, hours were better, we were working only ten hours a day which made our work day much easier.

In 1916 and 1917 wages began to go up and I changed my work from a topper to a looper, and my average wage then was about \$15.00; in 1918 conditions improved both in hours and in wages which was due to the war. In 1919, I married and had a looping machine put in my home, not working regularly I made an average of \$12.50 at home. In 1920 and 1921 and 1922 hosiery business slumped, lot of the mills closed down, others worked just part time, wages came down; during that time I worked in a department store in K----, making \$15.00 a week, then again in Memphis, Tenn., making \$20.00. Coming back to D----- in 1922-23 I went back to the hosiery mill. This particular mill was paying good wages and I made an average of \$23.50, other mills were on the slump. In 1924 conditions were bad everywhere, no one had regular work. I only made an average of \$15.00 all last year, people suffered from this slump. In late fall of 1924 business picked up, we began working ten hours a day for five days and a half making a total of 55 hours a week. In 1925 the place I worked in had so many orders that it was almost impossible to get any time off, the management became so strict and the hours so long, and they required you to work every minute of the time, and after working regularly for four months, I stayed out from my work being sick, not seriously so, but sick enough to stay away from work. The foreman had quite a bit to say about my absence, in fact, doubting my word as to my really being sick, making it so unpleasant that I was forced to quit the mill. In all the places I have ever worked, this is the only one that I ever quit on bad terms.

Yes, conditions are improved quite a bit, but there is still room for more improvement. When we get shorter hours for women workers in industry and get a law prohibiting boys and girls under sixteen years of age from

working over eight hours, then we the women in industry will be satisfied.(3)

No. 3

My Work

I was born in F. County, N. C., my father was a farmer, but soon after I was born he decided to move to f----so my brother and sisters could work in the mill as prices were low for farm produce at that time.

As soon as I was old enough my younger brother and I would take dinner to the ones working in the mill. My mother's health was not very good and I was kept out of school a lot to help with the house work. Each day when we carried dinner I would help my sisters spool. At first I couldn't do anything but take out the empty quills later I put in the full bobbins and soon I learned to use the knotter and could tie the ends together. But I was not destined to play long like this very long.

My parents decided to move to R---- when I was between the age of thirteen and fourteen years old. I was considered old enough to begin working and it was too late in the year to begin school there, so I began working.

I had to get up at five o'clock in order to get to work by six. We had to walk a mile to work and stand up until twelve o'clock. I sat down to eat my dinner, usually on a bolt of cloth or anywhere I could find to sit. We only had forty minutes for dinner and right back to work until six that night.

My first job was spooling. This was not hard to do, but I had to walk up and down in front of the ma-

-
- (3) During the time the writer had the looping machine in her home, she had a child. Her husband was in France in the A.E.F. His wounds have made him incapable of working since his return. Her mother takes care of the little girl during mill hours. The writer has been considered one of the best and fastest workers in the mill by her superintendent. She does not state that when he told one of the other workers that he thought she was able to work and should be there, she wrote him a note saying: "The time of slavery is past, I know when I am sick." She is an example of the "independent" type. She is twenty-six years old.

chines and tie ends all day. The monotony was awful after I became accustomed to it day after day. I only left my work long enough to get a drink of water or be excused; if I did, my work would stop and I would get behind and I had a certain amount of work to do and in order to do it, I must work every minute.

The climate at R----didn't seem to agree with any of the family, so my parents decided to move after we had been there only six months.

Mr. P----was building a mill at W----and was anxious for large families. He persuaded my father to move there before the mill was finished. I worked at several different things before the winding machines were installed, then I was given a set of machines. This work was similar to spooling and I liked it much better and was soon an expert winder. I learned to keep up three sets of machines in a few months.

People came to W----from all over the state and several came from adjoining states, because Mr. P----paid good wages considering wages paid elsewhere. This was a small village and some people weren't desirable neighbors so it soon became very unpleasant to live there. After eighteen months we moved to D---- where we have lived since then.

I decided I would try to do some other kind of work beside cotton mill work after we moved here. Some friends of ours told my sister and me to go to the tobacco factory to work. They said the work was clean and easy to do, but we soon found it wasn't very clean. We were both put to packing cigarettes by hand. The odor of the tobacco made me feel sick and faint. The windows were kept closed to keep the cigarettes moist and pliable so they could be shaped in the package. When the floors were swept I could hardly breathe, the tobacco dust was so thick. The sweeper would take up pans full of tobacco off the floor each time they swept.

It is needless to say I took the first job I heard of, which was in a bag factory.

I was given a machine to sew bags on. This work was the nicest, pleasantest work I had done so far. I sat down to operate the machine and folded the bags and pressed the pedal, and the bag was sewed, in the flash of an eye almost. This place had more ventilation than any of the previous places I had worked at and the sanitary conditions were better. I worked until school

started in September and I started back to school with the hopes that I could finish some day, but my hopes were not to be realized. I had to stop school at Christmas and go back to work again. I was unable to get my place back, so I went to the cotton mill to work for the third time.

The sanitary conditions were not nearly so good as in the bag mill. The wages were also lower in the cotton mill and the people dipped snuff and spit on the floor, or anywhere they chose. As soon as they had an opening, I went back to the Bag Department, and worked there for several years.

I became interested in the Y. W. C. A. when it was being organized and I became a charter member. The Y. secretary became interested in me and helped me in many ways. She told me of the Bryn Mawr Summer School and how I could go. I filled out the papers as she told me to do, but did not dream that I would ever be chosen to go. When the letter came saying I was accepted, I could hardly believe my ears. I was like another girl said she was, "I thought there was something wrong with the school." But later on I realized the school was wonderful and that society was to blame for the way conditions had been before and not the school.

I came back home with a broader vision than I had ever had before. I knew then why I was not strong and healthy like girls of my age should be. I had associated with girls two months that had not worked long hours as I had worked, and had had better sanitary conditions when they had worked and they were much stronger physically.

I went back to work when I got home, but wasn't feeling well. The overseer came and told me I would have to work at night for two weeks. I told him I couldn't get enough sleep and rest in the day to be able to work, but he insisted I could. I quit and came home, but he thought I would work that night.

I clerked in a jewelry store until Christmas and after the holidays were over I went to work at the Hosiery Mill.

I went to work as an Inspector. I had to sit down from seven in the morning until twelve, one hour for lunch and back to work until six that evening. I worked like this nearly two years, then I was promoted to the forelady's place, which I still hold. The sanitary

conditions are not what they should be. The toilet on the first floor for girls has only two commodes and about thirty girls have to use it. There is only one window in the toilet and that is a half window fastened with a chain so it only opens a very little. Then, too, the cuspidors aren't cleaned more than twice or three times a week and the people spit on the floor around them and some spit between the machines. The lint is flying all the time, but when the men clean the machines it is a good deal worse. They use an electric machine that blows the lint off of the machine all over the room. Sometimes when the machines are real linty it looks like we are in a heavy snow storm. Only it is worse for we are inhaling this in our lungs while the snow is harmless.

I expect to keep on working in the cotton mill, but I hope to be able to change the working conditions soon. First, that we may have shorter working hours; second, better sanitary conditions; third, more pay. (4)

These anonymous interviews by women mill workers appear in Chapter 9 of Mary Cowper's unpublished study "Cotton Cloth: A Type Study of the Community Process." She wrote this study during 1924-1925 under direction of UNC professor Howard W. Odum. The complete manuscript and other notes reside in Box 10 of the Mary O. Cowper Collection, Topical Series: Suffrage, Industrial Labor Concerns, Social Legislation, Writings and Notes: *Cotton Cloth*, 1925, Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Durham.

(4) The writer is twenty-six. Her father is not able to work at all, and her pay helps support the father and mother.