Lesson: Comparing the Working Conditions of Women
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Grade Level: High School
Common Core Standards:

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.5 Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.6 Evaluate authors’ differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors’ claims, reasoning, and evidence.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.7 Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.8 Evaluate an author’s premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.9 Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.11-12.1a Introduce precise, knowledgeable claim(s), establish the significance of the claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that logically sequences the claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.11-12.1b Develop claim(s) and counterclaims fairly and thoroughly, supplying the most relevant data and evidence for each while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both claim(s) and counterclaims in a discipline-appropriate form that anticipates the audience’s knowledge level, concerns, values, and possible biases.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.11-12.9 Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Wisconsin Academic Standards:
• B.12.2 Analyze primary and secondary sources related to a historical question to evaluate their relevance, make comparisons, integrate new information with prior knowledge, and come to a reasoned conclusion.

• B.12.5 Gather various types of historical evidence, including visual and quantitative data, to analyze issues of freedom and equality, liberty and order, region and nation, individual and community, law and conscience, diversity and civic duty; form a reasoned conclusion in the light of other possible conclusions; and develop a coherent argument in the light of other possible arguments.

• B.12.13 Analyze examples of ongoing change within and across cultures, such as the development of ancient civilizations; the rise of nation-states; and social, economic, and political revolutions.

Essential Question: What conditions existed as America industrialized and how is this connected to the labor movement?

Learner Outcomes – Students Will Be Able To:
• Interpret and analyze primary sources
• Describe what life was like in early textile mills for young women
• Draw conclusions about the effects of industrialization on average Americans
• Explain the struggles and importance of the creation of labor unions
• Explain the significance of strikes and connect strikes to the conditions in early textile mills
• Compare conditions in early 19th century textile mills to those of early 20th century Wisconsin mills and trace changes in factory work over time

Procedure:
1. Introduction: Ask students how mass production of particular products affects all Americans, in contrast to cottage industries. Call on students for responses. Break responses into economic, social and other categories on the board.
2. The teacher will show the students the Lowell Mills time table, which emphasizes punctuality and organization here.
3. The teacher will lead the students in reading the introduction of “The Life of a Lowell Girl” reading (attached). Students will understand why young unmarried women worked in early textile mills.
4. Students will highlight key phrases and answer the corresponding questions.
5. Students will then read about the harsh working conditions in early factories. The students will read the two sets of rules and regulations, associated with employment and living in boardinghouses, and answer the comprehension questions. Students should also read the rules and regulations for the Poignaud and Plant Boarding House here.
6. Ask students which regulations they found to be particularly strict or interesting. Ask the students how they think the Lowell girls reacted to the strict regulations. Ensure that both responses (the girls tolerated the rules; the girls rebelled against the rules) are presented.

7. Explain that the regulations were directed at the female workers. However, the regulations also make a reference to male workers. What jobs were male workers given in the textile mills?

8. The next two Lowell Girls primary sources provide individual accounts of working in the mills. The students will read “A Letter from Lowell” here, and answer the comprehension questions. The teacher should caution the students to read the description of the primary source carefully. They should also read the letter critically and question whether the woman’s description of factory life is realistic. A contrasting perspective is provided by a worker who participated in the Lowell Girls strike in 1836.

9. The students will read “The Lowell Mill Girls Go on Strike, 1836” here and here and answer the comprehension questions. In a follow-up discussion, students will assess the two differing perspectives.

10. Next, students will synthesize the knowledge that they gained from the four Lowell Girls primary sources. Using the “Summary of Lowell Girls Primary Sources” worksheet, students will write three paragraph responses. They will describe the working conditions for the textile mill workers. The students will weigh the advantages and disadvantages of working in the textile mills as a young, unmarried woman. Finally, they will assess the two primary sources written by individual workers and consider the bias of both authors.

**Closure:** To study change over time, students will analyze the testimony of working class Wisconsin women eighty years after the Lowell textile mills. The students will read “Women’s Working Conditions in a Wisconsin Factory in 1914” and answer the comprehension questions. In a follow-up discussion, the students will compare and contrast the working conditions for Lowell Girls in the textile mills of the 1830s and 1840s with the working conditions for female workers at the Diamond Match Co. in Oshkosh, Wisconsin in 1914 here.

**Assessment:** The students’ individual primary analysis assignments will be assessed based on their written responses. The teacher will monitor student understanding based on their participation in class discussions. In the culminating essay, students will write a five-paragraph essay, comparing and contrasting the working conditions for female workers in the Lowell textile mill in the 1830s and the Diamond Match Co. in Oshkosh in 1914. Students will likely cite the similarities of the role of a matron within the factory system, the poor wages, unsafe working conditions, and the limited education of female factory workers. Students will likely cite the differences of no boardinghouses in the twentieth century and progressive reforms like a nine-hour work day law, one hour required noon meal, and the experiment of exercise opportunities provided during the work day.
The Life of a “Lowell Girl”

Before the Industrial Revolution, making clothing was a long, laborious process for colonial women. Once machines were invented to spin thread and weave cloth, mass production of cotton textiles began in New England in the early 1800s. Workers were needed to work in these new textile factories. But who would do such difficult work for little pay? Owners hired young unmarried women from local farms. The owners promised parents that they would provide a disciplined, respectable lifestyle and supervision of the women in company-owned boardinghouses. In return, owners were able to pay female workers less than male workers.

Working in a factory was much different than working on your family farm. Factories required order, discipline, and a reliance upon the clock. “Lowell girls” (named for the young female workers of the Lowell, Massachusetts factory) worked 12- to 13-hour days, six days a week. The Lowell girls were paid between $2 and $4 each week and the workers paid $1.25 for room and board.

The working conditions were very difficult; there were many on-the-job accidents and no insurance to pay for medical bills. In the factories, it was very hot in the summer and cold in the winter. Workers spent almost all of their time in the mill buildings or the boarding houses nearby. Not only did the women have to obey the factory bell, they also were controlled by other regulations, like curfews and mandatory church attendance.

Directions: Read carefully the following primary source selections and underline or highlight key ideas. Then answer completely the corresponding questions.
Rules of Employment for “Lowell Girls”

1. What type of primary source are the two documents that you read? (For example, photographs, newspaper articles, regulations, letters, diary entries, records, etc.)

2. Who wrote the documents?

3. When AND where were the documents written?

4. Why were these documents written?

5. Who was the intended audience? (This means who was supposed to read these documents.)

6. After reading both documents, formulate TWO questions that you have about the documents or about the life of a Lowell girl.

7. In your opinion, what were the THREE strictest regulations placed on the Lowell girls?
8. How do you think the Lowell girls reacted to these regulations? Did they follow the rules?
Working at a textile mill was often dangerous and tedious (boring) work. Although the women were paid less than men, the Lowell girls’ wages were much better than what women could earn in other jobs like being a teacher or servant. Many workers preferred earning their own wages than living on the family farm. The typical Lowell girl stayed at the mills for four years.

However, many of the women found the time to have some fun. Before coming to the mill, most of the young women did not have the opportunity to spend much time with their peers. Now they were surrounded by hundreds of women their own age. Unlike other factory workers, the Lowell girls were encouraged to use their free time to take classes and form women’s clubs. In their limited free time, the women went shopping and went to dances.

**Directions:** Read carefully the following primary source selection and answer completely the corresponding questions.
Letter From Lowell Mills Girl

Directions: Read the letter and then answer the corresponding questions:
1. What type of primary source is this document? (For example, photograph, newspaper article, autobiography, regulations, letter, diary entry, records, etc.)

2. WHO wrote this document and WHEN and WHERE was it written?

3. Who was the intended audience? (This means who was supposed to read this document.)

4. Is this document BIASED [unfair or prejudiced]? Explain your answer.

5. What are at least THREE advantages for Lowell girls working in the textile mills?
The Lowell Mill Girls Go on Strike, 1836

1. What type of primary source is this document? (For example, photograph, newspaper article, autobiography, regulations, letter, diary entry, records, etc.)

2. WHO wrote this document and WHEN was it written?

3. Who was the intended audience? (This means who was supposed to read this document.)

4. Is this document BIASED [unfair or prejudiced]? Explain your answer.

5. What were at least TWO of the Lowell Girls complaints that caused them to strike?

6. What was the outcome of the strike? Why did many of the Lowell Girls leave the textile mills?
Summary of Lowell Girl Primary Sources

You have now completed the first job (or hat) of a historian by being a history detective and conducting research by reading four primary sources related to the Lowell Girls. Now, it is time to be a scholar (Hat #2). You will assess the sources that you read and synthesize or think through the information you learned. You will present the information (like a chef – Hat #3) with the written responses below.

Directions: Answer the following questions, writing a paragraph of at least FIVE SENTENCES for each response.

1. Describe the everyday working conditions for the Lowell Girls. Why do you think that Lowell Girls agreed to work in the textile mills?

2. What were at least two advantages and two disadvantages of working in a textile mill?

3. You read two differing perspectives about working as a Lowell Girl, a “Letter from Susan” and the account of a worker who participated in an 1836 strike. Assess or judge these two sources. Can we believe both of the authors? Is one of the primary sources more persuasive to you? As a historian, is it best to just one of these sources or both sources? Why?
Women’s Working Conditions in a Wisconsin Factory in 1914

1. What is this primary source?  
   (For example, photographs, newspaper articles, letters, diary entries, government testimony, etc.)

2. Who were telling their stories?

3. When AND where was the document written?

4. Why was this document written?

5. Who was the intended audience?  (This means who was supposed to read these documents.)

6. What were the working conditions like at the Diamond Match Company?  What types of jobs did women have?  What were their working hours?

7. What suggestions did the employees, like the matron, give to improve conditions at the factory?

8. Did these employees seem content or happy with their jobs and their lives outside of work?  What did these women do in the evenings after work?