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Women and Work: Views and Visions From the Pioneer Valley, 1870–1945

Donna S. Kenny

Women in the Pioneer Valley, as in all communities across America, always worked. They labored in semi-skilled and unskilled jobs for meager wages that averaged only two-thirds of the pay that men received for the same work. Women worked on the farms, in the professions, in home-based cottage industries, for reform movements, as writers, independent artists and craftswomen, and as volunteers.

In Figure 1, tacked onto the wall beside the telephone is an advertisement for “Dr. Miles Anti-Pain Pills for Headache.” One wonders how often the woman in the photo needed Dr. Miles’ remedy after working all day beneath the bare Edison bulb which hangs above her head in the center of the room. This woman is surrounded by timeless tools of domesticity, known to every woman at some point in her life. In the distance is a sunny dining room where one notes a wicker baby pram just inside the doorway. The variety of utensils and presence of the large pot hanging in the foreground suggest an ability to serve many guests. Perhaps this is the cook at a local boardinghouse or restaurant.

For over three hundred years women worked alongside men molding the landscape that shapes the Valley today. Farmhouses in rural Valley communities stretched and creaked with the weight of rooms added for ever-expanding families. Women managed the home life on these farms; many of them also labored with their families in the fields. Photographs such as the one by the Howes brothers, itinerant photographers from Ashfield, depict rural women as agricultural workers harvesting the local tobacco and onion crops (Figure 2). “The women are pictured in ways that belie the conventional image of late nineteenth century women as . . . overprotected stay-at-homes.”¹

One imagines that the tired but satisfied group in Figure 3 has just returned from the hay fields. This may be the scene of an extended family who lived together on the farm, or one of neighborly cooperation which traditionally characterized farm life in the Valley. In all probability, these two women had to cook and serve a meal to their families, as well as attend to a myriad of late afternoon and early evening chores awaiting their attention in the farmhouse.

Some photographs also convey the poverty and isolation of many early farm women in the Valley. Figure 4 depicts a frail matriarch who appears dwarfed

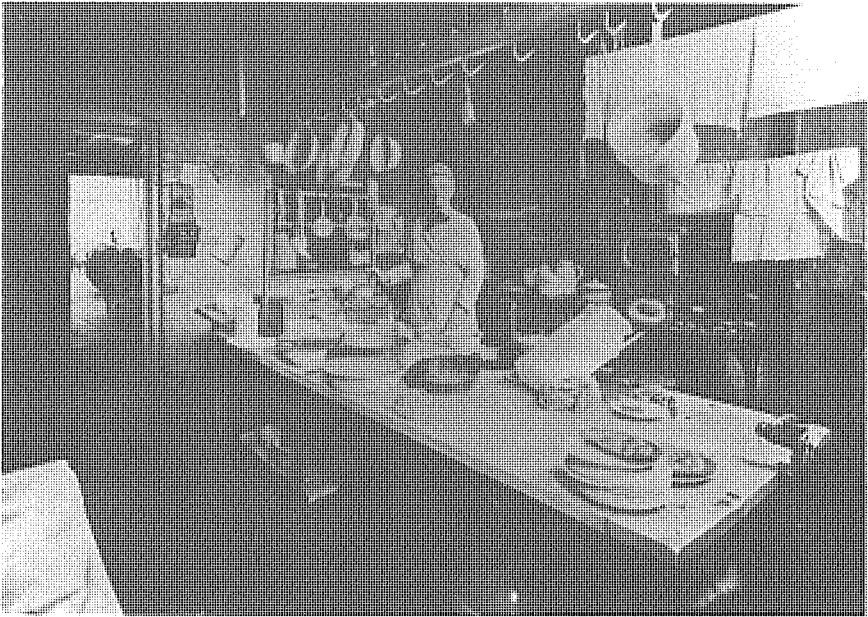


Figure 1. KITCHEN WORKER. Circa 1910.
Courtesy of Donna Stronach Kenny, Northampton, Massachusetts.



Figure 2. SEWING SHED. Circa 1882-1907.
©Howes Brothers, LaFrancis Collection, Ashfield Historical Society, Ashfield, Massachusetts.



Figure 3. TWO FARM FAMILIES WITH HORSE-DRAWN HAY WAGON. Circa 1915.
Courtesy of Wistariahurst Museum, Holyoke, Massachusetts.



Figure 4. THREE GENERATIONS. Circa 1882-1907.
© Howes Brothers, LaFrancis Collection, Ashfield Historical Society, Ashfield, Massachusetts.

by her environment as she poses in the barren farmyard with her daughter and grandchildren. The farmhouse door is swung open and a washtub rests on the ground near the tilting well house.

In the Valley's villages and small towns women were teachers, nurses, store clerks, waitresses and office workers. Throughout decades of change in the social and economic landscape, women continued to nourish the succeeding generations and to serve as culture-keepers of society. As a principal industry in the region, education attracted many women to work and study here. Between 1869 and 1946 fourteen colleges and private preparatory schools were founded in the Valley.² Included in this group are two of the most prominent women's colleges in the United States: Mount Holyoke Seminary which was originally founded in 1837 by Mary Lyon of Buckland, and Smith College which was founded in 1871 by Sophia Smith of Hatfield. The overwhelming majority of public school teachers in the Valley were women. Their early credentials may have consisted of a high school diploma or a degree perhaps from the nearby Westfield State Normal School, which had been founded in 1838 as one of the first colleges in the country to admit women and black students.

In 1895, a South Hadley female school teacher with a high school education earned an annual salary of \$195.50. The town paid another woman, who had graduated from a Normal School, the larger sum of \$307. However, the janitor received \$390.25 for his work and the school superintendent received \$622.22.³

During her early career as a young school teacher in the hilltowns of western Massachusetts, Jessie Tarbox Beals (Figure 5) taught first in a one-room schoolhouse on the outskirts of Williamsburg. There she earned seven dollars per week and received free room and board at two-week intervals from the parents of her pupils. Eventually she transferred to a school in the center of town where enrollment had grown to thirty pupils and her salary increased to ten dollars. In 1893 Beals moved north to Greenfield because its larger population offered potential for a more lucrative teaching position and a more active social life. She left the area in 1900, soon achieving national recognition in her second career as the country's first woman news photographer.⁴

Starting in the late 19th century, women physicians were active in the Valley. Dr. Mary P. Snook (Figure 6) was the country doctor for residents of the Hampshire County hilltowns from 1930 to 1945, residing first in Chesterfield and then Worthington. In 1932 she became the first female medical examiner in Massachusetts (and possibly the country). From 1948 to 1960 Dr. Snook was director of the out-patient department at the Northampton State Hospital.

After the Civil War when thousands of women had cared for the maimed and dying, nursing was increasingly honored as a profession. From the turn of the century, young women in the Valley graduated from nursing programs affiliated with local hospitals, and many operated under the auspices of the Catholic Diocese of Springfield. In 1890 nurses' national average pay ranged between \$1 and \$4 per week.⁵ Work shifts usually lasted twelve or more hours. Unlike today, nursing was exclusively a "woman's job." Sexual division and deference were taken for granted. Well-trained nurses stood up immediately whenever a



Figure 5. **JESSIE TARBOX BEALS WITH SCHOOLCHILDREN.** Circa 1890.
Courtesy of Williamsburg Historical Society, Williamsburg, Massachusetts.



Figure 6. **A HOUSE CALL—DR. MARY P. SNOOK.** Circa 1931.
Courtesy of Dr. George A. Snook, Northampton, Massachusetts.

male physician entered the room. It is interesting to note that early census takers included teachers and nurses in the category of domestic servants.⁶ At the turn of the century the visiting nurse in Valley communities provided, in addition to nursing care, social work and teaching services. As in the rest of the country, women were the social workers of the Valley. Their clients were mostly children and other women.

In Figure 7 a pregnant woman in the doorway talks with the visiting nurse, while a small child lies sprawled across the bottom step.

“ . . . not only were these tenements crowded, they were built with dark rooms, narrow courts and air shafts, with insufficient plumbing, and no proper fire protection . . . 50 percent of the cases of tuberculosis were laid at the door of improper housing, and a large part of the high infant mortality.”⁷

By 1890 one-fifth of all working class families took in boarders; many women also took in laundry as a means of support.⁸ Some black women who moved into the Valley from southern states, as well as immigrant Irish women, worked as day servants and housemaids for wealthy families in the Valley (Figure 8).



Figure 7. HOME VISIT BY THE VISITING NURSE. 1918.
Courtesy of Visiting Nurse Association of Springfield, Inc., Springfield,
Massachusetts.



Figure 8. AUGUSTA TODD, COOK FOR THE JOSEPH E. LAMB FAMILY, OLD DEERFIELD. Circa 1890.
Courtesy of C. Robert May, Greenfield, Massachusetts.

“If a woman was living in as a housemaid in a home in the [Holyoke] Highlands, she had a little room of her own on the third floor. Some didn’t even have a closet. Boards were attached to the walls with little hooks to hang her coat on. Maybe [she] had a chair. In these places [she] did everything—cook, wash windows, dishes, polish silver—everything that goes with the house. If they had a party that was extra work . . . You never got rich working for these people.”—Dorothy Hamel⁹

“Mother graduated from Tuskegee Institute. After she married, she taught school in the lower grades down South. In 1923 I moved up here [Holyoke] with my parents who came up from Georgia for my father to work in the mills . . . My sister had to take care of us because my mother was out working and my father was working. [Mother] used to do day’s work . . . laundry work mostly.”—Alma Griffin Jennings¹⁰

The Valley’s economic history includes an impressive diversity of manufacturing. Toward the mid-nineteenth century farm women participated in the early put-out system of production. At home they took in such items as animal hides, palm leaf and broom corn from which they then produced vast quantities of boots, shoes, buttons, hats, fans, brushes and brooms. Local entrepreneurs paid the women piece wages for their work in these early cottage industries. Often the women exchanged their hand-made articles for groceries and dry goods at the local general store.



Figure 9. SEWING HALL, BURNETT HAT FACTORY. Amherst, 1892.
Courtesy of The Jones Library, Boltwood Collection, Amherst, Massachusetts.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century the manufacture of palm leaf hats was a principal industry in Amherst. The Burnett hat factory (Figure 9) was a major employer of women; as many as 250 women worked there during peak seasons.¹¹ Palm leaf was imported from the West Indies and Cuba. Upon its arrival in Amherst, women mill operatives bleached, split and dyed the leaf. The palm leaf was distributed to farm women in the countryside to be woven by them on a piece-meal basis into webs for Shaker hoods and men's hats. The hats were then returned to the factory where women bleached, pressed, trimmed, and packed them for shipment. As far back as 1871 over 100,000 dozen palm leaf hats were produced here.¹²



Figure 10. IRISH WOMAN SORTING RAGS. Holyoke, 1936-1937.
Courtesy of the Lewis Hine Collection, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, cold water flats in cities like Chicopee, Easthampton and Turners Falls teemed with the interdependent lives of immigrants. At the turn of the century two-thirds of the textile workers in Holyoke were women, many of them French-Canadian, Polish, and Italian. Men usually held the more skilled jobs of weavers. Irish workers dominated the paper mills of the city, with men again occupying the skilled jobs.

Women worked at unskilled or semi-skilled tasks, such as sorting rags (Figure 10) in the rag-rooms and wrapping the final product in the packing and shipping rooms. Remnants left over from pattern cuttings in the textile mills were put to use in the manufacture of cotton paper. Women in the paper mills sorted these “clean” pieces as well as dirty rags from the streets. Constant exposure to these unhealthy working conditions crippled many women with tuberculosis and related respiratory ailments.

During wartime many women assumed major responsibility for the operation of family farms and local businesses. Women swelled the work force in Valley mills and factories. They drove buses, repaired trucks and tractors, operated gas stations and performed hundreds of tasks which had traditionally been considered “a man’s job.”

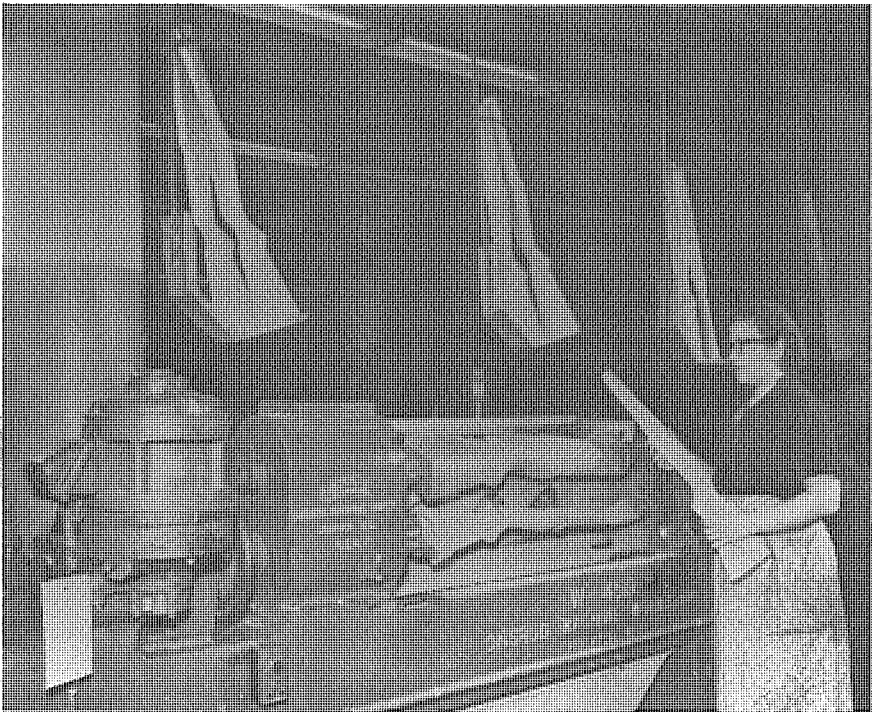


Figure 11. WORKING BLANK GUN STOCKS ON WOOD LATHE. Springfield, circa 1942.

Courtesy of Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Springfield Armory National Historic Site, Springfield, Massachusetts.

The woman in Figure 11 is working on the Springfield M-1 Garand. This rifle was used by nearly all the Allied troops during World War II. As "soldiers of production," women comprised nearly half the total work force at the Armory during the war. "Almost 15,000 workers worked 24 hours around the clock, producing 5,000 rifles a day."¹³

Photographs such as these serve as irrefutable documents that resurrect and enliven our past. The visual evidence presented here instills a rich appreciation for women's extensive participation in the development of the Massachusetts towns and cities of the Connecticut River Valley. This article presents only a brief look at these women's contributions. Yet, it lends strong testimony to the importance of preserving the history of our communities' more anonymous residents whose quiet, unheralded lives shape our common heritage.

NOTES

The photographs in this essay are from the traveling exhibition, "Women at Work: Views and Visions from the Pioneer Valley, 1870-1945." The exhibit consists of 130 reproductions of original photos borrowed from 42 private collections, business and educational archives, historical societies and public libraries. With only a few exceptions, all sources are located within the middle Connecticut River Valley of western Massachusetts. Donna Stronach Kenny of Northampton, is curator of the exhibition. John Bross, Assistant Professor of design and photography at Greenfield Community College, served as photographer and exhibit designer. Virginia Low, Associate Professor of English at Greenfield Community College, and Dr. Mary-Elizabeth Murdock, Director of the Sophia Smith Collection and Women's History Archive at Smith College, served as project consultants.

1. Gerald W. McFarland, "The World of the Howes Brothers," Introduction to *New England Reflections*, Alan Newman, ed., (New York, 1981).
2. Margaret E. C. Howland, "New England Studies (Dartmouth College) End-Institute Report, May 1982" (unpublished manuscript, Library/Learning Resources Center, Greenfield Community College, Greenfield), p. 13.
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6. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
7. Constance McLaughlin Green, *Holyoke, Massachusetts: A Case History of the Industrial Revolution in America* (New Haven, 1939), p. 283.
8. Wertheimer, *We Were There*, p. 209.
9. Interview of Dorothy Hamel by Dan Fitzgerald, 1974. Tape recording, Oral History Project, American International College, Springfield.
10. Interview of Alma Griffin Jennings by Ella DiCarlo, 1974. Tape recording, Oral History Project, American International College, Springfield.
11. Edward W. Carpenter and Charles F. Morehouse, *The History of Amherst, Massachusetts* (Amherst, 1896) p. 292.
12. Green, *Holyoke*, p. 283.
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