

Child Factory Worker: Matthew Jenkins:

As a frail six year old, one of ninety orphaned children, (60 girls and 30 boys) I lived in an apprentice house where Samuel Greg bought children to work in the cotton factory. I became known as a pauper apprentice where I signed a contract that virtually made me the property of Mr. Greg. I received board and lodging and two pence a week. Although I was not accustomed to working in a household setting alongside my family members, many of my friends were used to this type environment and had a very difficult time adjusting to the separation as a result of the factory system in which they worked in a different building from their parents under the supervision of a shop foreman or factory overseer. During this period in time, 50% of the total workforce was composed of children.

I began in the factory as a “scavenger” where I had to pick up the loose cotton from under the machinery. This was extremely dangerous as I was expected to carry out this task while the machine was still working. The whirling motion and noise of the machinery horrified me and the dust and flue half suffocated me. My initial reaction to the horrific factory pollution resulted in sickness and headaches which later was labeled “mill fever”. The dust and floating cotton fiber in the atmosphere was a major factor in the high incidence of tuberculosis, bronchitis, and asthma amongst the young workers. Although I became accustomed to these conditions, visitors could only remain for ten minutes before they began gasping for air. I was also responsible for sweeping under the wheels while they were in perpetual motion. I frequently lay flat to avoid being run over or caught in the machinery. I watched as my friends, David Abrams, lost his left leg as it was caught in one of the machines, Hannah Karan lost her right arm, but the worst memory that I have is of poor Mary Richards’s screams as her entire body was sucked into the machine and whirled round and round; her blood was streaming over the machine and dropping to the floor and I listened as her bones were cracking one by one. I watched as they carried her lifeless body from the factory. Much to my surprise, David and Hannah returned to work as soon as they recovered.

1. Compare and contrast David and Hannah’s requirement to immediately return to work without monetary compensation to today’s injured worker.

As I grew in size, I became a “piecer” in the factory where I walked along the mule as it advanced or receded, catching up the broken thread and skillfully reuniting them. I was continually running to and fro and had great difficulty keeping up with the work. If I fell behind, I was beaten with a strap or sometimes a stick in an attempt to spur me on. This job was very rough on my hands; it made them bleed; the skin was often completely rubbed off; and in that case they bled perhaps in a dozen parts. My legs felt great pain as a result of my required fourteen hour work days which eventually resulted in deformities in both knees. This abnormality became known as “knock-knees” and actually caused me to lose twelve inches of my height due to my knees becoming so weak that they turned inward. The building that I had to work in was dirty; low-roofed; ill-ventilated; ill-drained; no-conveniences for washing or dressing; as well as an average of eighty –two

degrees. Can you imagine any young boy doomed to toil twelve to fifteen hours a day in such cruel and inhumane conditions?

- 2. Describe Matthew's life as a scavenger and a piecer.**
- 3. Compare and contrast the life of a typical young boy on a farm fifty years before the Industrial Revolution to Matthew's life.**

My day usually began around five o'clock and lasted until nine at night. In reality there were no regular hours, masters and managers did with us workers as they liked. Our lives were literally dictated by the ringing of a bell. The doorkeeper looked the door punctually at 5 a.m. The clocks in the factories were often put forward in the morning and back at night, if there were any clocks at all. Though, this was known amongst the hands, everyone was afraid to speak and a workman was afraid to carry a watch, especially a young boy like me. I was required to walk to work and if I was late, I was beaten severely with a strap.

- 4. Describe how you would feel in a classroom setting where there were no clocks and if there were, the clocks were put forward in the morning and turned back in the evening, and your school day was a minimum of 12 hours.**

I was not allowed time to sit and eat meals. The breakfast which the factory owners provided while I continued to work consisted of water-porridge, with oatcakes in it and onions to flavor it. Dinner mostly consisted of thick and coarse oatcakes, often covered by flues from the wool; and in that case had to be blown off with my mouth, and picked off with my fingers, before I could eat it. On rare occasions, I was given potato pie with boiled bacon in it, so thick with fat that I could scarcely eat it; though I was so hungry I would eat anything and was glad to get it. Once a year I was given cheese and brown bread.

Today, I still have nightmares about the terrible hardships that I endured as a result of my work in the factories and I have the physical deformities to remind me as well.

- 5. How was Matthew's life changed as a result of the Industrial revolution?**
- 6. Does Matthew believe that the Industrial Revolution improved or diminished the quality of life for 19th century citizens? Support your answer.**
- 7. Does Matthew believe society should do something to promote fairness and justice as a result of the industrial revolution? Support your answer.**