LUCY LARCOM WAS once one of the most famous and beloved poets in America. Today she is best remembered for her autobiography, *A New England Girlhood*, which tells about her growing-up years as a mill girl, toiling in the dusty and noisy cotton mills of Lowell, Massachusetts.

Lucy was born in 1824, in the peaceful seaside village of Beverly, Massachusetts. She was the ninth of her family's ten children, which included eight girls and two boys. As a young girl she enjoyed exploring the meadows and woods near her house and playing with her brothers and sisters.

When Lucy was seven years old her father died unexpectedly, changing her life forever. Lucy's mother struggled to find the money to feed and clothe her big family. Not many jobs were open to women then. One of the few places women could find paid work was in the water-powered cloth mills that sprang up in the eastern United States during the early 1800s. So Mrs. Larcom made a difficult decision. She uprooted her family from their quiet village and moved to the busy factory town of Lowell, about thirty-five miles away. Located on the Merrimac River, Lowell's massive, red-brick cotton mills provided jobs for thousands of young women, and for girls as young as ten years old, from all over New England.

In Lowell, Lucy's older sisters quickly found jobs in the cotton mills. Mrs. Larcom accepted an offer to manage one of the town's many boarding houses, where mill girls could rent furnished rooms and eat their meals in a shared dining room.

Though the work was hard, the mills did enable farm girls and other young women to earn their own money. Some even opened bank accounts.
Like most child mill workers, Lucy began as a bobbin doffer. That meant she was responsible for pulling spools, or bobbins, of freshly spun cotton thread from the spinning machines and replacing the full bobbins with empty ones. Monday through Friday Lucy spent up to fourteen hours a day at the mill. On Saturdays she worked there for another eight hours. Sunday was her one and only day off.

The mill was dirty and hot, and the big spinning and weaving machines that turned bales of raw cotton into thread and cloth were deafeningly loud. Their buzzing and clattering hurt Lucy’s ears and frazzled her nerves. As time went by, she discovered that saying poems and stories to herself helped her forget about the terrible noise. Many years later, Lucy wrote in her autobiography: “I defied the machinery to make me its slave. Its incessant discords could not drown the music of my thoughts if I would let them fly high enough.”

Though rather quiet and shy by nature, Lucy felt a close bond with the thousands...
of young women toiling beside her, many of whom came from farm families and were earning their first money. "I found that the crowd was made up of single human lives, not one of them wholly uninteresting, when separately known. I learned also that there are many things which belong to the whole world of us together, that no one of us, nor any few of us, can claim or enjoy for ourselves alone."

At the end of her first year in Lowell, Lucy got a greatly appreciated break from the cotton mill. In Massachusetts, all children under the age of thirteen were required to attend school for a minimum of three months each year. Lucy's months back at school were a huge success. Her kindly and dedicated new teacher made learning a delight. Lucy moved ahead so quickly with her lessons that by the end of her short school term she was ready to progress to high school.

Lucy dreamt of leaving her mill girl days behind to attend high school. However, she was now considered old enough to run a spinning machine by herself, meaning that her weekly pay would rise to more than one dollar. Lucy knew that her family needed her wages. So she returned to the hated mill, disappointed but not defeated. She would go back to school again someday, Lucy told herself. Until then, she would just have to be her own teacher. She later wrote:

"I began to reflect upon life rather seriously for a girl of 12 or 13. What was I here for? What could I make of myself? Must I submit to be carried along with the current, and do just what everybody else did? No: I knew I should not do that, for there was a certain Myself who was always starting up with her own original plan or aspiration before me, and who was quite indifferent as to what people generally thought. Well, I should find out what this Myself was good for, and what she should be."

Lucy's spinning machine was located next to a window. Determined to continue her education any way she could, Lucy cut articles from newspapers and pasted them around the window's wooden frame. Whenever Lucy was able to look up from her machine for a few seconds, she skimmed the newspaper clippings, which she dubbed her "window gems." Lucy also borrowed books on all sorts of different subjects from the Lowell library. She especially

Young girls labored in the New England textile mills well into the twentieth century.
loved poetry books, and soon she had begun composing her own poems. Her poems "just grew," Lucy reflected. "They were the same as breathing or singing." Several of Lucy's poems appeared in the Lowell Offering, a monthly magazine for the mill girls that featured stories, songs, and poems written by the young women themselves.

In 1846, when Lucy turned twenty-one, she finally left the mill for good. After seven years of studying on her own, she had earned the equivalent of a high school degree. With her older sister and her sister's husband, she moved to what was then the country's western frontier, to a town in rural Illinois near St. Louis, where she taught school for three years. Eager to continue her education, she then enrolled in a female seminary, which was like a modern-day women's college. She earned her tuition money by tutoring less advanced students.

When she finished her college training in 1853, Lucy moved back to Massachusetts and taught at Wheaton Seminary near Boston. Lucy was respected by her students for encouraging free discussion in the classroom, and she founded a literary society. Her poetry began to appear in newspapers and magazines.

Lucy eventually left the seminary to write full time and to help a sister whose husband had died. In 1865 she became an editor for one of America's earliest children's magazines, Our Young Folks, and later contributed frequently to St. Nicholas Magazine (a forerunner of Cricket). By the time Lucy died in 1893, she had published fifteen volumes of poetry and other books.

Many mill girls attended lectures, joined literary circles, and published their poems, essays, and stories in the Lowell Offering.

In the autobiography she wrote near the end of her life, Lucy emphasized that she never regretted her years working as a mill girl. "I had early been saved from a great mistake; for it is the greatest of mistakes to begin life with the expectation that it is going to be easy, or with the wish to have it so. What a world it would be, if there were no hills to climb!"

"I knew there was no joy like the joy of pressing forward," the mill girl poet wrote. "Like a plant that starts up in showers and sunshine and does not know which has best helped it to grow, it is difficult to say whether the hard things or the pleasant things did me most good."
A STRIP OF BLUE

by Lucy Larcom

I do not own an inch of land,
But all I see is mine,
The orchard and the mowing fields,
The lawns and gardens fine.
The winds my tax collectors are;
They bring me tithes divine,
Wild scents and subtle essences,
A tribute rare and free;
And, more magnificent than all,
My window keeps for me
A glimpse of blue immensity—
A little strip of sea.

Illustrated by Lori McElrath-Eslick