



Spring Newsletter

Volume 22

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Landscapes Lost, Meanings Found: Lowell Operatives' Changing Views of Nature

by Professor Chad Montrie

[The article is an overview of information that will be presented at the Lowell Historical Society Annual Meeting at 1:30 on May 6, 2007 at the National Park Visitor Center, 246 Market St., Lowell. We encourage all interested individuals to join us for the presentation.]

When young women migrated to Lowell in the early nineteenth century they changed the circumstances and purpose of their labor. Wage work on machines under regular supervision, in brick mills that lined the waterways of a fast-growing city, was different from labor as part of a family production unit on a New England farm. Many historians have investigated and explained various aspects of this change, and we know quite a bit about it. But we have yet to investigate the so-called mill girls' migration as part of an evolving relationship with the environment. How, we might ask, did the shift from rural farms to urban mills affect the way the women experienced and thought about the natural world? This lecture will focus on that question.

Before migrating from family farms scattered about New England, women operatives viewed nature largely in utilitarian terms, a perspective grounded in daily, direct use of the environment for the survival and

comfort of themselves and other family members. After going to work in the mills, however, the operatives were less able to see how their labor was any sort of productive exchange with the environment and they felt increasingly estranged from the natural world. For many of the mill hands, nature lost its identification with work and became a place exclusively for casual leisure, meditation and academic study, and, particularly when there was a chance to return home, temporary or permanent escape. In fact, this evolving view of the natural world was an important but sometimes understated part of the operatives' resistance to mill labor. The grumbling, "turnouts," and turnover that began so soon after the women's arrival in Lowell were not only about wage cuts, boardinghouse rates, and their refusal to be "slaves" to industrial tyrants. They were also about the operatives' separation from a factual as well as fictional rural landscape, one they believed was more healthy, beautiful, spiritually meaningful, and conducive to the development of good morals.

Lowell Trivia

By Martha Mayo

1. What hospital was formed by the mills for their workers?
2. Who wrote Stranger in Lowell in 1845?
3. When did Lowell High School open?
4. What comedy team started in Lowell?

Answers are on the third page of the newsletter.

GROWING UP IN LOWELL V

Growing up in the Spindle City During Depression and War: Robert Brassil's Lowell

By Gray Fitzsimons

Robert D. Brassil was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1921. A few years later, however, the death of Robert's father from injuries sustained in an automobile accident prompted his family's move to Lowell. It was in the Spindle City that Robert's mother, Mary (McCann) was born in 1891. Her father, James T. McCann, an English-born mule spinner of Irish parentage, had immigrated to the United States in 1881, and had settled briefly in Manchester, New Hampshire, before moving to Lowell about two years later. An active trade unionist whose labor activism led to his firing and blacklisting from the city's large cotton mills, James McCann operated a social club and barroom in Lowell, prior to his death in 1921. One of McCann's sons, James P., taught carpentry at the Lowell Vocational School and built a house on Wentworth Avenue in Belvidere. Robert moved with his family into the Wentworth Avenue house, where he, his two sisters, and younger brother grew up during the years of the Great Depression.

The following reminiscence of Robert encompasses his years growing up in Lowell. It is an excerpt from a longer oral history interview conducted by Gray Fitzsimons at Lowell National Historical Park in October 2004 and available at the Center for Lowell History:

My father was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His name was Timothy Francis Brassil and [he] was a very prominent physician. He had one of these touring cars that had a canvas type covering. And I was told that he had, coming from late at night from an emergency call, he had an automobile accident. He skidded coming down a hill and hit a telephone pole [that injured] his chest. That did not cause his death, but within a very short time — probably 2-1/2 years—he died unexpectedly. And after my father died my mother decided to move back to Lowell, because she had her mother here, and a brother and a sister here.

Her brother [Joseph P. McCann] was head of the

carpentry department at the Lowell Trade School. And in the summertime he'd build homes, and he built a home on Wentworth Avenue. So we moved there when I was probably four years old. I was raised in Lowell, went to school in Lowell. I went to the Sycamore Street School. It was a grade school, just three grades. It was right up the street from where I lived, probably no more than 300 yards. Unfortunately that school burned to the ground. My brother Tim, who is four years younger than I am, he was attending, he was in the second grade at that school when it did burn. They replaced that school with a sixth grade school called the Oakland School.

One of the things that I had a real bad memory of is some of the times that I spent in the Moody School. The Moody School is at the corner of High Street and Rogers Street. And in that geographic location it drew all of the students from Belvidere. And most of the students from Belvidere were pretty well-off, when you consider the times. There were other students who came from Pleasant Street, and the lower areas of Belvidere, the so-called tenement regions, and I can remember kids coming to school and there were holes in their shoes, they would stuff cardboard in their shoes, their clothes would be ragged and torn. You know that they didn't have enough food to eat. Of course, the children had no control over that. Their parents probably just didn't have [much] opportunity.

When my younger brother was about ten, my mother took a civil service exam and then worked for the city of Lowell, in social services. She became an investigator. And she also would have to visit people who were deprived, and had very little, and older people who probably had something and had lost it all during the Depression. And I can remember some of the stories that she told me about people she knew that at one time were very well off, and they were reduced to having nothing, based on the Depression and then losing everything they had.

[After] I went to the Moody School, [I] then [went to] the Lowell High School. I was graduated in the class of 1939. I thought that my experience at Lowell High School was fabulous, because there was such a mix of ethnic and religious groups from all over the world. As the jobs opened, the lower rung on the ladder opened opportunities for immigrants. You had your French-Canadians come down. You had your Greek-Americans come in. You had your Italian-Americans, your Polish-Americans, Lithuanians, and of course most of their sons and daughters went to school with me. And I can remember a lot of the parents had a very, very difficult

time speaking English, but their children went on to be doctors and lawyers, and did very, very well.

[After] Lowell High School, I attended Lowell Textile; [but] my education was interrupted by the Second World War. I enlisted and went into the Air Force, served until September 25th of 1945. When I was discharged I decided to take advantage of the GI Bill. I went back to school, and I was graduated then from Lowell Textile Institute in 1949 with a BS in Textile Chemistry, but a dual education, one consisting also of textile subjects and textile operations.

I wanted to stay in Lowell, because by this time my mother had had a stroke. And my older sister was living in Memphis. My younger sister was living in New York. My brother had gone into the Trappist Monastery. And I was the only one left at home, and I just felt that I should stay in this area. I went over into New York and had a number of interviews and decided not to leave. And a friend of mine, who was the assistant chemist at the Merrimack [Mills], he had just received a promotion to go into the dye house and become one of the assistant dyers. And he told Ted Cote, who was the chemist at the Merrimack, that I might be available. So I went down and had an interview with Ted, and Ted hired me as his assistant, and that's how I started. That was in the summer of '49.

Post Script:

Many accounts of Lowell's textile manufacturing contend that, except for a brief period of prosperity during World War II, the city's large cotton mills experienced continual decline beginning in the 1920s. Yet the Merrimack Mills, following the company's acquisition by the Lowell-born Jacob Ziskind in 1946, became a very successful enterprise as a leading producer of velveteens and corduroys. Part of the company's marked rise in profits may be attributed to Ziskind's willingness to invest his capital in the Merrimack, most notably in the installation of a state-of-the-art dying and finishing plant. It was here that Robert Brassil got his start in the textile business. Eventually he became superintendent of the Dying and Finishing Department. Ziskind's untimely death from a heart attack in 1950 soon resulted in the Ziskind family selling the Merrimack Mill to a group of Rhode Island investors. After running the mill for a few years these investors closed it down and sold off the newer machinery to Southern textile manufacturers. Robert soon found himself in the South, relocating to Charlotte, North

Carolina, where he spent much of his career working for FMC, one of the nation's largest chemical companies. (Call Tom Langan at 978.452.0897 to publish your memories of growing up in Lowell.)



LHS CORPORATE MEMBERSHIPS

The Lowell Historical Society proudly announces our Corporate Membership program. Corporate members demonstrate their organization's commitment to the preservation of Lowell's past and the dissemination of information to keep Lowell's heritage alive in the future. The following organizations have made this commitment:

- ★ D.J. Reardon Co.
- ★ Wyman's Exchange, Inc.
- ★ Law Office of Elizabeth Broderick
- ★ Belanger & Foley, Inc.
- ★ Lowell Co-Operative Bank
- ★ Mazur Park Apartments

We would like to have the pleasure of listing your company here in the future.



Corporate Membership

Enclosed is my \$100 tax deductible gift for a Corporate Membership into the Lowell Historical Society.

Name of Company: _____

Contact Person: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State & Zip: _____

Estimated Number of Employees: _____

Send to Lowell Historical Society, PO Box 1826,
Lowell, MA 01853.

Answers to Trivia Questions:

- 1) Lowell Corporation Hospital, 2) John Greenleaf Whittier, 3) 1831, 4) Bob and Ray

NEWS FROM THE PUBLICATION COMMITTEE

by Pauline M. Golec, Chair

The Publication Committee proudly announces the recent completion of a new membership brochure. Attractive and interesting, it promotes a society rich in tradition but with an eye to the future.

Be on the lookout for these green and yellow (think spring and rebirth) brochures, which will soon be found in local venues and at Lowell Historical Society programs. Distribute them to encourage others to join the Society.

And a final important note, this brochure project was made possible by the effective work of the Society's Grant Committee and a subsequent grant from the Greater Lowell Community Foundation.

A section of the brochure provides the History of the Lowell Historical Society and is presented here for your information:

“In December 1868, prominent members of the community formed the Old Residents’ Historical Association. Created to preserve the history of Lowell, initially this group was selective in admitting members. The by-laws limited eligibility to those men who had lived continuously in Lowell since its incorporation as a city in 1836.

The organization was first located in the Central Block Building. By 1897, a new home was found in Memorial Hall above today’s Pollard Library. As the group’s numbers dwindled, they agreed to form a new association with membership opened to all.

In May 1902, the Lowell Historical Society was established as the corporate successor to the Old Residents’ Historical Association and welcomed both men and women. The Society continued to promote local history, collect historic materials, and publish papers titled the Contributions of the Lowell Historical Society. A fire at Memorial Hall in 1915 nearly destroyed these papers and the rest of the Society’s collections, but the quick response of the Fire Department limited the damage.

By the 1950s, the Society’s membership and leadership became more representative of the city’s diverse population. Renewed energy led to the publishing

in 1976 of a general history of the city and to successive publication ventures including two postcard books—*Lowell: The Mill City* and *Lowell: The River City*.

In the 1980s, the organization relocated to the Lowell Art Association’s Whistler House and, later, to St. Anne’s Rectory. Finally, in 1991, with the cooperation of the Lowell National Historical Park, the Society moved to its current location in the Boott Cotton Mills Museum. Much of the Society’s paper and photograph collections are maintained at the University of Massachusetts Lowell, Center for Lowell History in the nearby Mogan Cultural Center.

Today, the Lowell Historical Society continues to preserve and perpetuate the city’s proud history, past and present.”



Harvard Brewery Remembered

Mehmed Ali presented his knowledge of the Harvard Brewery to a interested audience in the large conference room of the D.J Reardon company. The attendees were also treated to an interesting collection of Harvard memorabilia provided by three local collectors: Doug Crose, Gerald Roth, and Tom Paskiewicz. The Society provides its special thanks to Eric Hanson of the D.J. Reardon company for not only providing the wonderful site for the presentation but also for providing the beer for the Society’s beer tasting fund-raiser.



One feature of the program was the recognition of former brewery workers (left to right): Pauline Rousseau, Bill Droll and Ruth (Quinn) Flanagan. Past President of the Society and featured speaker Mehmed Ali in rear.

EBAY AUCTIONS OF LOWELL INTEREST

Ayer Ague Cure Bottle: Rare open pontiled aqua Ayer's Ague Cure bottle that is attic mint. A very rare mint 1850's rectangular pontiled cure that stands 7" tall. The front of the bottle has the word

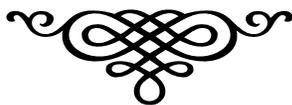


AYER'S in small sunken panel. On the side panels are the words Ague and Cure while the back has Lowell, Mass. The open pontil is crudely applied while the lip has a double ring collar. The bottle has no chips, dings or damage. Sparkling clean with no haze. The circular open pontil is very obvious, but it doesn't have much glass that stuck, just a good piece of jagged glass about 1/3 of the way around. This is a very scarce pontiled cure! The price was \$232.50 plus \$6 shipping.

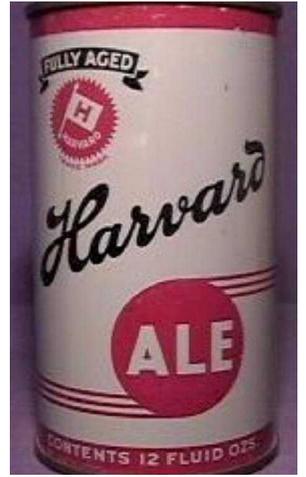
Lowell Police Badge: This badge is a "radiator" style used in the late 1800s early 1900s and is an obsolete/defunct style no longer in use. It is not an issued badge. The price was \$37.63 plus \$5 shipping



Larose Bros. Half Pint Milk Bottle: Lowell, Mass. milk bottle in good condition with no chips or cracks. The price was \$6 plus \$6 shipping.



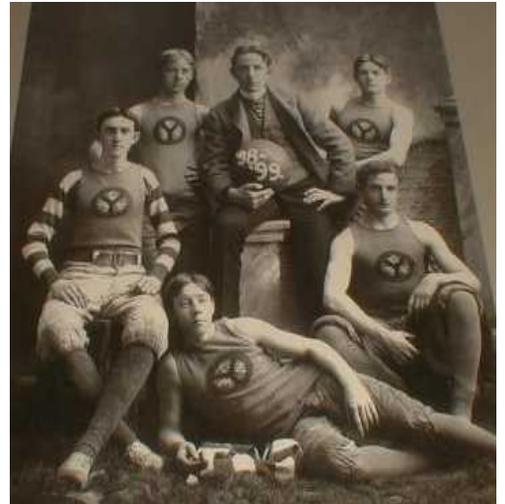
Harvard Brewery Ale Can: Excellent gray flat top Harvard Ale can from Lowell, MA in A1+ condition. Very nearly a perfect can - even bottom-opened. The price was \$73 plus \$5 shipping.



Fireman Postcard: Unused real photo postcard (RPPC) of a horse drawn wagon with firemen from Lowell Mass. The price was \$46 plus \$2.50 shipping.



Basketball Photo: Rare 1898-99 YMCA 19th Century Basketball Cabinet Photo. Wonderful and early basketball image depicting members of the Y M C A basketball team. 10 3/4" x 13 1/2" crystal clear image on original mat and still housed in its original 18 3/4" x 22 1/2" frame.



Exceptional early basketball piece. The price was \$1,300 plus \$15 shipping.

Lowell Historical Society
P.O. Box 1826
Lowell, MA 01853

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The preservation of Lowell history depends heavily on **YOUR** membership. If you have not yet sent in your membership renewal for 2007, please do so as soon as possible.

Lowell Historical Society

The Lowell Historical Society's mission is to collect, preserve and publish materials related to Lowell and to promote the study of the history of the City.

We are located at the Boot Cotton Mills Museum, 115 John Street, Fourth Floor, Downtown Lowell Massachusetts 01852

The office is open on Wednesdays and Thursdays, from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. The telephone number is 978 970-5180 or on the Web at: <http://ecommunity.uml.edu/lhs>

Calendar of Events

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Program: Trivia Night -- An evening of Trivial Pursuit with Lowell Trivia mixed in.

Date: April 28, 2007, 7:00 p.m.

Location: Club Lafayette, 465 Fletcher St. Lowell

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Program: Presentation by UML Professor Chad Montrie Landscapes Lost, Meanings Found: Lowell Operatives' Changing Views of Nature

Date: May 6th. 2007 - Annual Meeting, 1:30 p.m.

Location: National Park Visitor Center, 246 Market St., Lowell

All of our programs are free and open to the public. For information or directions call 978-970-5180