

Introduction: Why Lowell? Why Dancing?

Throughout much of the nineteenth century, Lowell, Massachusetts was at the cutting edge of technology, the very center of America's Industrial Revolution. It was there, on the banks of the Merrimack River, that automation and water-power combined to manufacture textiles on a scale previously unimaginable. The "Lowell Experiment," as it was originally known, was the work of a group of investors, and the land that became the city of Lowell was carved out of the surrounding towns of Chelmsford, Dracut, and Tewksbury.

Building a planned city in the middle of farms and open fields not only required finding the labor to build it, but the labor to staff it, as well. Many of the bricklayers and ditchdiggers who constructed Lowell's mills and canals were Irish immigrants brought up from Boston. But for the workforce to run the looms, the investors turned to a segment of society they considered more reputable and easier to control. Farm girls were recruited from across New England to populate this modern utopia. In the company boarding houses, the girls' morals would be protected; in the mills, their purses would be enriched; and in the churches and schools, their minds would be educated.

Although Lowell was a business venture, it also became a major tourist attraction, a sort of futuristic theme park: *See the animatronic looms move as if by magic! Watch the beautiful, young women tend to them! Hear the thundering noise of hundreds of machines running in concert! Wonder at the towering, brick factories that spring up virtually overnight! Touch the miles of fabric churned out! Experience modern man's ingenuity at its finest!*

When the author's own great-grandfather traveled from his home in western Pennsylvania to Boston in November of 1866 for a railroad convention (The Third Annual Convention of the Grand International Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers), the delegates were treated to a tour of Lowell.

But Lowell wasn't a make-believe world: it was a manufacturing city where capitalism ruled and sexism was the order of the day.

Dancing was both scorned and embraced by the residents of the city. Looking at the history of dancing in Lowell offers insights into pastimes, social mores, courting, sex, sexual harassment, prostitution, etiquette, social status, and religion. It dusts off the mill girls of history books and breathes a bit more life into their world.

There have been many books written about Lowell, but dance has been relegated to a line here or a mention there. Trying to write a book on the subject reminds one of the archaeologist who must put together mere shards of artifacts scattered throughout a dig site to tell a story. But the pieces *are* there and, combined with material from period dance manuals and etiquette books, plus personal experience with the dances of the time and the promises and pitfalls of the dance hall, it is possible to offer an in-depth look at a lively—and scandalous—piece of Lowell history.

