**“I Must Of Course Have Something Of My Own Before Many More Years Have Passed Over My Head”: Sally Rice Leaves the Farm, 1838**

From the rocky soil of Vermont’s hill towns, many young men and women in the nineteenth century went looking for new opportunities. Often they made a series of moves between farm, factory, and city. Their leave-taking pitted the responsibilities of maintaining family farms against the new attractions of financial and social independence. Sally Rice, born in 1821 in Dover, Vermont, was typical. In 1838 she found work as a domestic servant in New York, not far over the border from her family’s hardscrabble farm, securing for herself much valued wages and independence. Several years later she worked as a weaver in one of the many cotton mills that lined the Blackstone Valley of central Massachusetts and Connecticut. Her letters home to her mother and father in Vermont carefully weighed issues of family and independence, farm and factory life.

[Union Village, 1839]

Dear Father and Mother:

I am well. I found good crossing the mountain. Got to Arlington about 8 in the evening. Staid over night and the next morning started for home. Arrived at Cambridge about one stoped at Comstocks hotel. I found a man there that was going directly to Union Village. With him I rode here and I was never so glad to see any place as I was to see my old home and friends. I found them all well except Mr. Salisbury. He was very sick and is now with the inflammation of the lings. It is doubtful whether he ever gets well. His sister is here taking care of him. I found Nancy here and another girl which was not much help. Nancy went away the next day but one and last week the other girl went so I alone at present. We expect Maria Gayton will come this week. Elem Knight and I got up Monday morning at one oclock to wash. He helpt me some and we got done before light and I should be willing to get up every morning at one...I can have a home here as long as I will stay and am steady. They are very anxious that I should live with them as long as I work out anywhere...I have one of the best homes and good society which is a good deal better than I can have there [at home]. Look at the company I should be with, a profane Sabbath breaking set...I can never be happy there in among so many mountains... I feel as though I have worn out shoes and strength enough riding and walking over the mountains. I think it would be more consistent to save my strength to raise my boys. I shall need all I have got and as for marrying and setting in that wilderness, I wont. If a person ever expects to take comfort it is while they are young. I feel so...I have got so that by next summer if I could stay I could begin to lay up something...I am most 19 years old. I must of course have something of my own before many more years have passed over my head. And where is that something coming from if I go home and earn nothing. What can we get off that rocky farm only 2 or 3 cows. It would be another thing if you kept 9 or 10 cows and could raise corn to sell...It surely would be cheper for you to hire a girl one that would be contented to stay in the desert than for me to come home and live in trouble all the time...You may think me unkind but how can you blame me for wanting to stay here. I have but one life to live and I want to enjoy myself as well as I can while I live...Do come away dont lay your bones in that place I beg you...I want you should write me an answer. My love to all who inquire after. S. R.

Masonville, Sunday, Feb 23, 1845

Dear Father:

I now take my pen in hand to let you know where I am and how I came here and how my health is. I have been waiting perhaps longer than I ought to without letting you know where I am and yet I had a reason for so doing. Well knowing that you were dolefully prejudiced against a cotton factory, and being no less prejudiced myself, I thought it best to wait and see how I prospered and also whether I was going to stay or not. I well knew that if I could not make more in the mill than I can doing housework I should not stay. Now I will tell you how I happened to come. The Saturday after New Years I came to Masonville in Thompson, Connecticut, with James Alger to visit his sister who weaves in the mill. We came Saturday and returned to Millbury on Monday. While here I was asked to come back and learn to weave. I did not fall in with the idea at all because I well knew that I should not like it as well as housework and Knowing that you would now approve of my working in the mill. But when I consider that I had got myself to take care of, I knew I ought to do that way I can make the most and save the most. I concluded to come and try, promising Mrs. Waters that if I did not like it I would return the first of April.

I have wove 4 weeks and have wove 6.89 yds. We have one dollar and 10 cents for a hundred yards. I wove with Olive Alger one week to learn and I took 2 looms 2 weeks and now I have 3 looms. I get along as well as anyone could expect. I think that before the year is out I shall be able to tend 4 looms and then I can make more. 0. and P. Alger make three dollars a week besides their board. We pay 1.25 for our board. We three girls board with a Widow Whitemore. She is a first rate homespun woman. I like it quite as well as I expected but not as well as housework. To be sure it is a noisy place and we are confined more than I like to be. I do not wear out my clothes and shoes as I do when I housework. If I can make 2 dollars per week besides my board and save my clothes and shoes I think it will be better than to do housework for nine shillings. I mean for a year or two. I should not want to spend my days in a mill unless they are short because I like a farm too well for that. My health is good now. I wrote a letter to Levi and Nancy the week before I came her with a strict command not to tell any mortal that I was coming because if I did not stay I wanted nothing said about it. And I say now that if it does not agree with my health I shall give it up at once. I have been blessed with good health always ever since I began to work out. I have not been confined to my bed but one day since I was sick with mumps the time Grandmother Rice died. I was very sick one day when I was at Mrs. Waters.

Dear Father, in my last letter I told you I had morally reformed. Yes I trust I have and bless God that he unsealed my eyes to see where I was standing, and where I have been since I became a backslider. The name haunts me. It all seems like a dream. Pray for me, Father, that if I ever enjoyed Religion I may enjoy it again and do as much good as I have hurt in the cause and the great God assisting me I will try to pray for myself. I feel I am perfectly willing to give up all into the hands of God and will try to lead a better life than I have done.

I want you to write as soon as you get this. Address your letter to Masonville, Thompson, Conn. Give my love to Mother & to all our folks. Tell Brother to write. I have not written to Hiram yet. I want to know where Ephraim is & what he is doing and what you are all about and howyou all do Father.

Good Bye, Sarah Rice

[Millbury, Sept. 14, 1845]

Dear Father, Mother, Brothers and Sister

Source: Nell W. Kull, “I Can Never Be Happy There Among So Many Mountains-The Letters of Sally Rice,” Vermont History 38 (Winter, 1970), 51–55.