Marching With "General Ludd": Machine Breaking in the Industrial Revolution

In the early 1800s, machines began to radically change the lives of many English cloth workers. Skilled and proud of their handmade products, many workers revolted by smashing the machines that threatened their way of life. Lacking a central leader, the workers claimed to follow a mythical figure called "General Ludd," apparently named after an apprentice named Ned Ludd who once smashed a mechanical loom. Today, the term "Luddite" is still used to refer to people resisting technological change.

For centuries, English women worked at home with spinning wheels to make wool and cotton yarn. Men wove the yarn into cloth on hand looms at home or in small village shops. Finishers, called "croppers," wielded heavy shears to remove the nap, or fuzz, on the woven cloth. Others worked by hand to make articles of clothing such as knitted stockings for both men and women.

During the early 1800s, several conditions threatened the livelihood of English cloth workers. Bad harvests increased food prices. War with Napoleon in Europe and with the United States in America disrupted trade, cutting the demand for cloth overseas. Falling wages, unemployment, and hunger added to the misery of many workers and their families.

To keep their businesses alive, employers started cutting costs. Instead of paying craftsmen to make cloth and clothing by hand in their homes and small shops, employers increasingly turned to machines. At first, they shifted to machines that workers could use in their homes, but gradually they switched to machines powered by water or steam in large factories. Machines could do the work of many craftsmen and could be tended by relatively few workers, even women and children.

"Engines of Mischief"

In the county of Nottinghamshire, employers rented out hand-operated machine looms, called stocking frames, to workers in small shops. Workers used the stocking frame to knit stockings, hats, gloves, scarves, and other small articles of clothing. The employers paid these workers by the pieces of work they completed. Production soared because of these machines, but worker wages sank, and the quality of goods declined. Anger mounted, especially among the traditional hand knitters who couldn't compete with the stocking-frame workers.

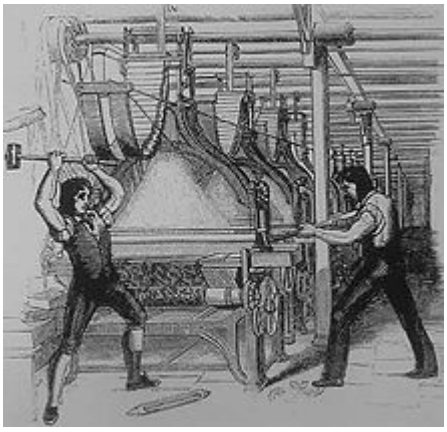
To the north, Yorkshire was the center for wool-cloth finishing. This involved cleaning, stretching, pressing, and cropping. Croppers cut off the nap on the cloth, using shears that were four feet long and weighed 40 pounds. Experienced and skilled, Croppers took great pride in their work. But increasingly, unskilled workers were doing the same kind of work with machines called gig mills and shearing frames. One cropper wrote, "now gigs and shearing frames are like to become general, if they are

allowed to go on many hundreds of us will be out of bread."

Shifting the workplace from the home and village shop to large factories radically disrupted family and community life. Unskilled women and children tended the factory machines. They often worked 12 hours or more a day behind locked doors. Factory workers could be fined for talking on the job. Heat, noise, cotton dust, and machine accidents constantly threatened their health.

Factory owners and employers who rented stocking frames and other machines to men still working at home or in small shops sought ever-increasing production and profit. Most employers supported a laissez faire economy--one with no government interference in how they ran their enterprises or treated their workers. In 1899, a laissez faire-minded Parliament repealed worker protections going back to the days of Queen Elizabeth. Parliament also rejected worker pleas for a minimum-wage law and made trade unions illegal. The times were ripe for a worker rebellion.

"The Hero of Nottinghamshire"



In 1811, food riots and stocking-frame breaking erupted in Nottinghamshire, where the legendary Robin Hood lived. Since trade unions were illegal, workers formed secret, underground groups that sent threatening letters to employers and local officials. The letters were usually signed by the mysterious "Ned Ludd."

Soon the Luddites were arming themselves, training in secret, and marching on nighttime raids against shops and factories where they smashed the hated stocking frames. By the end of 1811, they had destroyed about 1,000 frames.

The English government responded by planting spies, offering rewards to informers, and sending several thousand troops into the troubled area. But the authorities had little success in cracking the Luddite code of secrecy. Seven Luddites, aged 16 to 22, were put on trial, convicted, and sent to the prison colony of Australia. Luddite raids and other activities in Nottinghamshire finally ended in the spring of 1812 when Parliament passed a law that made machine breaking a death-penalty offense.

"With Hatchet, Pike, and Gun"

The most famous Luddite raid took place in 1812 against a factory in Yorkshire owned by William Cartwright. Cartwright's factory contained 50 water-powered shearing frames, each doing the work of four or five croppers with their heavy cutting shears. Cartwright was determined to protect his property from the Luddite machine breakers. He and 10 of his workmen, all armed with muskets, remained inside the factory at night to defend it in case of attack.

Shortly after midnight on April 11, 1812, local Luddite leader George Mellor, a 24-year-old cropper, marched with about 150 other workers to Cartwright's factory. Armed with hatchets, pikes (similar to spears), and guns, the Luddites, swarmed in front of the four-story factory. Some began to throw stones at the windows. Others began to strike its heavy main door with sledgehammers.

From inside the building, Cartwright and his men began shooting at the Luddite attackers, the first time this had ever happened. Cartwright also ordered one of his men to ring the factory bell to alert a troop of cavalry stationed nearby. The surprised Luddites began shooting back into the factory, and an exchange of gunfire took place for about 20 minutes.

Mellor encouraged his men who were still pounding away at the factory door. "Bang up my lads," he cried. "In with you. Kill every one of them!" But the solid door held.

Fearing the arrival of cavalry, Mellor ordered his men to retreat. The Luddites left two of their men dead in front of the factory. Several others died later of gunshot wounds. Among the factory defenders, only Cartwright was wounded. He became an instant hero to factory owners and government authorities, who redoubled their efforts to crush the Luddite threat.

The violence was not over. About two weeks after the battle at Cartwright's factory, another factory owner, William Horsfall, was ambushed and shot to death. Horsfall had taunted that he wished he could ride through streets filled with Luddite blood.

Food riots and machine breaking spread to neighboring Lancashire. A dozen more Luddites were killed. The widespread violence in the three counties produced a growing fear of a general rebellion. Even so, Parliament still refused to address the grievances and suffering of the workers and their families.

"We Will Never Lay Down Arms"

The English government decided to use fear and force to destroy the Luddite movement. The government sent more than 10,000 British troops into Nottinghamshire, Yorkshire, and Lancashire. The authorities also offered pardons to those who renounced their oath to "General Ludd." Paid informers and spies reported the names of local Luddite leaders and testified against them in court. Soldiers broke up Luddite meetings, made arrests, and forced confessions.

George Mellor, the leader of the Cartwright factory raid, and two other Luddite leaders were tried for the murder of factory owner William Horsfall. Convicted largely on the testimony of an informer, Mellor and the others refused to break the Luddite code of silence. They were hanged in January 1813. A short time later, 14 other Yorkshire Luddites were tried and hanged for attacks on factories and machine breaking. Another 10 were executed after trials in Lancashire.

Scattered attacks against machines and factories continued for a few more years, but the Luddite movement was finished. Thousands of machines and even entire factories had been destroyed. But the defeat of "General Ludd" brought on by military force, trials, and hangings cleared the way for England's Industrial Revolution.

By the 1830s, the factory system had just about replaced most of England's hand spinners, weavers, and croppers. Laissez-faire economics and the machine ruled the lives of most English workers.

Luddites Today

Although the Luddite movement died long ago, the term "Luddite" survives. It means a person who resists technological change. It is commonly used as an insult. It can be applied to a person who favors a typewriter over a computer or who has never learned to drive a car.

For Discussion and Writing – answer on your own piece of paper

1. How did the factory system radically change the way of life of English workers in the early 1800s? (Give several, specific examples of these changes.)
2. Why did the Luddites smash the machines? Please explain in detail
3. Why did the factory owners want people to work in their factories rather than from home? Please explain in detail
4. Why would the English government side with the factory owners over the Luddites? Explain
5. Do you agree or disagree with the methods used by the English government to put down the Luddite revolt? Why?
6. Was the factory system good or bad for the average worker? Explain your answer in detail.

From *Bill of Right in Action*

Spring 2001