

Child-Labor: A Fact of Life

In 19th Century

By the General Statutes, parents and guardians are required to send to school, at least twenty weeks during the year, all children between the ages of eight and fourteen years, under a penalty of 20 dollars for each offence against the law. Moreover, no child under ten years of age can be legally employed in any manufacturing or mechanical establishment. No child between the ages of ten and fifteen shall be so employed who has not attended some day-school three months, or sixty school-days, within the year next preceding such employment, under a penalty of 50 dollars against employer and parent. (1)

Towns are required to appoint truant officers, and make other provisions for carrying the law into effect. As there is no penalty annexed for a breach of the law on the part of corporate authorities, the Acts, so far as they require municipal action, are virtually permissive, and, like most permissive legislation, they fail to secure the object aimed at. Out of 342 towns only 127, in 1873, had made the provisions concerning truants required by law. The Board of Education, in their annual report, recommend the adoption of "a more stringent system of compulsion, with the necessary agencies for its efficient administration. For want of such agencies the existing compulsory provisions are not generally carried into effect. Towns are required to appoint truant officers, but as there is no penalty annexed, the requirement is largely ignored." (2)

1860s

* It is very doubtful whether more than three out of every seven children, of proper age, are ever at one time in regular attendance at the common schools of the United States.

1870s

The laws for regulating the employment of children, such as, **the Factory Acts** and **the Agricultural Children's Act** had only a partial success,

According to the States Reports

. . . in the great majority of cases have failed to fill the schools, or to protect the children against the cupidity of parents or the temptations of the labour markets. . . .

The history of the Factory Laws in Pennsylvania is a most disheartening story of failure to protect children in the enjoyment of school rights. . . .

The general testimony was that it is a rare thing for parents to take their children from the factories to send them to school. It is easier for the average parent to understand the value of three dollars in hand every Saturday than it is to comprehend what an education may do for the future of his child." ⁽¹⁾

¹ Penn. Report, 1873, p. xxxvii.

While the manufacturers were ready to do their duty, the parents were not, in all cases, and the agent says: "I found some parents unwilling to take their children out of the mills, and positively refusing to send them to school after they were discharged." ⁽¹⁾ Some of the children, when they were discharged, were carried into the neighbouring states of Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

¹ Conn. Report, 1870, p. 21.

The parents, irritated by the exclusion of their children from the factories, either removed them to other States or left them to run about the streets.

"The State needs it as a safeguard against the pressing demands of capital for cheap labour, raw muscle, mere human working machines, and against the incoming tide of immigration and ignorance, to supply this demand." ⁽¹⁾

¹ Maine Report, 1872, p. 92.

The Superintendent for Illinois refers to compulsion as the “most important school question of modern times.” He says: “Given all other elements, as lands, buildings, equipments, funds, and teachers of the best quality, and in costliest profusion, there yet remains another essential condition—pupils. If these are wanting, or to the extent that these are wanting, there is no education. To that extent treasure is wasted, time is lost, and the system is a failure.” (1)

How great is the waste caused by irregularity is shown by the Superintendent for Iowa. He says: “The average length of time the schools have been taught is six months and ten days, while the average length of school attendance is less than four months. We thus provide and pay for two and one half months of school more than would be actually required to instruct the number registered if they attended regularly. The cost of maintaining these two and one half months of unnecessary school, exclusive of school-house building, is 1,171,300 dollars, or 5-13ths of the whole cost for the year.” (2)

¹ Illinois Report, 1872, p. 225.

² Iowa Report, 1873, p. 38.

A Glimpse of the Child Labor In the 20th Century

In his book, NEA*: The First Hundred Years" (1957), Edgar B. Wesley summarized **a-half-century battle** for **the Compulsory Education Law** and **the Child-Labor Law** in two sentences:

There are “three people interested in getting the child out of school: the parent, the child, and the employer. The parent wants the child’s wages; the child wants to be independent; the employer wants cheap labor.”

* NEA: National Education Association.



INDIANA: Child laborers working in glass and bottle factories (1908)

In 1908, [photographer Lewis Hine](#) was hired by the National Child Labor Committee to document exploited child workers. The photos he captured, including the one above, played an instrumental role in changing child labor laws during the first half of the 20th century.



SOUTH CAROLINA: Child laborers taken out of school to work (1912)

This photo, also taken by Lewis Hine, shows several child laborers at the Maggioni Canning Company who could only attend school for half the day. They spent four hours shucking before school, several hours shucking after school, and eight or nine hours shucking on Saturday, according to [Hine's original caption](#).



WEST VIRGINIA: A young coal trapper working inside a mine (1908)

This exploited child laborer was photographed by Lewis Hine in [Turkey Knob Mine](#).

(The above photos were taken from "The most fascinating historic photo taken in every US state." INSIDER Lucy Yang 11/1/2017 MSN, 11-27-17)



In 1900, 18 percent of American workers were younger than 16.

(17 surprising facts about working in America, MSN, 9-1-14)

1948



Q: Was Hugo Munsterberg correct to say that "**American Children need *Good teachers and Good Parents***"?

Read:

File 4: Child-Labor Amendment: *A Half-Century Battle*