

Three People Want the Child

In “*NEA: The First Hundred Years*” (1957), Edgar B. Wesley summarized a **half-century battle** to end the Child Labor 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.

Parents Want the Child’s Wages

“Cruelty to Children”

1883

The temptation to parents to utilize their children for the purpose of enlarging their scanty means of subsistence, regardless of the injury to the morals, the intellect, or the physical health of the child, is so strong that the latter considerations rarely enter into their thoughts. The evil in this respect is a growing one, and if allowed to continue will endanger the welfare of the community by impoverishing the material out of which the American mechanic — so justly relied on as the main-spring of the nation’s wealth — is made. Factories are crowded with children of very tender years who are compelled to work at starvation wages, frequently over ten hours a day, in close, confined rooms, until at last the physical system falls into premature decay, and consumption, with its attendant and kindred diseases, ensues. According to the census of 1870, the whole number of children of both sexes between the ages of ten and fifteen years pursuing “gainful” occupations was 739,164. The last census of 1880 enlarges this number to 1,118,356 — an increase of 379,192 in ten years.

“Cruelty to Children,” *The North American Review*, July 1883

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The Washington Post

The searing photos that helped end child labor in America Jessica Contrera 4 hrs ago



A young spinner in a North Carolina cotton manufacturing company poses for Lewis Hine, the documentary photographer who inspired the creation of laws to ban child labor.



Maud Daly, age 5 and Grade Daly, age 3, photographed by Hine in 1911. Hine wrote that each girl picks a pot of a shrimp a day for a Mississippi oyster company. “The youngest said to be the fastest worker,” Hine noted.

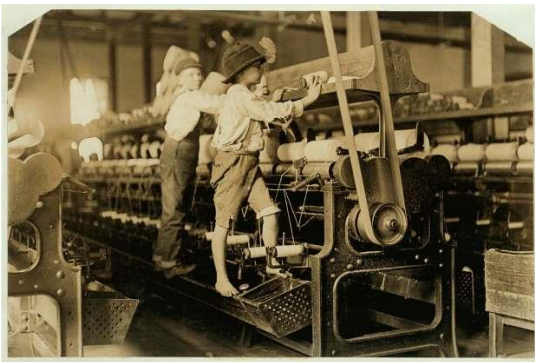


The “breaker boys” at a Pennsylvania coal mine, photographed by Hine in 1911.



In 1916, Hine took this photo of Harold Walker, a 5-year-old field worker in Oklahoma.

Hine strove to show that working conditions for children were unsafe. At a Georgia textile mill in 1909, he found boys so small they had to climb on the machinery to mend broken threads.



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Hine photographed this 10-year-old boy on a tobacco farm in Connecticut in 1917.



Hine took dozens of photos of newsboys on the streets of Washington. Here, he photographed 6-year-old Earle Holt in Southwest Washington.



In 1911, Hine met these boys working in a glass factory in Alexandria, Va. Hine rarely took photos of black children, who were typically not allowed to work alongside the white children he photographed.



Frank, a 14-year-old coal miner in West Virginia, had his legs cut off by a motor car inside a mine. Hine photographed him in 1910.

He arrived at the coal mines, textile mills and industrial factories dressed in a three-piece suit. He wooed those in charge, asking to be let in. He was just a humble Bible salesman, he claimed, who wanted to spread the good word to the laborers inside.

What Lewis Hine actually wanted was to take photos of those laborers — and show the world what it looked like when children were put to work.

In the early 1900s, Hine traveled across the United States to photograph preteen boys descending into dangerous mines, shoeless 7-year-olds selling newspapers on the street and 4-year-olds toiling on tobacco farms. Though the country had unions to protect laborers at that time — and Labor Day, a federal holiday to honor them — child labor was widespread and widely accepted. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that around the turn of the century, at least 18 percent of children between the ages of 10 and 15 were employed.

Hine’s searing images of those children remade the public perception of child labor and inspired the laws to ban it. Today, the Library of Congress maintains a collection of more than 5,000 of Hine’s photographs, including the thousands he took for the National Child Labor Committee, known as the NCLC.

“It was Lewis Hine who made sure that millions of children are not working today,” said Jeffrey Newman, a former president of the New York-based committee.

The organization’s mission wasn’t about showing the public that children were being used for financial gain — that was already a well-known fact. At the time, many believed the practice had substantial benefits. Youths could learn the value of hard work. Businesses could increase their productivity and decrease the hourly pay. Parents could depend on their children to support the family, meaning the adults could work less or not at all.

As one mother [remarked](#) to the NCLC in 1907: **“I am really tired of seeing so many big children ten years old playing in the streets.”**

Hine’s photos showed the price: unsafe working conditions, dangerous machinery and **business owners who refused to educate the children or limit their working hours.....**

You can explore the archive of Hine’s photos on [the Library of Congress digital archive](#).

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Read:

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