



# Teaching With Documents: Photographs of Lewis Hine: Documentation of Child Labor

## Background

*"There is work that profits children, and there is work that brings profit only to employers. The object of employing children is not to train them, but to get high profits from their work."*

-- Lewis Hine, 1908

After the Civil War, the availability of natural resources, new inventions, and a receptive market combined to fuel an industrial boom. The demand for labor grew, and in the late 19th and early 20th centuries many children were drawn into the labor force. Factory wages were so low that children often had to work to help support their families. The number of children under the age of 15 who worked in industrial jobs for wages climbed from 1.5 million in 1890 to 2 million in 1910. Businesses liked to hire children because they worked in unskilled jobs for lower wages than adults, and their small hands made them more adept at handling small parts and tools. Children were seen as part of the family economy. Immigrants and rural migrants often sent their children to work, or worked alongside them. However, child laborers barely experienced their youth. Going to school to prepare for a better future was an opportunity these underage workers rarely enjoyed. As children worked in industrial settings, they began to develop serious health problems. Many child laborers were underweight. Some suffered from stunted growth and curvature of the spine. They developed diseases related to their work environment, such as tuberculosis and bronchitis for those who worked in coal mines or cotton mills. They faced high accident rates due to physical and mental fatigue caused by hard work and long hours.

By the early 1900s many Americans were calling child labor "child slavery" and were demanding an end to it. They argued that long hours of work deprived children of the opportunity of an education to prepare themselves for a better future. Instead, child labor condemned them to a future of illiteracy, poverty, and continuing misery. In 1904 a group of progressive reformers founded the National Child Labor Committee, an organization whose goal was the abolition of child labor. The organization received a charter from Congress in 1907. It hired teams of investigators to gather evidence of children working in harsh conditions and

then organized exhibitions with photographs and statistics to dramatize the plight of these children. These efforts resulted in the establishment in 1912 of the Children's Bureau as a federal information clearinghouse. In 1913 the Children's Bureau was transferred to the Department of Labor.

Lewis Hine, a New York City schoolteacher and photographer, believed that a picture could tell a powerful story. He felt so strongly about the abuse of children as workers that he quit his teaching job and became an investigative photographer for the National Child Labor Committee. Hine traveled around the country photographing the working conditions of children in all types of industries. He photographed children in coal mines, in meatpacking houses, in textile mills, and in canneries. He took pictures of children working in the streets as shoe shiners, newsboys, and hawkers. In many instances he tricked his way into factories to take the pictures that factory managers did not want the public to see. He was careful to document every photograph with precise facts and figures. To obtain captions for his pictures, he interviewed the children on some pretext and then scribbled his notes with his hand hidden inside his pocket. Because he used subterfuge to take his photographs, he believed that he had to be "double-sure that my photo data was 100% pure--no retouching or fakery of any kind." Hine defined a good photograph as "a reproduction of impressions made upon the photographer which he desires to repeat to others." Because he realized his photographs were subjective, he described his work as "photo-interpretation."

Hine believed that if people could see for themselves the abuses and injustice of child labor, they would demand laws to end those evils. By 1916, Congress passed the Keating-Owens Act that established the following child labor standards: a minimum age of 14 for workers in manufacturing and 16 for workers in mining; a maximum workday of 8 hours; prohibition of night work for workers under age 16; and a documentary proof of age. Unfortunately, this law was later ruled unconstitutional on the ground that congressional power to regulate interstate commerce did not extend to the conditions of labor. Effective action against child labor had to await the New Deal. Reformers, however, did succeed in forcing legislation at the state level banning child labor and setting maximum hours. By 1920 the number of child laborers was cut to nearly half of what it had been in 1910.

Lewis Hine died in poverty, neglected by all but a few. His reputation continued to grow, however, and now he is recognized as a master American photographer. His photographs remind us what it was like to be a child and to labor like an adult at a time when labor was harsher than it is now. Hine's images of working children stirred America's conscience and helped change the nation's labor laws. Through his exercise of free speech and freedom of the press, Lewis Hine made a difference in the lives of American workers and, most importantly, American children. Hundreds of his photographs are available online from the National Archives through the National Archives Catalog.

## Resources

Foner, Eric, and John A. Garraty, eds. *The Reader's Companion to American History*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991.

Nash, Gary B., et al. *The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1990.

Tindall, George Brown, with David E. Shi. *America: A Narrative History*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1992.

## The Documents



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Garment Workers, New York, NY

January 25, 1908

National Archives and Records Administration

Records of the Department of Commerce and Labor, Children's Bureau

Record Group 102

National Archives Identifier: 523065



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Basket Seller, Cincinnati, OH

August 22, 1908

National Archives and Records Administration

Records of the Department of Commerce and Labor, Children's Bureau  
Record Group 102  
National Archives Identifier: 523070



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Boys and Girls Selling Radishes

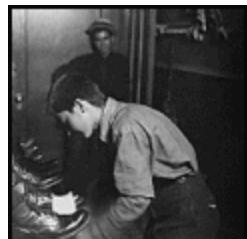
August 22, 1908

National Archives and Records Administration

Records of the Department of Commerce and Labor, Children's Bureau

Record Group 102

National Archives Identifier: 523071



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Boy Working in a Shoe-Shining Parlor, Indianapolis, IN

August 1908

National Archives and Records Administration

Records of the Department of Commerce and Labor, Children's Bureau

Record Group 102

National Archives Identifier: 523072



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Boys in a Cigar Factory, Indianapolis, IN

August 1908

National Archives and Records Administration

Records of the Department of Commerce and Labor, Children's Bureau

Record Group 102

National Archives Identifier: 523076



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Boy Running "Trip Rope" in a Mine, Welch, WV

September 1908

National Archives and Records Administration

Records of the Department of Commerce and Labor, Children's Bureau

Record Group 102

National Archives Identifier: 523077



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Children Working in a Bottle Factory, Indianapolis, IN

August 1908

National Archives and Records Administration

Records of the Department of Commerce and Labor, Children's Bureau

Record Group 102

National Archives Identifier: 523080



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The Noon Hour at an Indianapolis Cannery, Indianapolis IN

August 1908

National Archives and Records Administration

Records of the Department of Commerce and Labor, Children's Bureau

Record Group 102

National Archives Identifier: 523088



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Glass Blower and Mold Boy, Grafton, WV

October 1908

National Archives and Records Administration

Records of the Department of Commerce and Labor, Children's Bureau

Record Group 102

National Archives Identifier: 523090



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Girls at Weaving Machines, Evansville, IN

October 1908

National Archives and Records Administration

Records of the Department of Commerce and Labor, Children's Bureau

Record Group 102

National Archives Identifier: 523100



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Young Boys Schucking Oysters, Apalachicola, FL

January 25, 1909

National Archives and Records Administration

Records of the Department of Commerce and Labor, Children's Bureau

Record Group 102

National Archives Identifier: 523162



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Girl Working in Box Factory, Tampa, FL

January 28, 1909

National Archives and Records Administration

Records of the Department of Commerce and Labor, Children's Bureau

Record Group 102

National Archives Identifier: 523166



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Nine-Year Old Newsgirl, Hartford, CT

March 6, 1909

National Archives and Records Administration

Records of the Department of Commerce and Labor, Children's Bureau

Record Group 102

National Archives Identifier: 523174



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Boy Picking Berries, Near Baltimore, MD

June 8, 1909

National Archives and Records Administration

Records of the Department of Commerce and Labor, Children's Bureau

Record Group 102

National Archives Identifier: 523205



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Workers Stringing Beans, Baltimore, MD

June 7, 1909

National Archives and Records Administration

Records of the Department of Commerce and Labor, Children's Bureau

Record Group 102

National Archives Identifier: 523215



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Boys Working in an Arcade Bowling Alley, Trenton, NJ

December 20, 1909

National Archives and Records Administration

Records of the Department of Commerce and Labor, Children's Bureau

Record Group 102

National Archives Identifier: 523246

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