In the Playtime of Others: Child Labor in the Early 20th Century

When you look at the pictures in this issue you are seeing what Lewis Hine saw through the eyepiece of his camera eighty years ago. Your students' great-grandparents were probably children around them. They could have been among these working youngsters who posed for Hine at their jobs in factories, on city streets, and in tenement homes. This issue of ART TO ZOO uses historical photographs to teach about the work and working conditions of child laborers in the early 20th century. In American history, you can use these materials to introduce your students to working conditions at the turn of the century and to illustrate one of the many reform movements that flourished around that time.

The writing assignment, "A Child Worker Speaks Out," may be used in English, and the Pull-Out Page stamp-designing activity in Art. Step 3 of the Lesson Plan gives your students practice in observation. And both Step 3 of the Lesson Plan and "AnswerIt!" (on the Pull-Out Page) focus on analytical skill.

It was 1906 when Hine began making photographs for the National Child Labor Committee, an organization dedicated to bringing about reforms in child labor laws. To document the conditions that children were working under, Hine spent over ten years traveling around the country for the NCLC. He made thousands of photographs and wrote reports on what he saw as he visited cotton mills in New England and the South; glass factories in West Virginia and New Jersey; Pennsylvania coal mines; Massachusetts cranberry bogs; sugar beet fields in Wisconsin and Colorado; canneries in Maine, Mississippi, and Maryland; and city streets in many parts of the country.

Over and over, Hine saw children working sixty and seventy-hour weeks, by day and by night, often under hazardous conditions. He saw children caught in a cycle of poverty, with parents often so ill-paid that they could not support a family on their earnings alone, and had to rely on their children's earnings as a supplement for the family's survival. He saw children growing up stunted mentally (illiterate or barely able to read because their jobs kept them out of school) and physically (from lack of fresh air, exercise, and time to relax and play). He saw countless children accident rates three times those of adults. For children to work was nothing new—even very small children had been expected to labor alongside their parents in colonial times—but public attitudes toward child labor had shifted radically from what had been before the Civil War. Then, most people had taken it for granted that poor children should work. Child labor was even desirable: it was a way for poverty-stricken youngsters to support themselves (and their widowed mothers, injured fathers, and younger brothers and sisters), instead of becoming a burden to the community. People argued that working had moral benefits too. It kept these youngsters out of harm's way: a poor boy with a job was less likely to become a delinquent, a poor girl less likely to become promiscuous. And people claimed that working from an early age made the children into skilled workers and gave children a headstart toward success in adult life.

This last point had been truer earlier in the century, when the apprenticeship system was still flourishing. Apprentices had to undergo years of restricted freedom and hard work, but in exchange their master was required by law to provide training in his craft or trade; instruction in reading, writing, and (for boys at least) simple arithmetic; and room and board. But by the Civil War, the apprenticeship system had pretty well broken down. The country was becoming industrialized. After the Civil War, this process sped up dramatically, turning the country into the world's foremost industrial power in just a few decades. Being a factory worker was a completely different story from being an apprentice. As industrial laborers, children received only money in exchange for their work—and very little money at that. Now they worked in crowded, noisy, impersonal, and often polluted surroundings, often subject to the authority of someone who hardly knew them. Long hours kept them out of school. Even in the rare cases where evening or Sunday instruction was available, children tended to be too exhausted to benefit from it.

And most factory jobs were so limited in scope that they didn't teach young workers skills that would prepare them for better jobs in the future. A cobble's apprentice in the old days eventually learned every step from piece of leather to completed boot. But a young worker in a shoe factory might spend her childhood doing nothing but positioning a heel to be nailed on by machine, over and over and over. When she grew up, she would be prepared for nothing but unskilled labor.

In the latter decades of the 19th century, many states enacted laws to regulate child labor in many industries. These laws raised the age limits at which children were allowed to work; restricted the number of work hours permissible and eliminated night work; and prohibited the employment of children in many hazardous jobs. Very often, however, these state laws were not enforced. Many had huge loopholes. It was common, for example, for a notarized parent's affidavit to be sufficient proof of age. Many parents—out of necessity or venality—lied so their children could work. And if regulation was successful in one state, then industries would simply move to a neighboring state where they could operate more freely.

By the time the National Child Labor Committee was founded in 1904, it had become evident that federal regulation was necessary. But employers of child labor—and often the children themselves and their parents, who wanted the money or could see no way to survive without it—resisted. Little by little, however, public support for child labor legislation became more widespread. Federal legislation was passed in 1916 and again in 1919, but both laws were declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. Although the number of child workers declined dramatically during the 1920s and 1930s, it was not until the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938 that federal regulation of child labor finally became a reality.

Many American children today never work before they graduate from high school or college, or work only sporadically as babysitters, leaf rakers, and dog walkers in their neighborhoods. Children still hawk newspapers on city streets. Others deliver to their regular paper routes. Many kids earn spending money this way, and they enjoy their jobs and feel they are part of the working world. But some children still work long hours in agriculture and in home industries, helping to supplement the family income.
At the time that Lewis Hine made this photograph, more children were working in the textile industry than in any other branch of manufacturing. Employers often justified employing children in cotton mills by emphasizing that their jobs did not require great strength. This was true. Most of these children worked in the mill spinning rooms as sweepers, spinners, and doffers. The girls who worked as spinners spent their time moving among the machines, wiping lint off them and watching for breaks in the cotton. When a girl saw a break, she had to fix it as fast as possible by tying the thread ends together.

Boys who worked as doffers had the task of changing the bobbins as soon as they were filled. The children working at these jobs were often so young that they had to stand on boxes to reach the bobbins. It was easy for them (especially when they were exhausted after long hours of work) to catch their clothes in the moving machinery, or to fall into it themselves.

Children in the mills usually worked eleven- or twelve-hour days, five-and-a-half days a week, often at night, amid a deafening racket of machinery. Since moisture and heat helped keep the cotton from breaking, the windows in mills were kept closed. Lint from the cotton accumulated in the air. It covered the children's clothing and filled their lungs. A boy mill worker was only half as likely as a boy on the outside to live to the age of twenty. For girls, the ratio was even worse.

Whole families often worked in the mills, especially in the South. They lived in mill villages, in houses owned by the mills. If they went to school at all, it was in a mill school, but according to one turn-of-the-century study, about half of these children under fourteen years of age were unable to read or write.

Yet reforms tended to focus on industrial child workers. This was in part because most people thought of work in the fields as less harmful to children than work in factories. When they imagined children doing agricultural labor, they thought of youngsters helping their parents on the family farm, getting healthy exercise in the open air, and learning the skills they would need in the future.

But even the children who worked in family-owned fields often spent grueling weeks at heavy labor, often in bitter weather, and at times when school was in session. Many farm children fell behind their own age group in school.

Moreover, many children in agriculture were working land that didn't belong to their families. Some were the children of sharecroppers. Many were seasonal workers whose families lived in the city during the winter, but hired themselves out for agricultural work from early spring until well into the fall.

Arrangements for this kind of work were often made through a middleman. The workers were paid by how much they picked. The only way this kind of work could pay off was if several family members worked—including as many children as possible.

Agriculture (Photograph 2)

In the early decades of the 20th century almost three-quarters of all child laborers worked in agriculture. Yet reforms tended to focus on industrial child workers. This was in part because most people thought of work in the fields as less harmful to children than work in factories. When they imagined children doing agricultural labor, they thought of youngsters helping their parents on the family farm, getting healthy exercise in the open air, and learning the skills they would need in the future.

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Coal Mines (Photograph 3)

Most of the children working in coal mining were boys. Very few of the year-old boys. The breakers would be buildings outside the coal mine itself. There, boys of soy had wooden boards placed over them, if the coal dust, and they would work for as long as they could. The boys' job was to pick out waste like slate and stone that was mixed in with the coal. To be able to see which pieces were waste and which were coal, as tons of coal sped past them, the boys had to crouch low over the chutes. Over time, their chests grew narrower and their shoulders rounded. The burning coal bruised and tore their hands. Crushed and broken fingers were common. Sometimes a boy reached too far and fell into the moving coal.

The breakers were filled with the roar of machinery, and the air there was filled with coal dust that coated the boys' clothing and filled their lungs. For this a boy might earn 50 cents a day. From the breakers, a boy would usually move on to the, in which he might work as a mule-driver or a door tender. A door tender spent fourteen hours a day underground in the darkness, often standing ankle deep in water, waiting to open the trap door for the mules hauling their loads of coal to pass through. His reward for his fourteen hours in the dark was sixty cents.

Some of the boys who worked in the coal mines never set foot in school. Only a few could read a child might develop a vocabulary of 300 words a week or more, or can read if they were three times as common for boys as for adults.

Canners (Photograph 4)

There were a number of similarities between hiring out children to work in canneries and hiring out for agricultural work. Both seasonal jobs, usually set up through a labor agent. Both tended to involve whole families who moved from site to site. For the season, living in tenement quarters or shanties, provided by their employers, almost always under unhealthy conditions.

The employers themselves argued that, since they dealt with perishable foods, canneries were jobs for agricultural workers of the late 19th century. They would do this by repeating a precise but repetitious task over and over again.

A canning factory was humming with activity. The main problem with the factory was that the workers were restricted by law.

Leaving home on the job

When you have explained what their job consists of, have your students write down two guesses (that are right, or wrong, or fall somewhere in between) about what the children's job might be. Then explain the task to the children. You need to supervise them very closely. The factory will lose money if they make mistakes or drop coins, their pay will be cut. Then have the children begin. Be a supervisor. Give them the tasks.

Now tell your students more about what their work would have been like. Have them role-play factory workers of the early 20th century. They will do this by having them carry out the role-play in the Industrial Homework 2: Children at Work. Have your students write down two guesses (that are right, or wrong, or fall somewhere in between) about what the children's job might be. Then explain the task to the children. You need to supervise them very closely. The factory will lose money if they make mistakes or drop coins, their pay will be cut. Then have the children begin. Be a supervisor. Give them the tasks.

When you think the simulation has gone long enough, tell the children to stop and to think for a moment about how different these children were from children in your class, as you can see from this picture—they too were allowed to earn money this way.

Aside from this, the coal mining trade had been virtual unregulated long after many other kinds of child labor were restricted by law.
You don't have to live in Washington to study at the Smithsonian. "Teaching Writing Using Museums and Other Community Resources," a special ten-day course, will be offered by the Smithsonian Institution this summer for elementary and secondary teachers living more than 75 miles outside the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area.

The course carries graduate credit from the University of Virginia. Tuition and materials will be approximately $325. No scholarships are available.

"Teaching Writing Using Museums" will survey ways in which teachers can use local museum exhibits and such diverse resources as cemeteries and houses as tools for teaching and writing. In addition to working on formal and informal exercises, participants will interview several Smithsonian staff writers to learn about various approaches to writing.

The course, worth three graduate credits, is open to full-time classroom teachers (grades 5 through 12), school librarians (media specialists), and curriculum specialists. Interpreters for hearing-impaired individuals can be provided for classroom work.

Classes will meet from July 5 through 14 in Washington, D.C. Specially priced housing may be available in a conveniently located college dormitory. Participants will arrange their own meals.

Enrollment is limited. Applications must be postmarked no later than April 3. Notices of acceptance will be mailed by May 4.

For an application form, including complete information, write:

National Seminar
Office of Elementary and Secondary Education
Area of Arts and Education, Room 1163
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560

Or, telephone (202) 357-3049 or (Telecommunications Device for the Deaf) 202/357-1696.

Follow-up Activities

Here are a few additional activities that your students can do to follow up what they have been learning in the Lesson Plan.

• Right Here, Eighty Years Ago

1. Find a color or black and white photograph of a child worker. You can find these photographs through library resources or by visiting museums. Write what she says, in her own words. Be sure to point this out in your instructions.

2. Joseph Severio, 11 years old, selling snacks on a Wilmington, Delaware, street in May 1910. He has been pushing a cart for two years and works six hours a day. He gives everything he earns to his father.

b. Coats or hats?

b. If you are in a school district that does not have a library, you can find objects and you can find objects around your own community. Tell your students about the advantages and disadvantages of working at the factory in which they were employed as children. Do they think that it is hard to compare different times? What about different cultures? What about different classes?

b. Children of the City, at Work and at Play.

b. The disadvantages of working in a factory are very different from a few hours a week.

b. Many child workers were usually badly paid. This not only meant that they made money they couldn't attend school, or could attend only part of the time. Many child workers were injured, disabled, or even killed on the job. Laborers in workplaces that were very polluted, and sometimes had to handle toxic substances (like dyes).

b. When the photograph was made? If not, how long after the photograph was made. Ask your students to think about how these people might have felt about their work. What were the advantages and disadvantages of working in a factory? What were the advantages and disadvantages of working in a factory? What were the advantages and disadvantages of working in a factory?


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From America's earliest days, countless children contributed their work to building this country. Imagine that the United States Postal Service has decided to issue a series of four stamps honoring the contributions of these child workers of the past.

There will be four 25-cent stamps in the series. Each stamp will show a child worker carrying out a different job. The stamps will be in full color.

You are the artist who is going to design and draw these stamps. Draw on loose sheets of paper so you can experiment with different designs. When you are happy with four of your pictures, make them look like stamps by putting in the holes around the edges. The drawing on this page will give you some ideas.

Your teacher can show you some actual stamps that come in series of four or you can go to the post office and ask to see commemorative stamps. Be sure to put the words 25 USA (or USA 25) on each stamp you design. You may also want to include a short phrase about child workers.

If there is a photocopying machine you use that will make copies that are smaller than the original, you can see what your finished signs would look like at normal stamp size. Remember one thing though: no matter how good your stamps look, don't put them on an envelope you are actually sending—it won't go through the mail!

Two girls at work in a cotton mill. It is likely that only the older one is officially on the company payroll, while the younger is simply called a "helper." This means that she works unofficially; her earnings are probably recorded as part of her sister's pay. This was a common way for companies to avoid obeying child labor laws.

Vance, a 15-year-old trapper in a West Virginia coal mine, in September 1908. Vance spends about 12 hours a day here in the darkness of the mine. His job is to open this door when necessary.

A girl at work in a cotton mill early in this century.

Use these pictures or the others in ART TO ZOO to get ideas for your stamp designs. Above we have taken one part of the photograph, called a "detail," for our stamp.
It is 1912 and you are a grown-up. You come across the following letter to the editor in the Vanguard Magazine:

You disagree strongly with the picture Mr. Bumbershoot has painted in his letter. You work for an organization that is trying to reform the child labor situation. Because of your job, you know a lot about the lives of child cotton mill workers. You have visited many mills in person and seen first-hand what working conditions there are like. In fact, you have visited the Bumbershoot Mill, and you know that it is typical. You decide to write a reply and send it to the editor of the Vanguard Magazine. In your reply, explain why Mr. Bumbershoot’s description is, in your opinion, inaccurate. Discuss at least four aspects of these young mill workers' lives that you consider harmful to them.

Dear Sir:

I feel I must respond to your recent article on child workers, “The Sufferings of the Babes.” I am the owner of a large cotton mill. Among the workers in my mill are many children. I do not apologize for employing them. I do not think it wrong to employ them. In fact, I am proud that I hire children to work in my mill. Because of their mill jobs, these youngsters have a far better start in life than they would otherwise have had.

The Bumbershoot Mill is located in a poor rural area. Almost all our workers come from isolated farms. Before they came to work and live at the mill, these children spent their days toiling in the fields. They almost never went to school. They almost never learned to read. They grew up poor and ignorant.

Then they came to work at the mill, and their lives changed. For the first time, they lived in clean new houses. They had money in their pockets. They had a store and a church nearby. The met people from different places. Their lives opened up.

And they did not have to leave their families to get these rewards. They came with their families.

Older brothers and sisters hire work alongside their fathers and mothers; younger children tag along to help the older ones. We let them do this because we at Bumbershoot believe in the family. We even provide jobs to unfortunate youngsters who have lost their fathers, so they can support their widowed mothers.

The work that the children do in the mill is not hard. They sweep floors. They change the bobbins. They keep the machines clean and repair breaks in the threads. They get healthy exercise as they walk around the mill performing these tasks.

And as they perform these tasks, these little ones are learning important lessons in hard work and responsibility.

How much more promise the future holds for these youngsters at the mill than for those on isolated farms, or for those whose families had to go to the city to find work. What bad habits are those children picking up on city streets?

Yes, when I walk through my mill and hear these youngsters humming merrily as they go about their work, I am proud of what I am offering them: a better start in life.

Respectfully yours,

J. Zacharias Bumbershoot
Proprietor, Bumbershoot Mill

January 17, 1912

Editor
The Vanguard Magazine
New York, New York
Desde los primeros días de existencia de Los Estados Unidos, muchísimos niños trabajadores han contribuido al desarrollo de este país. Imagina que el Servicio Postal de Los Estados Unidos ha decidido imprimir una serie de cuatro estampillas para homenjar las contribuciones de estos niños trabajadores del pasado.

Habrá cuatro estampillas de 25 centavos en la serie. Cada sello postal mostrará a un niño haciendo un trabajo diferente. Las estampillas serán en colores.

Tú eres el artista que va a diseñar y dibujar estas estampillas. Haz dibujos en hojas de papel para que puedas experimentar con diferentes diseños. Cuando hayas terminado, escoge cuatro de los dibujos que te gusten más y conviértelos en estampillas haciendo los contornos. Los dibujos de esta página te darán algunas ideas.

Tu maestro/a te mostrará algunos sellos postales que se imprimen en series de cuatro o puedes ir a la oficina de correos y pedir estampillas conmemorativas. Asegúrate de poner 25 centavos USA (o USA 25 centavos) en cada estampilla que hayas señalado. También puedes incluir una frase sobre los niños que trabajan.

Si tienes acceso a una máquina fotocopiadora haz copias más pequeñas que tus dibujos originales para que puedas ver tus diseños del tamaño de una estampilla normal. Recuerda que, no importa lo bien que se vean tus estampillas, no debes pegarlas en el sobre a pesar de que vas a enviar—porque el correo no las va a aceptar!

Dos niños trabajando en una fábrica de algodón. Es bastante probable que solo la mayor de ellas esté incluida oficialmente en planillas, mientras que las más pequeñas sean simplemente una "ayudante." Esto significa que ella trabaja extralegalmente; sus ganancias son probablemente registradas como parte del salario de la hermana. Era una forma muy usada por las compañías para evitar cumplir con las leyes de trabajo para niños.

Utiliza estas fotografías y otras en este ejemplar de Arte a Zoológico para inspirarte en tus diseños de estampillas. Como puedes ver nosotros hemos escogido parte de la foto de arriba, "un detalle," como tema para nuestra estampilla.

Una niña trabajando en una fábrica de algodón a principios del siglo. 25 centavos
La Planta Algodonera Bumbershoot

17 de enero de 1912
Editor
Revista Vanguardia
Nueva York, Nueva York

Estimado Señor Editor:

Quiero que escriba a su reciente artículo sobre los niños trabajadores, "El Sufrimiento de los Niños."

Yo soy dueño de una planta algodonera. Entre los trabajadores de mi planta hay muchos niños. Yo no me enredo en empleos porque no pienso que es correcto darles trabajo. Francamente estoy orgulloso de emplear niños para que trabajen en mi planta.

Debido a sus trabajos en la planta, estos jóvenes tienen una mejor oportunidad en la vida de la que tendrían si no trabajaran allí.


Y estos niños no tuvieron que dejar a sus familias para obtener estos beneficios. Ellos vinieron con sus familias. Los hermanos y hermanas mayores trabajan aquí al lado de sus padres y madres, y los niños menores les ayudan a los niños mayores. Nosotros les permitimos esto porque la Planta Algodonera Bumbershoot cree en la familia. Nosotros ofrecemos trabajo a los desafortunados jóvenes cuyos padres han muerto, para que ellos puedan mantener a sus madres vivas.

El trabajo que estos niños hacen en la planta no es un trabajo pesado. Ellos barren el piso. Ellos cambian las bobinas. Ellos mantienen limpias las máquinas y reparan los hilos cuando estos se revientan. Ellos se ejercitan cuando caminan por la planta haciendo sus quehaceres. Y mientras hacen estas cosas, estos niños aprenden importantes lecciones sobre el trabajo con dedicación y sobre responsabilidad.

El futuro ofrece muchas mas promesas a estos niños en la planta algodonera que a los niños que están en granjas aisladas y también a esos cuyas familias tienen que ir a la ciudad para encontrar trabajo. ¿Qué malos hábitos aprenden esos niños que van por las calles de la ciudad? Si, cuando yo camino por mi planta algodonera y oigo a estos niños canturreando alegremente mientras hacen su trabajo, me siento orgulloso de poder ofrecerles ésto: un mejor camino en sus vidas.

Respetuosamente,

J. Zacharias Bumbershoot
Propietario de la Planta Bumbershoot