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**Photos That  
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# Seeing Is Believing

by Mary Morton Cowan

**L**ewis Wickes Hine knew that a picture could tell a powerful story. He also had great compassion for poor people struggling to maintain their dignity. Hine's earliest photos were of families at the Ellis Island immigration station from 1904 to 1909. Hine knew that those families' futures would be hard, but he admired them for trying to make their dreams come true. In his photographs, Hine recorded the hope and fear he saw expressed by many immigrants. He cared especially about the children.

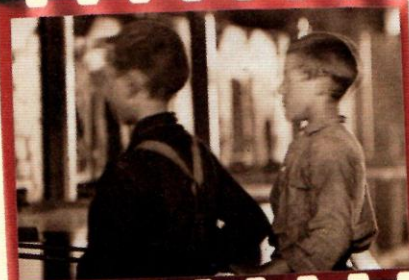
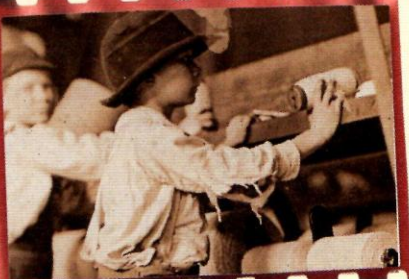
Hine published some of his photographs. About that time, an organization called the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC) was investigating child labor conditions. In workplaces that were hazardous and unhealthy, children worked long hours at exhausting jobs and were paid almost nothing. A normal workweek was 12 hours a day, six days a week. There was no chance to go to school and very little time for play.

The committee believed that if the public could see children doing adult work in horrid conditions, surely it would take notice. In 1908, the NCLC hired Hine to photograph children at work. Hine spent the next decade as the organization's official photographer.

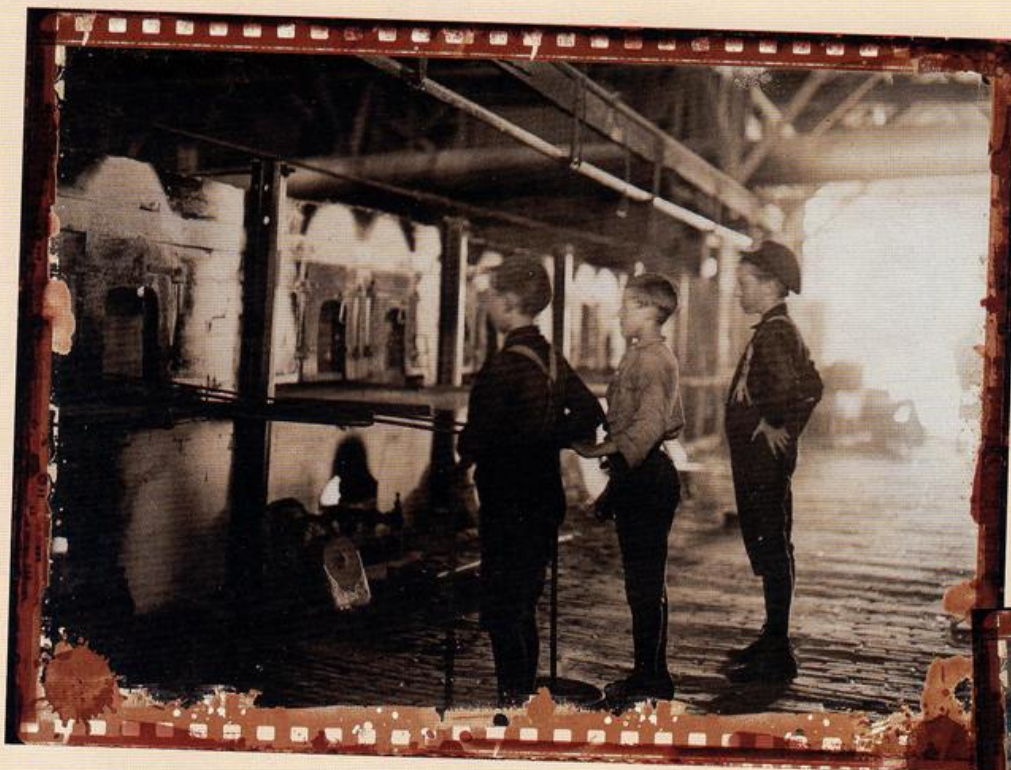
Over the years, Hine took thousands of photographs for the NCLC, which distributed Hine's photographs in pamphlets, magazines, and newspapers. (Examples of his photographs are shown at right and on the following pages.) Hine dedicated his art to helping America's children—to telling their stories and freeing them from abusive labor conditions.

And his work got the public's attention. Hine's revealing photographs played a major role in child labor reform, since for many people, seeing was believing. In 1938, the Fair Labor Standards Act banned oppressive child labor, set a minimum hourly wage (24 cents), and established a maximum workweek (44 hours).

While he probably is most famous for his photographs of children at work, Hine also took photographs of the American Red Cross's relief efforts during World War I (1914–1918) and the building of the Empire State Building (1930–1931). He also worked for the Works Progress Administration to document industry and employment during the Great Depression (1929–1941).





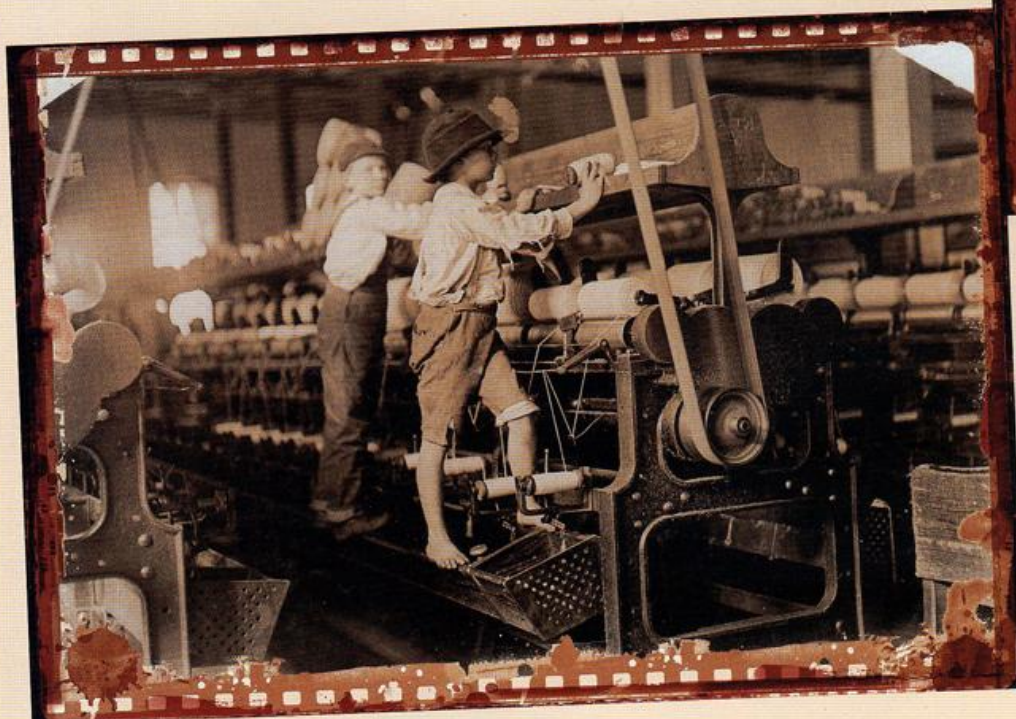


In glass factories, "carrying-in" boys carried molten glass from the furnace to the bottle makers, then back to the furnace again. The floor was spattered with broken glass, making cuts common, and many boys suffered from heat exhaustion.

In coal mines, young boys sat in grimy breaker rooms from daybreak until dark, picking out pieces of slate that fell down the chutes along with the chunks of coal. Most of them suffered chronic coughs from breathing in coal dust. Older boys worked down in the mines, where there was constant danger from explosions and cave-ins.



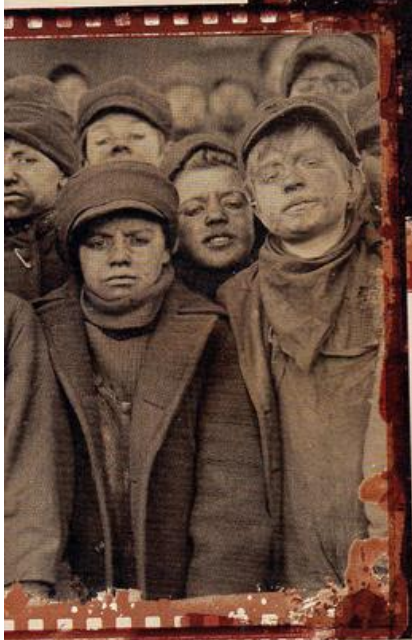
The hot air in textile mills and factories was full of lint, and the whirring machines were deafening. Children often worked barefoot to make it easier to climb onto the huge machines to change spools or bobbins. Forced to work quickly, children often caught their fingers in the machinery.







Whole families toiled in crowded, filthy tenements in temperatures that were stifling in the summer and bitter cold in the winter. This mother and her two young daughters were paid pennies to make artificial flowers.



At canneries along the seacoast, children as young as three years old stood all day in stinking sheds shucking oysters or peeling shrimp. During canning season, families worked from 3:00 or 4:00 A.M. until late afternoon. Children constantly cut their hands on the sharp knives used to crack oyster shells. 📷

Mary Morton Cowan has written numerous articles for *COBBLESTONE*, *CALLIOPE*, *APPLESEEDS*, and *FACES*.

