

LEWIS HINE AND CHILD LABOR, *By Joe Manning*

The following is from the *Boston Evening Transcript*, January 27, 1903:

“In Massachusetts, it will be recalled, the arousal of the public sense as to the need for child labor regulation began at the time of the great Fall River mills catastrophe, when hundreds of children from seven to nine perished, unable to save themselves as did the older people. The Massachusetts Legislature took a radical step, which is imitated now all over the land, when it passed its first child labor law in 1875. That law provided that children under ten should not work in cotton mills, no matter what the exigency of the family might be. Within the last decade the age has been raised to thirteen, then to fourteen, and only last year, the compulsory education feature was attached, which makes the law strong and guarantees its complete enforcement.”

PHOTOGRAPHER AND SOCIAL ACTIVIST LEWIS WICKES HINE WAS ON A MISSION. He wanted to eradicate child labor in the United States of America, a practice that had existed since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, and was rampant in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The National Child Labor Committee had hired him in 1908 to take photographs of the children in or near their workplaces, in order to expose their plight to as many influential people as possible. The organization had thousands of members all over the country who were on the lookout for factories that employed young children, often in violation of state child labor laws that were meager and infrequently enforced.

HINE WAS BORN IN OSHKOSH, WISCONSIN IN 1874. When his father died young, Hine went to work in a furniture factory to help support his mother, and to save for a college education. He wound up studying sociology at the University of Chicago, and then was hired as a teacher at the Ethical Culture School in New York City, where he used photography as a teaching tool. In 1905, he photographed immigrants arriving at Ellis Island. Several years later, he took pictures of steel workers in Pittsburgh for the Russell Sage Foundation.

When he arrived in Lawrence in November of 1910, Hine had been traveling nearly three years, and had taken several thousand photographs. He took about 15 pictures of child workers at Pacific Mills. The following year, he visited Winchendon (Mass) at the beginning of September and took 40 pictures, and

then went directly to Lawrence and took about 50 more, coincidentally just four months before the Bread & Roses Strike. All but one of the stories in this exhibition represent his work in Lawrence.

It is important to remember that most of the boys in these pictures would have reached draft age by the time their country entered WWI. One morning, instead of heading to their jobs, some would find themselves heading out of town on troop trains, leaving their lively community behind. Those who returned safely would face the Great Depression in another 10 years, when most would struggle to support their wives and their own children, the youngest (boys) of which were doomed to reach draft age about the time the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

Without child labor to hold them back, most of these girls and boys would have experienced the joys of a simple, unencumbered childhood, finished school, and entered adulthood better prepared to reach their full potential. Some might have gone on to become doctors, nurses, teachers, scientists, or business and government leaders. But those achievements are not the only measure of accomplishment. Almost all the children in these stories married, had children, survived the great challenges of the 20th century, and are remembered affectionately by their descendants. Lewis Hine would have been proud of them.

Ironically Lewis Hine, after having great difficulty getting work during the Great Depression, died in poverty in 1940. He was 66.

ABOUT JOE MANNING

JOE MANNING IS AN AUTHOR, HISTORIAN, FREELANCE JOURNALIST, SONGWRITER AND POET. Among his books are *Steeple: Sketches of North Adams* (1997) and *Disappearing into North Adams* (2001). In 2002, he contributed a lengthy essay about the social history of the River Street neighborhood in North Adams for *Porches: Art and Renewal on River Street*, a book edited by the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. His poetry has been published frequently in *The Berkshire Review*. He has written many newspaper and magazine articles, ranging from travel essays to social commentary.

THANKS TO THE FOLLOWING PERSONS FOR THEIR VALUABLE ASSISTANCE: **Martha Mayo**, University of Massachusetts Lowell Center for Lowell History; **Christine Lewis**, writer and journalist; **Robert Forrant**, Professor and Senior Research Fellow, University of Massachusetts Lowell; **Louise Sandberg**, Archivist, Lawrence Public Library; **Susan Grabski**, Executive Director, Lawrence History Center; and **Allyson Kennedy-Spencer**, student, University of Massachusetts Lowell.

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