

# “THE BITTER CRY OF THE CHILDREN”

“I sell papers every day in the year; Sundays too. Been at it four years,” said William Jerry, a thirteen-year-old newsboy. William was talking to photographer Lewis Hine in Burlington, Vermont, on a snowy day in December, 1916. At the time, Lewis Hine had been traveling for nearly ten years across the United States, photographing children at work.

In those days, children often worked long hours at very low pay, doing dangerous and **tedious** jobs in mills, mines, and factories and on city streets. Children as young as three years old helped their parents to **shuck** oysters or peel shrimp. Many ten-year-olds worked as **doffers** or **spinners** in giant woolen or cotton mills.



Group of boys outside the Chace Cotton Mill in Burlington, where they worked, some of them for as long as three years, though the oldest were no more than thirteen, May, 1909. Lewis Hine, photographer. Photos courtesy of the Fleming Museum, University of Vermont.



Bernice Bedard (left), Sadie Finnogan (center), and Tessie McGrath (right), three girls who worked at the American Woolen Company in Winooski, May, 1909.

Many adults were concerned about these children and began to look for ways to change this situation. They felt that children deserved time for school and play, and that those younger than sixteen years old should not be forced to work all week to help support their families. In 1904, the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC) was formed to try and change the laws and protect the rights of children.

The NCLC did not argue that children should never work, for chores at home and on the farm were and still are a part of growing up. But the NCLC opposed jobs for children that lasted ten to twelve hours a day, week after week, year after year. Mill children and young coal miners often caught **tuberculosis** or skin disease. They suffered from failing eyesight, poorly developed muscles and bones, and nervous tension. Sometimes they were badly injured by the machinery in the mills.

To convince the public of the need for better laws governing child labor in the United States, the NCLC chose a young photographer named Lewis Hine. Already people knew Hine's wonderful pictures of immigrants arriving at **Ellis Island** and struggling to earn a living in America. Hine cared about people and was willing to fight injustice.

**The Bitter Cry of the Children**, a powerful argument on behalf of the needs of poor children, was published in 1906. This famous book was written by Lewis Hine's friend, John Spargo, who later came to live in Bennington, Vermont. In his book, Spargo argued that the children of working mothers living in poverty, as well as young children themselves who worked in the mills and mines, were suffering greatly. They were underfed, ill-clothed, and exposed to danger and disease. Spargo suggested that mothers and children needed better medical care, neighborhood nurseries, pure milk and baby food, and better education about nutrition and health. **The Bitter Cry of the Children** made many people see the evils of child labor.



So Lewis Hine began to visit children at work, and take their pictures. He asked them their names and ages, and how long they'd been working. The NCLC believed that more than two million children under sixteen years of age were working all day, every day. Hine's photographs showed how difficult and often dangerous their work was. The photographs appeared in magazines and in exhibits and helped people see for the first time that something must be done to protect the children.



Addie Laird was ten years old in August, 1910, when Lewis Hine took this picture of her beside the machine she tended at the Vermont Cotton Mill in North Pownal. Photo courtesy Brattleboro Museum.

Lewis Hine visited Vermont several times between 1909 and 1916. He photographed Vermont children at work in cotton mills, lumber yards, marble mills and woolen mills, on street corners, and on the farm. The children he met here were small for their age, poorly dressed, often barefoot, and worked long hours for low pay. Hine's photographs show the great sympathy he felt for each one of these small laborers.

By 1914, thirty-five states had made it illegal to employ children under fourteen years old, and limited the work day to eight hours for those under sixteen years of age. By the 1930s, child labor was beginning to disappear. The photographs taken by Lewis Hine were one of the reasons why children's lives across America began slowly to improve.

## VOCABULARY

**tedious**—boring, tiresome

**shuck**—take the shell off the oyster

**doffers**—children whose job it was to take the bobbins filled with thread off the winding machines

**spinners**—children whose job it was to tend the spinning machines that spun cotton or wool into thread

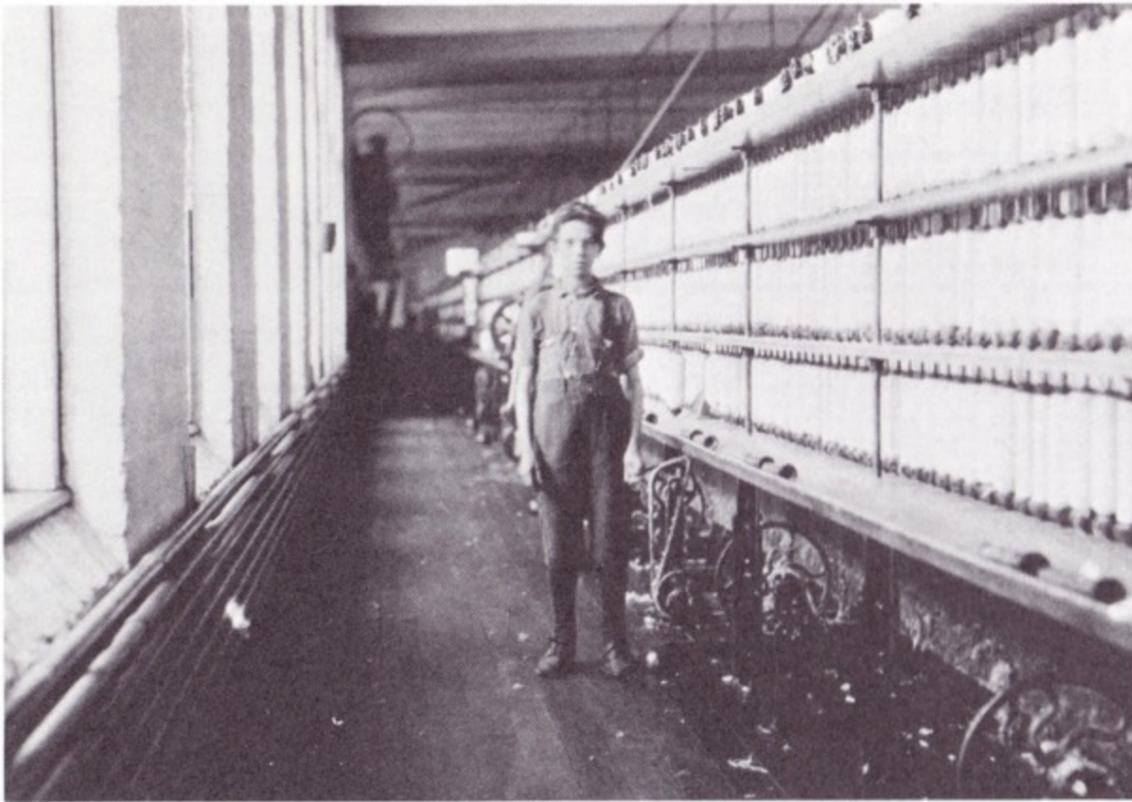
**tuberculosis**—a disease of the lungs

**Ellis Island**—the main U.S. immigration center from 1892 to 1943, located in New York harbor. The Statue of Liberty stands nearby.





Addie Laird (front row, third from left) squints in the bright sun as she poses outside the Vermont Cotton Mill in North Pownal, surrounded by others—mainly children like herself—employed in the mill. August, 1910.



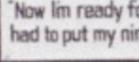
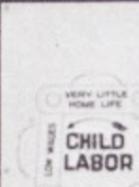
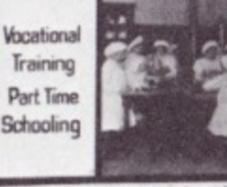
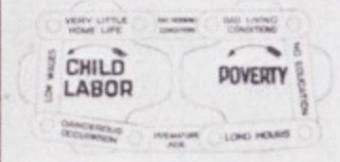
Joe Beaudoin worked as a back-roper in the mule room, where cotton was twisted into thread, at the Chace Cotton Mill, Burlington, May, 1909.

## “THE GOLF LINKS”

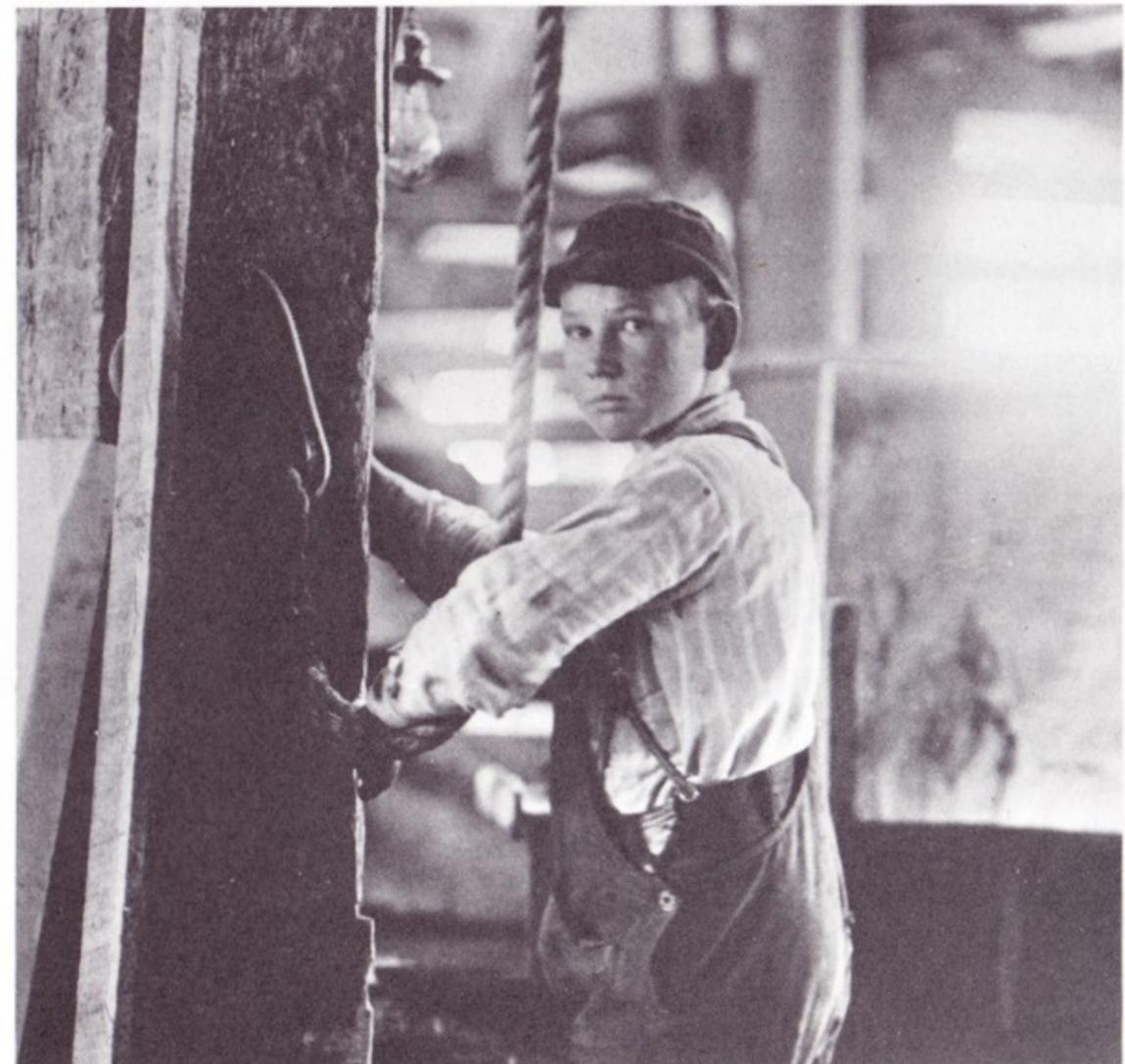
by Sarah Cleghorn

The golf links lie so near the mill  
That almost every day  
The laboring children can look out  
And see the men at play.

*Sarah N. Cleghorn (1876-1959) lived in Manchester, Vermont, throughout most of her life. She wrote hundreds of poems. Some she called “sunbonnet poems,” because they were about life in rural Vermont. Others, like the one printed here, she called “burning poems” because they reflected her burning interest in social reform. Cleghorn believed in women’s right to vote, a world without war, and an end to child labor.*

<b>EVERY CHILD NEEDS TO WORK</b>	<b>CHILD LABOR DOES NOT PAY</b> The Child The Parents The Industry The State
<b>WORK THAT DEADENS</b>	And The Worst of it is <b>CHILD LABOR</b> MAKES <b>MORE CHILD LABOR</b> Because — <b>Child Labor Breeds Poverty</b>
 These Children are Working so that their Employer May Make Money	
<b>WORK THAT DEVELOPS</b>	 This Cotton Mill Operative Began Work as a Child 40 years ago “Now I’m ready for the scrap heap and I’ve had to put my nine year old girl in the mill”
 School Gardens - Corn Clubs - Canning Clubs	
 Manual Work Trade Schools	
 Vocational Training Part Time Schooling These Children Are Learning While they Work	 <b>THE ENDLESS CHAIN</b> Each Wheel Keeps the Other Moving

Lewis Hine’s photos on this exhibit panel show that child labor led to poverty and suffering. National Child Labor Committee, ca. 1910.



At the Vermont Marble Company in Center Rutland, this boy ran a marble-working machine, September, 1910.