Child Labor in Oklahoma:  
The Photographs of Lewis Hine, 1916-1917

Lewis Hine photographed children all over the country in the early 1900s. Although he focused on larger cities, in 1916 and 1917 he photographed child laborers in the new state of Oklahoma. Oklahoma’s child workers were different for two reasons. First, the state had stricter laws than the federal government when it came to child labor, although they still allowed children under eighteen to work up to ten hours a day! Second, many of the children who worked in Oklahoma were often not in factories like other states and larger cities but worked as farmhands and labored alongside their parents. Hine photographed child laborers in Tulsa, Oklahoma City, Lawton, Shawnee, Okmulgee, Sulphur, and other smaller communities in the state. His documentary style of work brought the horrors of child labor in the United States and the responsibility of citizens to the forefront of American thought. Because of Lewis Hine’s work through the National Child Labor Committee, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938.

All of the photographs featured in this exhibit are from Lewis Hine’s work with the National Child Labor Committee, which were given to the Library of Congress in 1954.
Social Reform in the Second Industrial Revolution

The Second Industrial Revolution is the period between the Civil War and the beginning of World War I. It was a time of expanding technology, machinery, production, and, of course, labor. More and more Americans began working outside of the home, but regulations, or laws put in place by the federal government or state to protect citizens, were not growing with the new labor. Because many citizens, including children, were being treated poorly by employers, activists began to organize to create change in their communities, or social reform.

Social reform photographer Lewis Hine spent much of the early 1900s traveling the United States documenting what some called “child slavery.” Child labor was widespread. According to the 1900 US Census, two million children worked in factories, mills, mines, cotton fields, and the streets. Most of the children were not in school. Many were illiterate and some did not speak English. It was commonplace that the children would work twelve to fourteen hour days. Lewis Hine was hired by the National Child Labor Committee in 1908 to document this ever-growing problem in order to persuade the public and the government to pass meaningful laws to protect children.

Child Labor Laws: 1916–1941

In 1916 Congress passed the Keating-Owen Child Labor Act, which was signed into law by President Woodrow Wilson. Oklahoma native and US Senator Robert L. Owen was a co-author of the bill, which was also supported by the National Child Labor Committee. Two years later, though, the law was declared unconstitutional by the US Supreme Court. In the same year, Congress passed the Child Labor Tax Act. Four years later, this act was also struck down by the US Supreme Court. Also in 1916, Lewis Hine began documenting the horrors of child labor. It would be another thirty years until a law was finally passed and upheld that protected children from long hours, dangerous work environments, and lack of schooling. The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 was passed, and in 1941, the US Supreme Court ruled in favor of the children.

In Oklahoma, child labor laws were established during its first territorial legislature in 1890, far in advance of the national movement. The law established a ten-hour work day in factories and workshops for women and children under the age of eighteen, but these laws were obviously still flawed. Kate Barnard, Oklahoma’s first commissioner of charities and corrections, worked to update the law in 1907 which stated that children under fifteen could not be employed in an occupation that could be dangerous or unhealthy. Although this was a step in the right direction, the child labor laws in Oklahoma still had little authority to protect children working on farms, selling newspapers, shining shoes, or making deliveries, as these forms of employment were hard to regulate.
Lewis Hine and Oklahoma

When Hine came to Oklahoma in 1916 the state was still primarily an agrarian society. While Oklahoma City and Tulsa had some small factories, much of the child labor was found on farms, in cotton fields, and on the streets. Lewis Hine visited country schools that could hold classes only a few months out of the year to accommodate child laborers who would attend between harvest seasons. He also visited the schools for the deaf and blind where students learned job skills to prepare them for life outside the school walls.

Most of the time employers did not want Hine to photograph their child laborers and their work conditions. To gain access to the children, Hine would represent himself as an equipment manufacturer, fire inspector, or whatever it took to get through the doors with his bulky camera equipment. While inside, he would interview children, photograph them, and document important information. Often he would be forced to wait outside the factories or mines for the children to arrive or leave for the day. Hine was relentless when it came to giving children in Oklahoma and across the nation a voice.

Documentary Photography

Documentary photography was an important tool for Lewis Hine not only to generate social change; it also served as a form of art. Hine was able to capture the real-life struggles of child laborers while also evoking emotion and sympathy for his subjects as works of art. Lewis Hine scholar Judith Gutman said that his “sympathy for the homeless, downtrodden, and the abused, roused the conscience of the Nation.” Could this have been accomplished without the compassion of the photographer, armed with the knowledge of how to take a great photograph?

Photography, because of its mechanical nature, lends itself to document the world as it is, and for many, that is its sole function: however, a person behind the lens who maneuvers and positions the camera, and it is that person alone who sees and translates what we see in the final image. It was Hine’s vision that produced the photographic documents in such a way that would move people to action. A camera could not do that on its own.
Photo Collection: Lewis Hine in Oklahoma, 1916-1917
All captions are notes about the children written by Lewis Hine.

Mart Payne, 5 years old, picks from 10 to 20 pounds a day. Mother said: "Mart, he haint old nuff to go to school much, but he kin pick his 20 pounds a day. Mostly 10 or 15 pounds." Location: Comanche County, Oklahoma.

Callie Campbell, 11 years old, picks 75 to 125 pounds of cotton a day, and totes 50 pounds of it when sack gets full. "No, I don't like it very much." Location: Pottawatomie County, Oklahoma.

Johnnie, Carrie and Jim Davenport picking cotton for MR. J. P. Daws, Route 1, Shawnee. Johnnie picks 75 pounds, Carrie 100 pounds and Jim 150 to 200 pounds a day. Get $1.00 a hundred pounds. No School yet. Mother is a renter; moves about a great deal. Location: Pottawatomie County, Oklahoma.

Norma Lawrence is 10 years old and picks from 100 to 150 pounds of cotton a day. Drags the sack which often hold 50 pounds or more before emptied. Location: Comanche County, Oklahoma.
Fred Hill, 3 years old, sometimes picks 20 pounds of cotton a day. Location: Comanche County, Oklahoma.

Sarah Crutcher, 12-year-old girl herding cattle. Route 4, c/o S.O. Crutcher. She was out of school (#49 Comanche County) only 2 weeks this year and that was to herd 100 head of cattle for her father, a prosperous farmer. She said: "I didn't like it either." She is doing well in school. Is in Grade 8. Location: Lawton, Oklahoma.

Herschel Bonham, Route A, Box 118, an 11-year-old boy cultivating peas. He belongs to a cotton club in school. Father says he can pick 200 pounds of cotton a day. Location: Lawton, Oklahoma.

Bartrum Choate, a 12-year-old boy driving colts to town. Works for W.F. Barber, Route 3, Lawton, Okla. Location: Lawton [vicinity], Oklahoma.
Family of L.H. Kirkpatrick, Route 1, Lawton, Okla. Children go to Mineral Wells School #39. Father, mother and five children (5, 6, 10, 11 and 12 years old) pick cotton. "We pick a bale in four days." Dovey, 5 years old, picks 15 pounds a day (average) Mother said: "She jess works fer pleasure." Ertle, 6 years, picks 20 pounds a day (average) Vonnie, 10 years, picks 50 pounds a day (average) Edward, 11 years, picks 75 pounds a day (average) Otis, 12 years, picks 75 pounds a day (average) Expect to be out of school for two weeks more picking. Father is a renter. Works part of farm on shares (gives 1/4 of cotton for rent) and part of farm he pays cash rent. Location: Comanche County, Oklahoma.

Scott School #41; Miss Smith, Teacher. Opened September 4th -- 8 months term. 19 present to-day--should be 60. 20 are enrolled and 16 was the average attendance last month. Teacher expects 60 enrolled by January 1st. School does not settle down until January, and then the year is half gone. Absences due to cotton picking. Raise some grains here and a few of the older ones will be absent for work. Families are continually changing. Many tenants. Location: Comanche County, Oklahoma.

A pair of truants, tending their father’s mules. Photo taken during school hours, near Oklahoma City. Boys are 9 and 11 yrs. old. Location: Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Alley scene. Location: Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.
Jack Ryan, 6 years old, and Jesse Ryan, 10 years old. Onem Smith, 12 years old and lives at 1506 S. Robinson St. Onem said: "I never have been in school in my life but I got a pretty good education - sellin papers." Been selling here 6 months. These boys are truants who were photographed during school hours. Location: Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Sam Pine, 8-year-old truant newsboy, who lives at 717 W. California St. Said: "I was late getting up and don't want to get the rubber tube for being tardy so I stayed away to-day." Photographed during school hours. Location: Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Manley Creasson, 914 W. St. Messenger #6, Mackay Telegraph Co. Says he is 14; school records say 13. Says he has steady job - "Been a messenger for years. Get $15 for 2 weeks' pay." Location: Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.
Ernest Chester, 5 years old lives at 624 S. Robinson St. Sells with his older brother Emmet, who is 9 years old. They are up very early. Location: Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

John Dowers, 7 years old, lives at 108 W. Frisco St. Starts out at 5 a.m. some days. Father is blind and sells newspapers. John is a pretty good beggar. Was seen trying to borrow a dollar from the bank to "get father a watch" (father is blind). Location: Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Jack Ryan, 6-year-old newsie, who lives at 126 1/2 W. Reno St. Location: Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Everett Glin, 6 S. Oklahoma St. 7-year-old truant newsie. Said mother told him to stay home. Says he gets up at 4 a.m. some days to sell. Location: Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.
Stoking the furnace in the power-house. Pauls Valley Training School. The boy was very proud of his job. Location: Pauls Valley, Oklahoma.

Eleven-year-old bakery worker Glenn Dungey. Location: Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Boys working at forging. Oklahoma City High School. Location: Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

High School boy at work in machine shop. Oklahoma City High School. Location: Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Daily inspection of teeth and finger nails. Older pupils make the inspection under the direction of teacher who records results. This has been done every day this year. School #49, Comanche County. Location: Lawton vicinity, Oklahoma. Location: Pauls Valley, Oklahoma.

Sewing and darning. Training School for Deaf Mutes. Location: Sulphur, Oklahoma.

Interior of workshop of Sanitary Ice Cream Cone Co. Boys packing cones are John Myers, 14 years old and a boy 12 years old who is working steady now. Boss said: "He said he wasn't going to school so I took him." Location: Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.


Learning typesetting. Training School for Deaf Mutes. Location: Sulphur, Oklahoma.
Kate Barnard

Catherine Ann “Kate” Barnard was born in 1875 in Geneva, Nebraska. After her mother’s death when she was just two years old, Barnard lived in Kansas before moving to Oklahoma City to live with her father in 1891. As a young woman, Barnard earned her teaching certificate and ran a few one-room schoolhouses in Oklahoma Territory. She also worked as a secretary.

Between her teaching background and activism through the Democratic Party and the Catholic Church, Barnard became concerned with the suffering of children and adults alike at the hands of poverty and lack of education. Despite the fact that women were not allowed to vote, or involve themselves in any political issues for that matter, Barnard saw the real potential women had in politics when it came to the care of others. As Oklahoma Territory was gearing up to apply for statehood, Barnard convinced the Oklahoma Constitutional Convention leaders that the new state needed a commissioner of charities that would oversee social reform. In 1907, Kate Barnard became Oklahoma’s first commissioner of charities and corrections, a position she won by a large margin. She was the first woman elected to an Oklahoma state office.

Between her two terms as commissioner, Barnard advocated on behalf of child laborers, education for children, single mothers, mistreated convicts, and even American Indian children’s rights in the state, a position that made her very unpopular by the end of her terms. Although she left politics in 1915 with quite a few enemies, her legacy as an early female politician and work on behalf of Oklahoma children is still applauded today.
**Louis Brandeis**

Louis Brandeis was a lawyer as well as a Supreme Court Justice from 1916 to 1939. He is remembered as a progressive intellectual and social justice reformer for his work in privacy and labor laws. Louis Brandeis was born in Kentucky in 1856 to immigrant parents from Bohemia. He graduated from Harvard Law School with the highest grades in the school’s history at only twenty years old. Brandeis then established a law firm in Boston where he worked at defending the “common man” against federal and state injustice.

In 1908, Brandeis represented the state of Oregon in the landmark Supreme Court case *Muller v. Oregon*. He argued that states had the right to pass laws that limited the number of hours that women worked.

Because of Brandeis’s argument that employers could and should be regulated by the state, child labor regulations were also called into question. The victory of *Muller v. Oregon* created a legal precedent whereby child labor laws could be instituted.

**Mother Jones**

Mary Harris “Mother” Jones was an Irish-born wife and mother of four who immigrated to Canada and then the United States in 1860. She worked as a dressmaker and seamstress and even had her own dress shop in Chicago, but it burned down in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. When her husband and all four of her children died due to yellow fever in 1867, Jones understandably had a hard time coping with her loss. Jones became interested in child labor laws and the protection of children, like hers, and the lack of accountability that many employers had when it came to the law. Jones began organizing labor marches and speeches. At one point, Jones had children come on stage or sit in cages while she discussed the horrible working conditions for children all over the country.

At sixty years old, Mother Jones was nicknamed “the most dangerous woman in America” for her powerful alliances and reform methods against child labor. In 1903, Mother Jones organized a “Children’s Crusade,” a march from Pennsylvania to the home of President Theodore Roosevelt in New York with banners demanding “we want time to play” and “we want to go to school.”

"Mother" Jones and her army of striking textile workers starting out for their descent on New York. The textile workers of Philadelphia say they intend to show the people of the country their condition by marching through all the important cities (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).
Robert L. Owen

Robert Latham Owen was born in Lynchburg, Virginia, in 1856. His father was president of a railroad company and his mother was Cherokee, originally from Indian Territory. Robert attended school in Virginia and Baltimore, eventually receiving a master’s degree from Washington and Lee University in 1877. In 1879, his father died unexpectedly, and Robert and his mother returned to Indian Territory. While there, he became the secretary of the Cherokee Board of Education and studied law.

After passing the bar, officials appointed Robert the head of the Union Agency of the Five Civilized Tribes. During this time, Owen practiced law and edited the *Vinita Indian Chieftain*. He argued many of his cases on behalf of the Five Civilized Tribes. He argued one of those cases, the “Eastern Cherokee” case, before the US Supreme Court and the decision awarded millions of dollars to members of the Cherokee tribe.

Owen ran for an Oklahoma senate seat after statehood in 1907. He received the most votes out of all the candidates and became one of Oklahoma’s first senators as well as one of the nation’s first senators of American Indian descent. Senator Owen went on to help create the Senate Banking Committee and served as its first chairperson. Owen also led on issues like child labor reform, women’s suffrage, prohibition, and the direct election of senators.

Owen had many political victories, including the co-authoring and passage of the Keating-Owen Act, or the Child Labor Act of 1916. He worked tirelessly with the National Child Labor Committee and was highly influenced by Lewis Hine’s photos.

Glossary

**agrarian society**: A society focused or built around farming.

**child laborers**: Children who work in highly physical or dangerous conditions.

**documentary photography**: Photos used to chronicle significant events as well as everyday life.

**employer**: A person or company who provides one with a job.

**illiterate**: Without the ability to read or write.

**harvest season**: Time when a crop is ready to be reaped or picked and then processed.

**occupation**: A job.

**regulations**: Laws put in place by the federal government or state to protect citizens.

**relentless**: To never give up despite all odds.

**responsibility**: Having influence over something, being accountable or to blame.

**social reform**: A movement to create change in certain aspects of society.

**sympathy**: A feeling of sorrow or concern.

**unconstitutional**: Not allowed or in accordance to the United States Constitution.
Activities

Photo Analysis

Show this photo on the projector or divide students into small groups and give each a copy of the photo. Have students study the photo and write down anything that stands out to them. Next, have students discuss what they think the importance of the photograph is.

Discussion questions:

1. Why did the photographer feel this moment was important to remember?
2. What is the photographer hoping this photo will accomplish?
3. How is this photo different from the photos we take today? Are there similarities?

Next, display the same photo but divided into four quadrants. Focusing on one piece at a time, have students describe what they see and the small details they might have missed earlier. After each quadrant has been looked at individually, show the entire photograph again and ask students what they now see.
Photo Analysis (continued)

Discussion questions:

1. After analyzing the photo in pieces, what do you see differently about the photo?
2. What details did you miss the first time? What do you think those details mean?
3. Now that you have studied the photo in great detail, what does it tell you about child labor in the early 1900s?
Creative Writing Activity: Diary or Journal Entry

Have students choose a Hine photograph from Oklahoma. After studying the photo, have students do a free write about their observations and feelings about the piece. Provide the following prompts:

1. How old does the child/children look?
2. What is their physical condition? (Do they look healthy, properly clothed, happy?)
3. Does this job look safe?
4. What kind of home or family do you think the child/children live in or come from?
5. Do you think this child/children have time to go to school?

Next, have students create a diary or journal entry for a child in the photograph. Have them describe what the child is like (their name, how old they are, what they are doing) and their workday as this new character. Be sure to have students write this entry in first person and to include their reasons for working and how they feel about their job.

The Mill: Some boys and girls were so small they had to climb up on to the spinning frame to mend broken threads and to put back the empty bobbins. Bibb Mill No. 1. Macon, Georgia.
Social Reform Discussion

In the form of a class discussion, have students share what kinds of work or jobs they do either around their house or at school.

Discussion questions:

1. Do you have chores at home or responsibilities at school?
2. Are any of these jobs dangerous?

Next, have students participate in a conversation about why children are no longer allowed to work at such young ages or for long hours in places that are not safe. Now, have them consider another set of questions about responsibility.

Discussion questions:

1. Should the government regulate child labor? What about jobs that adults do?
2. Who should be in charge of these rules?
3. What social injustices do you see today, perhaps when you watch the news or read books or magazines?
4. How can we help children laborers in other countries who are not protected by these laws?

The Child Labor Coalition
http://stopchildlabor.org/

Interactive Child Labor World Map
http://stopchildlabor.wpengine.com/?page_id=139

A child laboring in a United States tobacco field (image courtesy of the Stop Child Labor Coalition).
Primary Source Quote

Read the primary source quote and answer the questions below.

“If I could tell the story in words, I wouldn’t need to lug around a camera.” – Lewis Hine

1. What does Hine mean by this?
2. Can photographs be more powerful than words sometimes? Why?
3. Why do you think it is important that we remember the child laborers that Hine photographed?

Johnnie, Carrie and Jim Davenport picking cotton for Mr. J. P. Daws, Route 1, Shawnee. Johnnie picks 75 pounds, Carrie 100 pounds and Jim 150 to 200 pounds a day. Get $1.00 a hundred pounds. No School yet. Mother is a renter; moves about a great deal.] Location: Pottawatomie County, Oklahoma.
Write Lewis Hine a Thank You Letter

Lewis Hine died in 1940 at the age of sixty-six, only two years after the Fair Labor Standards Act was passed. Impoverished and homeless when he died, many people had long forgotten about him and his photographs. He never knew that decades later his life’s work would become synonymous with social reform documentary photography.

Have students think about the importance of standing up for others and the contribution that Lewis Hine’s photos made in the effort to protect children from dangerous working conditions and allowing them to get an education. Then, have students write a thank you letter to Hine. Be sure they include why his work is important and how his photos affect children in Oklahoma and around the country today.
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Lewis Hine Photography Foundation

http://www.lewishinephotographs.com/

National Women’s History Museum

https://www.nwhm.org/