Child labor

THROUGHOUT HISTORY children have worked to help support their families. In late 19th-century America, families clung to the old farming custom of family labor, where parents and all the children work to make the farm succeed. They brought this custom into the industrial workplace, which meant that children worked for wages, sometimes in the same mills or factories as their parents.

About one in six children between the ages of 10 and 15 supplemented meager family incomes with paying jobs in textile mills, coal mines, canning factories, and tobacco-processing plants. Children of immigrants worked in sweatshops or assembled pieces of garments or hats alongside their parents in the kitchens of city tenements. In the South, both white and African American children picked cotton all day in the hot sun.

Child laborers earned from a few pennies to 75 cents a day, a fraction of what adult workers earned. They worked long shifts, often 10 or 12 hours a day. Sometimes they worked in dangerous conditions, handling toxic substances, exposed to dangerous machinery, or threatened by coalmine cave-ins or gas leaks. Usually they lost out on education, so desperate was their need to earn money.

Many Americans believed that children of the working classes or immigrants ought to work long hours in order to stay out of trouble. In the early 1900s, 28 states passed laws to restrict child labor, but employers routinely ignored or evaded them. They lied to authorities about their employees and instructed children to hide when factory inspectors came around. The Supreme Court repeatedly blocked attempts at national regulation, arguing that employers and employees in the United States should be “free” to buy or sell labor in any way they chose.

After 1900, progressive reformers began to agitate for an end to the abuses of child labor. In 1904, a coalition of concerned citizens, politicians, and investigators organized the National Child Labor Committee. The committee sent photographer Lewis Hine to document violations of the law in mines and mills that employed young children. Hine's powerful photographs and the Child Labor Committee's mass public relations campaign helped turn public opinion against child labor.

In 1912, the National Consumers' League, inspired by veterans of the settlement-house movement, succeeded in creating a Children's Bureau within the Department of Labor. By 1916, Congress had started to pass laws to regulate child labor, and by 1920 most states had outlawed the employment of children under 14 and mandated compulsory education up to that age. It was not until the late 1930s, however, that the Fair Labor Standards Act banned the full-time employment of children under 16. A campaign to outlaw child labor by a constitutional amendment never succeeded.

SEE ALSO
Childhood; Children's Bureau, U.S.; Family life; Labor; National Consumers' League; Photography; Progressive movement; Reform movements; Settlement-house movement

FURTHER READING
Hindman, Hugh D. Child Labor: An