

Now in Public Domain, Lewis Hine Photos Changed America

JUDITH NIERMAN

An American photographer, educator, and photo journalist, Lewis Wickes Hine played an important part in the passage of laws regulating child labor in the United States. Born in 1874 in Wisconsin, Hine worked to finance his own college education after his father died. He studied sociology in Chicago and New York, earned a master of pedagogy degree from New York University in 1905, and began teaching at the Ethical Culture School in New York City. There he encouraged his students to use photography as a tool in education. His classes took field trips to Ellis Island, where he and the students photographed the immigrant multitudes arriving daily.



Edwin Cope, 13, at midnight in Cumberland Glass Works, Bridgeton, N.J.

In 1906, Hine, who was by then a professional photographer as well as a sociologist and educator, went to work for the Russell Sage Foundation, which funded social research. His task was to document people and life in Pittsburgh's steel-making industry.

Two years later, Hine left his teaching position and took his photography skills to the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC), which advocated for social reforms in the area of child labor. At that time, there was no federal law dealing with this serious social problem. Hine documented child labor conditions, revealing the pitiful and dangerous working conditions of hundreds of thousands of unwashed, underfed, and undereducated American children. He traveled thousands of miles, sometimes risking his personal safety, to photograph

children working in factories, fields, sweatshops, and mines. According to photo historian *Daile Kaplan*, Hine adopted personas such as salesman to gain entrance to workplaces. When factory owners denied him access, Hine hid his camera in his clothes or simply waited outside to take photos that continue to shock us today. His work contributed to the 1916 passage of the Keating-Owen Act, which prohibited interstate commerce in goods manufactured or processed by child labor, although this law was twice declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. The NCLC continued pressing for reform until in 1938 President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Fair Labor Standards Act, which regulates the employment of children to this day.

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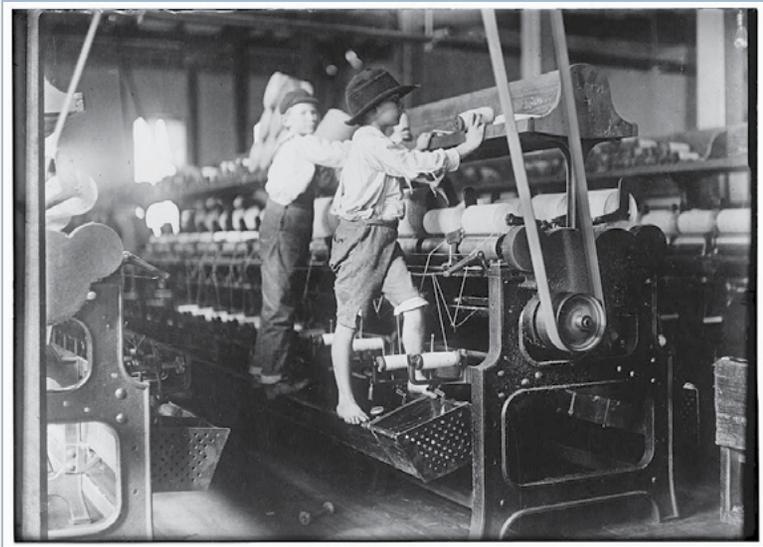
Hine wrote captions for his photos and placed images in sequences within a graphic design. He bears responsibility for developing “a new graphic language instrumental in photography’s successful assimilation into popular culture—the picture essay or photo story format,” said *Kaplan in Photo Story; Selected Letters and Photographs of Lewis W. Hine*.

During and after World War I, Hine worked for the Red Cross photographing the war-ravaged living conditions of French and Belgian civilians. He later traveled to the Balkans, taking pictures of children there. From 1930 to

1931, he created iconic photographs of the construction of the Empire State Building.

In his later years, Hine worked again for the Red Cross, this time recording the effects of drought in Arkansas and Kentucky. He was also employed by the Tennessee Valley Authority to make a photographic record of dam construction, and he worked for the Works Progress Administration. But Hine was not able to support himself from his photography and died in poverty in 1940 after an operation.

In 1954 to celebrate the NCLC’s 50th anniversary, Gertrude Folks Zimand, then the committee’s chief executive, gave the organization’s records to the Library of Congress. The gift included 5,100 photographs and 355 negatives produced by Lewis Hine. The NCLC stipulated that no restrictions of any kind be placed on the use of Hine’s work. This generous gift effectively places these Hine photos in the public domain. ©



Above: Some boys were so small they had to climb up on the spinning frame to mend the broken threads and put back the empty bobbins.

Right: Spinner in Vivian Cotton Mills, Cherryville, N.C.

