

# Childhood Lost - Child Labor During the Industrial Revolution

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### Introduction

In the years that followed the Civil War, known as the “Rise of Industrial America, 1876 – 1900” on the American Memory Timeline of the Library of Congress Learning Page, the United States emerged as an industrial giant. When studying history we see that existing industries flourished and new opportunities developed, such as petroleum refining, steel manufacturing, and the widespread use of electrical power. The use of railroads grew exponentially and industry and services once in isolated areas of the country entered into a national market economy.

This era of industrial growth transformed American society creating a new class of wealthy entrepreneurs and a comfortable middle class. The increase in industry resulted in a growth among the blue collar working class. This labor force was made up of millions of newly arrived immigrants and vast numbers of families migrating from rural areas to cities with the hope of job security and prosperity.

With a dream of a better life, rural families relocated to the cities to find work. Sadly, most were disappointed when they arrived and discovered that the truth was not as “rosey” as they had been led to believe. The jobs available required long hours and offered little pay. In most situations, every able family member was needed to work to simply keep the family above the poverty level. Those working included children as young as three.

Young children working endured some of the harshest conditions. Workdays would often be 10 to 14 hours with minimal breaks during the shift. Factories employing children were often very dangerous places leading to injuries and even deaths. Machinery often ran so quickly that little fingers, arms and legs could easily get caught. Beyond the equipment, the environment was a threat to children as well as factories put out fumes and toxins. When inhaled by children these most certainly could result in illness, chronic conditions or disease.

Children working in rural areas were not faring much better. Harvesting crops in extreme temperatures for long hours was considered normal for these children. Work in agriculture was typically less regulated than factory duties. Farm work was often not considered dangerous or extraneous for children, even though

they carried their weight and more in loads of produce and handled dangerous tools.

Beyond the topic of safety, children working lengthy hours had limited access to education. Many families relied on income earned by each family member and did not allow children to attend school at all. Those fortunate enough to be enrolled often attended only portions of a school day or only a few weeks at a time.

[\*Library of Congress Learning Page Features and Activities Timeline Accessed 9.24.08\*](#)

Reforming child labor laws and creating new laws that would enforce a minimum working age, prohibiting dangerous jobs and conditions and establishing maximum hours children could work was not a popular endeavor. It took several years and many attempts by Congress to pass national laws designed to improve working conditions and regulations relative to children in the workforce.

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