

CHILDREN IN THE VICTORIAN WORKPLACE

Perhaps no group was as exploited in the nineteenth century as children who were put to work before they could read or write. As soon as they were able to walk and to use their hands children were regularly employed in industry and agriculture. They were put to work in mills, factories, and coalmines as well as on farms and on the streets. Their education was sacrificed while they put in long hours for meager pay, working in deplorable conditions for bosses who had no regard for safety.

In the days before unions, parents often depended upon a financial contribution from their children to get by. In smaller towns, extended family or the church could help care for its members, but in cities with exorbitant rents, high living expenses, and greater anonymity, many families were unable to survive on two incomes. City children were especially vulnerable.

Children who worked indoors were often exposed to toxic fumes, extreme heat, and dangerous machinery. Those who worked in glass factories often cut or burned themselves on broken or hot glass. Children in textile mills were forced to breathe in dust and cotton fibers. Many suffered permanent lung damage.

Small and nimble children were assigned to equipment that required quick motions. Those who operated machinery designed for adults often lost fingers. Working long days meant they sometimes fell asleep on the job, putting them at risk for serious injury.

Young children who worked on city streets peddled all kinds of wares --in summer heat and winter cold. Boys worked as chimney sweeps or delivery boys or sold newspapers. Girls sold items such as hot corn, flowers, or cigars or were employed as match girls.

Children began working as young as age three. The youngest girls who worked as apprentices in Rhode Island's Slater Mill in the early 1800s earned 35 cents a week while boys earned 50 cents. In New York City factories it was common for older children to be paid two to three dollars a week for a twelve-hour day or longer, sometimes seven days a week. Conditions were so loathsome that children occasionally went on strike.

In America, the work ethic that idle hands were the devil's workshop prevailed. At the start of the century the average workday lasted from dawn until dusk. In 1808, the Baltimore Cotton Manufactory solicited children aged eight through twelve to join its workforce. Such practices prompted some states to pass laws limiting workdays to ten hours and establishing the minimum age at twelve.

Yet industrial expansion after the Civil War meant more children were needed in the workplace. While mothers feared they would develop bad habits such as smoking and swearing while working among adults, families desperate to make ends meet offered up their children to fill the demand. By the end of the century, the census found almost two million children between ages twelve and sixteen in the workforce. Many more under age ten worked illegally.

Dickens portrayed accurately the plight of children in England, where for the mere cost of food and shelter mill owners put orphaned children to work. Youngsters no older than five worked up to sixteen hours a day, resulting in illiteracy and disease.

In the early 1800s, 80 percent of Americans worked on farms. By the 1890s, many had traded the hardships of agriculture for life in cities where industrial jobs were abundant.

It was not until 1933 that laws with some permanence were established and enforced. There are still some great-grandparents today who remember leaving school to go to work at young ages.