

Standing on a Box: Lewis Hine's National Child Labor Committee Photography, Gaston County, 1908

November 8, 2008 through February, 2009

This exhibit was one component of **Standing on a Box: Lewis Hine's National Child Labor Committee Photography, Gaston County, 1908**, a multi-part community project exploring Greater Gaston's early twentieth-century textile history and its influence on Gaston County's present and future.

The **Standing on a Box** exhibit showcased the 1908 Gaston County photographs of Lewis Wickes Hine, staff photographer of the National Child Labor Committee.



Between November 1908 and February 1909, Lewis Hine photographed children in and around nineteen cotton mills in North and South Carolina as part of National Child Labor Committee efforts to document child labor in regional textile mills. Many of those photographs were made in Gaston County, North Carolina.

These images of young Gaston County textile workers were displayed around the country to bring attention to the issue of child labor. Those poignant photographs have been credited as being instrumental to the success of the child labor reform movement to pass state and federal legislation against child labor. Combined with artifacts from the Museum's collection, the exhibit examines a rarely-mentioned but critical part of our local cultural heritage.

This project has been made possible by the North Carolina Humanities Council, a state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the North Carolina Arts Council, an agency funded by the State of North Carolina and the National Endowment for the Arts, which believes that a great nation deserves great art. Assistance and support has also been provided by Preservation North Carolina, Friends of the Gaston County Public Library, Gaston County Museum of Art & History, Gaston County Historic Preservation Commission, Gaston County Public Library, Gaston Arts Council, and community volunteers.



“There are two things I wanted to do. I wanted to show the things that had to be corrected. I wanted to show the things that had to be appreciated.” Lewis Hine

Lewis Wickes Hine (1874-1940) was one of the most important and influential American photographers of the twentieth century. Born in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, Hine studied Sociology at the University of Chicago before moving to New York City in 1901.

He first became interested in photography as a teaching tool while working at the Ethical Culture Fieldston School. Hine would take his students to Ellis Island and photograph some of the thousands of immigrants arriving

there. The founder of the school, Felix Adler, also headed a new reform organization, the National Child Labor Committee. In 1908, Adler asked Hine to become the NCLC's staff photographer.

During the Great Depression, a number of government agencies hired photographers to document the social and economic hardships faced by millions of Americans. Hine occasionally found work from these agencies, including the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Works Project Administration.

Although Hine won several awards for his photographs in the 1920s, he always struggled to make ends meet. In 1939, the bank foreclosed on his home. Hine died in extreme poverty on November 3, 1940.

During the ten years he worked for the National Child Labor Committee, Hine traveled thousands of miles photographing children working in fields, factories, mines, and mills across the country. In the fall of 1908, the NCLC sent Hine to document child labor in the southern textile industry. Over the next few years, Hine's photographs of children working in the cotton mills of NC and SC were published in magazines and pamphlets. They drew public attention to child labor in the US, and are credited with building support for stronger state and federal child labor laws.

Child Labor

Public concern over child labor in the U.S. was sparked by the 1900 census, which revealed that 2 million children were working in mills, mines, factories, fields, and city streets across the country. Lewis Hine's visit to Gaston County in November 1908 was part of a much longer journey covering thousands of miles as he photographed children working in coal mines in West Virginia and Pennsylvania and glass factories in New Jersey. From Maine to Missouri, Hine documented children making shoes, dolls, and boxes; shucking oysters and slicing sardines; picking cotton and tomatoes; and selling newspapers.

The new spinning machines used by Southern cotton mills could be tended by the youngest hands. When Lewis Hine visited Gaston County, half of all spinners were under the age of fourteen. In 1908, it was illegal in North Carolina to employ someone under the age of 13 except as an apprentice. Nightwork was limited to those at least 14 years old.

Children under 18 could legally work up to 66 hours per week.



Before birth certificates, a parent's written statement established a child's age and employment eligibility. Labor laws were hard to enforce. There were no inspectors and



state labor officials had no authority to enter a mill or factory. By 1908, no NC employer had been prosecuted for violating child labor laws.

Most of Hine's Gaston County photographs were taken to prove that existing child labor laws were being ignored, bent, or violated in some cotton mills. Hine made notes with each of his photos, asking the children how old they were and how long they had worked at the mill. This revealed that they had been hired well before their 13th birthday. He also documented

the negative health effects of children working twelve-hour shifts in flying cotton lint for sixty hours a week. He also noted their pay: 25 to 60 cents a day.

The absence of African-American children in these photographs is because African-Americans were not allowed to work the same jobs as whites. If they were employed at all in a particular mill, black men were offered only the lowest-paid and most difficult jobs; black women's work in the mills was even more limited.

Picturing Labor as a Part of Childhood

By 1908, attitudes towards childhood had changed dramatically from the previous century. During the 1800s, America was mostly rural, and the family farm was essential to American economic and social life. All members of the family, including children, were expected to help. By the late 1800s, attitudes towards family roles and childhood had changed. Middle-class men were expected to be the sole family "bread-winners." Most middle-class women stayed home to raise a family and manage the household while childhood became associated with innocence, play and learning. This is the ideal of family life we have today.



With the turn of the century, many families had left the farm and moved to the mills. For some, it was the prospect of steady wage-earning work, a place to live, and the amenities of town life. For others, factory work was an alternative to an even harder life on the farm, always one bad crop away from foreclosure or starvation. However, wages paid to adult male textile workers were not enough alone to support a family and in some cases, mill-owned housing was reserved for families who could provide a certain number of workers, regardless of age. Lewis Hine's photographs of children emerging from huge mills after long hours of tedious work were designed to shock middle-class Americans into recognizing the extent and consequences of child labor.

The National Child Labor Committee

Lewis Hine came to Gaston County as staff photographer for the National Child Labor Committee. Organized in New York City in 1904, the NCLC was one of the first non-profit organizations formed in the U.S. It is still in operation today.

The NCLC saw child labor as a social problem brought about by the fast and largely unregulated growth of industry in the late 1800s. It worked to expose the practice of employing children in a wide range of industries and to gather support for stronger child labor laws. By documenting their unhealthy and dangerous working conditions, the organization was able to point out the long-term negative consequences of child labor,

Lewis Hine's visit to Gaston County in 1908 was a key element in exposing the lax regulation of child labor in the textile industry. Photographs were featured in publications and posters around the country.

By 1913, North Carolina law banned child workers under 12 and restricted the work hours of those under 14. However, the laws were still rarely enforced. Federal protection of children in the workplace would not be accomplished until 1938, when the Fair Labor Standards Act was passed.

In 1985, the NCLC established the Lewis Hine Awards for Service to Children and Youth, honoring Americans for their work with and on behalf of young people.

The Hine Subjects and Their Descendants

Between November 1908 and February 1909, Lewis Hine photographed children in and around nineteen cotton mills in North and South Carolina – from Whitnel to Laurinburg, Clinton to Dillon. In all he would take 236 photos, more in Gastonia (35) than any other town, and more in Gaston County (59) than any other county. It was here that some 200 young people had their photographs taken by him over five days in November 1908. In the notes Hine wrote to accompany each photo, we learn the full names of 29 people, and the first names of two others, all from Gastonia.

As a part of the “Standing on a Box” project, attempts were made to identify and contact living descendants of all 31 of the Gaston County Hine subjects. Currently, descendants of 16 of them have been identified. Most are now two or three generations removed from the young people in these photographs.



“What you see is what you get!”

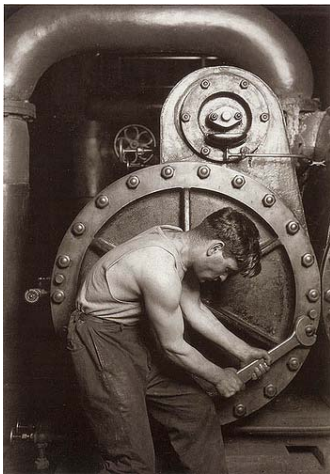
The intensity of Hine’s photographs was made possible in part by the camera he used. The Graflex camera revolutionized news and documentary photography. Although the Graflex looks bulky and heavy today, in 1908 it was one of the most portable and versatile professional cameras available. It became a favorite of press photographers.



Before the Graflex, the only way to view an image the camera lens would see, was on a groundglass on the back of the camera. The image would appear upside down! The photographer then had to focus the image before inserting a glass plate on which the photo would be captured. Once the plate was inserted, the photographer could no longer see what the camera would record. If the subjects moved, everything would be ruined.

Using a Graflex, however, Hine could view the image at the moment he took the photograph. Looking down into the hood on top of the camera, a mirror reflected the image to him right-side up. This meant that he could change the angle or distance from his subjects to get the picture he wanted and made it possible for him to capture a momentary expression.

The Father of Documentary Photography



Throughout his career, Hine was a photographer for hire. His pictures were influenced by the assignments he was able to obtain. In the 1920s and 1930s, he looked for opportunities to celebrate the industrial worker and the dignity of honest labor. He felt too many Americans, he felt, were not aware that real people controlled the machines that made their cars, clothes and other goods they depended upon. One of his most reliable employers in the 1920s was Western Electric, which published Hine’s photos of its workers in its employee magazine.

Some of his most famous photographs were taken of the Empire State Building construction, which he was hired to document in the 1930s. But even his images of fearless welders balanced on girders hundreds of feet above the New York City traffic failed to secure him steady employment.



Hine's work became more publicly recognized in the 1930s. A book of his photographs of industrial workers, Men at Work, was published in 1932. In 1939 the Riverside Museum in New York City mounted the first retrospective exhibit of Hine's work. Since then, his photographs – including those taken in Gaston County in 1908 – have been viewed around the world in publications, galleries, and museums. They have helped to earn him the title of “the father of documentary photography.”

Gaston County, 1908

Not long after Gaston County was formed in 1846, the textile industry began to take root. In addition to abundant natural resources, textile mills were able to draw upon both the Catawba River and the South Fork of the Catawba for power. After the Civil War, cotton became Gaston County's primary business. At one point, it has been said that Gaston County had the largest number of running spindles in the world!

By 1908, there were 35 textile mills operating in the county, the largest being Loray Mill, founded in 1900. Called “The Million Dollar Mill” it was a symbol of achievement for Gastonia and Gaston County. Loray also claimed the largest mill community, covering more than 50 blocks. This area, along with several other mill villages, became known as West Gastonia.



Farm families moving into the villages brought with them cows, chickens, hogs and created family garden plot. Kerosene lamps lit most mill houses and open fireplaces provided heat. Families drew water from common wells or hydrants and sewer systems were little more than a row of outdoor privies.

Life did not always run to the sound of the machines. Sunday was a day of rest for mill hands. Church attendance was high though denomination was not important. If a church lacked a minister, the congregation simply moved to another house of worship until one could be found. Baseball was the favorite sport with mills financing and organizing factory leagues. The Gastonia High School theatre group staged regular productions. Whether in the mills or in the villages, a keen sense of kinship arose amongst workers.

Life as a Mill Child

‘The mill came first always.’

Like a Family, 1987

For mill children, like their parents, life was regulated by the factory bell. Mothers would adapt nursing schedules to the breaks in the workday. As children grew older, curiosity drew them to the constant hum of the factory. There were no fences, gates, or bricked in

windows until the 1920s and children were allowed to wander in and out of the mill freely. Most children would carry dinner pails to working family members or would sit with a younger sibling either in the mill itself or at home. Tending the family vegetable garden and the animals were also regular chores.



While most factories provided a school, usually financed by the mill, attendance was highly irregular. Once they were deemed ‘old enough’ or if a family’s income depended upon it, a child was taken out of the classroom and placed in the mill. During peak production times, it was custom for the supervisors to come to the school seeking workers. The children regularly took themselves out of school as well. Armed with knowledge gained from playing alongside the looms and the family Bible to prove their age, children as young as twelve would sign themselves up to work. Sometimes this was against their parents’ wishes, though often the children would recognize the importance of their labor to the family’s well-being.

With money so tight, store bought toys were a luxury few could afford. Children made do with hand-me-downs or used their own imagination and ingenuity to create games and toys for themselves. Things such as new clothing and shoes generally started with the oldest and were passed on till the youngest received them or they wore out.

The sense of community extended to the care of the children as well. Orphaned children were often taken in by unrelated families with no hesitation. Dating, or courting, was also a community event. Young couples were rarely alone and usually gather in groups at each other’s homes or at church after prayer meetings.

These are Lewis Hine’s own words, notes he made after taking each photograph. They give us unique insights into the worlds of these children.



Eugene Bell, House 48 Loray Mill.

Said he was 12 years old. (question). “Leastwise that’s what mother says.” (I am convinced that many children believe they are as old as they say they are,—their parents have misstated their ages so long.) Worked most two years—sweeping. Location: Gastonia, North Carolina.



Boys going home from Sunday School. Right to left. Willie Long – in mill 4 yrs.; James Hurley; Lloyd Long – 12 yrs., in mill 2 yrs.; Spurgeon Price – 13 yrs., in mill 3 yrs.; Clarence Price – 14 yrs., in mill 3 yrs.; Charley Caswell – in mill 3 yrs. Gastonia, North Carolina.



Trenton Mill, Gastonia, N.C.
Tom Jenkins (left hand end) 13 years old, been in mill 3 year. Walter Jenkins, 15 years old, 4 years in mill. John Glover, (right hand) 16 years old, at mill 5 years. Closing hour, 3 p.m. Saturday, Nov.
Location: Gastonia, North Carolina.



(Right Hand boy) *John Campbell*, 10 years old. Been three years in mill. In school part of this time. (Left hand boy) Roy Little. Said 12 years old. 2 years in mill and worked nights 9 months. Doffer.
Location: Gastonia, North Carolina.



Orley Shrouce, 8 Ozark Mill. 10 years old. Said he worked a year, but when new law came in a while ago the mill people turned him off,--too young. "Then they came again and hired me back." Doffer--60 cents a day.
Location: Gastonia, North Carolina.



Girls running warping machines in Loray Mill, Gastonia, N.C. Many boys and girls much younger. Boss carefully avoided them, and when I tried to get a photo which would include a mite of a boy working at a machine, he was quickly swept out of range. "He isn't working here, just came in to help a little."

Location: Gastonia, North Carolina.



Noon hour at Vivian Cotton Mills, Cherryville, N.C. Shows the character of the "hands" in a better class mill, --well ventilated and lighted.

Location: Cherryville, North Carolina.



Gastonia, N.C. Boy from Loray Mill. "Been at it right smart two years."

Location: Gastonia, North Carolina.



Ozark Mill, Gastonia, N.C. Work 12 hours at a stretch. No special time off to eat. "Eat a-workin'." 9:00P.M. Friday, Nov. 6, 1908. Mill was running.

Location: Gastonia, North Carolina.



Going home from Loray Mill. Smallest boy on the right hand end, John Moore. 13 years old. Been in mill 6 years as sweeper, doffer and spinner.

Location: Gastonia, North Carolina.



John Poindexter, "I'm ten years old. Helps me mommy in the spoolin' room every day." (Loray Mills, Gastonia, N.C.)

Location: Gastonia, North Carolina.



Oldest girl, Minnie Carpenter, House 53 Loray Mill. Gastonia, N.C. Spinner. Makes fifty cents a day of 10 hours. Works four sides. Younger girl works irregularly.

Location: Gastonia, North Carolina.



Bob Burton, Gastonia, N.C. 15 years old. A typical adolescent, overgrown, thin, anaemic {sic}. Been in mill for 8 years. Doffing still in Ozark Mills.

Gastonia, North Carolina.



Mill at High Shoals, N.C. 8 P.M. Mill was running.

Location: High Shoals, North Carolina.



A few of the girls going home from Loray Mill, Gastonia, N.C. Many others younger.

Location: Gastonia, North Carolina.



Lea Rabb, 84 Main St., Loray Mills, Gastonia, N.C. 12 years old. 5 years in the mill.

Location: Gastonia, North Carolina.

Note: correct spelling is "Lee"



Spinner in Vivian Cotton Mills, Cherryville, N.C. Been at it 2 years. Where will her good looks be in ten years?
Location: Cherryville, North Carolina.



Doffers in Trenton Mills, Gastonia, N.C. Others as small and some smaller. Little girls too.
Location: Gastonia, North Carolina.



Closing hour Loray Mill, Gastonia, N.C. November 7, 1908.
Location: Gastonia, North Carolina



Cherryville Mfg. Co., Cherryville, N.C. A few of the workers.
Location: Cherryville, North Carolina.



Doffer in Mellville Mfg. Co., Cherryville, N.C. Said he had been working for two years. Many of them below age.
Location: Cherryville, North Carolina.



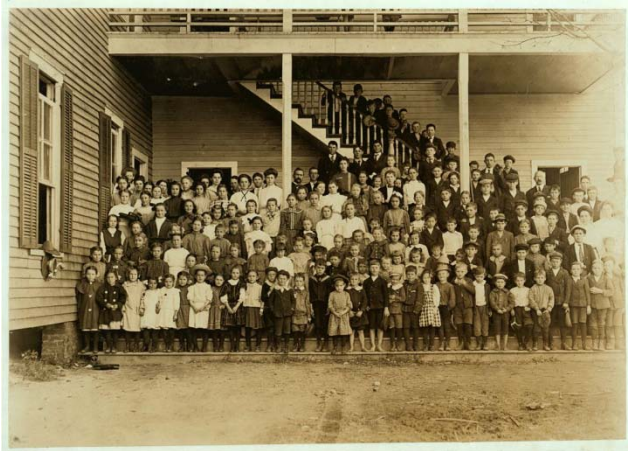
One of the doffers Vivian Cotton Mills, Cherryville, N.C. Nov. 10, 1908.
Location: Cherryville, North Carolina.



Cherryville Mfg. Co., Cherryville, N.C.
One of the smallest boys. Doffer.
Location: Cherryville, North Carolina

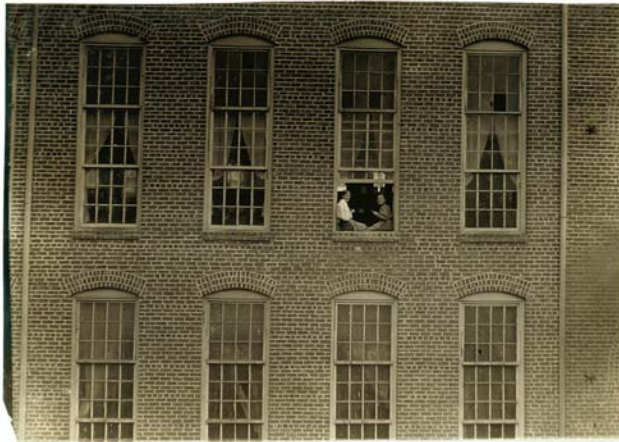


High Shoals (N.C.) School. This is average attendance. Enrollment is 80. Only one other school in town and about 15 attend that. See photo 279 (St. John's Mission School) Population of town is about 1000. Where are the rest of the children: This school is supported principally by the Mill Co. (Partly by County). Betterment work is being started. Mill superintendent is very suspicious of Photographers. Couldn't get any of mill children. Photo. November 9, 1908. Location: High Shoals, North Carolina



The pupils in the Cherryville N.C. Graded School. 200 attend, including the High School. Population of the town is 2,000. Where are rest of children: Asked these children how many had ever worked in a cotton mill. About one-third of them held up their hands.

Location: Cherryville, North Carolina



The only photo of the mill children I could get. The superintendent was too suspicious. Many young girls and boys in there on day shift. Some below 12 years old went in on night shift.

Location: High Shoals Mills, North Carolina



St. Johns Mission School, High Shoals, N.C.

“Not supported by the Mill company, but we are always on good terms with them,” said the Sister in charge. Supported by the Episcopal Church. Average attendance 15. Location: High Shoals, North Carolina.



A home in Cherryville. Soon to go to work. Location: Cherryville, North Carolina.



Lacy (12 yrs. Old) and Savannah (11 yrs old) Have worked two years. Father said "The little one is a cracker jack on spinnin', at least so the boss says. She ain't satisfied unless in the mill. The oldest one isn't so good at it. Not as quick." (Note the tense, serious looks on the younger. Older one more like a real girl).

Location: Gastonia, North Carolina.



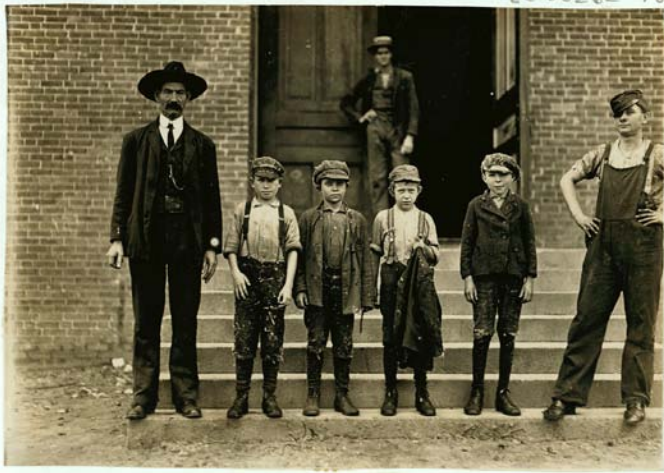
Boy on right Charlie Burton – 9 – Ozark Mill. This anaemic {sic}, hollow chested, stoop shouldered under-sized and weight, said –"Been in mill 6 or 7 years. 12 years old. Haint grown none for 5 years. Doff at night and get 60 cents. Couldn't stand the sweepin' at the other mill, so mother moved us over here so I could get a job at doffin'." "Night work is 12 hours at a stretch." His sister (14 years old) has been spinning for 6 years. Makes 50 cents a day. (See small photo,--Maggie Burton). No. 315. Other

boy—Frank Goodson—Been in mill 6 years. This mill was running nights at the time the photograph was taken.

Location: Gastonia, North Carolina.



Rush Merrill, Loray Mill, Gastonia, N.C. 12 years old. Been in mill 3 years Doffer. Gets 75 cents a day. Said sometimes gets 3 to 5 hours a day resting between times. Location: Gastonia, North Carolina.



Closing hour Loray Mill, Gastonia, N.C. November 7, 1908.
Location: Gastonia, North Carolina



Girl – Baner(?) Carswell. Been in mill 4 years. 12 years old. Runs 6 sides = 60 cents a day. Soon will run 8 = 80 cents a day. Father said “the wife of neighbor made \$7.40 last week, \$1.40 more than her husband. Women and girls makes more than the men.” Child 8 yrs. old helps sister.
Location: Gastonia, North Carolina.



*Spinners. Smallest girl – Pearlie Turner, 408 East Long Ave. Been at it 3 years and runs six and seven sides. Her Sister (largest girl, **Viola**) runs only four sides. I found other cases where youngest sister did much more work than oldest and family stimulated her by praising her speed and the other’s slowness.*
Location: Gastonia, North Carolina.



Closing Hour, 3 p.m. Trenton Mills, Gastonia, N.C.
Zoe Lanier. Help sister in mill.
Location: Gastonia, North Carolina.



Closing hour, Loray Mill, Gastonia, N.C. One of the smallest boys said he had been in mill 2 or 3 years (and is 12 years old).

Location: Gastonia, North Carolina.



Golla Chambers, House 38 Loray Mill, Gastonia, N.C.

12 years old. In mill 3 years, spinning 2 years, weaver 1 year. Other sisters spinners.

Location: Gastonia, North Carolina.



Lea Clemner, 5 Trenton Street, Gastonia, N.C. 8 years old. Beginning to doff. Said he gets only 15 cents a day. Works part time in mill (4 days a week and part time goes to school. Query,-- When?)

Location: Gastonia, North Carolina.



Maggie Burton, 14 years old. A typical adolescent. Sister to Charley Burton. Been Spinning 6 years. Can run 7 sides = 70 cents a day. Does run 5 sides = 50 cents a day.

Location: Gastonia, North Carolina.