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 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.

**Early Advocates For Children**

**GRACE ABBOTT**  Progressive Era reformer Grace Abbott was born in Grand Island, Nebraska on November 17, 1878. Reared in a family of activists, Abbott grappled early on with political and social issues. Her Quaker mother was connected to the Underground Railroad and the woman suffrage movement; her father was a leader in state politics.

In 1917 Abbott joined the Department of Labor. Assigned to the Children's Bureau, a division charged with investigating and reporting issues pertaining to child welfare. Abbott began implementing the first federal law restricting child labor. In 1918 the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the legislation.

By 1921, Abbott headed the Children's Bureau and led the campaign for a constitutional amendment limiting child labor. Although never ratified, the amendment set a precedent for New Deal legislation regulating the labor of children under the age of sixteen. *Library of Congress Today in History Accessed 9.26.08*

**JANE ADDAMS** As a young woman, Jane Addams did not know what she wanted to do with her life. Born September 6, 1860, in Cedarville, Illinois, Addams grew up in an era when women were expected to marry and raise children. Addams knew she wanted to do something different.

During a tour of Europe, Addams discovered Toynbee Hall in London, the world's first settlement house and the inspiration that would lead her to fight for the rights of children, help the poor, and become the first American woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. Addams came back to Chicago and started Hull House. At the center's first Christmas party, Addams was surprised when several little girls refused the candy she offered them. The girls, she discovered, worked long hours in a candy factory. Soon, Addams and others at Hull House worked toward establishing child labor laws. *Library of Congress America’s Story accessed 10.17.08*

**LEWIS HINE** Founded in 1904, the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC) began a mission of "promoting the rights, awareness, dignity, well-being and education of children and youth as they relate to work and working." Starting in 1908 the committee hired Lewis W. Hine, first on a temporary basis and then permanently, to carry out investigative and photographic work for the organization.

A teacher who left his profession to work full-time as an investigator for the committee, Hine prepared a number of the reports and took some of the most powerful images in the history of documentary photography.

The Library of Congress holds the papers of the Committee, including the reports, field notes, correspondence, and over 5,000 of Hine's photographs and negatives.

These papers and extensive captions that describe the photo subjects reflect results of this early documentary effort. They offer a detailed depiction of working and living conditions of many children - as well as adults -- in the United States between 1908 and 1924. Hine later referred to his photographic work for the NCLC as "detective work." You can view digitized versions of Hine's images at the Library of Congress website by going to the Prints and Photographs Online Catalog. *Library of Congress American Treasure of the Library of Congress and Wise Guide Accessed 9.26.08*