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CHILD LABOR IN FLORIDA: A PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAY

Children have always worked, but not until the late nineteenth century did reformers initiate the campaign to restrict child labor. As children moved with their parents from family farms to urban workplaces, their exploitation became more apparent, especially as it was exposed in dramatic photographs that showed their sad faces with vacant stares. Indeed, photography played a major role in the crusade of the National Child Labor Committee to remove children from dangerous jobs, establish a minimum age for their employment, limit their hours of work, and prohibit working at night. Organized in 1904, the National Child Labor Committee was one of many progressive movements led by aroused middle-class reformers who sought to curb the abuses associated with industrialization.¹

After northern states took steps to restrict the exploitation of children in the workplace, the South became a target of reformers. Early in this century, many southern industries, including textiles and canning, employed large numbers of children as young as five and six years of age. In 1900, some 25,000 children under the age of fifteen were employed in southern factories. Countless others labored in the fields and branches of agriculture that increasingly relied on paid labor to plant, harvest, and process crops. Once northern states passed the first restrictions on child labor in the late nineteenth century, the South used the absence of state controls, or the presence of less restrictive legislation, as a competitive advantage in attracting runaway industries, notably in textiles.²

At the beginning of this century, Florida’s less industrialized economy employed children in certain sectors. In addition to agriculture, where children worked alongside their parents, the most notorious employers of children were seafood processors, canning plants for fruits and vegetables, and the so-called street trades, which included selling newspapers, carrying messages, making deliveries, and shining shoes. Tampa’s cigar industry also employed children, as can be seen in photographs from the period.³

The prevalence of child labor in the Sunshine State attracted the attention of reformers. In 1908, the National Child Labor Committee hired a young photographer, the now famous Lewis W. Hine, to document the working conditions of American youth, and he made several trips through Florida in the years before World War I. His photographs were carefully crafted political statements that proved a powerful tool in the fight against child labor. Following in the footsteps of other states, Florida passed a law in 1913 that prohibited the employment of children under fourteen in mills, factories, laundries, and theaters. Boys under ten and girls under sixteen were barred from selling newspapers in cities with a population of more than 6,000, where children under twelve were prohibited from working in stores or offices and from delivering merchandise or messages. The law also limited the hours children under sixteen could work to fifty-four hours in a six-day week. All night work by children under eighteen was prohibited. In addition to the obvious exemptions, Florida’s statute was further weakened by a provision that set at a maximum fine of fifty dollars for violation of the law.⁴
Despite the many loopholes in such legislation, the number of children working declined in the U. S. after 1910, but in Florida and elsewhere, children continued to be an important source of labor in some sectors. Many, of course, worked legally, but illegal employment was common due to the lack of enforcement and the opposition of parents who still wanted the additional income provided by their children’s labor. In 1920, Florida’s enforcement apparatus consisted of only one inspector for the entire state, and he had to cope with employers and parents who conspired to disobey the law. False birth certificates were easy to secure, and obviously underage children could flee the job site when word spread that the state inspector was in town.\(^5\)

Another obstacle to eliminating child labor was Americans’ ambivalent attitude toward work by children. On the one hand, most people agreed that boys and girls should not be allowed to operate dangerous equipment or work before reaching at least the age of twelve. On the other hand, many Americans continued to think of work, especially by teenagers, as a way of learning the virtues of self-reliance, thrift, and dependability. Reformers fought back by pointing that working children, especially in the street trades, also learned how to cheat, smoke, steal, and pimp. Nevertheless, the ambivalent attitude toward child labor helps explain why it was not until 1938 that the federal government successfully passed legislation effectively outlawing the employment of children under sixteen in many industries (other than agriculture) and barring children under eighteen from working in dangerous occupations. Despite this ban, a 1992 government report found that 670 youths aged sixteen and seventeen were killed on the job in the 1980s. Recent abuses have led the National Child Labor Committee to conclude that “Child labor today is at a point where violations are greater than at any point during the 1930s.”\(^6\)

The following photo essay shows children at work in a variety of Florida settings from fields to factories to local streets. While many of these scenes have disappeared, others still exist in contemporary Florida, often hidden from view in fields and sweatshops.
Aurel Rosin of Arcadia, described as a “young entrepreneur” in 1915, was clearly at play, not at work, but scenes like this reflect Americans' ambivalent attitude toward work by children.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.
Agriculture was the oldest and most common employer of children like the one in the foreground, picking strawberries in Polk County in 1915. Until the 1950s, child labor was considered so important in picking strawberries that schools closed during the harvest season in winter.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.

A group of strawberry pickers go home after a day’s work in the fields in the 1930s. Children were considered especially good at picking this crop, because they had nimble fingers and could crawl more easily than adults.

Photograph from The WPA Guide to Florida.
Flora English and Louise Bonniwell at the John C. English citrus packing house in Alva (Lee County) in about 1905.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.
Children helping operate a crude sugar cane mill in Manatee County in the early 1900s. The mill extracted juice from the cane to make sugar.

Photograph from *Yesterday’s Bradenton* by Arthur C. Schofield.

Children in 1903 feeding sugar cane into a mill located in St. Petersburg.

Photograph from *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream* by Raymond Arsenault.
A young boy working as a “dipper” in a turpentine camp. The “dippers” emptied the cups filled with gum from pine trees into buckets; these were then emptied into 50-gallon barrels and taken for processing to a distillery. A “dipper” could fill four to seven barrels a day.

Photograph from Venice: Journey from Horse and Chaise by Janet Snyder Matthews.

The two boys (right) worked at the sawmill of Harrison M. Evans (seen here with his wife and two sons) in Largo in 1905. Fourteen-year-old Cliff Fussell (farthest right) made $1.50 a day at the mill.

Photograph from Largo. Florida. Then ‘til... by Harvey L. Wells.
So-called “street trades” like selling newspapers and making deliveries employed some very young children. This photo of Leslie and Eric Cooper, ages 6 and 10, was taken in Tampa by Lewis W. Hine in 1913. According to Hine, who worked for the National Child Labor Committee, the two boys worked all day, seven days a week.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.

Newspaper boys who were selling the Tampa Daily Times in 1922. Under state law they had to be at least 10 years old.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.
Two young messenger boys who worked in Tampa. Florida’s 1913 child labor law prohibited children under 12 from delivering messages or merchandise, which in addition to the long hours was considered a dangerous job.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.

Wilbur Gold, a 12-year-old messenger for Western Union, was photographed by Lewis Hine in Tampa in 1911. Gold worked until 11 at night, but in 1913 the state made night work illegal for children under 18.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.
Western Union messenger boys photographed in Tampa in 1921.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.

J. Mack Towne (seated center) and his son D.P. Towne (dressed in black) posed with the staff of Tampa’s Towne Laundry in 1903. The staff included several young boys. Florida’s 1913 child labor law prohibited the employment of children under 14 in laundries.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.
Twelve-year-old S.B. (Buck) Cochrane took a break from his bread delivery job to pose for this picture in Glades County. Youths in communities with a population of less than 6,000 were exempted from many provisions of the Florida’s child labor law.

Photograph from *Glades County*.

Children worked in services related to Florida’s tourist industry. Here a child drives tourists in the 1890s along the route of the Sanford & St. Petersburg Railroad.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.
A barefoot caddy at a course in the Tampa area (date unknown).

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.

Young caddies at a golf course in Bradenton in 1926.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.
Cigarmaking required a long period of apprenticeship, in some cases up to two years. Prospective cigarmakers attended “factory schools” like this one in Ybor City. According to Lewis Hine, who took the picture in 1909, young apprentices paid the boss $15 to $25 for being taught.

Photograph courtesy of the Albin O. Kuhn Library, University of Maryland.

Young cigarmakers at Englehardt & Co. in Tampa (1909). Lewis Hine noted, “Youngsters all smoke.” This observation reflected one of the concerns of reformers who sought to curb child labor.

Photograph from Lewis Hine by John R. Kemp.
Young cigarmakers working in the factory of Filogamo & Alvarez in 1909. In busy times, factories employed many young workers, a practice labor leaders in the cigar industry tried to stop. Control over the number of apprentices was always an issue in union negotiations.

Photograph from *Lewis Hine* by John R. Kemp.

Women and young girls were also employed in the cigar industry. This Lewis Hine photo of a box factory in Tampa in 1909 shows them making cigar boxes.

Photograph courtesy of the Albin O. Kuhn Library, University of Maryland.
Even after restrictions on other forms of labor, children continued to work legally in agriculture, as demonstrated by this 1946 scene near Plant City in Hillsborough County.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.

Charley Micco, a young Seminole, worked alongside his grandfather on a cattle ranch in 1950.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.

2 Ibid., 36-41.


4 Ibid., 87-93; Trattner, *Crusade for the Children*, 105-106.
