
Human Junk



Children Textile
Workers and their
private and social
lives in High Point,
North Carolina 1910-
1930's

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“The exploitation of children would produce only human junk” photographer Lewis Hine professed as he traveled across America in the early twentieth century taking hundreds of photographs documenting child labor.¹ Hine, child labor reformers, and progressives of the period fought a constant battle with mill owners and southern gentry who argued child laborers were essential to factory production. The voices of the children were largely absent from these two separate groups who felt they had the right to argue their own points of view without understanding the motivations, difficulties, or private lives of the children they were attempting to either save or exploit. The purpose of this paper is to provide insight into the motivations of children textile workers and the ways these children struggled with commerce, social interactions, playtime, and education while working in textile factories. This paper will analyze photographs of High Point, North Carolina taken by renowned early twentieth century photographer Lewis Hine in 1912 and 1936. These photographs are primary source information of the period and help to create a visual representation of these children workers. By looking at these photographs and revealing actual oral histories of child laborers through the 1910’s and 1930’s, a clearer picture emerges into the personal lives and leisure time of child laborers beyond the reformers’ presumptions and mill owners’ exploitation.

Child Laborers, Mill Owners, and Reformers

“Mill work was better than farming. It had to be.”² Bertha Awford Black, a resident of Thomasville and High Point, North Carolina describing her life working in a cotton mill in the

¹ John K. Kemp, *Lewis Hine: Photographs of Child Labor in the New South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 10.

² Victoria Byerly, *Hard time Cotton Mill Girls: Personal Histories of Womanhood and Poverty in the South* (New York: Cornell University ILR Press, 1986), 64. Victoria Byerly’s book documents women who worked in cotton mills mostly in North Carolina and their experiences. Byerly conducted interviews with white and black mill workers throughout mostly North Carolina. Several of her interviewees lived in and around High Point, North Carolina. These women were elderly when Byerly conducted their interviews, however these women provide the main primary source documentation. Bertha Awford Black was born March 5, 1899 and lived on Trotter Street in Thomasville, NC for seventy years as of the publication of Byerly’s book. She has previously lived in Trinity, North Carolina on a farm prior to working in the cotton mills of High Point and Thomasville. She started working in the Amazon Cotton Mill in Thomasville in 1911.

early twentieth century. Many families, like Bertha's, left their rural farms and sought employment in manufacturing cities across the new South. Like the Black family, children were an integral part of the new workforce laboring in the textile and cotton mills of these manufacturing towns. Black asserts "We were all anxious to go to work because, I don't know, we didn't like the farming. It was so hot and from sunup to sundown. No, that was not for me."³ Black's motivations reveal some children saw mill work as potentially better than toiling on the farm. However, Black is highly critical of child labor and proclaims, "You know, that ought to have been stopped a long time before it was. We didn't get no education. We weren't old enough to go to work. That thar (sic) child labor law was wonderful when it came in. We, every one, should have been in school."⁴ Bertha Awford Black had personal motivations for leaving the farm and working in the mills but she does not disguise her opinions of the difficulties or deprivations of that decision. Also, one of the main things to consider when viewing child laborers was that many of these children had little life choices. Parents were often the ones making the decisions for their children and the desire for extra money was essential in families' choices in taking their children out of school and encouraging them to work.

The mills owners had their own motivations for hiring child laborers. They sought employees that could work cheaply, who they could train quickly, and were present in large numbers across the south. High Point had mills as early as 1890 when the first cotton mill was opened by Oliver S. Causey.⁵ As the decades progressed, High Point along with thousands of other towns across the New South incorporated mills and factories as industry emerged as a viable, profitable business in many old southern towns. Due to the influx of so many mills, the

³ Byerly, *Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls*, 64. Bertha Awford Black.

⁴ Byerly, *Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls*, 65. Bertha Awford Black.

⁵ Barbara Taylor, "Textiles Chronology High Point, NC," High Point Museum, 2004. This small pamphlet was created by former Director of the High Point Museum Barbara Taylor. This booklet was used internally at the museum to document the history of the textile and furniture industry in High Point, North Carolina. Oliver S. Causey built "cottages" for his mill workers therefore establishing High Point's textile village standard. By 1926, High Point had become the second largest Hosiery Mill town in the world.

communities and housing for the workers sprang up all over the town and created brand new neighborhoods outside of the older established city limits. In the census record for 1910, 2870 people lived in High Point and by 1930 the population had grown to 40,906.⁶ Looking through the census records, a large portion of these residents worked in some form or fashion in the textile and furniture industries. The census records also document that many of the children included in the census list their occupation as textile workers. This supports the reformers argument that children working in the textile mills was extensive and proliferate. It is also worth noting that many children also listed their work status as farm laborers revealing the work nature of the rural environment as well as town life. These working existences for children was a key factor in family and mill owners' arguments to employ children factory workers because they had previously worked on the farms and therefore were already aware of their roles as beneficial to the family income.

The reformers saw a drastic difference between laboring on the family farm and working for wages in unsafe, dusty, and enclosed buildings for up to sixteen hours a day in some cases. The reformers could document child laborers in these mills; however, the ability to alter the conditions was an uphill battle with mill owners and southern business men. Especially difficult for the reformers was the attitude toward their motivations in many of these southern mill towns.

Historian Walter I. Trattner reiterates a mill owner's argument,

“that Northern agitators were intent on smothering Southern industry. Reformers were charged with trying to take away the only means of support for widowed, destitute mothers. It was declared of course that children were better off in the factory than on the isolated, mountainous farms from which they had come, an argument that would soon become the main weapon in the arsenal of those who opposed regulation.”⁷

⁶ Census Records, www.censusrecords.com, 12 April 2013.

⁷ William I. Trattner, *Crusade for the Children: A History of The National Child Labor Committee and Child Labor Reform in America* (Chicago: Quadrangle Booke, 1970), 83. Trattner is a Associate Professor of History and Social Welfare at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee at the time of publication.

Child labor reformers sought to end these types of prejudicial arguments and the harsh working conditions of youngsters in southern mills in the early twentieth century. These child labor reformers in 1904, including North Carolinian Alexander J. McKelway, created the National Child Labor Committee.⁸ In 1913 McKelway wrote “That childhood is endowed with certain inherent and inalienable rights, among which are freedom from toil for daily bread; the right to play and to dream; the right to the normal sleep of the night season; the right to an education, that we may have equality of opportunity for developing all that there is in us of mind and heart.”⁹ The reformers like McKelway and photographers like Lewis Hine wanted to publicize the hardness and depravity of the children they documented but the resistance from mill owners created conflict that prevented significant changes in child labor laws until much later in the century.

Southern and northern opponents of child labor hired photographers, such as Lewis Hine, to document child workers to facilitate an argument against child labor and to advocate for child labor regulation across the country. Hine visited High Point, North Carolina in 1912 photographing mill children and in 1936 in the depression era documenting living and working conditions across the country.¹⁰ Two photographs taken by Hine in October 1912 will be

⁸ Vincent J. Roscigno and William F. Danaher emphasizes “Prior to the passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933...children from eight and nine years old upward, and perhaps even younger, were employed in mills throughout the South.” Vincent J. Roscigno and William F. Danaher, *The Voice of Southern Labor: Radio, Music, and Textile Strikes 1929-1934* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 11. Roscigno and Danaher are reiterating the same argument made by most historians about the ages and quantity of young children working in the textile and cotton industries in the New South. But according to William Hays Simpson’s book *Southern Textile Communities* reports, the “First decade of the 20th century in North Carolina, no child between 12 and 13 years could work in the mills except in an apprenticed capacity, and unless he had attended school four months in the preceding 12 months.” William Hays Simpson, *Southern Textile Communities* (Charlotte: The Dowd Press Inc., 1948), 7. Even after legislature was passed, Roscigno and Danaher state that many mill owners willingly broke the law to keep their cheap child laborers. The Child Labor, Compulsory School Attendance and Mothers' Pension Laws of the States in Brief published by the National Child Labor Committee reveals North Carolina State Law in 1920 states “14 years for mills, 8 hour days prohibited during school hours, 9pm to 6pm prohibited.” *The Child Labor, Compulsory School Attendance and Mothers' Pension Laws of the States in Brief*, National Child Labor Committee, (New York, 1920).

⁹ Walter I. Trattner, *Crusade for Children*, 2.

¹⁰ John R. Kemp, *Lewis Hine: Photographs of Child Labor in the New South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 9. Lewis Hine was born in Wisconsin in 1874. He became one of the most famous photographers of the early twentieth century. Hine was hired to document child labor across the south for the National Child Labor Committee. Hine refers to these children as “human junk.” He distributed these images through lectures and exhibits to promote reformers’ agenda.

Image 2: Lewis Hine Photograph 1912, *Pearl*

Mill Workers and Their Living Conditions

These two photographs do not reveal anything of the living conditions of the children working in the mills at the time. Later, the living conditions of workers and their families were documented by Hine in his 1936 series of photographs taken in High Point. The reason for the 1936 images was to document manufacturing and living conditions during the depression of the 1930's. The images taken in 1912 were used to document the child labor abuses of the manufacturing industry across America. In Image 1, taken in 1912, Luther Perdue tells Hine, "We live outside the Corporation."¹¹ Perdue and his family lived outside of the mill owner's control by living in housing not built and provided by the mill owners. Though, these neighborhoods were relatively close to the factories and the families still utilized much of the commerce provided by the mill owners and engaged in social interactions with the surrounding mill community. The Sanborn Map of 1911 does not show Shelton Street supporting the argument that new neighborhoods were developing at a rapid rate.¹² In the 1910 census, Luther lived with his father John, mother Jane, brothers Harvey, Fred, Paul and sister Mamie at 709 Hamilton Street. Less than two years later, the family moved to a brand new neighborhood on Shelton Street where they still resided in the 1930 census.¹³

The image below is a photograph taken by Hine in 1936 showing a dirt road with mill houses on either side. (See Image 3). The image shows the right side of the street is well kept and appears to be of better quality than the washed out clapboard structures on the left. One can

¹¹ Lewis Hine, Image 1: Luther Perdue, 114 Sheldon St. Said 9 years old. Been working 6 months in High Point Hosiery Mill, N.C. Works all day now, making about \$3.00 a week. Said he expects to go to school later. "We live outside the Corporation and school begins late" (a chance for children to evade school attendance and work). Location: [High Point, North Carolina] , Lewis Hine Photograph, October 1912 High Point, North Carolina. (Library of Congress) <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ncl2004003647/PP/resource/>

¹² Sanborn Map, High Point April 1911, <http://sanborn.umi.com.libproxy.uncg.edu/nc/6427/dateid-000006.htm?CCSI=3408n>. The Perdue's originally lived on Hamilton Street according to the 1910 census. The 1911 Sanborn does not list Sheldon Street. Sometime between the 1911 Sanborn Map and the October 1912 photographs, the Perdue family had moved to a new neighborhood built on Sheldon Street.

¹³ Census Records, www.censusrecords.com, 12 April 2013.

almost visualize the Perdue family living in a house that looked like the one on the left and eventually moving into a newer house built on Shelton Street similar to those houses on the right. The mill houses were usually uniform in construction and availed the families of modern conveniences not usually present in their rural farm houses. Annie Viola Fries, remembers her impressions of the mill housing, “They had nice houses for next to nothing for rent, had running water, bathrooms inside, and at home we had an outside toilet and a well to draw our water. So they lived good in the mill village. I thought it was good that the mill company would fix something for you like that.”¹⁴ Understandably, rural families moving to mill villages saw their housing as better than living on rural farms without indoor plumbing and electricity. However, the absolute authority over the families living within the mill owners’ control did not allow for individual expression and tightened the workers’ separation of their home and work lives.



Image 3: Lewis Hine Photograph 1936 , *High Point, North Carolina-Housing*.

Because of the large influx of mill workers, new neighborhoods were developed by mill owners to house their workers in close proximity to the mills. But workers also took their own

¹⁴ Byerly, *Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls*, 23.

initiative and built their own homes outside of the owner's control. Image 4, a photograph taken by Hine, shows an isolated mill house on the outskirts of High Point in 1936. Some mill workers did not want to live under the control of the mill owners, though this left them longer distances to travel to work. The ability of workers to build their own homes outside of the mill village allowed the worker some semblance of autonomy though without vehicular transportation the ability of workers to get to work was more difficult. The style and design of the homes could be tailored to the family needs and did not conform to any set standards imposed by the mill owners.



Image 4: Lewis Hine Photograph, 1936, High Point, North Carolina - *Housing*.

The mill owners control over their workers extended beyond the attempts to control their workers' housing and neighborhoods. The mill owners saw their paternalism as beneficial to their workers and a way to create neighborhoods specifically tailored for mill workers' needs. Broadus Mitchell's book *The Rise of the Cotton Mills in the South* quotes a mill owners argument, "the use of children was not avarice then, but philanthropy; not exploitation, but

generosity and cooperation and social-mindedness."¹⁵ This attitude reveals that mill owners saw their role as one of paternalism and essential in providing work for many displaced families across the south especially for the young who was essential to the workforce in the mills.

The opposing arguments for and against child labor did not stop thousands of children of working in mills at a time when there was little legislation forbidding child employment or at least the ability of mill owner's to ignore any such legislation. One of the reasons reformers were advocating against mill owners was the contention that mill owners deliberately looking the other way in regards to the safety of their child workers. This argument is essential in understanding the reasons behind the continual legislative battles waged between reformers and mill owners about child laborers working in these dangerous mills. However, the mill owners used their ability to provide housing, commerce, and wages to their workers as an argument for support of wage labor for all who could benefit from additional earnings. The mill owners saw their generosity in providing mill housing as their paternal duty for their workforce. The ability to oversee the off-duty aspect of worker's lives and exert financial control over their living conditions was a way to continue owner's influence outside the mill.

Commerce in Mill Communities and Downtowns

These two photographs shown below, taken by Hine in 1912, show several young children standing outside a mill in High Point (See Image 5 and 6). These mills in High Point were called the "Kindergarten Factories" because of the significant number of child workers. Bertha Awford Black describes her life as a child laborer and asserts "Once we went to work in the mill after we moved here from the farm, we had more clothes, and more different kinds of

¹⁵ Broadus Mitchell, *The Rise of Cotton Mills in the South*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 95.

food than we did when we was a-farmin.”¹⁶

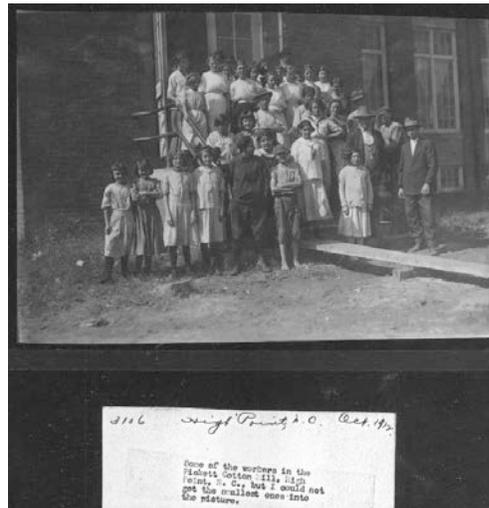


Image 5: Lewis Hine Photograph 1912



Image 6: Lewis Hine Photograph, 1912

This assertion by a former child laborer undermines the arguments by reformers and mill owners. These children saw, at least in a small way, their wages as beneficial to their ability to purchase better foods and clothing unavailable to their lives working on the farms. In Image 7, the children showed in the photograph are dressed in varying degrees of proper period clothing. One little girl is wearing what appears to be clean clothing with a bow in her head reinforcing

¹⁶ Byerly, *Hard time Cotton Mill Girls*, 64.

Bertha's remembrance of her childhood. Though, in the middle of the photograph there is another young child, a little boy with no shoes and what appears to be rather dirty, ragged clothing reaffirming the reformer's argument about the depravity of the child laborers' circumstances. Hine, who was attempting to document the numbers of children working in the textile mills, may have inadvertently provided support for both the workers' argument that they had more access to material goods but also to the reformers' argument that these children were being deprived of proper care by the mill owners.



Image 7: Lewis Hine Photograph 1912,

Regardless of which argument is the strongest, the reality was most community buildings, stores, and other public spaces were built and controlled by the mill owners in locations advantageous to the mill workers. Victoria Byerly describes the economic limitations of mill life, "Workers, mostly women and children, labored sixteen hours a day for wages that were just

enough to pay rent on their mill houses and their bills at the general store.”¹⁷ Bertha Black describes the advantages of working in the mills by having more available material goods however; Byerly expresses the long hours, low wages, and financial entrapment caused by the mill owners control over the mill stores and other social places. This dichotomy continues to prevail in the historical interpretation of the mill working community. The mill workers remember their lives quite differently than the historians who interpret the social relationships through various lenses not available to the previous child laborers. This is essential in understanding the remembrances of the former child laborers and the contradictions in the historical narrative.

However, the oral histories and the historians all agree that the general store or company store was the main place mill families shopped for daily sustenance and gathered for social interactions with other mill families. High Point’s Main Street would have had more variety of butchers, bakers, produce vendors, and even fruit stands. However, the distance of travel may have created difficulty for many families without vehicular transportation. The company store was the practical location for providing food for the family. Bertha Awford Black supports this idea that the company store provided better and more diverse food for the mill families. Luther (See Image 1) had three grocers and one company store close to his house on Sheldon Street according to the 1910 census.¹⁸ The mill owners would gain the profits from the store but the mill workers also gained a sense of community and camaraderie from visiting and gossiping alongside other mill workers.

Image 8 shows the Oakdale Company Store located in Jamestown, North Carolina. This

¹⁷ Byerly, *Hard Time Cotton Mill Girls*, 12. The problem with looking at these oral histories from the 1980’s is often the difficulty in interviewees remembering their childhood beyond the positive aspects and recollecting the actual difficulties inherent in their social choices.

¹⁸ Census Records. www.censusrecords.com . Potwin declares, "The village store is a center of accommodation, with its substation post office, its public telephone, laundry agency and community bulletin board, in addition to its variety of stock and bi-daily delivery service. Moreover a social value lies in the leadership of its clerks in the community." *Cotton Mill People of the Piedmont: A Study in Social Change*, 113.

building would have been similar in appearance to other company stores located throughout the south. These stores were located centrally throughout the mill communities and served the mill families exclusively providing essential goods and foods. Though, this meant that much of the items provided were relatively the same for every mill family unless they were able to shop in the Main Street commerce districts. Shopping on Main Street was not beneficial on a daily basis due to the distance from the mill neighborhoods and the lack of transportation available at the time. Several of the women interviewed by Byerly disclose their mother's had accounts at the company store and they looked forward to the weekly visits. The paternalism of the mill owners might have controlled much of the daily lives of their workers but the families did use the stores as a means of socializing and children saw the store as an essential part of their neighborhood and its use as a gathering place for families.



Image 8: Oakdale Cotton Mill Store

Mill stores were a way for newly arrived rural families to integrate into the social networks of the mill communities. The availability of jobs for rural families and the move to

urban towns gave North Carolina people the ability to forge new identities in mill communities.

Historian Mary Lethert Wingerd professes:

“On one hand, the mill whistle promised opportunity and escape from the uncertainty and drudgery of the fields, and the bustling village seemed an energetic antidote to quiet country life. The younger people, particularly young women, experienced a heady new freedom from parental control... On the other hand, town life and wage work appeared alien to traditional rural values, for already formed families and males in general, they posed a threat to previous independence and status.¹⁹

Traditional values were already under attack during this time with the changing social norms.

The 1920's saw a preponderance of social changes affecting dress, social activities, and even sexual interactions among the young people. Radio, theaters, and automobile transportation meant the average person living in the 1920's could see more, hear more, and do more than their parents and previous generations. The children who worked in these mills were especially susceptible to the modernization of the twentieth century. Marjorie Potwin's 1927 book *A Cotton Mill People of the Piedmont: A Study in Social Change* provides valuable first-hand account of her observations, “Since 1920 life in the mill village has shared in the general twentieth-century change. We have the auto and the movies and the radio, the lipstick and the boyish bob. We have an almost overwhelming complexity of old customs and old standards with new ways and new ideas.”²⁰ The 1912 photos taken of Luther and Pearl (See Images 1 and 2) show them as pre-teens however, eight years later they would be eighteen and nineteen and along with the other mill children probably participating in the cultural phenomena of the day. Many were so young when they left the farms that mill life was the only one they remembered. Therefore, their

¹⁹ Mary Lethert Wingerd, “Rethinking Paternalism: Power and Parochialism in a Southern Mill Village,” *OAH Journal of American History*, vol. 82, no.3 (Dec 1996) 876.

²⁰ Marjorie Potwin, *A Cotton Mill People of the Piedmont: A Study in Social Change*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927), She specifies, “Since 1920 life in the mill village has shared in the general twentieth-century change. We have the auto and the movies and the radio, the lipstick and the boyish bob. We have an almost overwhelming complexity of old customs and old standards with new ways and new ideas.” 34. Potwin was studying the Piedmont of Spartanburg, South Carolina. Her book could be considered a primary source due to the year of publication. She was living in Spartanburg, South Carolina as of the 1930 census.

identities as workers and urban members of an ever evolving society affected how they viewed their ability to engage in commerce and the types of social interactions they preferred in their free time.

One of the benefits to living in town was the availability of commerce thriving on the main streets across America. The Sanborn Map of 1917 shows Main Street, High Point with its various retail shops, ice cream parlors, restaurants, and theaters.²¹ Looking at the Sanborn maps, much of the newer mill communities did not have as much for the mill workers as older established communities controlled exclusively by mill owners. The two images below show Main Street and Luther Perdue's neighborhood at the same time (See Images 9 and 10). Main Street contains multiple shops and diversions for town folk. However, Luther's neighborhood only shows a Grocer and General Store. These establishments provided the mill workers their food and essential goods but did not give much in the way of entertainment or extra shopping. Even on the Sanborn Map of 1924, there is little commerce in Luther's neighborhood. There are wholesale grocers but little in the way of amenities available in the neighborhoods of the mill workers. Most had to travel to the downtown area of Main Street in order to avail themselves of theaters, restaurants, and other types of shopping.

As previously stated, many families had accounts at the local general store where they sustained additional debts to the mill owners. These stores offered the mill workers everyday items but not much variety. These workers would have to walk to South Main Street in order to purchase much of their clothing and anything not provided by the mill owners in the general stores. Bertha Awford Black claims "We'd buy our clothes already made at Kresses (sic) and

²¹ Sanborn Map, High Point July 1917
<http://sanborn.umi.com.libproxy.uncg.edu/image/view?state=nc&reelid=reel08&lcid=6427&imagename=00058&mapname=High Point July 1917, Sheet 2&CCSI=3408n>

then there was a general store and Mother had credit there.”²²

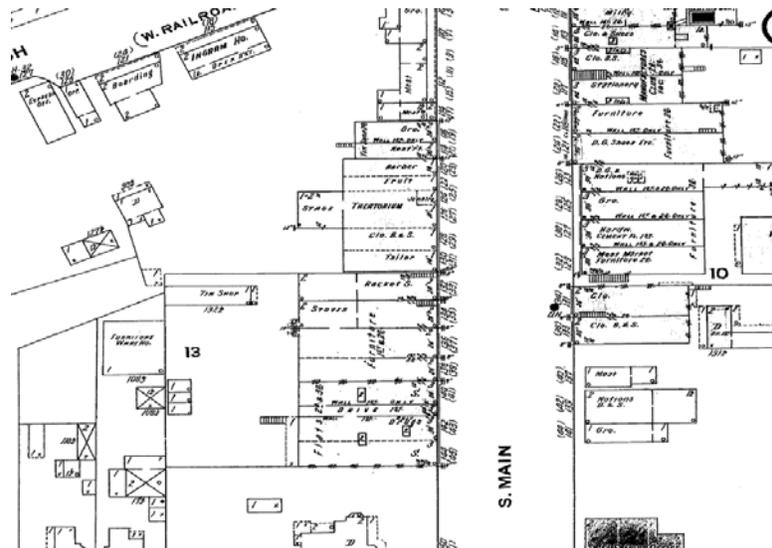


Image 9: 1911 Sanborn Map, High Point, North Carolina

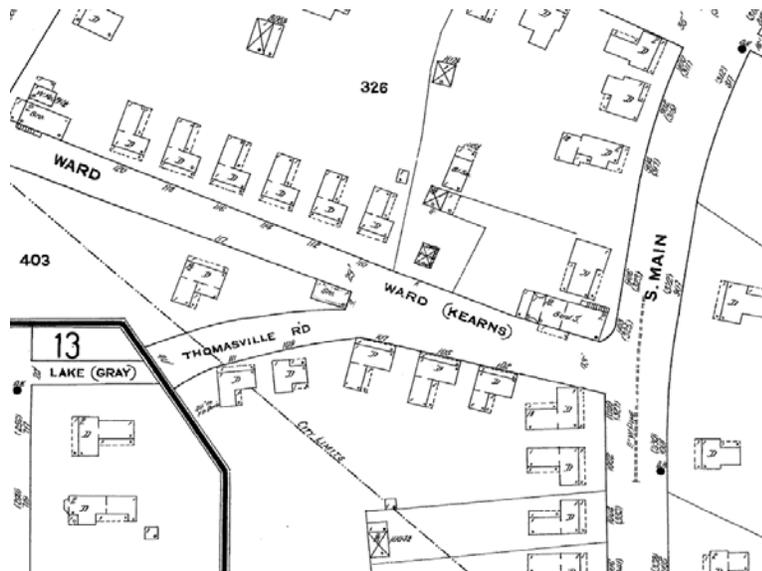


Image 10: 1911 Sanborn Map, High Point, North Carolina April 1910

Black and her mother shopped in the town stores but bought much of their food stuffs through the general store close to their home. Annie Viola Fries describes a man named Tradin' Charles

²² Byerly, *Hard times Cotton Mill girls*, 64.

Lambeth who came to the mill neighborhoods to sell old coats, gloves, and other clothing. She expresses, “my mother would buy coats from him for fifty cents or a dollar.”²³ This would support the mill neighborhoods but many of the extra items were not available close to home so mill workers had to travel across town to shop in the stores on Main Street. This availability supported High Point’s commerce but also gave mill children and their family’s agency in where they chose to shop and what goods they chose to buy with their limited incomes.

Socializing, Shopping, and Dating

Mill workers did use their limited income to engage in popular culture of the time. The mill workers did have access to the newest cultural inventions of the time by traveling a few miles to the downtown of High Point. Movies were the newest craze in the early twentieth century and mill workers, along with much of America flocked to the movie houses to watch silent films. In the 1920’s and 1930’s, movies became more sophisticated and going to the theater became an American pastime. Mill workers, when money allowed, also attended the movies however, Bertha Miller states, “We’d go to the show every once in a while, but it was so far to walk to town.”²⁴ According to the Sanborn map of 1911, there was a Theatrorium at 126 South Main Street.²⁵ By 1917, the Sanborn map shows two electric theaters existing in the downtown area reinforcing the argument that movie houses were a new craze in American towns.²⁶ Though Pearl and Luther were young, possibly their parents were able to enjoy an occasional movie at the time Hine visited High Point. Though, as Luther and Pearl aged and

²³ Byerly, *Hard times Cotton Mill girls*, 21.

²⁴ Byerly, *Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls*, 48.

²⁵ Sanborn Map, High Point April 1911, 1911 <http://sanborn.umi.com.libproxy.uncg.edu/image/view?state=nc&reelid=reel08&lcid=6427&imagename=00042&mapname=High Point Apr. 1911, Sheet 7&CCSI=3408n>

²⁶ Sanborn Map, High Point July 1917 <http://sanborn.umi.com.libproxy.uncg.edu/image/view?state=nc&reelid=reel08&lcid=6427&imagename=00058&mapname=High Point July 1917, Sheet 2&CCSI=3408n>

movies became part of American life, one can envision Pearl, Luther, and other young textile workers going to the theaters across America. As workers, these youngsters may have earned enough to afford going to the movies occasionally, however the distance from their homes to the theaters were so great as told by Bertha Miller that going to the theater may not have been as readily available to the mill workers living on the outskirts of town especially at a time when there was few vehicles available.

This distance between town and the mill community did create a schism when it came time for mill young adult workers to date or socialize with other young people. Pearl and Luther are much too young to date in 1912; however several of Hine's photographs show older girls and boys who were arguably ready for social interactions with the opposite sex. Clara Thrift, who grew up in Thomasville, claims "Uptown boys would go out with mill workers' girls, but they really didn't think these mill girls were good enough for them."²⁷ The town people, according to Thrift, had a dim view of the mill workers. A possibility for town boys to go out with mill girls may be the appearance of promiscuity of girls who worked for a living though this may be difficult to document. Though, a recent conversation with my grandmother who worked in High Point's hosiery mills in the 1940's revealed that when my grandmother and great-aunt were walking down English Street they were accosted by town boys yelling from their car, "Do you girls put out?" This interaction may speak more clearly toward the town boy's views of working mill girls and the assumption of their sexual promiscuity and to clarify this argument. Thrift also states that "When I look back, a whole lot of girls I grew up with got pregnant by boys outside the mill village. The girl was usually so scared she let the boy off scot free."²⁸ The attitudes of town folk toward the mill workers existed due to the rapid influx of so many new people to the

²⁷ Hall, *Like a Family*, 223.

²⁸ Hall, *Like a Family*, 223.

town and the perceived social status of the mill workers.

One of the reasons for this opinion by the town population was the distance of the mill communities from older established neighborhoods and the social separation imposed not only by the town folk but the mill workers. The newly arrived mill families lived on the outskirts of town in new neighborhoods which did not contain many older town families. "Relatively little opportunity is given for participating in social activities outside mill village circles. The type of social life that is afforded the mill village youth is therefore impaired by the fact that the group tends to develop its own standards of conduct and of morals."²⁹ The ability to engage in much more interactions outside the home such as movies, retail shopping, and new clothing standards of the time may have given young mill workers, especially young girls, the ability to broaden their understanding of the world and increase their social skills. This would support Marjorie Potwin's argument that the 1920s saw a drastic change in the attitudes of young people working in the mills. The proliferation of movies, music, short hair, and working for wages may have given mill girls an image of promiscuity. However, using their extra wages, when there was some, allowed young people to engage in commerce and social interactions far beyond their lives as mill workers.

Like Luther's family, when workers arrived they almost immediately moved into a mill community that existed largely outside of the town influence. Aliene Walser of High Point claims, "Before I was married, I remember hearing that mill people wasn't nothing but slum people, that there wasn't nothing to them. I've heard it said that mill people are a lower class of people."³⁰ This attitude toward mill workers carried over into the social interactions among the young people. Young mill workers socialized outside of their mill communities but as stated

²⁹ Jennings J. Rhyne, *Some Southern Cotton Mill Workers and Their Villages* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1930), 175.

³⁰ Byerly, *Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls*, 83.

these women interviewed by Byerly asserted that the uptown males and others in town viewed mill girls as especially promiscuous and unacceptable young ladies. The social stigma appears to have been especially hard on the young mill boys. They were not allowed to date the uptown girls however; the mill girls' were choosing to date uptown boys in the hopes of advancing their social position. Young mill boys would fight with outsiders who encroached upon mill girls or their community. Jacqueline Dowd Hall asserts, "On one level, the protection of young women from outsiders was a game of male posturing and bravado. But is also revealed how the forces of class could shape the most intimate aspects of young people's lives. Romance became an arena of conflict between mill and town, with women as the prize."³¹ The status of mill girls was a complicated relationship between mill boys protecting women whom they saw as their own and uptown boys seeking to engage in a little frivolity.

Even though mill girls may have had a sordid reputation as viewed by outsiders this did not prevent them from engaging in teenage social interactions. The money they earned helped them purchase better clothes and household furnishings than their families could previously afford. Bertha Awford Black claims that she was able to afford better clothing while living in the mill village rather than on the farm. Annie Viola Fries gives a reason why she chose to purchase furniture for her mill home. She asserts "went to Houghton's downtown and bought a living room suite. I just told Mama that I wanted to buy a living room suite 'cause I wanted to date and bring the boys in and sit and have something that looked nice."³² The ability to purchase readymade items in retail stores extended even to the young adults working in the mills. The dating environment gave the teenagers a way to socialize with the opposite sex and provided them with a larger social environment in which to interact.

³¹ Hall, *Like a Family*, 224.

³² Byerly, *Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls*, 25.

Shopping was another way children were able to have goods like other non-working children. The 1917 Sanborn Map does reveal several retail stores on Main Street that would have appealed to children.³³ 124 North Main and 122 South Main were both addresses for candy stores in downtown High Point. Candy stores would have appealed to young children regardless of their economic background. As previously discussed however, many mill children may not have the ability to shop in the downtown district without transportation. However, many general stores carried glass jars with candy for children to purchase as this photograph of Kress' department store in High Point circa.1920 illustrates. As previously stated, mill children and their mothers shopped at Kress' department store for clothing and it is reasonable to assert that children would have been able to purchase candy from these stores when they visited Main Street or their neighborhood general stores. Young children could still engage in commerce outside their working existence by purchasing candy at local stores.



Image 11: Kress Department Store, 1927 or 1928, High Point Historical Society.

³³ Sanborn Map, High Point July 1917.

Playtime

Younger children, who were too young to be thinking about dating, also engaged in social interactions in the mill villages. Though, there times for play were limited by their working hours. Byerly contends, “Only in the first years of life and, later, perhaps for a few hours on Sunday, was there time for these children to play.”³⁴ The types of play were relegated to their income bracket and the availability of toys. Though, mill children used their imaginations when creating their own play times. According to the oral histories, several of these child workers remembered their playtimes differently. This supposed inability to have a childhood is one of the arguments against child labor made by the reformers. Bertha Miller does support the reformers when she states, “When we weren't working in the mill, there wasn't nothing much to do only sit around there and laugh and talk.”³⁵ The distance between much of the commercial and retail industries of High Point does reveal that the mill neighborhoods were not situated to allow for daily commerce. However, it does appear through Hine’s photographs that children did have toys and did have some time to play and be children though how much of their lives were devoted to play and how much to work is drastically unequal. This supports the reformers argument and clearly shows that play time was a valued but limited part of the everyday lives of mill children.

Several of Hine’s photographs show children eating ice cream. The image below shows a mobile ice cream cart with three young girls standing outside of a mill eating their ice cream from a portable vendor. This is a quintessential American image of children enjoying a hot day. The presence of the mill buildings in the background does provide a different interpretation for this image. The identities of these three young girls are unknown, just like in most of Hine’s

³⁴ Byerly, *Hard Time Cotton Mill Girls*, 45.

³⁵ Byerly, *Hard Time Cotton Mill Girls*, 48.

photographs. One thing that is interesting about the photograph is the portable nature of the ice cream vendor. This vendor traveled to the mill community to sell ice cream to the workers. These children are enjoying ice cream, as well as several other children in other Hine photographs. The vendor appears to be aware of the potential profitability in selling to these mill children. Possibly because he knew they had money to purchase his wares but maybe because he saw a need for children to have a little bit of fun in their day by eating ice cream. Though the photographs were taken to show the hardships existing in child labor, the children enjoying their ice cream does provide an alternative interpretation that children were still able to maintain some semblance of their childhood through engaging in a normal childhood pastimes. Though it is unclear, if the children paid for the ice cream, or Hine supplied the treat for the children's cooperation. If so, then this offers a drastically differed interpretation than previously stated.



Image 12: Lewis Hine Photograph 1912,



Image 13: Lewis Hine Photograph 1912, *Salisbury, (N.C.) Cotton Mill*.

One of the most interesting tales about playtime in the mills was provided by Bertha Awford Black. She contradicts Bertha Miller's claim that there was not much to do in the mill community outside of work. Black states, "Well, we'd build us a little playhouse until they'd whistle's for us."³⁶ She is describing how she and her co-workers would create their own playtime and unique childhood game at the mill. This may not have been acceptable for the reformers as sufficient play time for children, but Black fondly remembers her times at play while working in the mills. The mill owners were little concerned with the children and their playtime as long as they returned to work after their breaks. Hine also shows children at play in one of his photographs. The boys above are shooting marbles, another common pastime of many boys of the period (See Image 13). While describing their work lives, Hine is giving the viewer another look inside the lives of these children. The reformers were attempting to document the depravity of the children's' circumstances; however, some images reveal that children were

³⁶ Byerly, *Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls*, 65.

allowed to be children beyond just their identities as laborers.

Oakdale Cotton Mills in Jamestown, North Carolina is the oldest continually running mill in the country. Mary M. Dalton's documentary *Oakdale Cotton Mills: Close-Knit Neighbors* has interviews with textile workers who remember their parents working at the mills as very young children. Ida Mae McGee was seven years old when she started working at the mill. Her daughter, Evie MCGee Swaim, remembers her mother talking about playing around the mill when she had breaks and playing down by the Deep River after work. Jeff Johnson, Customer Service Manager, showed a yo-yo built by his father with remnants of wood left in the mill and Oakdale cotton twine. He says, "My father would take scraps from Oakdale and make toys."³⁷ These children working and living around High Point's mills used their time wisely in creating playtimes for themselves and enjoying what little freedoms they had around their work schedules. This was not ideal for the children, but it emphasizes that they attempted to gain some form of childhood time in their busy lives. This ability to forge playtime around work reinforces the agency children had in acquiring their own spaces for childhood activities.

Mill children had little time for play but they did carve out time to have their own version of childhood. Two women interviewed by Victoria Byerly, both named Bertha, lived at the same time, in the same town, and worked in the same mill. Their stories of growing up in the mill community of High Point offer a different perspective than Hine's grim portrayal and mill owner's paternalism in the lives of these children. Miller describes talking and laughing just as many other girl's did during the time and even today, though she is quick to profess that in her case she was unable to afford any sort of social life outside her small community. Bertha Black, however does reveal her unique playtime and provides us a very interesting look at how these children were able to retain a small portion of their childhood by creating their own play spaces

³⁷ "Oakdale Cotton Mills: Close-Knit Neighbors," Mary M. Dalton (2009) Documentary.

outside of the mill. The Hine photograph below shows children sitting on the porch of their mill house with their toys (See Image 14). One has a bike, one a doll, and others with scooters.

Though they live in what most would consider an impoverished environment, they are still able to have toys.³⁸ These children, who are not mill workers, are still members of the mill community and able to, on a limited scale, enjoy childhood playtime and companionship while living in the close-knit neighborhoods surrounding High Point's mills.



Image 14: Lewis Hine Photograph 1936,

Reformers regarded the lack of childhood play for mill children as an essential right. McKelway even states that children have a “right to play and to dream.”³⁹ However, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill Graduate in Sociology Dr. Jennings J.Rhyne has another argument,

³⁸ This photograph was taken by Hine in 1936 after much of the child labor issue had been abolished. These children also, would have been too young to work in the mills. I use this photograph to illustrate that even in what some would consider deprived conditions, children still have the ability to play as children. There is no indication if these children are siblings or neighbors. Though, the caption indicates this was furniture factory workers' housing.

³⁹ Trattner, *Crusade for the Children*.

“In general, play and all forms of amusement and diversion are looked upon with indifference and suspicion by a large portion of the people in the mill villages of North Carolina. This attitude is probably a part of the social heritage of that Element of people on which the southern cotton mills have drawn largely for the requisite labor to run the machinery. A close relation may be found to exist between the feeling expressed and that older religious attitude which regards any form of play or amusement as being harmful to living a good life.”⁴⁰

If one looks at this argument, then possibly the parents of these mill children saw their work as more than essential for monetary reasons rather than extensive amounts of playtime which may have been deemed harmful to their religious souls. As part of a moral existence, working for one’s livelihood, just like farming, may have fulfilled a moral obligation in the family. The lack of play in much of Hine’s photographs may reveal more about family beliefs rather than deliberate family oppression of children in the mills. Regardless of whose argument one believes, the lives of mill children was affected by their labor and limited freedom to engage in normal childhood behaviors.

Education

The need to work had another major drawback for the mill children that were essential to the argument of the reformers and Hine. This drawback is also expressed by the women interviewed by Byerly. One of the main frustrations posed by most of the women reveals the lack of education available to many mill workers and their families. Annie Viola Fries admitted “when I got old enough I quit school and I went in the mill to help my mother. I went to work on the third shift.”⁴¹ Fries’ mother was sickly and she worked in the mill alongside her other seven siblings to enable her mother to stay home. Their father continued to work on the farm outside

⁴⁰ Rhyne, *Some Cotton Mill Workers and Their Villages*, 176. Dr. Jennings J. Rhyne was born in Bessemer, North Carolina and received his education at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, receiving his PhD. in Sociology in 1927. He became the Sociology department head for the University of Oklahoma in the 1930’s. www.waymarking.com (5 May 2013).

⁴¹ Byerly, *Hard Time Cotton Mill Girls*, 15.

of town. This splitting of the mill village family was quite common. The father often stayed on the farm when the mother and children worked in the mills. Fries admits, “Mama wanted us to have an education, she really did, it would have tickled her if one of us had went and graduated. That would have thrilled her to death. It would have, because she wanted us to learn to read.”⁴² Education was available for the mill children but their work schedule often prohibited them from attending school full time. The 1910 census reveals that Luther (See Image 1) can read and write but was currently not in school. There of course is no documentation about Pearl but many children in the textile mills would have had a rudimentary education but little schooling into high school.



Image 15: Jamestown, North Carolina – Oakdale Cotton Mill School 1912

Education became a key component of mill owners and their paternalism. Mill schools were largely funded by the mill owners and provided a place for mill children to learn obedience

⁴² Byerly, *Hard Time Cotton Mill Girls*, 18.

and conformity to mill life (See image 15).⁴³ Cathy McHugh's argument reveals, "'During the period from 1900 to 1918, forty-two mills were constructed in North Carolina in localities not then served by schools. In contrast with the earlier periods, however a school was provided at the time of the establishment of each mill.'"⁴⁴ Education of young children became an essential component of mill life. These young children would then grow up and continue working in the textile industry. However, mill owners did not want these children to receive too much education. McHugh also reveals that "of those students who went on to high school, very few ever came back to the mill to work, supporting the management viewpoint that the common school level provided sufficient preparation for mill work."⁴⁵ The appearance of paternalism exhibited by mill owners reveals an underlying desire to keep their workers bound to mill life. This is an aspect of the child labor that was not fully addressed by the reformers or Hine.

The mill owner's repression and the mill community's social isolation created a schism that hindered reformers' attempts to address the social and work conditions within the mills with mill owners and workers' support. One area that was exceedingly difficult was the separation between the local town and the mill community. This separation included many school districts that were exclusively either predominately non-mill children or funded and controlled by the mills. The social stigma attached to mill workers and their families created a chasm between existing towns and these new arrivals. Some of these divisions were created by the mill workers themselves. As Byerly contends "The cotton mill village was like one big white family closed off to the external world."⁴⁶ This exclusiveness created a general argument for reformers who used racism to claim that mill children were being socially and educationally kept ignorant while

⁴³ Cathy L. McHugh's book *Mill Family: The Labor System in the Southern Cotton Textile Industry, 1880-1915* declares, "The system of family labor and mill village residence served to increase the probability that a child educated in the mill village school would eventually work in the mill."

⁴⁴ Hays, *Southern Textile Communities*, 47.

⁴⁵ McHugh, *Mill Family*, 65.

⁴⁶ Byerly, *Hard Time Cotton Mill Girls*, 12.

black children were being educated. Kemp argues, “The potential for exploiting racism was evident, and reformers used it well, asking rhetorically why little white children should be destroyed in the mills and factories and kept in ignorance while the little black children went to school and played in the sun.”⁴⁷ The attitudes of mill owners to protect large numbers of their workforce, local town folk’s aversion to mill community inclusion and the mill workers’ social isolation against outsiders may have potentially created difficulty in any reformers coming to the communities to affect educational change.

The motivations for child laborers were complicated but understandable given their circumstances. These children worked long hours, for little pay, in hot, dusty and dirty factories due to social and economic hierarchy outside of their control. However, these children engaged in activities like eating ice cream, going to the theaters, and shopping at department stores as a way of retaining some portion of their children regardless of their life situation. Lewis Hine observed that the continual use of these children as workers would create “human junk.”⁴⁸ This term seems especially inaccurate and deplorable. Hine looked through his camera and photographed children working in mills across the country. His advocacy, along with other reformers, is to be applauded for promoting and eventually helping to improve child labor laws. However, the inability of Hine, reformers, and mill owners to see the children underneath the grime, to understand their motivations, and to see how they conducted themselves as children and young adults in a vastly changing world reveals how little the reformers and mill owners understood these young workers and how little the outside world understood their unique existence. Young Luther Perdue, Pearl, and thousands of other children working in textile mills were not becoming “Human Junk.” The reformers argument that they were working under harsh

⁴⁷ Kemp, *Lewis Hine*, 9.

⁴⁸ Kemp, *Lewis Hine*, 10.

conditions and deserved to be carefree and innocent like other children was absolutely correct. However despite their circumstances, Pearl and Luther deserve to be remembered not only for their working lives but for the lives they carved out as children in the mill villages of High Point and across the south.

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Images

Cover Image 1: Lewis Hine Photograph 1912, *Some samples (not all) of the children in the "Kindergarten Factory" run by the High Point and Piedmont Hosiery Mills, High Point, N.C. Every child in these photos worked; I saw them at work and I saw them go in to work at 6:30 A.M. and noons and out at 6 P.M. One morning I counted 22 of these little ones (12 years and under) going to work at about 6:15 A.M. Some of them told me their ages: 1 boy said 8 yrs. (worked when he was 7). 1 girl said 10 yrs. (apparently 7). 3 other girls said 10 yrs. 2 boys said 10 yrs. (1 got \$3.00 a week). 1 boy said 11 yrs. 2 boys said 12 yrs. (1 said he makes \$1. a day). (See also report.) Location: High Point, North Carolina*
<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/nclc.02636>

Cover Image 2: Lewis Hine Photograph 1936, *High Point, North Carolina - Housing. Some of the homes in Highland Yarn Mills company-owned village - High Point, North Carolina, 1936 - 1937* <http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/action/ShowFullRecordDigital?>

Image 1: Lewis Hine Photograph 1912, *Luther Perdue, 114 Sheldon St. Said 9 years old. Been working 6 months in High Point Hosiery Mill, N.C. Works all day now, making about \$3.00 a week. Said he expects to go to school later. "We live outside the Corporation and school begins late" (a chance for children to evade school attendance and work). Location: [High Point, North Carolina] , Lewis Hine Photograph, October 1912 High Point, North Carolina. (Library of Congress)* <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ncl2004003647/PP/resource/>

Image 2: Lewis Hine Photograph, 1912, *Pearl said she was 10 years old and helps her mother in the weave room of the Pickett Cotton Mill, High Point, N.C. She said her brother 8 years old helps too. Location: High Point, North Carolina*
Lewis Hine Photograph, October 1912 High Point, North Carolina. (Library of Congress)
<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ncl2004003694/PP/resource/>

Image 3: Lewis Hine Photograph 1936, *High Point, North Carolina-Housing. Homes of Furniture workers in the same district often vary greatly-not difference on same street- High Point, North Carolina, 1936. (National Archives)*

<http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/action/ShowFullRecordDigital?initpagemodel=on&mn=>

Image 4: Lewis Hine Photograph 1936, *High Point, North Carolina - Housing. Homes of colored workers in High Point, North Carolina, 1936 - 1937*

<http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/action/ShowFullRecordDigital>

Image 5: Lewis Hine Photograph, 1912, *Some samples (not all) of the children in the "Kindergarten Factory" run by the High Point and Piedmont Hosiery Mills, High Point, N.C. Every child in these photos worked; I saw them at work and I saw them go in to work at 6:30 A.M. and noons and out at 6 P.M. One morning I counted 22 of these little ones (12 years and under) going to work at about 6:15 A.M. Some of them told me their ages: 1 boy said 8 yrs. (worked when he was 7). 1 girl said 10 yrs. (apparently 7). 3 other girls said 10 yrs. 2 boys said 10 yrs. (1 got \$3.00 a week). 1 boy said 11 yrs. 2 boys said 12 yrs. (1 said he makes \$1. a day). (See also report.) Location: High Point, North Carolina. Lewis Hine Photograph, October 1912 High Point, North Carolina. (Library of Congress)*

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/nclc.02635/>

Image 6: Lewis Hine Photograph 1912, *Some samples (not all) of the children in the "Kindergarten Factory" run by the High Point and Piedmont Hosiery Mills, High Point, N.C. Every child in these photos worked: I saw them at work and I saw them go in to work at 6:30 A.M. and noons and out at 6 P.M. One morning I counted 22 of these little ones (12 years and under) going to work at about 6:15 A.M. Some of them told me their ages: 1 boy said 8 yrs. (worked when he was 7). 1 girl said 10 yrs. (apparently 7). 3 other girls said 10 yrs. 2 boys said 10 yrs. (1 got \$3.00 a week). 1 boy said 11 yrs. 2 boys said 12 yrs. (1 said he makes \$1. a day). (See also report.) Location: High Point, North Carolina. Lewis Hine Photograph, October 1912 High Point, North Carolina. (Library of Congress)*

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ncl2004003648/PP/resource/>

Image 7: Lewis Hine Photograph, 1936, *High Point, North Carolina - Housing. Homes of skilled furniture workers in Tomlinson Chair Mfg. Company, High Point, North Carolina. They have bought a small parcel of land, just outside the city limits, and put up a small cottage themselves. This seems to be popular, 1936 - 1937 Lewis Hine Photograph, 1936 High Point, North Carolina. (Library of Congress)* <http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/action/ShowFullRecordDigital?>

Image 8: Oakdale Cotton Mill Store

<http://www.jamestown-nc.us/historic-sites.html>

Image 9: 1911 Sanborn Map, High Point, North Carolina

<http://sanborn.umi.com.libproxys.uncg.edu/image/view?state=nc&reelid=reel08&lcid=6427&ima>

gename=00042&mapname=High Point Apr. 1911, Sheet 7&CCSI=3408n

Image 10: 1911 Sanborn Map, High Point, North Carolina April 1911
<http://sanborn.umi.com.libproxy.uncg.edu/image/view?state=nc&reelid=reel08&lcid=6427&imagename=00049&mapname=High Point Apr. 1911, Sheet 14&CCSI=3408n>

Image 11: Kress Department Store, 1927 or 1928, High Point Museum, *High Point Historical Society*

Image 12: Lewis Hine Photograph 1912, *Some samples (not all) of the children in the "Kindergarten Factory" run by the High Point and Piedmont Hosiery Mills, High Point, N.C. Every child in these photos worked; I saw them at work and I saw them go in to work at 6:30 A.M. and noons and out at 6 P.M. One morning I counted 22 of these little ones (12 years and under) going to work at about 6:15 A.M. Some of them told me their ages: 1 boy said 8 yrs. (worked when he was 7). 1 girl said 10 yrs. (apparently 7). 3 other girls said 10 yrs. 2 boys said 10 yrs. (1 got \$3.00 a week). 1 boy said 11 yrs. 2 boys said 12 yrs. (1 said he makes \$1. a day). (See also report.) 2 boys said 10 yrs. (1 got \$3.00 a week) 1 boy said 12 yrs. (1 said he makes \$1. a day) (See Also report). Location: High Point, North Carolina. Lewis Hine Photograph, 1912 High Point, North Carolina. (Library of Congress)*
<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/nclc.02634/>

Image 13: Lewis Hine Photograph 1912, *Salisbury, (N.C.) Cotton Mill. A game of marbles. All these boys work in the mill. Location: Salisbury, North Carolina Lewis Hine Photograph 1912 Salisbury, North Carolina (Library of Congress)*
<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/nclc.01525/>

Image 14: Lewis Hine Photograph 1936, *High Point, North Carolina - Housing. Homes of furniture workers in High Point - Owned by a real estate company, 1936 - 1937 Lewis Hine Photograph, 1936 High Point, North Carolina. (Library of Congress)*
<http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/action/ShowFullRecordDigital?>

Image 15: Jamestown, North Carolina – Oakdale Cotton Mill School 1912
<http://www.jamestown-nc.us/historic-sites.html>