

Lewis Wickes Hine was born in 1874 in the small town of OshKosh Wisconsin.

In 1904, Hine was studying education at New York City's Ethical Cultural School.

It was there that he became interested in photography and established himself as the school photographer. Because of his unique interest in photography, Hine was enlisted by his college professor Frank Manny to come to Ellis Island and document the immigrants who poured in by the thousands each day.

The crowds at Ellis Island were tired, hungry, hurried and confused. They spoke practically no English. But young Lewis Hine had a gentle and courteous way with people that gained the trust of his subjects... at least long enough to take their photograph.

Lewis Hine returned to Ellis Island several more times and captured more than 200 images. His body of work there led to assignments from reform groups such as the Child Welfare League and the National Child Labor Committee.

At that time, there were no compulsory schooling laws in the United States. Only a handful of states had laws regarding child labor, and enforcement of these laws was virtually non-existent.

The 1900 US Census reported over 2 million children were working full-time in America's mills, mines, factories and fields. In 1904, Ethical Cultural School Alumni Felix Adler founded *The National Child Labor Committee*.

The committee argued that long hours of work deprived children of an education and robbed them of a chance for a better future. Instead of preparing youngsters for useful lives as productive adults, child labor promised a future of illiteracy, poverty, and continuing misery.

They believed that a happy, healthy, normal childhood was the rightful heritage of all children.

In 1908 the National Child Labor Committee offered Lewis Hine a full-time job as an investigative photographer in its campaign to outlaw child labor.

As Hine traveled on assignment, he learned to pose as a salesman or fire inspector to gain access to a location. Once inside, he said he wanted to pose the children next to their machines "for a sense of scale".

If he was denied access he would wait outside for a change of shift and photograph the children as they exited and entered the gates... often the recipient of bullying and threats from suspicious factory police.

Hine traversed the United States again and again - sometimes logging 50,000 miles a year by train and automobile. He kept careful notes on all his images. He kept track of locations, childrens names and ages, and sometimes even quotes from the children themselves.

Callie Campbell, 11 years old, picks 75 to 125 pounds of cotton a day, and totes 50 pounds of it when her sack gets full. "No, I don't like it very much."

Laura Petty, a 6 year old berry picker on Jenkins Farm. "I'm just beginnin'. Licked two boxes yesterday." She gets 2 cents a box.

Nola McKinney, whose legs were cut off by a motor car in a coal mine in West Virginia when he was 14 years old.

One of the spinners in Whitnel Cotton Mill. She was 51 inches high. Has been in the mill one year. Sometimes works at night. Runs 4 sides - 48 [cents] a day. When asked how old she was, she hesitated, then said, "I don't remember", then confidentially, "I'm not old enough to work, but do just the same."

Fursen Owens, 12 years old. Can't read. Don't know A, B, C's. "Yes I want to learn but I can't when I work all the time." Been in mills 4 years.

In the segregated South, mill work was reserved for whites. Blacks were seldom hired.

Entire families left worn out farms for steady employment in the mills. Parents, often uneducated themselves, didn't want their kids "wasting time" by attending school.

Spinners had to be on their feet for eleven or twelve hour days, six days a week.

Mill workers often developed tuberculosis or bronchitis. Workplace accidents were common.

A boy working in a spinning mill was half as likely to reach 20 years old as a boy on the outside. Girls had even less chance.

In the coal mines of Pennsylvania Lewis Hine created some of his most haunting work.

Boys worked as miners, mule drivers, and gate tenders. But the youngest boys worked in the coal breakers outside the mines.

They spent long days in dangerous conditions perched on boards above flowing coal chutes, removing sticks and stones from the moving coal with their bare hands.

Hine noted: "The dust was so dense at times as to obscure the view. This dust penetrated the utmost recesses of the boy's lungs. A kind of slave-driver sometimes stands over the boys, prodding or kicking them into obedience."

"While I was there, two breaker boys fell or were carried into the coal chute, where they were smothered to death."

The fight to outlaw child labor in the United States was long and hard.

Thanks to the campaign waged by the National Child Labor Committee, fueled by Lewis Hine's powerful photographs, American public opinion turned against the practice of child labor, and the government responded.

The Keating–Owen Child Labor Act of 1916 was passed by Congress - only to be overruled as unconstitutional by The Supreme Court in 1918.

In 1918 Congress passed the Child Labor Tax Act - only to be overruled again by the Supreme Court in 1922.

Finally, in 1938 the Fair Standard Labor Act was passed, effectively ending the kinds of child labor Lewis Hine and the NCLC had worked so long and hard to end.

In 1940, at the age of 66, two years after seeing child labor become outlawed, Lewis Hine died.

The man who helped awaken America to the plight of the unfortunates died destitute and in relative obscurity. His money gone. His home foreclosed upon.

The Great Depression had decimated his modest life savings.

Years later America would begin to appreciate his monumental contribution not just to photography, but to American society itself.

Today, all Americans who don't have to spend their lives toiling in the dank recesses of coal mines, crouched in sun-stricken fields of agriculture, or in the mind-numbing grind of the factory floor owe a debt of gratitude to Lewis Hine and the National Child Labor Committee.