

AMERICAN HISTORY PLAY

# STOLEN CHILD



Circa 1911: This Lewis Hine photo shows young girls who work at a cotton mill.

# DHOODS

A century ago, 1.5 million kids worked long hours in dangerous factories, mines, and mills



## Words to Know

- **Industrial Revolution** (*n*): the sweeping change from a largely agricultural society to one dominated by mechanized industry, which started in England around 1750
- **sweatshop** (*n*): a factory where employees work in crowded, unsafe conditions for extremely low wages

## Characters

LEO, 11, a child laborer

FLOYD, 6, Leo's brother

MARTHA, 9, their sister

MR. BROWN, supervisor at a textile mill

\*LEWIS HINE, a photographer

ADVOCATE 1 } leaders at the National  
ADVOCATE 2 } Child Labor Committee

BOY, another child laborer

JOE, boss at a glassworks factory

NARRATORS A-E

\*Indicates a real person. All others are fictional composites.

## PROLOGUE

**Narrator A:** In the mid-19th century, the **Industrial Revolution** spread to the U.S. from England. Mines, factories, and **sweatshops** needed cheap labor to keep the machines running. Industry owners could pay kids less than adults, and kid-size hands were more adept with small machinery parts. By 1904, more than 1.5 million kids in the U.S. were working full-time.

**Narrator B:** As industries grew, people left farms for the cities. Immigrants also poured into industrial areas. The surplus of workers kept wages low, often just pennies a day. For poor families to put food on the table, every member—even small children—had to work.

## SCENE 1

**Narrator C:** It's 5 a.m. on a spring morning in 1904. Leo and Martha are trudging to work at a textile mill in Georgia. Their little brother, Floyd, skips along behind them.

**Leo:** Why are you so happy?

**Floyd:** I'm finally gettin' to work!

**Leo:** You'll soon wish you were at school instead.

**Floyd:** I want to be a spinner!

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**Martha:** Spinners are usually girls, and there's nothing fun about it.

**Narrator D:** Once at the factory, the kids go to work. Giant spinning machines wind cotton thread around hundreds of large spools called bobbins.

**Narrator E:** Leo, who sees a bobbin filling up, leaps onto the machine, takes off the full bobbin, and slides a new one into place.

**Mr. Brown:** Boy, you're not working fast enough. Step it up!

**Narrator A:** Down the aisle, a girl starts coughing loudly.

**Floyd:** What's wrong with her?

**Leo:** It's her lungs. Lots of kids cough around here.

**Narrator B:** The air inside textile mills is heavy with dust. Some kids develop serious or even fatal lung diseases from breathing it.

**Floyd:** How much longer do I have to sweep the floors?

**Leo:** The work day has just started. Ten more hours to go!

## SCENE 2

**Narrator C:** In 1904, a group of people concerned about such harsh working conditions forms the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC) in New York City.

**Narrator D:** In 1908, a New York schoolteacher named Lewis Hine

shows NCLC leaders photographs he has taken of children at work.

**Lewis Hine:** This child in Pennsylvania has burns all over his arms and legs from factory work.

**Advocate 1:** Have you had trouble getting inside these places?

**Hine:** I've had my scares, but it's worth the risk. Look at the boys in this picture. They were working 12-hour days in a coal mine. Not one of them knew how to read. They were malnourished too.

**Advocate 2:** Come work for us, Hine. Your photos will show people how hard life is for working kids.

**Advocate 1:** Just be careful. Mill owners will do anything to keep this stuff hidden. Without cheap labor, their profits would shrink.

**Narrator E:** Hine quits his teaching job and becomes the NCLC's chief crusader. He travels all over the country—up to 50,000 miles a year—photographing kids at work.

## SCENE 3

**Narrator A:** Floyd, now 10, is working in an aisle where Martha, now 13, is a spinner. Martha brushes lint from machinery and watches for breaks in the thread.

**Narrator B:** She sees a break and climbs up on the machine to tie the ends of the thread together.

Just then, Floyd starts coughing.

**Martha:** Are you sick?

**Floyd:** Nah, just wheezy.

**Narrator C:** Martha reaches into the machine, but she's distracted by her brother's cough. Suddenly, there's a clunk and an explosion of loose thread. Martha screams and falls to the floor.

**Mr. Brown:** What have you done?

**Narrator D:** He rethreads the bobbin and checks the machine for damage, barely glancing at Martha.

**Mr. Brown:** Get back to work!

**Floyd:** Let me help you up, Sis.

**Martha:** I'm OK.

**Narrator E:** But she isn't. Two of her fingers are badly mangled—and the damage is permanent.

## SCENE 4

**Narrator A:** Hine visits a glass-works factory in Virginia. The open furnaces make it 125 degrees inside. A smoky haze fills the room as boys run from place to place carrying searing-hot glass.

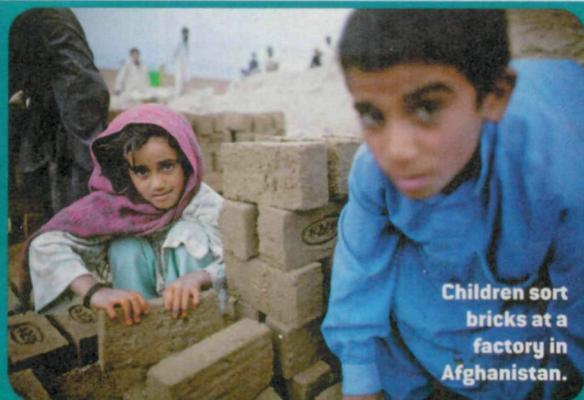
**Hine:** Hey lad, how about a photo?

**Boy:** Sorry, mister. Can't stop.

**Narrator B:** Hine sets up his tripod and focuses the camera. As the boy runs by again . . .

**Hine:** Hold it there!

**Narrator C:** The boy wipes sweat from his face and looks at the

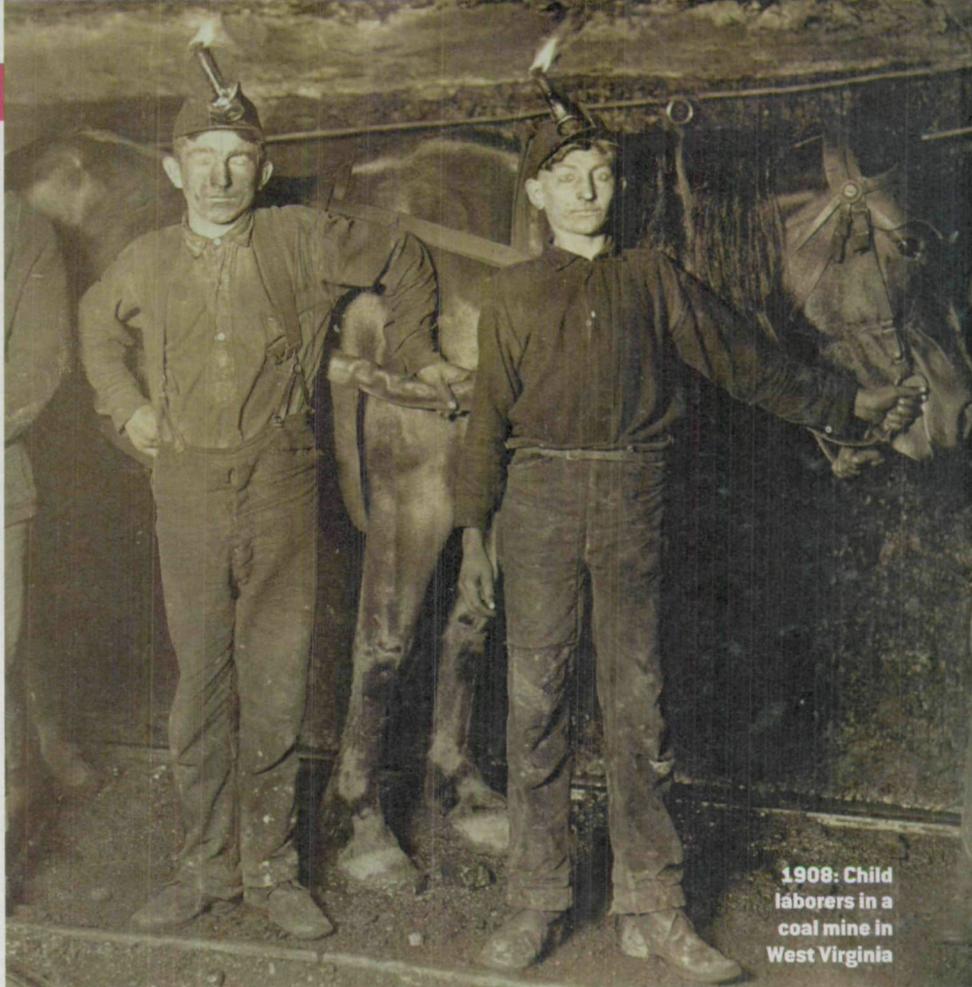


Children sort bricks at a factory in Afghanistan.

## CHILD LABOR TODAY

U.S. laws now bar kids from toiling in factories and mines, and at other industrial sites. But in many places around the world, no such safeguards exist. According to the International Initiative to End Child Labor, an estimated 211 million kids between ages 5 and 14 work—at least 60 million of them in dangerous or abusive conditions. In Asia and Africa, many kids have no choice but to haul bricks, harvest cocoa beans, weave fabric, or mine diamonds because their desperately poor families have sold them into bondage.

1912: A cotton mill worker in North Carolina after he lost two fingers in a machine accident



1908: Child laborers in a coal mine in West Virginia

camera. Hine takes a picture, but the burst of flame he uses to light the scene catches the boss's eye.

**Joe:** Hey! What are you doing?

**Hine:** I just took a photograph of one of your hardworking lads. Do you think it's right for children to work like this?

**Joe:** They're learning a skill.

**Hine:** They *should* be learning to read.

**Narrator D:** The boss grabs a long paddle used to take glass from the furnace. He shoves Hine with it.

**Joe:** Get outta here!

**Narrator E:** When the NCLC starts publishing Hine's photographs, people are stunned. As public outrage grows, factory owners are on the lookout for Hine.

**Narrator A:** He often disguises himself. At the textile mill where Martha works . . .

**Hine:** Hello, sir. I'm an industrial photographer hired to photograph your spinning machine. I'm told it's the biggest and best in the area.

**Mr. Brown:** Best in the state!

**Narrator B:** He leads Hine into the mill, where dozens of children are working. Hine sets up his camera.

**Hine:** Let's put a young worker next to the machine to give viewers an idea of how big it is.

**Mr. Brown:** You there. Come here!

**Narrator C:** A barefoot girl shyly

approaches, and the overseer leaves Hine to his work. As Hine takes the girl's photo, he notices her disfigured hand. It's Martha.

**Hine:** What happened?

**Martha (hiding her hand):** Nothing.

**Hine:** How long have you been working here?

**Martha:** I don't remember.

**Hine:** Do you go to school?

**Martha:** No, but I'd like to.

**Hine:** What do you do here?

**Martha:** I'm a spinner. My brother Leo works here too, on the bobbins. We had a little brother . . .

**Hine:** Had?

**Martha:** Floyd died—his lungs gave out. I'd better go back to work.

**Narrator D:** As he's leaving, Hine runs into the overseer.

**Hine:** Your machinery is impressive. Do you have many accidents?

**Mr. Brown:** Once in a while a finger gets mashed, but that's about it.

**Hine:** A lot of kids work here.

**Mr. Brown:** Yeah, but they're not expected to work hard. They like it.

**Narrator E:** Their expressions—which Hine has captured in his photographs—say otherwise.

## EPILOGUE

**Narrator A:** Hine spent more than 10 years documenting the harsh lives of child laborers. But change was slow in coming. In 1912, President William Howard Taft established the U.S. Children's Bureau to encourage reform. A few states passed child-labor laws but rarely enforced them.

**Narrator B:** In 1938, in large part because of Hine's work, the Fair Labor Standards Act was passed. It established a minimum wage and ensured safer working conditions for children. Hine died the same year. Today he is remembered as a fierce crusader against the exploitation of children. —Mack Lewis