

THE BITTER CRY OF THE CHILDREN

By John Spargo

*During the 1800s and early 1900s, children as young as 6 years old did dangerous work in factories for pitiful wages. In 1906, in his book *The Bitter Cry of the Children*, John Spargo exposed the grim lives of these children.*

Widespread abuse, Spargo argued, especially of immigrant children, required that the government step in to limit child labor. "If the nation is to receive these immigrants, the nation must accept the responsibility of protecting them," he wrote.

In 1916, Spargo and a host of other activists got results when Congress passed the nation's first federal legislation to protect young workers.

There are more than 80,000 children employed in the textile industries of the United States. Conditions are worse in the southern states than elsewhere, though I have witnessed many pitiable cases of child slavery in northern mills.

One evening, not long ago, I stood outside of a large flax mill in Paterson, New Jersey, while it disgorged its crowd of men, women, and children employees. All the afternoon, as I lingered in the tenement district near the mills, the comparative silence of the streets oppressed me. There were many babies and very small children, but the older children, whose boisterous play one expects in such streets, were wanting. . . . [But] at six o'clock, the [factory] whistles shrieked, and the streets were suddenly filled with people, many of them mere children.

"NO WONDER THE CHILDREN ARE STUNTED"

Of all the crowd of tired, pallid, and languid-looking children I could only get speech with one, a little girl who claimed 13 years, though she was smaller than many a child of 10. . . . She works in the "steaming room" of the flax mill. All day long, in a room filled with clouds of steam, she [stands] barefooted in pools of water twisting coils of wet hemp. . . . In the coldest evenings of winter [she], and hundreds of other little girls, must go out from the superheated steaming rooms into the bitter cold. . . . No wonder that such children are stunted and underdeveloped! . . .

8 • SCHOLASTIC SEARCH



The Granger Collection

"I COULD NOT DO THAT WORK AND LIVE"

According to the census of 1900, there were 25,000 boys under 16 years of age employed in and around the mines and quarries of the United States. In the state of Pennsylvania alone—the state which enslaves more children than any other—there are thousands of little "breaker boys" employed, many of them not more than 9 or 10 years old. . . .

Work in the coal breakers is exceedingly hard and dangerous. Crouched over the chutes, the boys sit hour after hour, picking out the pieces of slate and other refuse from the coal as it rushes past to the washers. From the cramped position they have to assume, most of them become more or less deformed and bent-backed like old men. . . . The coal is hard, and accidents to the hands, such as cut, broken, or crushed fingers, are common among the boys. Sometimes there is a worse accident: a terrified shriek is heard, and a boy is mangled and torn. . . .

I once stood in a breaker for half an hour and tried to do the work a 12-year-old boy was doing day after day, for 10 hours at a stretch, for 60 cents a day. I tried to pick out the pieces of slate from the hurrying stream of coal, often missing them; my hands were bruised and cut in a few minutes; I was covered from head to foot with coal dust, and for many hours afterwards I was [spitting] small particles of [coal] I had swallowed. I could not do that work and live, but there were boys of 10 and 12 years of age doing it for 50 and 60 cents a day.

Some of the [boys] had never been inside of a school; few of them could read. . . . I [was reminded] of the reply of the small boy to Robert Owen [a social reformer]. Visiting an English coal-mine one day, Owen asked a 12-year-old lad if he knew God. The boy stared vacantly at his questioner: "God?" he said, "God? No, I don't. He must work in some other mine." ■

WORKERS FROM THE 1900s. Employers often got away with paying women and children less than adult male workers. "It is a known fact that men's wages cannot fall below a limit upon which they can exist, but woman's wages have no limit," wrote Jacob Riis. And John Spargo described fathers who, unable to get a job, were forced to send their children to work. *Left to right: Women in a New York City hat factory; inside a New England shoe factory like the one in which Marie Van Vorst worked; "breaker boys" in a Pennsylvania coal mine, photographed by muckraking photographer Lewis Hine; a young boy carrying clothes in the garment district of New York City.*

THE WOMAN WHO TOILS by Marie Van Vorst

Marie Van Vorst spent many months working undercover in factories to learn about working women: "I laid aside for a time everything pertaining to the class in which I was born and bred and became an American working-woman." In 1903 she published *The Woman Who Toils*, a chronicle of her experiences.

"Ever worked before?" [the foreman asked me.]

"Yes sir."

"You come with me," he said cheerfully.

Two high desks rose in the workshop's center. Behind one of these I stood, whilst the foreman in front of me instructed my ignorance. The room was filled with high crates. These crates contained anywhere from 32 to 50 pairs of



The Granger Collection



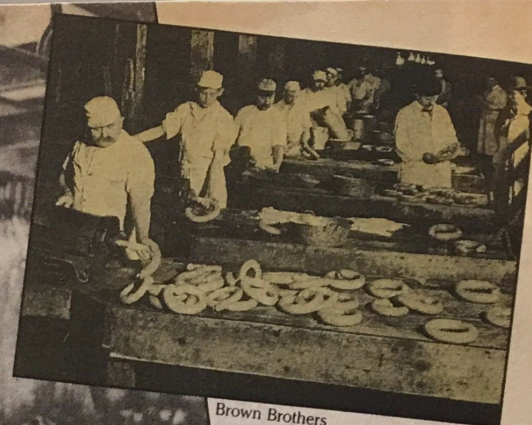
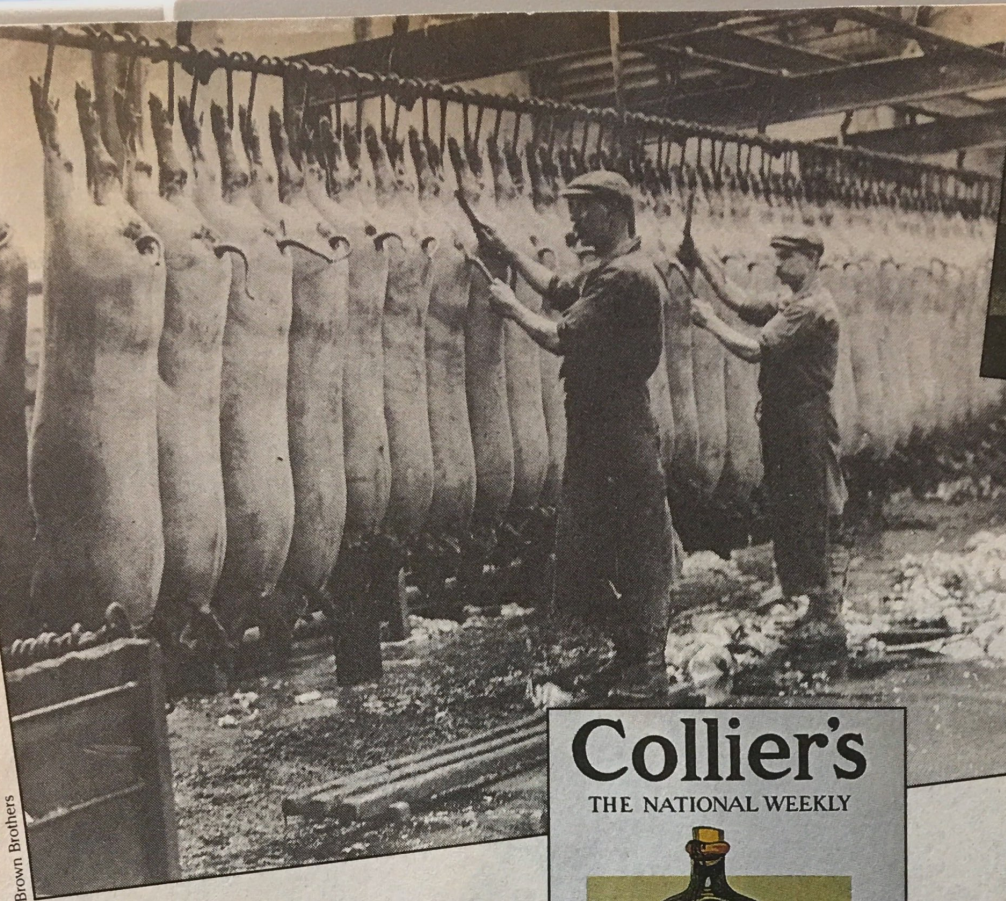
Brown Brothers

boots. . . . From the crate of boots rolled to my side, I took four boots and placed them on the desk before me. With the heel of one pressed against my breast, I dipped my forefinger in a glass of hot soap and water, water which soon became black as ink. I passed my wet, soapy finger all around the boot's edges, from toe to heel. . . . Then, with a bit of wood covered in Turkish toweling, I scraped the shoe between the sole and the vamp and with a third cloth, polished and rubbed the boot clean. In an hour's time, I did one third as well as my companion.

When my employer had left me, I observed the woman at my side: an untidy, degraded-looking creature, long past youth. Her hands begged description; their covering resembled not skin at all, but a dark-blue substance, leatherlike, bruised, ingrained, indigo-hued. . . . "Bobby" was not talkative or communicative simply because she had nothing to say. Over and over again, she repeated the one single question to me during the time I worked by her side: "Do you like your job?" And although I varied my replies as well as I could, I could not induce her to converse. . . .

At dinner time, I had stood, without sitting down once, for five hours, and had made the large sum of 25 cents, having cleaned a little more than 100 shoes. . . . I [then] went with my fellow workwomen and men [to a restaurant]. The place was so close and foul-smelling that eating was an ordeal. If I had not been so famished, it would have been impossible for me to swallow a mouthful. I bought soup and beans and ate ravenously. These patrons, mark well, are the rich ones, the swells of labor—able to squander 15 to 20 cents on their stew and tea. ■

Brown Brothers



Brown Brothers

PURE FOOD AND DRUGS, PLEASE! As Upton Sinclair was exposing the meat industry, Samuel Hopkins Adams was digging up dirt on the medicine industry. His articles disclosed that many medicines were laced with alcohol, opium, cocaine—as well as mercury and other poisons. *Clockwise: Meat-packing plant in Chicago; making sausage; Adams's story supporting the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906.*

SAUSAGE AND FILTH

SAUSAGE AND FILTH

There was never the least attention paid to what was cut up for sausage; there would come all the way back from Europe old sausage that had been rejected, and that was moldy and white—it would be dosed with borax and glycerine, and dumped into the hoppers, and made over again for home consumption.

There would be meat that had tumbled out on the floor, in the dirt and sawdust, where the workers had tramped and spit uncounted billions of consumption germs. There would be meat stored in great piles in rooms; and the water from leaky roofs would drop over it, and thousands of rats would race about on it. It was too dark in these storage places to see well, but a man could run his hand over these piles of meat and sweep off handfuls of the dried dung of rats. These rats were nuisances, and the packers would put poisoned bread out for them; they would die, and then rats, bread, and meat would go into the hoppers together. . . .

Under the system of rigid economy which the packers enforced, there were some jobs that it only paid to do once in a long time, [like] cleaning out the waste barrels. Every spring they did it; and in the barrels would be dirt and rust and old nails and stale water—and cartload after cartload of it would be taken up and dumped into the hoppers with fresh meat, and sent out to the public's breakfast. Some of it they would make into "smoked" sausage—but as the smoking took time, and was therefore expensive, they would call upon their chemistry department, and preserve it with borax and color it with gelatine to make it brown. They would stamp some of it "special," and for this they would charge two cents more a pound.

Collier's

THE NATIONAL WEEKLY



The Granger Collection

THE JUNGLE By Upton Sinclair

In 1906, Upton Sinclair published his novel *The Jungle* to awaken sympathy for workers in the Chicago meat-packing industry. But the book's great impact came mainly from its descriptions of the vile conditions under which meat bound for American homes was produced. The uproar created by the novel helped to pressure Congress into passing the Pure Food and Drug Act in the same year. Sinclair concluded that he had aimed at Americans' hearts, but hit them in their stomachs.

There was [one] interesting set of statistics that a person might have gathered in Packingtown—those of the various afflictions of the workers. . . . The workers [all] had their own peculiar diseases. The worker bore evidence of them on his own person—generally he had only to hold out his hand.

There were the men in the pickle rooms, for instance; scarce a one of these had not some spot of horror on his person. Let a man so much as scrape his finger pushing a truck in the pickle rooms, and he might have a sore that would put him out of the world; all the joints in his fingers might be eaten by the acid, one by one. Of the butchers and floor-men, the beef-boners and trimmers, and all those who used knives, you could scarcely find a person who had the use of his thumb; time and time again the base of it had been slashed, till it was a mere lump of flesh against which the man pressed the knife to hold it. The hands of these men would be criss-crossed with cuts, until you could no longer pretend to count them or trace them. . . .