

**Annals of the American Academy. 33: Sup. 73-8.**  
**March, 1909.**

Child Labor in the Textile Industries and Canneries of  
New England. Everett H. Lord.

Ever since the first cotton mill was established in New England, a little more than a century ago, the textile industries have

rapidly increased, and in the textile mills, which to-day are found in large numbers in every New England state, a large proportion of the operatives are young people. Probably in every factory town at least seventy-five per cent. of the children leave school as soon as they reach their fourteenth birthday, and almost one hundred per cent. of those who leave at this time go to work in the mills. That some escape from school before they are fourteen and enroll themselves among the workers is undoubtedly true, but the number probably is not great. The problem of child labor in the textile mill of New England does not primarily deal with very young children. It is true that during the past year a boy of nine years of age was found working in a Vermont woolen mill, and that a considerable number of children under the legal age have been found from time to time in mills in Maine, New Hampshire and Rhode Island. These, however, are sporadic instances and cannot be considered as characteristic of the industry.

Most manufacturers desire to comply with the law. They neither want children under fourteen in their mills nor do they wish to become law-breakers. The few who have little respect for the law are likely to be deterred from employing children because of almost certain detection and consequent punishment. The children who get into the mills under the age of fourteen do so usually through misrepresenting their age. In Maine, for instance, the law has required only that the employer demand of the child a certificate of some sort. It may be a copy of the town clerk's record, or a baptismal record, or a passport, and some employers have occasionally accepted certificates of doubtful authenticity.

When a child presents a paper covered with Syrian or Hebrew characters and assures the mill superintendent that the paper is his birth certificate, showing that he is over fourteen years of age, the superintendent may perhaps be excused if he relies largely upon the child's statement. In some cases, however, certificates obviously false have been accepted by employers, who have thus appeared to conform with the letter of the law, but have shown little regard for its intent. In other states the officials who have to pass upon the age of children have some-

times been similarly deceived, so that we have come to recognize as one of the most evident defects in our laws the method of proving the age of children. Until we can determine some other standard than that of years there will certainly be children of foreign birth considerably under the legal age at work in our mills and factories. A high educational test is likely to work hardship upon those children who come to this country at somewhat advanced age and who can hardly be expected to acquire in a year or two the English education demanded of children born on this side of the water. Perhaps some definite physical test, which shall show that the child is physically able to perform the work of the mill, without strict regard to the age in years, may be found to be the most satisfactory solution of this problem.

The vital problem connected with the employment of children and young people in the New England textile mills is probably not the physical one. Beginning their work when at least fourteen years of age, working in mills and factories, where the hygienic conditions are usually fairly good, and fortified by the invigorating climate of New England, it is not probable that a large proportion of even the younger operatives suffer greatly in respect to their health. It is true that those who have a predisposition to tuberculosis may develop it sooner under the conditions which prevail in the factory; similarly those who are particularly disposed to any disease may sooner suffer from its effects if they are deprived of the advantages of outdoor life and exercise. It does not appear, however, from a comparison of the young workers in factories with children of the same age in our public schools that the factory workers suffer more than do the school children.

The young factory workers do suffer, however, from woeful lack of education, and the evils consequent. Leaving the schools at fourteen, they take but little of the school training with them, and that little they are not likely to apply. Less than sixty per cent. of the children have completed the work of the grammar grades when they leave school. They have completed no course of study—they have only been in contact with some elements of culture, and have usually failed to absorb much from their con-

tact. Like the college boy whose mother said that "he had not taken trigonometry, but had been exposed to it," they have been exposed to a little elementary academic culture, but few, indeed, have taken any of it with them when they have left the school.

Even more serious than their slight academic education is their total lack of industrial training, for though most of the young workers rank considerably above the grade of illiterates, practically none of them have had any form of hand training or of the mental training which accompanies practical hand-work. This lack is felt keenly by many progressive employers, and in some of the mills of New England the employers are, at their own expense, providing industrial technical training for some of their young employees. The fact that in their mills the directive positions are practically all filled by men of foreign birth and education, indicates somewhat the need for immediate industrial training of the young workers. In these factories where the opportunity is being given to some of the young employees to continue their education the success of the experiment has been most encouraging. While the expense and the problems of supervision and direction are likely to deter many manufacturers from undertaking anything of the sort, it may be that the increased value of the workman and consequent greater return promised for the future will tend to make instruction of this sort more general. If children must be allowed to go to work at as early an age as fourteen, the state should still retain some hold upon them for a part of their time, requiring and aiding them to continue their education along industrial and some carefully correlated academic lines, until they reach the age of seventeen.

Investigations show that the children who enter textile mills remain in that industry, though they may and often do shift from mill to mill and from town to town. The work which is done in the mills is all of about the same grade and offers little to the adult wage earner; yet there seems to be no way out, and the workers continue their unskilled way, earning at thirty but little more than they did at fifteen and seeing before them a prospect of continually decreasing returns for their labors. The young workers are by no means altogether from the poorest homes. Many of them have parents who are in very comfortable cir-

cumstances and who could well afford to maintain their children until they had acquired a more complete education. Dissatisfaction with the school, a dissatisfaction to some extent justifiable, added to lack of foresight and parental ignorance or indifference accounts for the presence of the vast majority of the children in the mills. They gain neither in efficiency nor in earning power, but they have closed behind them the door to progress in other lines of employment which offer a fair living wage, and have associated themselves with the least enterprising class of our population. The state cannot remain indifferent to the needs of this large body of young people who have in them the making of good citizens, but whose citizenship is too often spoiled in the making.

The one industry in New England in which children are practically without legal protection is the canning industry in Maine. By an unfortunate exemption the law relating to child labor is made inapplicable to any manufacturing establishment the materials and products of which are perishable. It does not seem to have been considered by the legislators who established this standard that the children who were working in the canneries were also perishable. Surely it was not intended to rate children as cheaper than fish, for it is especially to the canning of fish that this law applied, yet that seems a logical deduction to draw.

Along the eastern coast of Maine there has grown up a great industry in competition with the sardine packers of France and southern Europe. The herring, which are found in great numbers along the coast, when properly prepared and canned, serve as a fairly passable substitute for sardines, and go into the market under that name. Years ago I visited a canning factory in which there were packed three different products, French sardines, brook trout, and mackerel, all of them being known as herring before they were canned. The fish are gathered in seines and weirs, and are taken in motor boats to the nearest factories. As soon as a load of fish is received at the factory the herring are taken out, cut to the required size, and placed upon flakes for drying and cooking. The cutting and flaking is commonly done by women and children. The fish

must be cut and cleaned as soon as they are delivered at the canneries. This may be in the early morning, or at any time during the day or evening, or even late at night. When a boat arrives, the cannery whistle blows for cutters, and whether they are at play in the streets or asleep in their beds matters not, the call must be obeyed, and the children go in troops to the shop. If work begins late in the day it may last until late at night, and in consequence it is not uncommon to see children of eight or ten years of age returning home from their work at midnight, perhaps to be called out again in the gray of the early dawn.

The operation of flaking is simple, and the children's deft fingers often can do more than can adults'. The flaked fish are taken to the ovens, where they are cooked in steam; then they are packed in the cans, a part of the work done entirely by women and children. The oil or mustard, or whatever flavor is to be given to the fish, is then placed in the cans, and they are passed through the topping machine, which is usually operated by a man and one or two boys. None of the work is particularly exhausting, and the rooms are usually open to the air. At the same time, the operatives frequently work long hours, as it is customary to can all the fish which may be at hand before stopping. In the busy seasons the factories sometimes run fifteen or sixteen hours at a stretch, and women and children remain as long as the factory is open. The surroundings, especially in the cutting room, are likely to be disgustingly dirty, but they are perhaps not unhealthful. The chief menace to the health lies in the irregularity of work and corresponding irregularity of home life.

It is impossible to say how many children are working in these canneries, but as a conservative estimate I should say that during the busy season not less than a thousand children under fourteen years of age are so employed. There are a good many children as young as eight or nine who work in the flaking rooms. These little ones do not always remain throughout the entire day, but as they are paid by the piece some of them stay until they have earned enough to satisfy them for the day, and then go to their homes. Others, either because of their own desire or because they may be required to remain, work as long as the fish

last. I have found one child of only five working in the packing room, usually employed as long as the other workers, and earning from eight to twelve cents per day.

In many of the sardine factories much machinery is used; the law does not require the safeguarding of this machinery as it does in other factories, and a child worker has to take upon himself "the risks of his employment." If he is injured, the employer is not liable for damages. In one instance, recently reported, a girl, only nine years of age, lost her hand while playing about a drier; No damages could be recovered; the girl was supposed to know that the machine was dangerous, and had no business to be playing near it.

Sardine canning is a seasonal industry, and this is urged by some as extenuation for the employment of children. They say the children are engaged only during vacation seasons, and so are not necessarily deprived of school facilities. The season, however, lasts from April 15 to December 15, leaving only four months of the year when the children are free from the call of the factory. As a matter of fact, I believe that this seasonal employment is one of the worst features of the business, involving as it does a long period of idleness, and setting before the children the example of their elders, who quite commonly rely upon their season's work for their entire support. Spending the winter months in idleness and dissipation, the parents are not likely to insist upon sending their children to school during these free months, and the children are certain to acquire ways of irregularity which are fatal to worthy industrial habits.

The moral atmosphere of the sardine factory is far from wholesome. Washington County, in which nearly all the canneries are located, is reported to have had more juvenile criminals in its courts during the past twenty years than any other county in Maine, and probably seventy-five per cent. of these young criminals have been sardine workers. Few of them are native born; indeed, few of them have permanent residence in the county or the state. The industry attracts a low grade of workers from a wide section, many coming from Canada. This makes the problem much more difficult for the local town authorities; their schools are not prepared to receive great numbers

of children from other localities, and so the truant officers seldom visit the factory camp. The old residents look upon the factory workers with a good deal of contempt, and feel unwilling to interfere in their behalf. The churches find the problem so hopeless that they have largely abandoned it, and until the state extends its protection there seems little prospect for improving the present evil conditions.