

CHILD LABOR IN GULF COAST CANNERIES: PHOTOGRAPHIC INVESTIGATION MADE FEBRUARY, 1911

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A line of canning factories stretches along the Gulf Coast from Florida to Louisiana. After many weeks spent in those canneries, I am convinced that, individually and as a "great and glorious people," we ought to be ashamed of ourselves. I have witnessed many varieties of child labor horrors from Maine to Texas, but the climax, the logical conclusion of the "laissez faire" policy regarding the exploitation of children is to be seen among the oyster-shuckers and shrimp-pickers of that locality.

Perhaps, in perfect fairness to all concerned, I should add that there are a few of these canneries that employ no children; but that's because *they are not in operation*.

By actual count of children at work, I found 125 boys and girls whom I judged to be from *three* to *eleven* years of age; and at least half of the canneries were working either a small crew or none at all on the days I visited them. This count I checked up constantly by means of ages given me by some of the children and their parents. From statements of age made by them, I have record of thirteen children *three* to *five* years old; twenty-five, *six* to *eight* years old; and fifteen, from *nine* to *eleven*; a total of fifty-three from three to eleven who told me their ages, and as I was getting photographs at the same time, too much questioning was hazardous.

We know that a child of three, or four, or five cannot do much consecutive work that has so little variety in it, but one is amazed and horrified to see how many minutes and hours of actual work these little tots do put in. The mother of three-year-old Alma told me proudly: "Yes, I'm learnin' her de trade." Grace and Maud, sisters, three and five years old, both help in the shucking, and they said the little one was "the fastest."

It is not at all rare to see four- and five-year-olds struggling

with the rough heavy shells and in the course of the day earning about five cents. The boss, pointing to one of these said: "Next year she'll work as steady as the rest." After they had gone home, I tried to get a photograph of Olga, a tiny five-year-old, who stubbornly refused to be taken. Her mother said, "she's ugly," but it seemed a case of physical weariness, as they had begun work rather early and she had been helping or hanging around her mother all day.

The earnings of the very little ones are not usually over five cents a day, but, as one can easily see, they are not only being kept out of mischief but are getting their early training. Bill, a bright little lad of five, said he made fifteen cents a day, and his mother added: "He kin when he wants to work, but he won't keep at it." Several of seven and eight years, earn from ten cents to "two bits." One eleven-year-old girl earns a dollar a day when shrimp are big; and one boy of twelve, who has been working for four years, made \$57.00 in three months last year. A fisherman told me that last year, on good days, his seven-year-old girl and nine-year-old boy each made 90 cents a day; and an eleven-year-old girl as much as \$1.25 a day.

Now, when you consider that in the glorious economy of things, under a kind of industrial scientific management, these children put in the winter months here, and the summer up in New Jersey, Delaware and Maryland, picking berries and making the most of other opportunities to work, you will find that few of the fifty-two weeks are wasted. The question of education has not entered into this whole proposition to any appreciable extent.

Then what do you suppose these little ones do for recreation? Of course if they can keep at work all day, they do; but if they cannot, *they tend the baby*. The pathos of the baby-tender, in such a situation, is unsurpassed. You see little ones, from four years upward, working until physical strain and monotony become unendurable, and then, for relief, go over into the corner and rock the baby or tote it around until they feel like working again. Mary, an active little child of eight, told me: "I shucks six pots a day when I don't got the baby wid me, an' two pots if I got him."

I wish I could take you into one of these long, dingy shuck-sheds at *three o'clock* some cold, damp morning. You would

find several hundred women and children (perhaps one or more, out of five, being under twelve years of age) lined up on both sides of the low cars of oysters which have just been steamed so they may be more easily opened.

The shucking is a simple process, deadening in its monotonous simplicity, and as the bodies of the workers sway back and forth with rhythm, concentrated on the job, one is reminded forcibly of sweatshop scenes in large cities. The hard jagged oyster-shells which they handle and upon which they stand, do not minister to physical comfort. From three or four in the morning, they work (on busy days) until about four in the afternoon, and sometimes they have a short lunch period at noon. In many factories they snatch their bite of lunch as best they can while the work goes on and the others are getting ahead of them.

I could not ascertain, but it can easily be imagined, what kind of breakfast these people and the children start the day upon, at such an early hour, which varies often from day to day as the catch fluctuates. Some of the children work from three or four o'clock until school time and also on Saturdays.

The irregularity of work is much greater in the packing of shrimp as the catch is so easily delayed by adverse weather conditions. The workers do not begin quite so early in the morning, and one manager told me that because the acid in the shrimp affects the fingers of the pickers, it is not possible for the best of them to work much over six hours. It is a common sight to find the children with swollen and bleeding fingers, but still keeping bravely at it. In the evening they harden the fingers in a solution of alum to get ready for the next day.

In one of the Louisiana factories, I saw a sign, conspicuously posted, bearing the legend: "Children Under Fourteen Years not Permitted to Work in This Factory," and I asked the manager what it meant. "Oh," he said, "that's the law, but if the factory inspector herself should come down here, I'd tell her, 'You put 'em out,' and see what she'd do about it." In the shucking-room, the boss said: "Why it'd take a sheriff all his time to keep the kids from workin'."

To one who has ever taught school, it is a constant surprise to find how long these youngsters keep at such kinds of monotonous

work. In school, it requires a sheriff to keep them at work after the interest has begun to lag, and that period of interest in work is very short in the case of children under eight or ten. The teacher, in desperation, is often compelled to resort to all kinds of devices,—marks, stars, honor lists, and sometimes main strength and awkwardness. Consciously or unconsciously, the parents of these little workers have also resorted to many devices. In the first place, the child is born into, and afterward enveloped by an atmosphere of industry. The “mob-spirit” carries him along. One boss told me that unless the shrimp-pickers began working at a very early age, they never attained real proficiency. A mother said her small boy went to school when he didn’t work.

Another factor that helps keep the child at work so steadily is that of imitation. The surest way the boy can show his manly qualities seems to be by becoming a wage-earner, and it is to this that many parents appeal. One told me (of course in the hearing of the child of seven), “She can beat me shuckin’; and she’s good at housework too—but I mustn’t praise her too much.”

Then there is the element of competition. One child reaches a certain speed (which fact is freely circulated), and other children try long and hard to beat it. Often have I heard down there, as I heard it in the cotton-mill districts: “She can do more work than her older sister.”

Many a child is controlled by the mere blind obedience to parental authority, modified and accentuated as it so often is by fear of punishment or ridicule. Think of a mother urging on her five-year-old boy by saying: “He’s lazy; could earn fifteen cents a day if he’d only work.”

Most of the children I have questioned say they would rather work than go to school. Recently I was laying some evidence of this nature before a superintendent of schools, a man who seemed fairly progressive, when he turned on me with the query: “Are they happy?” and I admitted that many of them seemed to be. “Are they healthy?” he continued; and I acknowledged that in spite of all the difficulties and irregularities in their lives, they seemed to be rather healthy. “Well,” he commented, “what are you worrying about then?” So many times have social workers told me that photographs of healthy, happy children do not make effective appeals in our child labor work, that I am sometimes inclined to

think that we must mutilate these infants in industry before the shame of it can be driven home. The horror of placing an industrial mortgage upon the back of a perfectly good child does not seem to be obvious.

We are willing to admit that the difficulties surrounding the owners of these factories are many and great. The help is fluctuating, seasonal, difficult to please, and it is so essential. Moreover many families cannot be persuaded to go South for the winter unless the children are permitted to work. The whole situation is analogous to that of our famous servant problem in the home. Nevertheless, the owners are already alive to the fact that public opinion is not on their side; at times it was very difficult for me to get photographs for this reason. When the owners attack the difficulties of this problem with the same keenness with which they have gone into the questions of improved machinery and housing conditions, and when they unite upon the stand they must take (for it is unfair to give any of their competitors the chance to employ younger children than they can), then will the improvement be attained. They cannot afford to blink the truth, nor can we afford to let them. For that reason, I think the forces that will educate them to the necessity for this stand, will be those of radical and efficient legislation and inspection, demanded by vigorous public opinion.