Lewis Hine

BORN: September 26, 1874 • Oshkosh, Wisconsin
DIED: November 3, 1940 • Hastings-on-Hudson, New York

Photographer; social reformer

“I wanted to show things that had to be corrected.”

Lewis Wickes Hine was a teacher-turned-reformer who exchanged his classroom for a camera and set about changing the world, one child at a time. Hine’s most famous photos featured children at work—in fields, factories, mills, and anywhere else young children were forced to work. His photographs were not effective because he was expertly skilled, but because the raw quality of his work reinforced the tone of harshness and despair that accompanied child labor. He was a pioneer in the field of photography as art.

Hine also used his talent to document relief efforts after World War I (1914–18), the construction of the Empire State Building, and the plight of women workers in the 1930s. Because of Hine’s work, America has a recording of its evolution throughout the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era. The Gilded Age was the period in history following the Civil War and Reconstruction (roughly the final twenty-three years of the nineteenth century), characterized by a ruthless pursuit of profit, an exterior of showiness and grandeur, and immeasurable political corruption. The Progressive Era was the period that followed the Gilded Age.
(approximately the first twenty years of the twentieth century); it was marked by reform and the development of a national cultural identity.

The student becomes the teacher

Lewis Hine was born in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, on September 26, 1874. His father, Douglas Hull Hine, was a veteran of the Civil War (1861–65). Hine’s mother, Sarah Hayes Hine, was a teacher. Douglas Hine died in an accident in 1892, forcing Hine to find his first job at the age of eighteen. He found work in a furniture upholstery factory and worked thirteen hours a day, six days a week. This exhausting schedule (seventy-eight hours weekly) earned him $4 a week.

Over the course of the decade, Hine worked several odd jobs. Every job was virtually the same: long hours and little pay. These frustrating experiences gave Hine firsthand knowledge of the world of the working-class poor. He worked alongside child laborers; he knew their lives intimately. This knowledge motivated him to want to make a positive change for children.

Hine wanted something better for himself as well, so he enrolled in extension courses at the University of Chicago while still living in Oshkosh. During this time, he met Frank Manny, a professor at the State Normal School in Oshkosh. Manny saw in Hine ability fueled by motivation, and he encouraged Hine to pursue his education. Hine became a teacher and had the great fortune to study with two of the most famous educators of the era: Ella Flagg Young (1845–1918), who became the first female superintendent of an American school in 1909; and John Dewey (1859–1952; see entry), an education reformer.

When Manny took a job as superintendent of New York’s Ethical Culture School in 1901, he hired Hine to be the nature study and geography teacher. Manny unknowingly set Hine on a path that would change his life when, in 1903, he gave Hine a camera to use as an experimental teaching tool. Hine was immediately fascinated with the camera and taught himself how to use it. Almost instantly, Hine realized the power of a photograph to tell a story. Throughout his life, he would improve his picture-taking technique and experiment with various styles of photography.

Creates first photo documentary

Hine designed a project for his students, most of whom were immigrants (people who permanently moved from one country to another) from
Eastern Europe. The purpose of the project was to teach the children respect for the multicultural atmosphere that filled New York during the early 1900s. In an effort to help his students understand the impact immigration was having not only on the immigrants themselves but also on American culture, Hine made several trips with his camera to Ellis Island, the port of entry for immigrants who crossed the Atlantic Ocean. The first of these trips took place in 1904; the last, in 1909.
With each visit to Ellis Island, Hine instinctively knew he was embarking on a journey that would seriously affect his life. By the time the documentary was completed, Hine had gathered together a large collection of photographs related to the immigrant experience. These photos were eventually published in various books.

Hine married Sarah Rich in 1904 (they would have one son, Corydon, in 1912) and continued teaching at the Ethical Culture School until 1908. In 1905, he completed work on his master's degree in pedagogy (the study of strategies, techniques, and approaches used in the classroom) and graduated from New York University. Despite this busy schedule, Hine managed to establish a sideline income by submitting photos on a regular basis to educational magazines, including *Elementary School Teacher* and the *Photographic Times*. He wanted to encourage other educators to use photography as an educational tool.

During this time, Hine attended the Columbia School of Social Work, where he met Arthur Kellogg (1878–1934), business manager of a social commentary magazine called *Charities and the Commons*.Establishing a friendship with Kellogg was a turning point in Hine's career. In 1907, he was hired to photograph various aspects of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a major industrial city with a focus on the steel industry. The magazine was investigating social and working conditions in Pittsburgh as part of a survey; Hine would supply the photos. His participation in this project, which encompassed two years, led him to capture the worklife of laborers and the issues surrounding them, such as industrial accidents, work conditions, and industrial employment of women. Hine also documented the health, recreational, and educational aspects of the lives of these residents of Pittsburgh.

The results of this investigative report were published in three special issues of *Charities and the Commons* throughout the spring of 1909. The completed Pittsburgh Survey, published in six volumes, became the model of “modern” social research. That same year, Hine left the world of teaching when he accepted a paid position on the staff of the magazine, as its photographer.

**Joins the National Child Labor Committee**

In 1908, Hine joined the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC), an organization dedicated to regulating child labor. The NCLC was not popular among the big businesses of America’s industrial society. Companies depended on child labor to maximize their profits. For pennies a day,
managers and owners could—and did—squeeze ten or more hours of work out of a child. If forced to hire adults to do the same jobs children were capable of doing, companies would make less money. The bonus of hiring child laborers was that they were less likely to complain about poor working conditions, and even less likely to strike (refuse to work unless specific conditions were met).

Child labor was common in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1900, nearly 20 percent of all children in the country between the ages of ten and fifteen worked. Some industries, such as coal mining and agricultural-based businesses (for instance, orchards and other farms), hired children as young as five to do simple, repetitive tasks. The workday began before dawn and did not end until sundown. During busy seasons, the hours were even longer. In addition to the jobs held inside factories and mills, thousands of very young children performed work at home, such as sewing and cigar-rolling, in their tenements (run-down apartments). Most child laborers gave up their schooling for the mere pennies they earned; they were forced to exchange their futures for dismal, miserable childhoods.

By the second decade of the twentieth century, some states had their own child-labor laws. Because the practice of using children as laborers was a cornerstone of big business, however, industrialists and other businessmen refused to adhere to the laws. Unfortunately, many child laborers could not count on protection from their parents, either. Parents often lied about their children’s ages and looked the other way when employers expected children to work longer hours than permitted by law. What was needed was federal regulation, which would not be enacted until the 1930s.

In the meantime, Hine helped child-labor reform move forward by traveling throughout America, photographing children working under unimaginable conditions. Usually he would disguise himself in order to gain entry to the factories, mines, fields, and mills where he found the children. Had his identity been discovered, his life would have been in danger. Social reform was going to occur only at the cost of big-business profits, and no company owner was going to let that happen without a fight. To get into a company, Hine would pose as a Bible salesman or an equipment and machinery inspector.

Once inside the business, Hine would engage children in conversation and quickly note their ages, jobs, and any other information he felt was important. In those instances when he could not gain entry to the
workplace, he would wait outside—sometimes all day or night—for the children to leave. As they did so, he would try to gather information, but more importantly, he would photograph them, with or without knowing his subjects’ information.

A mere glimpse at the children featured in Hine’s photographs told the story of their lives. Hine understood the power of perspective, light, and position in photography, and he used a combination that left no doubt in viewers’ minds that the children they were looking at led lives of misery and neglect. Going against the common photography style of the day, which had subjects gazing past the camera so as to appear as if they were not actually posing for a portrait, Hine would tell the children to look directly at the camera. In doing so, Hine made sure that when viewers looked at the children, the children were looking back at
the viewers. The impact of these photos on the child-labor cause was intense.

Hine had his photos published in magazines throughout the country, but he also published them in books and pamphlets, on posters and in bulletins. He traveled the country presenting them in slide lectures and exhibitions. In doing so, the reformer made sure to reach audiences at every level, whether their interests lie in reading or attending cultural events. Hine knew he had to appeal to the segment of the public that wielded the power to implement change.

Hine was not alone in his attempts to promote reform via a camera lens. Immigrant reporter Jacob Riis (1849–1914; see box) had done for tenement housing what Hine eventually achieved for child labor. Riis’s photographs of immigrant slums in New York City brought to the public the plight of the city’s poor. Although they were of two different generations, both Riis and Hine dedicated their lives toward eliminating poverty and improving the lives of America’s lower class.

Becomes an interpretive photographer

Hine’s photographs helped the NCLC achieve its goals. When the public pressured lawmakers into passing protective legislation for child laborers, the NCLC no longer needed Hine. More and more states began passing not only child-labor laws but also mandatory education laws. Although federal protection would not be in place until the 1930s, the NCLC knew they were on the road to serious reform, and their star photographer’s contribution had paved the way. Hine left the NCLC in 1917 to pursue a freelance (self-employed) career.

Hine worked with the Red Cross in 1918 to document the postwar relief efforts in Europe. In 1919, he organized exhibitions for the American Red Cross Museum. For the next six years, Hine was hired by various organizations to help their cause. Among them were the Boy and Girl Scouts, the National Tuberculosis Commission, and the
Jacob Riis emigrated from Denmark to America in 1870, at the age of twenty-one. He immediately loved his new country but was concerned about conditions in the cities. He became a reporter for the *New York Evening Sun* and quickly became known as a pioneer of photojournalism. Riis took his own photos to accompany stories he wrote about situations he saw in his new country.

Riis began photographing and documenting conditions in the city’s slums. He collected his work in a groundbreaking book entitled *How the Other Half Lives*. The book, published in 1890, brought Riis to the attention of an influential man who would one day be the twenty-sixth president of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919; see entry), then New York Police Board of Commissioners president, and Riis became fast friends. Together, they spearheaded the housing-reform movement.

Riis is credited with bringing to the forefront the plight of America’s urban poor. His two other photojournalism books are *Children of the Poor* (1892) and *Children of the Tenements* (1903).

Riis’s photojournalism efforts matched a new type of journalism called muckraking. Muckrakers exposed scandalous and unethical practices among established institutions in America. Some of the more famous muckrakers were Ida Tarbell (1857–1954), for her series on the Standard Oil Company; Upton Sinclair (1878–1968; see entry), for exposing the dangers and poor working conditions of the meatpacking industry in Chicago; and Lincoln Steffens (1866–1936), for his investigation of the scandals among city and state politicians. Muckrakers worked side by side with reformers throughout the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era.
Tenement House Commission. For his photography achievements, Hine was awarded the Art Directors Club of New York Medal in 1924.

Hine promoted himself as an “interpretive” photographer throughout the 1920s. He organized traveling exhibitions of his photograph collections for much of the decade. As the era’s most popular photographer, his exhibitions were in demand, especially in New York City.

Beginning in the 1920s, Hine used his camera to depict the working conditions for women across the country. He photographed women in the workplace as part of a famous series called the Shelton Loom Series. Hine’s photos for that project were published on the cover of Western Electric News. As part of his efforts, and with a clarity that indicates he was a man ahead of his times, Hine included photographs of homemakers (women who did not work outside the home) because he believed they deserved the same recognition as their workplace counterparts.

**Climbs the Empire State Building**

Hine received one of his most prestigious commissions in 1930, when he was hired to document the construction of New York’s Empire State Building. From May to November of that year, the fifty-six-year-old photographer climbed stairs, balanced himself on beams suspended hundreds of feet in the air, and dangled himself over the bustling city streets—all in search of the perfect photo.

Hine thought nothing of hanging one hundred stories above the ground to capture just the right angle on any one of hundreds of riveters, welders, and bricklayers. The building was constructed in record time. Over the course of just one year and forty-five days, at a rate of four-and-one-half stories a week, the Empire State Building was completed. Its official opening was on May 1, 1931. Many of Hine’s photos from that project were published in 1932. The book, *Men at Work*, received great acclaim by reviewers and readers alike.

Hine photographed other major events in the 1930s, including the 1933 Chicago World’s Fair. That same year, he was hired by the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) to photograph the construction of some dam sites. (The TVA was a government-controlled operation that provided flood control, electricity, and economic development in the Tennessee River Valley.) That assignment ended when Hine’s photos were published without giving him credit.
The end of the road

After the problem he encountered with the TVA, Hine sought out photographer Roy Stryker (1893–1975) in 1935 to seek advice about getting control of the rights to his photos. At the time, Stryker was head of the historical section of the Farm Security Administration (FSA). As America was experiencing its worst economic situation in history throughout the 1930s, the FSA was organized to assist farmers whose livelihoods had been devastated by the Great Depression (1929–41). Stryker told Hine to keep the negatives to all his photos as proof that he indeed owned them.

At the same time, Stryker was asked by President Franklin D. Roosevelt (1882–1945; served 1933–45) to select a handful of photographers to travel to America’s rural heartland and document the struggles
of its people during the Depression. Although Stryker told Hine about the job and Hine expressed deep interest in the project, Stryker kept coming up with excuses as to why he would not select Hine. Stryker never had any intentions of sending Hine on the mission; he told a friend that Hine was past his prime. The new, modern photography was of places and buildings, not of people. His encouragement of his fellow photographer was only out of pity.

Perhaps in response to Stryker’s suggestion that he try photographing urban and rural subjects without people, Hine spent the next couple years photographing machines. This change in subject matter allowed Hine to experiment with his style. The result was a collection of prints that perfectly reflected industrial America: Man had been replaced by machinery.

Hine was lead photographer of the National Research Project of the Works Project Administration (WPA) in 1936 and 1937. The WPA had been established in 1935 to continue providing relief for those Americans hit hardest by the Depression. It provided jobs to the unemployed at a time when work was hard to find. In 1939, Hine arranged for a small exhibition of his work at New York City’s Riverside Museum. Although the show was a success, it did not bring Hine the work he so desperately wanted. He was a portrait photographer without work. He died, penniless, in New York on November 3, 1940. Hine was a man whose work had outlived its usefulness: his photos were meant to inspire social reform, but by the 1930s, that reform had happened. Therefore, his particular form of photography no longer had any use. Yet his work provides detailed insight into a country that was changing by leaps and bounds, often at the expense of its people.

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