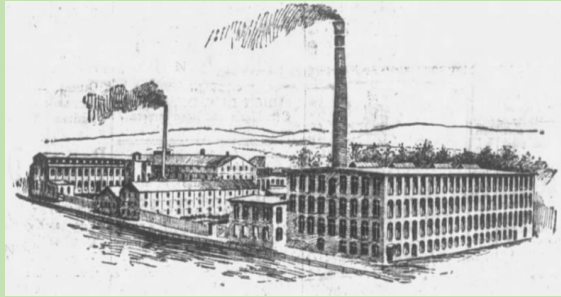


WORK FOR THE YOUNG GIRLS

WHEN?
1880s to 1920s

WHERE?
Wilkes-Barre area



EVENT
Factory work

VOCABULARY
wraith-like
black lung
white lung
bobbins
round-shouldered

Those young boys who worked in the breakers and those who worked underground faced lung disease called “black lung”. Young girls and women who worked in the spinning mills and dress factories were subjected to “white lung”. The young girls who worked the 10-12 hour shifts on the floors often began work at age 10 while some were younger. They were prized because they had nimble fingers needed to work the machines. The spinning bobbins created lint clouds so thick it was sometimes difficult to see from one end of the factory to the other. Workers



coughed continually trying to rid the deadly dust from their mouths and lungs. Pneumonia and tuberculosis plagued the workers (Gourley 71).

Mother Jones a leader of labor reform and organizer of those who labored under oppressive conditions. She was a fierce opponent of child labor. Often called in the press by her nickname “the most dangerous woman in America”, she stirred labor unrest speaking up for those who were too tired, too young, or too afraid to speak for themselves. The working girls were one of her many concerns about child labor.

Catherine Gourley, in her book *Working Girls*, notes that in 1915 a young Wilkes-Barre girl by the name Sarah Atherton was asked to “complete a study of wage-earning girls under the age of sixteen in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, for the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC)” (40).

Atherton opened her report with the following:

“Once the Wyoming Valley was covered with unbroken forest, the horizon was clear except for the wraith-like smoke of stray Indian camp fires.

Later it was planted with farms and orchards. There arose the smoke from chimneys of the early Connecticut settlers. Now it is filled from end to end with mining towns. The horizon, night or day, is never free from white smoke and steam” (Gourley 40).

Textiles mills that worked with cotton, silk, lace, and factories that manufactured tinware were all found in the city and surrounding area. Mill work often required repetitive motions that dulled the mind and squeezed the muscles until the pain was chronic. The girls worked in the summer heat without fresh air. The loud rhythmic noise of the machines meant that the girls had to virtually scream if they wanted to be heard, and their hearing would be impaired for the rest of their lives. Some were stooped over until the round-shouldered slouch became the way they walked to work and walked home.

Grouley uses Atherton's report to write about a young girl in a tin mill. She notes, "Her single task was to cut and press fasteners for bucket handles. With her right foot she shoved the needle. Down came the stamp. She moved the tin about under the stamp, cutting the entire sheet, *'like using all the dough when stamping out biscuits,'* observed Atherton. Over and over, she repeated the motion, cutting eight to ten thousand fasteners a day, each time always careful, not to stamp her fingers as well as the tin" (44). She did not control the speed of the machine; the machine controlled the speed of her fingers hour after hour, day after day.



Many of the girls were part of families that had come from foreign lands like Russia, Italy, Greece, Ireland, Poland in search of a way of life that would benefit them in ways they could not see happening in their home countries. Unfortunately, the dream did not match the reality they had envisioned. Their families were part of the reason Wilkes-Barre was growing quickly at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. By 1910 the city population was at 67,105 and 10 years later it would be over 73,000. The county population was over 390,000 even though in 1878 Luzerne county had been carved up into Wyoming, Susquehanna, Bradford, and Lackawanna. Population was increasing rapidly as were the number of business and industrial sites.

The young girls were absorbed by the factories disappearing into the shroud of smoke and steam. Atherton had trouble dealing with what she had witnessed. "There can never be quite silenced the hum of that machinery," she wrote, "the picture will not be utterly erased of hands that go back and forth through hours, days, and years" (Grouley 44).

ONLINE RESOURCES

[Wilkes-Barre Lace Mill](#)

[Times Leader 2007](#)

PRINT RESOURCES

Gourley, Catherine. Good Girl Work. Brookfield Connecticut: Milbrook Press: 1999.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

1. Choose a picture of a young girl in a mill and portray her in a one-person monologue.
2. Choose several pictures to create a slide show to demonstrate the work the young girls did.