

Child Labor in Pennsylvania

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Abstract

This curriculum unit introduces students to the subject of child labor and is designed to be used on a stand-alone basis in social studies classes or in American history courses during coverage of the Progressive Era. Although applicable to students of various ages, the curriculum unit has fifth grade students in mind. They will develop an understanding of child labor through photographs, diaries, and interviews with children who worked in the past in coal mines, textile mills, factories, and on street corners in Pennsylvania.

Historically, children have always worked in homes and the fields of family farms or plantations. Starting in the early nineteenth century, children also began to labor outside the home and their earnings contributed significantly to family income. The issue of child labor eventually spurred investigations and calls for regulation. Students will learn of the role of such reform groups as the National Child Labor Committee, the passage of legislation limiting the employment of youngsters, but also divisive opinions on the issue (for example, working class families could not afford to not have their children working and employers also wanted such cheap labor). The curriculum unit raises the issue of the persistence of child labor in our own times.