

Breaker Boys

In 1906, John Spargo published his book, *The Bitter Cry of Children* which described the working conditions of young children in our factory system. What was it like to be a breaker boy? His description will help you find out.

Work in the coal breakers is very hard and dangerous. Crouched over chutes, the boys sit hour after hour picking out slate and other waste from the coal as it rushes past to the washers. Because they sit crouched for many hours, most of the boys become more or less bentbacked, like old men.

The coal is hard, and accidents to the hands—such as broken or crushed fingers—are common. Sometimes there is a worse accident: a terrified shriek is heard, and a boy is mangled in the machinery or disappears in the chute to be picked out later, smothered and dead. Clouds of dust fill the air and are inhaled by the boys, leading to asthma and other breathing problems.

I once stood in a breaker for half an hour. I tried to do the work a 12-year-old boy was doing for 10 hours each day for 60 cents a day. The gloom was horrible. Outside, the sun shone brightly, the air was clear. Within the breaker there was blackness. Clouds of deadly dust covered everything. The harsh grinding of the machinery and the ceaseless rushing of coal through the chutes filled the ears.

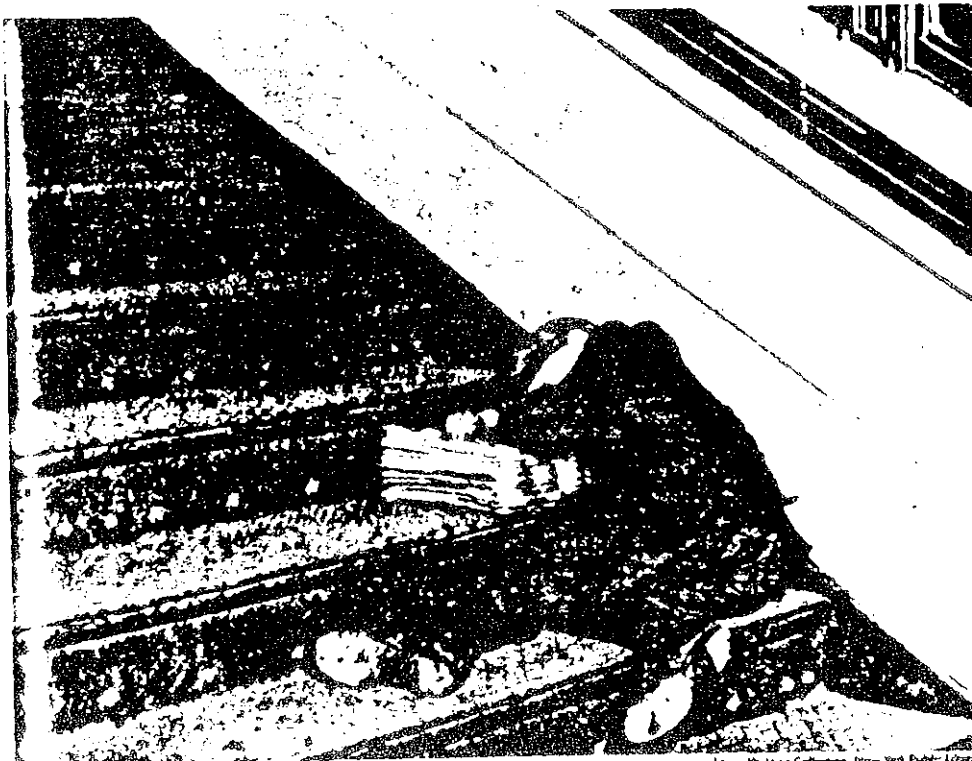
From the breakers, the boys graduate to the mine depths. Here, the work is more dangerous. In the mines of West Virginia, boys of nine or 10 are frequently employed. I met one little fellow 10 years old who was employed as a trap boy. He would sit alone in a dark mine passage, standing in water or mud that covered his ankles. He was often chilled by the winds that rushed in when he opened the trap door for the mules to pass through. He worked 14 hours straight, waiting, opening and shutting the door and waiting again, for 60 cents a day..

Wickes who was hired by the National Child Labor Committee in 1908 as part of a project to end abuses in the child labor system of the early 20th century.



In Loudon, Tennessee, in 1910, Hine captured the adult behavior of two girls (right) intent on their tasks. His notes record: "Two of the tiny workers, a raveler and a looper, in Loudon Hosiery Mills."

Photography Collection, Albert O. Kuhn Library & Gallery, U. of Maryland Baltimore County



In Jersey City, New Jersey, this young newsboy (left) was caught dozing off in the early morning hours on the subway steps. Hine wrote: "One of many young newsboys selling late at night (1:30 a.m.). He and others seek sleep in the car barn these bitter winter nights."

Levine W. Fong Collection, New York Public Library

Free Children Enslaved

From John Spargo's book, *The Bitter Cry of Children*, comes this revealing account of boys working in a bottle factory. Spargo was one of the first to draw attention to the exploitation of labor among the youth in this nation and the destruction of their young bodies and spirits. The following is based upon his visit to a bottle factory.

I shall never forget my first visit to a glass factory that night. It was a big wooden structure, so loosely built that it afforded little protection from drafts, surrounded by a high fence with several rows of barbed wire stretched across the top. I went with the foreman of the factory and he explained to me the reason for the stockade-like fence. "It keeps the young imps inside once we've got 'em in for the night shift," he said. The "young imps" were, of course, the boys employed, about forty in number, at least ten of whom were less than twelve years of age. It was a cheap bottle factory, and the proportion of boys to men was larger than is usual in the higher grades of manufacture. Cheapness and child labor go together,--the cheaper the grade of manufacture, as a rule, the cheaper the labor employed. The hours of labor for the "night shift" were from 5:30 P.M. to 3:30 A.M. I stayed and watched the boys at their work for several hours, and when their tasks were done saw them disappear into the darkness and storm of the night. That night, for the first time, I realized the tragic significance of cheap bottles. One might well paraphrase [Thomas] Hood's lines and say:

"They are not bottles you idly break,
But human creatures' lives!"

In the middle of the room was a large round furnace with a number of small doors, three or four feet from the ground, forming a sort of belt around the furnace. In front of these doors the glassblowers were working. With long wrought-iron blowpipes the blowers deftly took from the furnace little wads of waxlike "metal" which they blew into balls and then rolled on their rolling boards. These elongated rolls they dropped into molds and then blew again, harder than before, to force the half-shaped mass into its proper form. With a sharp, clicking sound they broke their pipes away and repeated the whole process...

Then began the work of the boys. By the side of each mold sat a "take-out-boy," who, with tongs, took the half-finished bottles--not yet provided with necks--out of the molds. ~~Then other boys, called snapper-ups, took the~~ bodies of bottles in their tongs and put the small ends into gas-heated molds till they were red hot. Then the boys

took them out with almost incredible quickness and passed them to other men, "finishers," who shaped the necks of the bottles into their final form. Then the "carrying-in boys," sometimes called "carrier pigeons," took the red-hot bottles from the benches, three or four at a time, upon big asbestos shovels to the annealing¹ oven, where they are gradually cooled off to insure even contraction and to prevent breaking in consequence of too rapid cooling. The work of these "carry-in boys," several of whom were less than twelve years old, was by far the hardest of all. They were kept on a slow run all the time from the benches to the annealing oven and back again.

I can readily believe what many manufactures assert, that it is difficult to get men to do this work, because men cannot stand the pace and get tired too quickly. It is a fact, however, that in many factories men are employed to do this work, especially at night. In other, more up-to-date factories it is done by automatic machinery. I did not measure the distance from the benches to the annealing oven, nor did I count the number of trips made by the boys, but my friend, Mr. Owen R. Lovejoy, has done so in a typical factory and very kindly furnished me with the results of his calculation. The distance to the annealing oven in the factory in question was 100 feet, and the boys made 72 trips per hour, making the distance traveled in 8 hours nearly 22 miles. Over half of this distance the boys were carrying their loads to the oven. The pay of these boys varies from 60 cents to a dollar for eight hour's work. About a year ago I gathered particulars of the pay of 257 boys in New Jersey and Pennsylvania; the lowest pay was 40 cents per night and the highest a dollar and 10 cents, while the average was 72 cents.

The effects of the employment of young boys in glass factories, especially by night, are injurious from every possible point of view. The constant facing of the glare of the furnaces and the red-hot bottles causes serious injury to the sight; minor accidents from burning are common...

In some districts, especially in New Jersey, it has long been the custom to import boys from certain orphan asylums and "reformatories" to supply the demand of the manufacturers. These boys are placed in laborers' families, and their board paid for by the employers, who deduct it from the boys' wages. Thus a veritable system of child slavery has developed, remarkably like the old English pauper-apprentice system. "These imported boys are under no restraint by day or night," says [one observer], "and are wholly without control during the idle hours. They are in the streets in gangs, in and out of the police courts and the jails, a burden to themselves and to the community imposed by the demand of this boy-destroying industry."

¹ anneal: heat to strengthen by removing internal stress