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Mill Villages kids did better than their country cousins

This writer, in the early 1950s, talked with a man who had begun working in a mill when he was five years old. He had worked in the same mill, on the same job, for 58 years.

What were his working hours in those early years? From "can see to can't see," he said, describing the dawn to dusk grind.

Wages? He didn't know. He thought his mother most likely collected for his three brothers, two sisters and himself. None attended school a single day.

The mill-worker's most vivid childhood memory was being tied to the machinery because he wanted to play rather than stay with the job. When asked if he felt that he had "lost his childhood" under those conditions, he looked puzzled. Obviously, he had never thought about that.

And old tenant farmer listening nearby cackled out, "Oh, Henry had it good as the rest of us. They tied me to the plowstocks soon as I could reach 'em. Never saw no money one year to the next."

The tenant farmer's observation is a valid one, according to many studies of living conditions in the cotton mills. Whether the studies were made by universities, the National Civic Foundation, state Departments of Commerce, or muckraking journalists, the conclusions were generally the same.

The most ardent skeptics reported that, on the whole, living conditions in mill villages in South Carolina were better than those of the dirt farmer or the squalid mountain cabins from whence so many came.

Around 1905 in South Carolina, an earnest debate arose as to whether it was better to leave the people in "pauperism and illiteracy," as one journalist phrased it, or to take the children into the mills where they could receive "industrial training with pay."

The S.C. State Department of Agriculture, Commerce and Immigration responded to the child labor charges of muckraking journalists by doing an intensive survey of the textile industry in 1905-07.

August Kohn, who conducted the

South Carolina's

Story



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state textile census, found that 8,835, or 23.7 percent, of the textile work force were under the age of 16 in 1905.

Kohn, like other investigators after exhaustive study, concluded that most mill owners did not prefer to use child labor, believing that cheap labor did not necessarily yield the largest dividends.

Surprisingly, Kohn also found that mill villages not only had better housing but had better schools. More than 11,000 mill children attended kindergarten in South Carolina in 1905. He found superior libraries and a much wider range of social programs than in the surrounding communities.

Kohn's statistics, which disproved the contentions of many that only a very few children worked, proved to be consciousness-raising enough to cause some reform legislation to hit the State House.

Child labor laws were passed making it illegal to employ children under the age of 12. Maximum hours, allowing no night work, were set, and children were not allowed in the most dangerous work areas.

The most interesting outcome of the new legislation was the realization, several years later, that in order to enforce the child labor laws, the state would need to keep vital statistics on births and deaths.

Other southern states, as anyone who attempts to trace his family

tree soon discovers, had had laws mandating the recording of births, marriages and deaths since the 1700s. South Carolina recorded none of these until 1911.

A law requiring licenses was passed in order to prevent marriages of children below the age of 14. Apparently, child marriages were not unusual in the mill villages. Another complaint of the times was that environmental conditions in the mills stunted the growth of the children. But there were no studies done to support this claim.

When children under 12 were forbidden to work in the cotton mills, it became necessary to find a place for them to be while their parents worked. This was how the law requiring compulsory attendance in the schools came into being.

The 1907 S.C. Child Labor Act had a deep and lasting impact on the state.