

Child Labor in the Postbellum Southern Cotton Textile Industry

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The growth of the southern cotton textile industry after the Civil War was supported by a migration of families from impoverished farms of the southern Piedmont region to the cotton mill villages. Labor was organized on the basis of a family labor system, whereby several members of the family were employed as operatives in the cotton textile mills. Therefore, one prominent feature of the labor policies of the mills was the employment of workers of varied ages, including children. The conditions of child labor were discussed as a social issue by humanitarians, educators, public officials, union sympathizers, and even mill managers. Very strong sentiments of moral indignation and outrage were expressed by Edwin Markham [6, p. 481] "In the Southern cotton mills...we find a gaunt goblin army of children keeping their forced march on the factory-floors -- an army that outwatches the sun by day and the stars by night ... -- a spectral army of pigmy people sucked in from the hills to dance beside the crazing wheels." Alternatively, the more moderate position taken by Holland Thompson [10, p. 244] emphasized that child labor was but a reflection of the relative underdevelopment and low income levels of the South: "The employers are not to blame for the evils of child labor. Such labor is simply a stage in the development of an industrial society."

This paper examines the role of child labor as an integral component of the family labor system rather than focusing narrowly upon the social and moral issues associated with child labor. Economic exigency and social custom explain parental pressure for child labor, but a fundamental explanation of rationale for the reliance of the mills upon child labor is more complex. Given the heterogeneous labor requirements of cotton textile production, the employment of child workers is explained

with reference to the operation of the internal job market and labor bargaining process. This paper will address the following questions: How did the employment of children influence family welfare? And, why did mills continue to employ young operatives even though managers apparently regarded them as the most costly and troublesome workers?

The family labor system may be interpreted as a significant extension of the traditional sphere of the family as the relevant decision-making unit. The southern cotton textile experience represents a case where the firm interacted with the family as a whole, not with the individual, during the job bargaining process. The recruitment and development of a disciplined factory work force involved a complex interrelationship and process of adjustment between both the mill managers and the workers. Economic and social activities were centered in the cotton mill village. Company paternalism exerted a pervasive influence over the lives of the workers. The comprehensive welfare program included moral guidance, subsidized company housing, the company store, schooling, and entertainment. Development of worker discipline was a paramount concern of management, and the mill village served as an institution for socializing and stabilizing the work force.

The composition of the work force in the South is provided in the Table.

The earnings of children employed in the mills positively contributed to the welfare of the respective families. The level of total family income was likely of greater importance in the decision to migrate to the mill village than the wages of any one individual family member. Generally the potential earnings of the head-of-household alone were considered inadequate to support a family in the mill village. Therefore, an individual parent felt compelled to supplement his meager earnings by allowing his children to engage in remunerative employment in the mill. The move to the mill signified an improvement in the material standard of living. As one operative commented in 1891, "I think we can do better here at the mill than we can on a farm."¹

Furthermore, from a life-cycle perspective, real productivity gains achieved during the phase of child employment would have been translated into higher individual earnings in successive years. Children raised in the mill village frequently remained in the employ of the cotton mill on into adulthood. Resources invested in on-the-job training improved worker productivity. Although children were not themselves considered the superior operatives by mill managers, it was widely believed that the best time to begin the training and

development of the work force was at a young age. Work experience as a child was important in developing a skilled, well-socialized work force. A mill manager commented, "from the ages of ten to fourteen years of age children can be taught more readily and more thoroughly to do efficient cotton mill work than at any other age."²

However it was argued that the supply of child workers tended to depress the general level of wages received by adults [5, pp. 245-46]. If all parents collectively withdrew their children from the labor force, the resulting rise in wages would have lessened the pressure to send children into the mills. One might argue that the elimination of children from labor force participation would contract the total labor supply, reducing the quantity of labor offered at each wage level. In order for businesses to attract sufficient labor, the new labor market equilibrium would dictate a rise in wages and a redistribution of income toward adult workers.

The above argument which predicts that adult wages would have been higher in the absence of child labor fails to recognize that the participation of several family members in the labor force was central to the internal logic of the system of labor organization which emerged in the industry. The character and complexion of the work force and the population in the mill village would have been dramatically altered had children been barred from employment. It is less likely that the mills would have initially induced whole families to migrate from the farm to the company town without the possibility for gainful employment for the young family members. Hence, it is improbable that a rise in adult wages sufficient to compensate for the direct loss in earnings of the children under 16 would have been realized by the family units who actually moved to the mill village. The organization of labor based on the family unit was a response to the need by management to secure a factory work force. The family labor system played a vital role in the dual personnel functions of initial recruitment and the continuing development of a stable, disciplined work force. Recruitment costs were minimized by attracting mature workers who brought with them additional workers. The costs of housing, extension of credit for moving expenses, and other welfare activities provided to the family were spread over several workers. An older sister typically worked alongside her younger sibling, economizing on supervisory and training costs. Further, child labor was viewed as a long-term investment or strategy for securing an experienced adult work force.

An interesting question which arises is whether or not children and adults represented competing groups in the labor

market. An employee in a mill in Richmond County, North Carolina, complained in 1887 that "the employment of children in the mills at low wages keeps a great many men out of employment."³ Also, spinning functions were frequently assigned to both women and girls. However, the most skilled and lucrative occupations such as weaver, loom fixer, or superintendent were open only to adults. Children were filtered into jobs which demanded the least individual initiative and responsibility.

Young workers earned less on average than adult workers. For 1890, average annual earnings for men, women, and children were \$245, \$159, and \$90, respectively [9, p. 125]. Although it has been stated frequently that children were paid at the same rate as adults when they performed identical tasks, this may only mean the piece rate was uniform, allowing for systematic variation in the job assignment.

With regard to the stability of the work, children were frequently considered the casual workers to be drawn into the mill as needed to cope with the variability of work load requirements. The village schools, financially supported by the mills, were subordinated to the daily and seasonal fluctuating labor demands of the mills. Commenting on the Alamance Mill school in North Carolina, one mill worker stated: "They ran it in the summers when the mill could not run on account of low water."⁴

Although age represented a group characteristic upon which stratification was predicated, mobility within the mill internal labor market was effected with the passage of time. Child workers continued to work in the mill as they matured. This is in marked contrast to the parish apprenticeship system in England where the majority of the young male textile workers were unable to obtain jobs in the mills when they reached adulthood [8, pp. 314-15]. That "entry ports" into the primary occupations were eventually made accessible to the child operatives was therefore not the direct consequence of the nature of cotton textile production per se but rather was a characteristic of the form of labor organization adopted in the southern cotton textile industry.

The employment of children in the mill was not generally perceived to represent unjust exploitation of the labor services of youth. Migration to the mill did not represent the initiation of the children into servitude or even their first introduction to gainful employment. Rather, the provision of labor services by children had been an accepted practice on the farm prior to the shift to the manufacturing sector.

The observation that many mill children were found to be in

poor health does not necessarily imply that the factory environment was the culprit. The work force was comprised of a large proportion of destitute farmers recently migrated to the industrial sector. The poorest farm families undoubtedly suffered severe deficiencies in nutrition and sanitation, and these were the families most likely to move to the mill village. A Senate investigative report [US Commissioner of Labor, Vol. XVII, pp. 10-11] concluded that "the so-called 'cotton mill anemia' and the stunted development of many of the cotton mill minors of the Gulf-Atlantic States are the direct result of hookworm infection rather than of mill work." The report estimated that in 1912 the transfer of 100 new mill operatives from the farm introduced 29 cases of hookworm disease to the mill village. Despite the improvement in sanitation in the mill village, eradication of the disease was aggravated by its persistence for up to twelve years.

Nevertheless, confinement in the factory at an early age may have had a deleterious impact upon the well-being of a child due to limitations on opportunities for recreation and creative play. If the work environment does not provide a source of stimulation and the child is exposed to this environment for 10 to 12 hours per day, the blossoming of the power of creative expression is stifled. The opinion of Edgar Murphy, a philanthropist who was opposed to child labor was expressed in the following statement:

In the factory, the child is just a child, an anonymous, practically unknown member of a pathetic industrial aggregate known as 'the child workers'.

In contrast, a mill advocate declared that children on the mountain farms never played because they simply did not know how; therefore, the stimulation and discipline of the mill and village environment represented a positive influence on the development of a youth [2, p. 151].

Apart from the value of the foregone earnings, an increase in leisure associated with the withdrawal of a youth from work did not necessarily represent an unambiguous improvement in family welfare. Microeconomic theory conceives of leisure time as an economic good which enters positively into the individual utility functions. However, if greater weight is attached to the preferences of parents in the family utility function, the increase in leisure time for children may not necessarily be perceived to be an improvement in family welfare. It was thought that if boys were excluded from the mill, they would be tempted to run wild in the streets, acquire bad habits, and be exposed to immoral influences. There were strong mores against idleness, reflecting the paternalistic moral guidance of management.

The employment of child labor gradually emerged as a controversial issue during the late nineteenth century. Within the mill community, opposition to the practice of child labor initially focused upon the fathers who shirked their financial responsibilities to their families. These parents were derisively labeled the "tin-bucket toters" as the extent of their work effort often was simply carrying a lunch pail to the children at the mill. In a sample of 723 working fathers of wage-earning children in the southern textile industry in 1907, a Senate investigator found that 13.7 percent worked less than 50 percent of the year and 3 percent worked less than 50 days per year [13, pp. 460-61]. Mill managers advocated strengthening the enforcement of vagrancy laws rather than enacting child labor restrictions.

A mill operative in Randolph County, North Carolina, expressed strong opposition to child labor in 1891. Such strong resistance among the workers was probably exceptional. As he was a homeowner with no children between the ages of 6 and 21, he would not be considered a typical representative operative. He asserted that "The confinement in the factories is so severe on the children that they grow up a delicate, dwarfish people. I expect that the capitalists would kick against [child labor] laws, because it would deprive them of a great quantity of cheap labor, but our legislators should bear in mind that all of the laws should not be in favor of capital."²

During the 1880s, manufacturers began expressing their preferences not to hire the very young workers. One dimension of this development was an increasing recognition of the costliness of this supposed "cheap labor." Mill management maintained that children, especially uneducated children, were careless, inattentive, and destructive. Nevertheless, there is an important qualitative difference between the tendency to reduce voluntarily the employment of child workers and the virtual elimination of all child workers.

The shift toward greater integration of spinning and weaving activities resulted in changes in the desired composition of the work force. Initially many of the southern mills, especially the small establishments in North Carolina, produced only yarn. The basic spinning operations of rapid splicing of broken ends could be quickly learned by a young girl. However, the greater demands for strength and maturity of the weaving occupation effectively limited this job category to the older, responsible workers. In North Carolina in 1909, 36 percent of all spinners were children, but only 5 percent of all weavers were under age 16 [11, p. 42]. Further, the ratio of spindles to looms declined from 43.1 in 1880 to 18.9 in 1899, reflecting the shift

toward greater emphasis on woven cloth [7, p. 96]. Therefore, the trend toward an increased proportion of woven cloth in total output would be accompanied by a declining proportion of children in the work force.

The composition of output was further modified as the quality of output was successively upgraded. As the fineness rating or grade of output was increased, the skill and training requirements became greater. Managers believed that an inordinate outlay of resources was expended upon the training of very young, immature children simply to socialize or acclimate them to the work environment in addition to efforts to train them specifically in machine tending. Hence, child labor was considered to be relatively expensive.

Although the manufacturers claimed that children provided unduly costly labor services, the continuation of the practice of family labor was nonetheless supported by mills themselves. Mill policies maintained or preserved the family labor system. The housing system, recruitment activities, and mill regulations requiring work by all but the youngest family members represented policies which served to perpetuate the family labor system. For example, the following rule was posted in a South Carolina mill in 1904: [12, pp. 491-92] "All children members of a family above twelve years of age shall work regularly in the mill and shall not be excused from service therein without the consent of the superintendent for good cause." A major explanation for the apparent paradox is found in the heterogeneous labor requirements of the mill.

Although textile production was generally considered an industry demanding relatively low skill levels on average, labor input requirements were not all homogeneous. Some occupations demanded skill, sobriety, and steady work habits, all characteristics of a primary labor market. Coinciding with the primary labor force needs were the occupations allowing for greater variability in worker reliability and discipline.

During the early years of the rapid expansion of the industry, an adequate core group of experienced primary workers was absent. Although attention was first directed toward the mature, responsible, head-of-household, the mill was essentially able to negotiate the purchase of the labor services of the family as a package or tied sale. The family labor system was, above all, a response to the heterogeneous labor needs of cotton textile production. The mill was responsible for matching the heterogeneous members of the family with the heterogeneous jobs in the mill; that is, the firm's allocation problem involved matching worker attributes with jobs [14, p. 660]. By offering a pattern of incentives designed to attract whole families, the

mills were able to attract them at a lower wage than would have been necessary had the mill refused employment to other family members.

In recruiting new workers, the mills wished to sort out the most productive adult workers from the labor queue to fill the primary jobs. However, as a condition of accepting employment, the parents may have steadfastly insisted that their children also be given employment. A manufacturer stated that "their parents often plead with us to take them [the children] with the plea that they must have them at work Consequently in many cases we are almost compelled to take them but we find it more profitable to work older hands at higher prices."⁶

That the mills were willing to accede to the demands of the parents does not imply that workers in general had substantial bargaining strength or power which they could wield over the mill. First of all, the testimony of manufacturers was to some extent self-serving, absolving the mills of the social or moral responsibility for forcing children to work. More importantly, the practice of child labor must be considered with respect to the job bargaining process. In order to attract the workers, the mill offered a combination package of incentives, including both the wage and working conditions. In a strategic bargaining maneuver, the mill created the impression that it had yielded to parental pressure; but in so doing, the mill was effectively responding to the heterogeneous labor input requirements while holding down total labor costs.

The enactment of legal prohibitions against child labor was widely opposed in spite of the gradually rising resistance to the extensive employment of children. The Southerner has long been characterized as a fiercely independent individual, suspicious of outside interference in his personal affairs [1, pp. 216-30]. The decisions regarding the appropriateness of employment of the offspring and the path of family welfare were considered the inalienable prerogative of the parent.

The laissez-faire attitude was also shared by the manufacturers. Consistent with their paternalistic stance, the manufacturers declared that they should be able to exercise freely their own discretion in determining who should be able to work in the mill. The viewpoint was expressed by one manager: "I see no chance to improve the condition of wage-earners over what they now enjoy except that the Legislature let them alone to follow their avocations without disturbance They are fully able to take care of themselves and will do if let alone."⁸ The above statement, of course, tacitly assumed that the operative would remain under the direction and guidance of the paternalistic mill manager. As an official of the North

Carolina mill claimed, "Who is the laborer's true friend? The manufacturer, of course."

A related viewpoint expressed by the manufacturers was the proposition that all efforts should initially be concentrated upon firmly establishing the foundation of the cotton textile industry in the South. A strong base would assure the continuing viability of the nascent industry. Only after the major industry was successfully permanently planted in the South should attention be redirected toward furthering specific goals of social betterment.

Apparently the mill managers were aware of the mounting concern over the issue of children working long hours six days a week in a mill. Acting as if they anticipated the rising criticism of child labor, the manufactures attempted to delay the implementation of mandatory regulations. More importantly, the mill managers feared that the adoption of restrictive child labor legislation would establish a precedent for further labor legislation. Despite the lower skill level of southern workers in comparison with New England laborers, the southern cotton textile manufactureres remained convinced that southern labor was relatively cheap. Labor restrictions would reduce the regional labor cost differential, and it was claimed that this would threaten the viability of the nascent industry.¹¹

In conclusion, the patterns of labor deployment based upon the family unit represented a response to the problems encountered in securing a disciplined factory work force wthin a predominantly agricultural region. The interaction between the workers and managers represented a resolution to the challenges introduced by the shift from the household farm to the mill village and factory setting.

NOTES

1. A mill operative in Cleveland County, North Carolina, quoted in North Carolina Bureau of Labor Statistics, Annual Report, 1891 (Raleigh: State Printer and Binder, 1892), p. 171.

2. J. M. Roberts, Secretary-Treasurer of John Rudisill Manufacturing Company, Lincolnton, North Carolina, quoted in North Carolina Bureau of Labor and Printing, Annual Report, 1887, p. 152.

3. A mill worker in Gaston County, North Carolina, quoted in North Carolina Bureau of Labor Statistics, Annual Report, 1887, p. 152.

4. Clem Moxley, quoted in [4, p. 36].

5. A cotton mill operative in Randolph County, North

Carolina, quoted in North Carolina Bureau of Labor Statistics, Annual Report, 1891, p. 178.

6. Manufacturer in Alamance County, North Carolina, quoted in North Carolina Bureau of Labor Statistics, Annual Report, 1887, p. 152.

7. For a thorough discussion of the controversy surrounding the legislative reform, see [3].

8. H. F. Schenck, President of Cleveland Mill and Power Company, Lawndale, North Carolina, quoted in North Carolina Bureau of Labor and Printing, Annual Report, 1905, p. 247.

9. Paul Barringer, Tuscarora Cotton Mill, Mount Pleasant, North Carolina, quoted in North Carolina Bureau of Labor and Printing, Annual Report, 1903, p. 134.

10. D. A. Tompkins, manufacturer in Charlotte, North Carolina, cited in North Carolina Bureau of Labor and Printing, Annual Report, 1901, p. 220.

11. Osborn Brown, President of Long Island Cotton Mills, Long Island, North Carolina, quoted in North Carolina Bureau of Labor and Printing, Annual Report, 1905, p. 246.

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4. Harriet Herring, Welfare Work in Mill Villages: The Story of Extra Mill Activities in North Carolina (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1939).

5. Robert Hunter, Poverty: Social Conscience in the Progressive Era (New York: MacMillan, 1917).

6. Edwin Markham, "The Hoe-Man in the Making: The Child at the Looms," Cosmopolitan, Vol. 61 (September 1906), pp. 480-87.

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8. Morris Morris, The Emergence of an Industrial Labor Force in India: A Study of the Bombay Cotton Mills, 1854-1947 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965).

9. Andrew Warren Pierpont, "Development of the Textile Industry in Alamance County, North Carolina," Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1953.

10. Holland Thompson, From the Cotton Field to the Cotton Mill: A Study of the Industrial Transition in North Carolina (New York: MacMillan, 1906).

11. US Bureau of the Census, Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1909: Manufacturers: Reports for Principle Industries, Vol. 10.

12. US Department of Commerce and Labor, Child Labor in the United States, Bulletin 52 of the Bureau of Labor (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1904), pp. 485-637.

13. US Commissioner of Labor, Report on Condition of Woman and Child Wage-Earners in the United States, Sen. Doc. 645, 61st Cong., 2d sess., 1912.

14. Gavin Wright, "Cheap Labor and Southern Textiles Before 1880," Journal of Economic History, Vol. 29 (September 1979), pp. 655-80.

Table

Percentage Men, Women, and Children in Southern Cotton Manufacturing

<u>Year</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Children</u>
1880	28.4	46.5	25.1
1890	34.4	41.4	24.2
1900	41.6	33.4	25.1

Source: US Census Office, Twelfth Census, 1900, Vol. 9, Manufactures, p. 32