

Historian identifies girl in well-known photo of child labor

By The Charlotte Observer, adapted by Newsela staff on 02.05.14

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Research by author and historian Joe Manning has helped identify the people in this 1908 photo taken in a Lincolnton, N.C., textile mill. They are (left to right) Lalar Blanton, her mother, Susie, and her sister, Ellen. Lewis Hine/ Library of Congress/MCT

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Lewis Hine was an early American photographer. He created a type of photography that showed people in daily life. In 1908, he took a picture of a worker in a cotton mill. She seemed too young to be there. She was just a little girl of 9 or 10, staring out a window.

It became one of his most remembered pictures. He took more than 5,000 while working for the National Child Labor Committee. His photos showed people breaking child labor laws in cotton mills and other workplaces.

Most of Hine's photos listed people's names. But the girl was identified only as a "spinner" at a textile mill in Lincolnton, North Carolina. A second photo of her in the same mill, standing next to an older girl and a woman, also had no names.

Now, a Massachusetts historian believes he has solved the mystery of both pictures. He has found descendants of 350 people in the Hine photos. He tracked down a granddaughter of the girl.

Tracking Down The Girl's Name

Writer and historian Joe Manning tried to find the names of the people in the Lincolnton photos for five years. He posted the pictures on his website and put an ad in the Lincolnton Times-News. No one replied.

Then he came up with an idea. He started searching a list of people in Lincolnton from 1910. He made a list of all white girls who were born around 1898 and had a sister about two years older. Twelve names came up. One of them was Lala Blanton.

Manning realized that thousands of people search for their ancestors online every day. So he published the names under the mystery photos on his webpage.

Two months later, he got an email. It was from Myra “Carol” Cook of Louisville, Kentucky. She thought the person identified as Lala Blanton might be her late grandmother. But she spelled her name Lalar Blanton.

Cook sent Manning pictures of Blanton as an adult in North Carolina. He took them to Maureen Taylor, a face-recognition expert he had used in the past. Taylor has been called the nation’s best historical photo detective. She said the faces matched perfectly.

Manning and Cook are confident the little girl in the photo is Lalar Blanton.

Finding Descendants Of Mill Children

For 105 years no one knew who she was. The girl by the window was known as “nothing but a child laborer,” Manning said. “Now, we’re finding out she was a person, not just a picture. She becomes a human being.”

Manning became interested in Hine's photos nine years ago. He is friends with the writer Elizabeth Winthrop. A Hine photo of a young girl in a cotton mill inspired a fictional character in one of her books.

Winthrop asked Manning to try to find out what happened to the real girl.

“It was an exciting idea,” he said. He started looking for people she was related to and found her granddaughter in 11 days.

Manning has been looking for more grandchildren ever since.

North Carolina professor Robert Allen has also found relatives of mill children in the Hine pictures.

Allen is a professor of American Studies. He found Gaston textile photos in the Hine collection at the Library of Congress. In 2008, he helped start a community project exploring that history.

Nearly 30 grandchildren and great-grandchildren of children in the mills came to a Gastonia gathering. It was on the 100th anniversary of Hine’s picture-taking.

Remembering Her Grandmother

The photos give information about what children did in the factories.

“It’s so foreign to us today,” Allen said.

Cook, now 50, remembers her grandmother as a “kind, generous, godly woman.” But she wasn't just a sweet old lady. “She could be tough.”

Cook did not remember her grandmother mentioning working in a mill. “But I do know she was very protective of children, especially little girls.” Her grandmother wanted her to have “all the things she didn't have as a little girl. She spoiled me rotten. She wouldn't let Mother spank me.”

Quiz

1 In what year was Lala Blanton born?

- (A) 1910
- (B) 1898
- (C) 1908
- (D) 2008

2 Read the paragraph below:

It became one of his most remembered pictures. He took more than 5,000 while working for the National Child Labor Committee. His photos showed people breaking child labor laws in cotton mills and other workplaces.

Based on the paragraph above, which of the following would you think is true?

- (A) Lewis Hine didn't care whether children worked in mills
- (B) Lewis Hine was against children working in mills
- (C) Lewis Hine just liked taking photographs
- (D) Lewis Hine was just doing his job

3 Read the following sentence:

"It's so foreign to us today," said Allen.

What does "foreign" mean as it is used above?

- (A) something from a different way of life
- (B) something from another country
- (C) something unpleasant
- (D) something exciting

4 Select the paragraph from "Tracking Down The Girl's Name" that contains a word that means "a person who was in someone's family long ago."

Answer Key

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Paragraph 6:

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