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Celebrating 175: Lewis Hine, Elizabeth McCausland Files, Correspondence, 1938-1940

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overcrowded, below-water quarters of third class, they were herded into detention at Ellis Island. The tremendous dormitories were jammed with iron beds, three tiers high; there were no mattresses, no sheets, only heaps of blankets in a corner of the room. Here the millions had to wait until their relatives came to claim them. Men were allowed to leave if they had a stated amount of money; but women and children had to stay --- often it must have seemed as if for all eternity.

Crowded together, shoved hither and thither, tagged and ticketed, tied to their bundles and baskets which they could not put down anywhere because they would not be permitted to return for them, bewildered by new conditions, handicapped by the language problem, these new Americans continued to pour into America. By 1924 one-third of our population of 95,000,000 were either immigrants or the children of foreign-born parents.

Luckily for history Lewis Hine was present at this great drama -- wangling his way in despite refusals, burning off his eyebrows with over-enthusiastic doses of flashlight powder, photographing, setting down the visual record of the greatest migration in history. The photographs of Hine give a face to those cipher millions, make them come alive for us today, so that we perceive them not as the "wretched refuse" of some teeming foreign shore, but as human beings with hopes and aspirations, with dreams to be free and happy, seeking a new life in the promised land of freedom and opportunity, courageously braving the new world. This could be a story read with the mind, not speaking to the heart. But the Hine photographs add vital experience; they make history human and real. "These things I have seen and known" these photographic documents say. The past can never again be a table of statistics; it must be the flux of human lives in epochal social movements.

The story does not end with Ellis Island. It reached out into the vast economic structure of America -- into Pittsburgh's coal and steel, into Detroit's auto industry, into rich farmlands of the Middle West, into the slums and sweatshops of New York City, into construction camps and railroad building, into the textile mills of the South, into the canneries, into the tobacco plantations, into the cranberry bogs, everywhere where there has been work to be done and human labor to be obtained at as low a cost as possible.

Hine's camera followed the immigrants. It saw a Slovak sitting on the doorstep of a steel worker's home in Homestead, Pa., playing an accordion. "The pursuit of happiness" in a town where striking workers had been shot down by Pinkertons? It saw Italian and Jewish families (father, mother and several children) toiling under the light of kerosene lamps at "home work" -- perhaps partly finished ready-made men's wear, perhaps artificial flowers, perhaps shelling nuts -- the youngest children too small to reach the table edge. It saw small girls standing on boxes to operate machines in hosiery mills, their hands unguarded against the mechanically operated needles. It saw the bare wooden bunks of a construction camp for New York State's barge canal, and also the company-run saloon where the construction workers would leave most if not all of their wages. It saw young boys in coal breakers, overseer standing by with rod -- "Spare the rod, and spoil the child," you know. It saw babies sleeping on sidewalks, newsboys out at 1 a.m. to sell Sunday papers, bootblacks, telegraph messengers, boys playing on dumps and scavenging in garbage cans, women carrying home boxes as big as themselves for firewood. Again history is given a face by the camera, supplied with that visual reality we cannot doubt.

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No record except the picture can recreate for the historian precisely this visual experience. Of course pictures alone will not tell all of history; and Hine has wisely supplemented. Vail I with documents of other sorts, photostats of newspaper clippings, labels with typed data relevant to the photograph's subject, identifying information, as place, date, etc. Certainly in our time photography seems to be the pictorial medium best suited to the documentary function, having attributes which carry conviction -- i.e., capacity to render textures and materials, sharp definition so that

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