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Celebrating 175: Lewis Hine, Elizabeth McCausland Files, Manuscripts and Published Articles, 1938

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Portrait of a Photographer
by ELIZABETH McCausland

"I'M AFRAID, MR. HINE, THAT YOU haven't the broad sociological background required," said a distinguished adviser when Lewis W. Hine announced his decision to give up teaching at the Ethical Culture School and set up as a "social" photographer. "Nonsense," retorted Arthur Kellogg, "it's wonderful to find a photographer who has any sociological background."

So began thirty years of work which led Lew Hine into southern cotton mills, New York tenements and sweatshops, West Virginia coal mines, Pittsburgh steel workers' homes and finally out into the perilous ether about the Empire State Building where construction workers dangles on steel chains and the photographer teetered on a girder. Today, in the new discovery of our immediate American past, Hine's early social photographs are recognized as vanguard masterpieces for the contemporary documentary movement.

When he conceived his plan of being a social photographer, Lew Hine had no idea of being thirty years ahead of the procession. A young man fresh from Oshkosh, Wis., he had early known social facts: at fifteen he had gone to work in a "Sawdust City" furniture factory for \$4 a week, sometimes thirteen hours a day. Followed work in stores and banks-but the road that led him to his own pioneering in documentary photography took a number of detours.

University extension courses, plus his private ambition to be an artist, brought young Hine to the notice of Frank A. Manny, who was head of the department of psychology and education in the state normal school. Manny's encouragement of his intellectual and artistic interests inspired Hine to go to Chicago, the mecca of midwestern youth at that time. In Chicago, John Dewey, Ella Flagg Young, Col. Francis Parker were fertile influences during the years when Hine studied to be a nature teacher. From Chicago to New York was the next stage; for when Manny was made principal of the Ethical Culture School, he brought with him a number of promising young Wisconsinites, including Hine.

Why Manny selected him to be school photographer, Hine can't explain. "I had never had a camera in my hand. I went at it backwards. I was taking

[[image]]

Bernice Abbott

Lew Hine focused on social subjects thirty years before the "picture magazines"

flashlights before I had ever taken a snapshot. But then one of Manny's chief jobs has always been to X-ray potentialities in the rank-and-file." Certainly the results justified the choice. And thus it came about that after six years at the Ethical Culture School, the last four of which were concerned part time with photography, Hine came to the end of the detours. Thenceforth the road led straight ahead.

It was not an easy road to travel, however. Flashlights first, snapshots after-that is the clue to Hine's character. When he became school photographer in 1905, he didn't know anything about cameras, lenses,

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flashlights before I had ever taken a snapshot. But then one of Manny's chief jobs has always been to X-ray potentialities in the rank-and-file." Certainly the results justified the choice. And thus it came about that after six years at the Ethical Culture School, the last four of which were concerned part time with photography, Hine came to the end of the detours. Thenceforth the road led straight ahead.

It was not an easy road to travel, however. Flashlights first, snapshots after-that is the clue to Hine's character. When he became school photographer in 1905, he didn't know anything about cameras, lenses, flashes. From today, at any time, he will say with a raised hand both hostile and aid, "How is it that you make so much better prints than I do? Is it because your enlarger is better than mine?"

Disarming is the toothlessness with which he accepts advice. "Oh, Mr. Hine, I wouldn't stop that picture that was later so much of the work. It's a very good one, the more you have it." "Yes," he will answer. "I guess you're right. Scandon said the same thing."

The difference between a consciously formulated documentary spirit and an earlier generation's intuitive approach is summed up here. Yet, make no mistake, accident did not produce some fine child labor studies, those "human documents" (of which Florence Kelley

wrote, "The camera is convincing. Where words fail and passion flares, the meaning and the camera carry conviction.") those "work portraits," "time exposures" and "photo essays" which Mr. Hine published during the decade of social and humanitarian warfare before the war. They came out of the fine vision of an eye devoted to the understanding and improvement of human life by means of education and legislation.

To that program Lew Hine lent his talent and his own intense conviction. For when he gave up his teaching job at the Ethical Culture School, he "was not giving up education." It was never "visual education" that he childishly hoped, with his Sal viem camera, his red-tinted lens and his "hard of flashlight powder."

The difference between his approach, however, and that of the documentary photographers of today is to be found in the fact that the younger workers consciously integrate the social and esthetic elements. With Hine the esthetic objective was passively; the esthetic standards seem to have accrued these casually. At least, no particular attention was paid to them by the esthetic public, which studied the photographs absolutely for their social implications.

To understand the character, both of the man and of the period, we cannot turn to literature. The nineteenth-century American writers furnish no prototype for men like Hine. For Hine is as American as the "Oshkosh Friend" from which he hails. The magazine by which he gained access to studio mills to photograph illegal child labor, the device by which he photographed work, toil and back misery in family films, the camera he shared in penetrating sepias modern in technique, these ingredients and design factors to give for him, suggest the high ingenuity associated with the Yankee genius. Certainly, if ever a man spoke the American vernacular it is Lew Hine. He looks like a whole human. Despite his DLM from New York University in 1905, he talks like one. Try to get him to pose for a photograph. "Oh, gosh," he says, "what did I do with my hands?" His own American language is a whole, human and moving

technics. Even today, at sixty-four, he will say with a naïveté both lovable and sad, "How is it that you make so much better prints than I do? Is it because your enlarger is better than mine?"

Disarming is the trustfulness with which he accepts advice. "Oh, Mr. Hine, I wouldn't crop that picture that way. Leave in more of the street. It tells more, the more you have in it." "Yes," he will answer, "I guess you're right. So-and-so said the same thing."

The difference between a consciously formulated documentary system and an earlier generation's intuitive approach is summed up here. Yet, make no mistake, accident did not produce those first child labor studies, those "human documents" (of which Florence Kelley wrote, "The camera is convincing. Where records fail and parents forswear themselves, the measuring rod and the camera carry conviction."), those "work-portraits," "time exposures" and "photo stories" which The Survey published during the decade of social and humanitarian upsurge before the war. They came out of the fine sincere energies of an age devoted to the amelioration and improvement of human life by means of education and legislation.

To that program Lew Hine lent his talents and his own sincere incorruptible personality. For when he gave up his teaching job at the Ethical Culture School, he "was not giving up education." It was toward visual education that he deliberately turned, with his 5x7 view camera, his rectilinear lens and his "barrel of flashlight powder." The difference between his approach, however, and that of the documentary photographers of today is to be found in the fact that the younger workers consciously integrate the social and esthetic elements. With Hine the sociological objective was paramount; the esthetic attributes seem to have occurred almost casually. At least, no particular attention was paid to them by the enthusiastic public which studied the photographs absorbedly for their social implications.

To understand the character, both of the man and of the period, we cannot turn to literature. The nineteenth century American writers furnish no prototype for men like Hine. Yet Hine is as American as the "Oshkosh B'Gosh" from which he hails. The stratagems by which he gained access to textile mills to photograph illegal child labor, the devices by which he photographed work certificates and birth entries in family Bibles, the cunning he showed in persuading suspicious mothers in tenements, illiterate immigrants and foreign laborers to pose for him, suggest that high ingenuity associated with the Yankee genius. Certainly, if ever a man spoke the American vernacular it is Lew Hine. He looks like a wheat farmer. Despite his Ph.D. from New York University in 1905, he talks like one. Try to get him to pose for a photograph. "Oh, gosh," he says, "what shall I do with my hurrah?" His own American language in a wide, human and moving

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