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PREVIEW

**CHILD LABOR IN COMMERCIALIZED AGRICULTURE  
1890-1966**

by

**Mary Lyons-Barrett**

**A DISSERTATION**

**Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
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For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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DISSERTATION TITLE

Child Labor in Commercialized Agriculture 1890-1966

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CHILD LABOR IN COMMERCIALIZED AGRICULTURE  
1890-1966

Mary Lyons-Barrett, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 2002

This is the first historical work devoted solely to the labor of children in commercialized agriculture and to the efforts of federal and state governments to restrict such labor. The central argument of this dissertation involves analyzing why it took so long for reformers to view child labor in industrialized agriculture in the same manner that they viewed child labor in mining, the textile mills, and other industries. Specifically, how did the romanticization of children working on farms delay the inclusion of child agricultural workers under protective labor legislation? Most reformers saw child labor in industry and mining as detrimental to the welfare of children at least by the late 1880's. On the other hand, the public and even many reformers tended to see the work of children in commercialized agriculture as healthy and beneficial to their welfare as late as the 1930's. The Keating-Owen Act of 1916 prohibited child labor in industries engaged in interstate commerce, but only indirectly affected agriculture through its inclusion of canneries. The earliest successful attempt to restrict child labor in agriculture at the federal level came with the passage of the Jones-Costigan Act in 1934, which regulated child labor in the sugar beet

industry. The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 restricted child labor in mining and heavy industry, but specifically exempted children working in agriculture. The exemptions under the FLSA for children working in commercialized agriculture continued up until 1966, when amendments were passed that restricted children working in agriculture outside of school hours.

PREVIEW

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I began my doctorate nearly nine years ago, I knew the road would be long, but I never realized how winding it would be both personally and academically. Fortunately my family and my dissertation committee have persevered with me over the years. My husband Bill is blind, and our daughters Cathy and Elizabeth were only in second grade and kindergarten respectively, when I began summer school. They have had to deal in the last year with all my pressures and try to keep our home running smoothly. For that I am ever grateful and hope that they can share in my pride in finishing this project.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction to the Children

The small tanned hands of Sarah moved quickly over the ground, pausing but a second over the thin beet seedlings, pulling out the weakest plants and leaving but one to grow in each block. The tiny bonneted figure moved quickly on her knees to the next block, pausing, then pulling out weak seedlings as she went. On her knees, the eight-year-old "beeter" would continue this elimination of the weakest for another five miles until sundown, some twelve more hours. Not only had the hot sun tanned her fair skin brown, but the grueling crawling on the dry rough ground had left her little fingers cracked and her knees scraped. The hot summer's sun was at times unbearable, but if youth's memory wasn't so fleeting, she would have counted the hot summer months better than the cold days she had spent the previous fall during topping season, where cold temperatures often froze her skirt and leggings stiff when they came in contact with the morning dew.

Sarah was luckier than her older sister Carrie whose body showed numerous wounds from her several years of topping beets. The topping knife was heavy and unwieldy in the hands of a ten-year-old, and it left behind scars on her knees and arms from the cuts that healed slowly. By the time Sarah and Carrie had reached adolescence, their stooped backs would be noticeable to anyone who

cared to measure or examine their posture, and any nurse could tell that their slow healing cuts came from the lack of proper nutrition. But most of all, if a teacher should ask them about school, they would probably say that they liked learning things but that helping their family was more important than book-learning. Though far from retarded, the girls would probably be at least two grades behind their peers because their family adjusted its migratory schedule to that of the sugar beet<sup>1</sup> crops.

Muckrakers in the early 1900's had stirred many Americans to condemn the highly visible forms of dangerous labor, such as the breaker boys in the coal mines, the child night workers in the glass factories, and the bobbin girls in the textile mills. The average citizen, though, read little until the First World War about the exploitation of children involved in the street trades, domestic service, or industrialized agriculture. Journalists and reformers often exalted the "varied tasks of farm life with the endless opportunities for change and individual initiative." Although admitting that the child who worked on the farm may have worked harder than the child in the mill, reformers considered the child working in the "pure air of a farm" to be better off than

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1. This introduction is the author's conception of what life would be like for a typical child beetworker between the 1890's and early 1930's. The description of the fictional characters Sarah and Carrie is a composite of what child labor reformers described in words and photos.

the child laboring in the "dust-laden air of a factory" with the "strained attention and monotonous tasks of mill life."<sup>2</sup>

Child field workers may have received little attention from the press, but the U.S. Census Bureau did count them. As early as the 1870's, the Census Bureau tabulated a separate category of gainfully employed children from ten to fifteen years of age. In 1870, one out of every eight children was employed. By 1900, the ratio had jumped to one out of six children, with over sixty percent of these engaged in agricultural work of some kind.<sup>3</sup> The census figures grossly undercounted the number of children actually working in agriculture because they did not normally count children who worked for their parents on family farms, nor did they count children who worked for their parents who were tenants. The census is taken in January, which is a time of year when children who work seasonally would be listed as non-working

When people did pause to think of child labor in rural America, they visualized bonny rosy-cheeked

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2. John Spargo, The Bitter Cry of the Children (New York: Macmillan Company, 1906; reprint ed., New York: Garrett Press, 1970), p. 150.

3. Robert H. Bremner, ed., Children and Youth in America: A Documentary History Vol. 2: 1866-1932 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 601; Elliott West, Growing Up in Twentieth-Century America: A History and Reference Guide (Westport, Ct: Greenwood Press, 1996), p. 213.

children helping their parents on family farms, not the overworked migrant children with their dirt-streaked faces, living in the shacks and coops assigned to their parents. In the early 1900's, the private New York-based National Child Labor Committee (NCLC) began studying and publishing reports on young children working in<sup>4</sup> berry harvesting. The Committee recognized that this labor was something different than the traditional assistance that children provided their parents on the family farm. It began by challenging the myth that any type of farm work was healthier than industrial child labor. In challenging this myth, the NCLC had to counter a rural work ethos that prevailed in this country dating back to Jefferson's agrarian republic.

The reasons for agricultural labor becoming more strenuous and more injurious to children from the 1880's on was largely due to three different but related trends in agriculture. The first was the growth of "bonanza" farms, or one-crop farms, and the accompanying evolution of industrial or commercial farming. The second was the change in the type of agricultural labor required for these large farms, which meant a few permanent farmhands and large amounts of temporary or migratory labor. The third development was the use of foreign labor to meet the needs of seasonal agriculture. This was partly

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4. National Child Labor Committee Papers, Minutes, Board of Trustees Meeting, December 8-10, 1905.

because even though the majority of agricultural workers have been native-born, use of such labor tended to be concentrated in certain crops. This was due to the economic needs of recent immigrants who turned to agriculture when they could not find more stable industrial jobs, and because growers chose immigrants as a form of cheap labor over native-born workers.

The bonanza farms that emerged in the late 1860's gradually developed into the commercial farms of the early 1900's that required large amounts of seasonal labor.<sup>5</sup> Most of the bonanza farms were not owned by local farmers, but by absentee Eastern capitalists or Western speculators who hired a person to manage the farm.<sup>6</sup> The bonanza-size wheat farms for the most part only required large numbers of workers at harvest time. Harvest workers were typically adult males who moved from one farm to the next, following the harvest. Even as far south as California, growers considered the climate favorable to wheat growing and discovered that California wheat could stand the long shipment to England and still bring a good price. Consequently, wheat production in California jumped from six million bushels in 1860 to forty million bushels by 1890. Wheat growing was a large-

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5. Stanley Norman Murray, The Valley Comes of Age: A History of Agriculture in the Valley of the Red River of the North, 1812-1920 (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1967), pp. 212-213.

6. Thomas J. Schlereth, Victorian America: Transformations in Everyday Life 1876-1915 (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991), pp. 43-44.

scale operation that involved a minimum of expense with moderate labor costs, and most importantly, promised a quick return.<sup>7</sup>

After a drought hit California in 1863-1864, some wealthy landowners began to explore the prospects of irrigation and a few projects began in 1872. In spite of the high capitalization costs, irrigation projects rapidly sprouted up in the 1880's. Large landowners who used irrigation were able to grow crops not grown in the Midwest, and were able to farm intensively in areas that had previously been considered unarable. Some California farmers began to plan less wheat and more fruits and vegetables. Single Chinese men were the major source of agricultural labor during this period and were considered highly skilled as pickers, pruners, and stem grafters. Then in the 1890's, growers were concerned about a shortage of skilled horticultural labor because of the ban on Chinese immigration under the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, turned to growing sugar beets on some of the bonanza farms.<sup>8</sup>

On the East Coast, the success of the bonanza farms on the West Coast drove many small New England wheat farms out of grain production and into the more

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7. Carey McWilliams, Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Labor in California (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1969), p. 50.

8. Ibid., pp. 49, 59, 62-64, 82.

specialized truck farming of vegetable and fruit crops. Between 1879-1899, the number of commercialized farms soared in states such as Pennsylvania, New York, Delaware, and New Jersey. Truck farms in these states drew much of their labor supply from cities such as Philadelphia, New York, and Baltimore.<sup>9</sup> Italian and Polish agricultural workers became experienced in intensive farming techniques, and some eventually purchased small acreages of their own in New York and Connecticut.

On both coasts, the specialized one-crop farms required large amounts of labor that could be mobilized for short periods of time. On the wheat farms, adult male farmhands or bindlestiffs (workers who carried their possessions in a bundle) were used, sometimes in combination with mechanical harvesters.<sup>10</sup> On berry and vegetable farms, however, mechanical equipment was not used until the 1930's, and even then in a limited way. Instead, adults and children performed the backbreaking jobs of thinning plants and picking the crop immediately when it ripened, which was usually within a short period of time. With some crops, there was also the need to have workers on hand to tend the crops between planting and

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9. Cindy Hahamovitch, "In the Valley of the Giant: The Politics of Migrant Farm Labor, 1865-1945" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, 1992), pp. 24-25.

10. John Steinbeck, Of Mice and Men (New York: Viking Press, 1937; renewed 1965). Bindlestiffs are the central characters to this novel set on a bonanza wheat farm.



harvesting. This necessitated the providing of minimal housing for a large migratory work force that would supplement a much smaller permanent labor force. Much of the "stoop" labor involved workers spending the better part of their day bent over in hoeing or picking fruits and vegetables near the ground.

In the South, large bonanza farms did not appear, but the use of hand labor or stoop labor was as intense as it was on the Coast. The production of cotton was a monoculture in the South, but the oversupply of cheap labor and the lag in technology in creating a mechanical picker kept cotton picking a job often dominated by women and children.<sup>11</sup> Until cotton cultivation spread into the Southwest, the need for agricultural labor was met initially by a system of tenant farmers and their families tending shares owned by a large grower. Roughly ten per cent of the sharecropper children hired themselves out to area farmers to bring in extra money picking cotton.<sup>12</sup> When cotton growing expanded into the Southwest in the 1920's and 1930's, growers generally followed the Western pattern of using migratory labor instead of relying on long-term sharecroppers and tenants.

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11. Victor Weybright, "Two Men and Their Machine," Survey Graphic, 25 (July 1936): 433.

12. Joan M. Jensen, With These Hands: Women Working on the Land (Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1981), p. 205.

The acceptance of children working in Southern agriculture goes back to the days of slavery, when slave children accompanied and worked beside their parents in the fields. Slave children began by doing "trash", which was basically weeding and other simple tasks, as soon as they were able to walk. As slave children grew, they learned methods of picking cotton "clean" and stripping tobacco plants of their leaves. After the Civil War, the number of children involved in Southern agriculture increased as sharecropping spread among both poor whites and poor black farmers. In Alabama, Texas, and Oklahoma, children in groups or working with their parents picked cotton bolls and deposited the lint in bags. The children were often smaller than their bags, which hooked over one shoulder and then opened on their other side. In Texas, a seven-year-old child working from sun-up to sun-down<sup>13</sup> could pick thirty-five pounds.

If working in cotton meant long days in the blazing sun, then tobacco work, especially tending shade tobacco, presented other hazards to children. Shade tobacco is grown under canvas or cheesecloth. In the early 1900's, children in Kentucky and South Carolina had the task of working under the canvas, thinning and weeding around the plants. All tobacco plants have suckers which interfere with proper growth and must be removed from the stems of

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13. Lewis W. Hine, "Present Conditions in the South," The Child Labor Bulletin (February 1914): 67.

the plant. Before insecticide use became more widespread, children often did much of the debugging of tobacco leaves, removing insects and nematodes by hand.<sup>14</sup> To harvest tobacco leaves, one could either prime the plant, which meant removing the leaves as they ripened, or stalk cut the tobacco, which meant spearing the leaves on a sharp stick or lath. The laths were then hung in curing sheds while they dried. The National Child Labor Committee in 1907 had received disturbing reports on the use of child labor in "pickers shanties" and "stripping barns" in Delaware, Maryland, Connecticut, Kentucky,<sup>15</sup> Virginia, and Pennsylvania.

Growers of fruits, vegetables, and cotton preferred the stability of the family unit, though it meant the employment of children. Adult male laborers sometimes were unreliable or challenged growers with demands for better wages. And successive waves of newcomers to the country faced with stiff competition in urban areas and unable to afford to purchase land for their own assured the growers of a continuing supply of stoop labor.

An overview of migratory labor by crops, beginning in the early 1900's, would reflect three distinct migratory streams of labor: the East Coast stream, the midcontinental stream, and the West Coast stream. The

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14. Raymond G. Fuller, Child Labor and the Constitution (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1923; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1974), pp. 58-60.

15. National Child Labor Committee Proceedings, 1907-1909, p. 59.

East Coast stream provided labor to the truck farms (potatoes, strawberries, sweet corn) of Maryland and Delaware, up north to the cranberry bogs of New Jersey and Massachusetts. Turn-of-the-century workers included Irish, a few Italians, Scandinavians, and native-born, who were joined by southern blacks, Puerto Ricans, and West Indians after World War I.<sup>16</sup> On the East Coast westward to Ohio, children worked primarily in small fruits and on the truck farms. Children picked snap beans, tomatoes, cucumbers, and pulled onions on truck farms in Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, and New Jersey. Mothers and children picked strawberries in Delaware and Maryland. In New Jersey, the "Garden State", they also pulled potatoes out of soil that had already been loosened by machines. Probably the most difficult work for children involved picking cranberries. Cranberries grow on viney plants in damp bogs that are usually chilly in the fall. In Maine, Massachusetts, and New Jersey, children by themselves, and sometimes with a parent, usually their mothers, picked cranberries off viney plants that often scratched their arms and legs.<sup>17</sup> The bogs were also a haven for mosquitoes who feasted on

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16. Ronald L. Goldfarb, Migrant Farm Workers: A Caste of Despair (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1981), pp. 8-11.

17. Charles L. Chute, "The Cost of the Cranberry Sauce," The Survey (2 December 1911): 1283.

the unprotected cranberry pickers. An equally unenviable job for children was pulling onions that grew in marshes in Ohio and other eastern states. Like the cranberry bogs, onion marshes are by their nature a perfect breeding ground for mosquitoes and other biting insects. Onions were also weeded, as well as harvested by hand,<sup>18</sup> which entailed often working a fourteen hour day.

Then around World War I, more Southern and Eastern Europeans entered the migratory labor group on the West Coast including Armenians. Single, male Filipinos entered in the 1920's and 1930's. Native-born workers, such as the "Okies" and "Arkies," made up a large proportion of the agricultural labor force in the 1930's in California, while Mexicans and Mexican-Americans filled in during labor shortages in World War I and again in World War II<sup>19</sup> on the West Coast. The core of migratory labor has been Latinos from Mexico since World War II, with additions of Central Americans after 1970.

In the West and Southwest, in addition to sugar beets, children worked primarily in potatoes, hops, figs, raisin grapes, and by the 1930's, cotton. Although it varied in terms of what labor was available in an area, children often worked in walnuts, melons, olives, and

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18. Charles E. Gibbons, "The Onion Workers," in Children in the Fields, ed. Dan C. McCurry (New York: Arno Press, 1975), p. 34.

19. Elliott West, Growing Up in Twentieth-Century America: A History and Reference Guide (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), p. 124.

peas. Some of the older children worked in prunes, pears, apricots, and peaches, and helped often in boxing up the fruit. In potato fields, machines loosened the soil around the potato plants so that young children and women following the potato digging machines could pile up the potatoes. Older children would then put these piles in bags that they carried, which could weigh as much as 60<sup>20</sup> pounds. In California and Arizona, children picked melons alongside their parents and loaded the melons in crates. Hops were grown all along the Pacific coast and probably drew the largest numbers of children since the work itself was considered less skilled than other types of picking, such as peach or almond picking. Hops are a member of the nettle family of the hemp sub-order. They grow on vines in bunches or cones that can be trained over trellises. When the hops were ripe, workers brought down the trellises and laid them flat so that the cones<sup>21</sup> could be pulled off easily by children and put in a sack. Hops, like raisin grapes and figs, are sticky to work with and their juices draw a lot of insects. Adults and children tried not to get the sticky juices on their clothes because when they did, they had to contend with

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20. James E. Sidel, "Pick for Your Supper: A Study of Child Labor Among Migrants on the Pacific Coast," in Children in the Fields, ed. McCurry, p. 34.

21. David Vaught, Cultivating California: Growers, Specialty Crops, and Labor, 1875-1920 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1999), p. 60.

the swarms of bugs. In the 1930's, Okie children helped their parents pick cotton in southern California. Because Arizona placed even fewer restrictions on child labor than did California, many Okie families crossed over into Arizona so that their children could work with them in cotton fields. Younger children averaged picking between 75 and 125 pounds a day, while thirteen and fourteen year old children could pick as much as 300 to 400 pounds a day. Even tiny children seldom picked less than 50 pounds<sup>22</sup> per day.

The last stream, and probably the most important one in regards to child labor in commercialized agriculture, is the one called the midcontinental stream based in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. Some writers further break down this category into one group that travelled in and around Texas working the cotton crop and a second group that travelled to the Great Lakes area to work in the sugar beet fields in Michigan and Minnesota. This stream also has branches that extend into the Rocky Mountains<sup>23</sup> and the northern Pacific.

Though children were involved in all of these streams, there were differences in the numbers of children associated with particular crops. Small children were rarely used for orchard work on the Pacific Coast

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22. Kate Clugston, "Cotton or School," in Children in the Fields, ed. McCurry, p. 27.

23. Goldfarb, Migrant Farm Workers, p. 10.

because they were too short to be of any practical use, but they were used in the Northwest to pick hops. Crops that involved stoop labor, such as beet thinning and onion pulling, or picking bugs off cotton stalks, were tasks that were traditionally relegated to children because of their nearness to the ground or because of their dexterous little fingers.

The most publicly visible case of child labor in agriculture -- and thus the major target of reformers for many years -- was in sugar beet growing. The major centers of sugar beet were in the Middle West to the Great Lakes area; the Rocky Mountain and Plains states, which included Nebraska, Colorado and Wyoming; and the Pacific coast.<sup>24</sup> Utah was one of the few states where sugar beets were grown that did not rely wholly on foreign labor. The high birth rate among the Mormons, and their attitude that no farm work was beneath them, kept<sup>25</sup> beet production primarily a family affair.

The reason for the increase in sugar beet production was partly due to the increase in the consumption of sugar after the Civil War in such processed foods as jams and jellies, and as an additive to coffee, tea, cereal, and soft drinks. The financial reasons farmers were

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24. Kent Hendrickson, "The Sugar Beet Laborer and the Federal Government: An Episode in the History of the Great Plains in the 1930's," Great Plains Journal 3 (Spring 1964): 44.

25. Leonard J. Arrington, Beet Sugar in the West: A History of the Utah-Idaho Sugar Company 1891-1966 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966), p. 23.