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Children of the Mills: Faces of Huntsville Mill Children

B. SUSANNA LEBERMAN

During his career as a photographic investigator, Lewis Hine took thousands of pictures in the United States and Europe. Who are these people that stare back at us across time through Lewis Hine’s photographs? While the identities and ultimate fates of many will never be known, there is a substantial body of material that allows us to identify many of Hine’s subjects – including those in Huntsville.

Many of Hine’s photographs include his field notes – names, places, dates – information Hine captured to validate his findings. In addition to their intrinsic value, Hine’s field notes also provide a starting point for other researchers following in his footsteps. This article, based on notations Hine made concerning photographs he had taken in Huntsville, is an example of the way in which his documentation has served later historical and genealogical research.

Gracie Mae Clark

Hine photographed the Clark family during his visit to Huntsville in November 1913. According to Hine’s field notes, Gracie Mae Clark (center, in the white dress) was a 13-year-old spinner who lived with her family at 268 A (Alpine) Street. This is the sum total of Hine’s field notes on the Clark family. This is enough, however, to allow a modern day investigator to reconstruct Gracie’s life.

Gracie Clark
November 1913
Gracie’s work release affidavits identify her parents as Jim A. and Lucinda Clark. According to the 1910 census, the Clarks had had six children: William, 13; Zetta, 12; Gracie, then six; Bertie, five; Lindon, three; and Elsie (a son), one. Her work release affidavits also shed revealing light on her early employment history:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of Employment</th>
<th>Employer</th>
<th>Reported Date of Birth</th>
<th>Reported Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January 1912</td>
<td>West Huntsville Cotton Mills</td>
<td>March 1, 1899</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1912</td>
<td>Merrimack Manufacturing Company</td>
<td>March 1, 1899</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 1913</td>
<td>Lowe Manufacturing Company</td>
<td>March 6, 1900</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1915</td>
<td>Dallas Manufacturing Company</td>
<td>March 8, 1899</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Work release affidavits were the means by which parents gave their permission for children to work in the mills. Jim (also a mill worker) and Lucinda executed release affidavits for three of their children – Gracie, Will, Zetta, and Bertie. All were made with their “mark” (an “X”), rather than a signature. According to the January 1912 affidavit, Gracie was 12 years old. But the 1910 census, made when the Clarks were living as farmers in New Hope, recorded her age as only six. This means that Gracie was in fact only nine years old when she began work at West Huntsville Cotton Mills. It is possible that the later affidavits from July 1912 and January 1913 indicate that she was working at several mills at the same time, rather than moving from job to job. There is no available evidence that Gracie attended school for the mandatory eight weeks a year. That she received at least some education is suggested by the fact that her name does not appear in the 1914 Children Ineligible for Employment.

Gracie married Will Forrest on July 6, 1918 (Marriage Records 44:114). According to their marriage certificate, Will was 19 years old, weighed 142 pounds, and stood five feet, six inches tall. Gracie, who was only 14, was described as five feet tall and weighing 110 pounds. Gracie apparently did not need her parents consent to get married; her “mill birth date” made her legally of age. Their marriage certificate describes both Will and Gracie as cotton mill workers. Will appears to have just been able to sign his name to the certificate; Gracie, who could not write, made her mark with an “X.”
Sanford Franklin was the son of William E. and Ida Jane (Hall) Franklin, both of whom were originally from Winchester, Tennessee. According to the 1910 census the Franklins had ten children: Richard, 17; Hattie, 15; Garland, 13; Lenora, 11; Sanford, seven, Lee, six; Mattie; Wilburn S.; William A.; and Lillie.

Sanford began work at the Merrimack Mill when he was 10 years old. Richard, his eldest brother, signed his work release affidavit, which was filed in August 1913. The affidavit lists his age as 12. (This, of course, is inconsistent with the census of only three years earlier, which gives his age as seven. In November 1913, Sanford told Lewis Hine that he had been working in the mill for four months.) This age discrepancy appeared years later on Sanford’s marriage certificate. Sanford listed his age as 24 in 1925, when he was really 22 years old. He was not a minor, so why did he use his “mill age”? Maybe he sought to maintain consistency, or maybe he really believed that he was 24.

In Hine’s photograph, Sanford (on the far left) stands with two other boys in front of what appears to be a backyard pasture. Of these three boys, Hine only recorded Sanford’s name. The other two boys could be family or neighbors. His brothers, Garland and Lee, were close to his age, and both worked at Merrimack. The 1920 census lists Will, the father, as employed
as a spooler, Garland as a weaver, Lee a spinner, and Sanford as a doffer. Doffing was a hard work. It was a doffer’s job to push a large wooden doffers box from row to row and collect finished spools. If the doffers were small, they would have to climb up the side of the looms to reach the top spools. Often they would not wear shoes because it made climbing easier. This was a typical job for boys in the textile mills.

The Huntsville City Directory for 1922-23 listed Sanford as a Merrimack employee living at 250 A Street. His parents, William and Ida, are also listed with the same employer and house number. William died the next year on March 26, 1923. Ida died in January 1925. They are both buried in Merrimack Cemetery.

In June 1925, Sanford married Ella Grace Campbell, a cashier. Details provided by the marriage certificate aid in creating a fuller picture of a grown Sanford. He was five feet, eight inches height, and weighed 140 pounds. Ella was five feet, six inches tall and weighed 125 pounds. Although he had been working since he was ten, Sanford was literate enough to sign the marriage certificate. He listed his occupation as a shipping clerk with residence in Memphis, Tennessee. It is possible that Sanford and Ella moved away permanently because the couple has no later listings in the City Directory; neither is buried in the Merrimack cemetery.


Eliza and Pink Durham

Lewis Hine photographed Eliza and Pink Durham, the children of Pinckney and Permillia Durham, in November 1913. The Durham’s had seven children: Eliza, Henry, Joe, Myrtle, George (known as Pink), Jimmie, and Lola. The youngest two children, Jimmie (1909-1922) and Lola (1916-1917) died early and are buried in Merrimack Cemetery.
Eliza and Pink Durham

Pinckney died some time between 1916 and the 1920 census. Pinckney and Permillia are both listed in the Huntsville City Directory for 1916, and in 1920 the census lists her as a widow.

At the time of Eliza and Pink’s picture, Eliza’s leg was broken. Hine wrote that her leg was broken on the job when a boy ran over her with a doffing box (a heavy wooden box used for the collection of spools). When Hine returned to Huntsville in December 1913, he took another picture of Pink. Because the picture is from a distance his face is not visible, but Hine labeled the photograph as “Pinkie Durham, 8 year old sweeper, going to work, noon hour.” If he worked a regular eight-hour shift he would have gotten off at eight at night and walked home.

There are no records of Eliza having been married, but by the time of the 1920 census she was apparently no longer living with her mother and siblings. She is not included in the list of household inhabitants. Pink is listed as a 17-year-old doffer. He was the sole financial support of the remaining family members at home.

Pink married Lana May Muscgrove on November 18, 1922. In order to be married, Pink need the permission of his legally appointed guardian, J. B. Morgan (who, coincidentally, had been appointed that same day). Pink’s signature on the marriage certificate is legible, but it is obvious that he is not used to writing. According to their marriage certificate, Pick was five feet, eight inches tall and weighed 145 pounds. Mary was five feet, six inches tall and weighed 128 pounds. Both listed their occupation as cotton
mill employees and their religion as "none." Lana herself was the daughter of a cotton mill worker. Her father, Call, died on July 28, 1922 when he fell into a Merrimack well and drowned.

Pink and May had three children. Their 11-month-old daughter, Corrine, died at home after a brief illness in 1931. She is buried in the Merrimack cemetery, and is the only one their children buried there. Pink and May also had two sons, J. D. and Howard Durham. Pink and his family apparently moved away sometime after 1931, and are not listed in subsequent Huntsville city directories. We do know that May’s family eventually moved back to Harden County, Tennessee. Perhaps the young couple followed them there.


The Henson Family

Lewis Hine took this picture, which he labeled “Pete Henson, Merrimack,” in November 1913. The picture was used in Daile Kaplan’s Photo Story to illustrate the harsh reality of child labor. Kaplan urged his readers to “note the downtrodden expression and posture.” It has been difficult to learn more about young Henson. There were no “Pete Henson” work release affidavits for any of the Huntsville mills, including Merrimack. There was, however, a Henson family that had four boys and three girls. According to the information in the Maulsby’s Merrimack Cemetery, none of the boys were named Pete, but it is not unusual for these children to be
known by an entirely different name. The head of this particular family was Mollie Henson. James T. Henson, her husband, is believed to have died in Tennessee. The family moved to Huntsville where they found work in the textile mills. Sithie, William, Charles Edward, David, Brooks, McGee, and Myrtis were the recorded children’s names. There was only one other family of Hensons, and their boys were all too old to be “Pete.”

David, standing next to the youngest Henson boy and most likely our “Pete”, started work in July 1913. It is highly unlikely that he was 12 years old as the affidavit states. The two older children had already been employed for a year when David began working. There are no affidavits for the girls. If they started jobs after 1915, there would be none because affidavits were no longer in use. Mollie Henson is listed in the Huntsville City Directory for 1916-17 as the widow of James, and she was employed at Merrimack, along with her sons. According to the 1920 censes, Molly lived on A Street, and was remarried to a man with the last name of Dickson. The household was comprised of four Henson children and one Dickson child (who was only a year old). The Henson children included two daughters, McGee and Marie (called Myrtise in the cemetery book), and two sons, James and Brookie (called Brooks). James, most likely called David earlier, is listed as a 17-year-old weaver. If he was seventeen in 1920, that would make him seven in 1913, and judging by the picture, just the right age for “our” Pete. In January 1942, a marriage certificate was issued to a James David Henson, whose father was Jim Henson. The birth date James David Henson reported was August 22, 1902, and his occupation was a textile worker.

Mollie, who married again for a third time to a man named Taylor, is buried in Merrimack Cemetery. Her tombstone reads “Mollie Lee Henson, May 9, 1878—December 16, 1935.” We have located no further information concerning James David; only Mollie is listed as buried in the cemetery.

Ann Maulsby, *Children of Industrial Huntsville*, p. 130.
Census, 1920, Merrimack Precinct, Madison County, Alabama, line 36.
Marriage records for Madison County, vol. 74 p. 3.
Hine photographed Madeline Causey in front of a mill house in Merrimack village in November 1913. It is likely that she has just finished a shift at the mill. Her eyes look very strained, and her hair is pulled neatly under a wrap. According to the 1910 census, Madeline’s family were farmers in Hillsboro, Lawrence County, Alabama before moving to Huntsville. Her parents were James T. and Allis Causey. They had seven children, six of whom were still living in 1910: Ethal Mae, 13; Estelle L, 11; Austin H. (Oscar), nine; Susie M. (Madeline), seven; Pearl, four; and Byron H. two.

Madeline began working on October 20, 1913, (the month before Hine’s investigative visit). Her affidavit lists July 7, 1901 as her sworn birth date, but the census records indicate that she was born in 1903. Twelve years old on paper, and ten in actuality, Madeline helped support her family. There is little information about Madeline and her family. There are no known Causeys buried in the Merrimack Cemetery; the family was not living in the village at the time of the 1920 census, and there are no listings for Causeys in the later editions of the Huntsville City Directory.

Hine took two photographs of Madeline. The one displayed here shows her in a lightweight dress with bare feet on a hard packed mud ground in November. The bottom of the house is exposed, and this scene creates a sense of deprivation. The second picture is a beautiful close up of her face, which reveals the soft detail of her features. It is obvious in both photographs that she is utterly exhausted. Both are typical of Hine’s work. One is

Madeline Causey
November 1913
able to empathize with her after a long day at work, and to remember that she is only ten years of age.


**A Note on Finding-Aids**

For those readers interested in conducting additional historical or genealogical research, the following finding aids are available at the Huntsville-Madison County Public Library:

- **Madison County Child Labor Sign-out Book.** This is an original book that parents or guardians were required to sign before a child could work in the mills. Because there was a law stating that children must be at least twelve years old to work in textile mills, there are corresponding affidavits in which the legal guardians swear to the age and personal information about the child. Ann Maulsby has organized this information in her compilation, *The Children of Industrial Huntsville*. This book is an easy way to quickly cross reference names with possible siblings without having to look through the whole registry or affidavits.

- **Affidavits.** According to Ann Maulsby, affidavits were discontinued on September 1, 1915 by authority of Act 169, which stated that no children under the age of 16 could work in mills. But one benefit to looking at the originals (located in the Probate Office on the library’s third floor) is to see if the guardian signed his or her name, or made their mark with an “X.”

- **Census Records.** Census records provide a wealth of information. They list occupations, nativity (place of birth), the total number children a family had, and of that number how many were living. These records may also identify neighbors. For example, the Merrimack census taker in 1920 went door to door by street. The census is taken every 10 years. Census records from Tennessee and Alabama can be viewed on microform in the Heritage Room on the library’s third floor.

- **Children Ineligible For Employment.** Published by the State Inspector in 1914. If a child did not meet the minimum eight-week requirement prior to 1914, his or her name should be in this book. The original is located in the University of Alabama Library in Birmingham, Alabama. There is a copy available in the Heritage Room.
The Huntsville City Directory. Another excellent source of information, the various editions of the city directory list names, addresses, employer, spouse, or widow.

Merrimac Cemetery Book. Compiled and published by Ann Maulsby, this is a unique source of information concerning the Merrimack mill community.

Dallas Mill Employment Records. This is an original book located in the probate Office on the library’s third floor. To use this book effectively, a researcher has to know the year in which Dallas Mill hired a particular individual. Users can go to that year, scan the names, and determine the exact date of employment and termination. It also states the job that person had.

Marriage Certificates. A standard tool of geological research, marriage records for Madison County are located in the Probate Office on the third floor of the library.

Property Deeds. Deed information is maintained kept in the Madison County Court House in downtown Huntsville. If a researcher is looking for a private citizen use the reverse index. The reverse index lists the name of the buyer, rather than the seller.