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# Bicycle Messenger Boys and the Evolution of American Labor Laws

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*Well, there is a greater variety of work for messengers to do than any other job I know of. You get calls to buy hats for men and women in the whorehouses, they send you out with notes and telegrams, they get chop-suey, and regular meals, cigarettes, drinks, clothing, groceries. I once had a whore send me out for a box of matches, gave me a dollar, and told me to keep the change. I have been sent out for corsets, and once for a pair of shoes. I have lots of calls for women's drawers, corset covers. I have gone for medicine and doctors, and got lots of cocaine for them when the sale was open.*

– An 1910 interview with a messenger boy[1]

From 1900 until the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) was passed in 1938, the bicycle messenger business was booming. In the days before any national child labor laws were implemented, poorly paid child bicycle messengers delivered millions of telegraph messages and tons of other goods each year. The work could be as exhilarating as it was dangerous. While in downtown urban areas it was often faster to deliver on foot; it was the more distant trips that required the additional speed of a bicycle. Bicycle messengers had to compete for space on disorganized, rough streets with horse-drawn wagons, automobiles, carriages, and streetcars. It could be dangerous work. Injuries from crashes were common, but a number of bicycle messengers during this time were also killed while delivering packages and messages. Sometimes it wasn't the messenger who got killed, it was the pedestrian that he ran into.

This era of the child bicycle messenger coincided with the formative period for American labor law and although there were some spotty state regulations, child labor laws did not exist at a national level until the passing of the FLSA. Bicycle messenger boys played a more substantial role in the evolution of these labor laws than has previously been recognized. At the state level worker's compensation laws were also being established and refined during this same thirty-five-year period. Child labor was rampant in the first decades of the twentieth century. The Census of 1900 found that twenty-five percent of boys ten to fifteen years old were contributing to their family's income.[2] The many child laborers who toiled long hours in the fields and inside dangerous factories were largely hidden from the public eye. Bicycle messenger boys helped to sway public opinion, and eventually legislation, regarding child labor because of their visibility in society and the hazards of their labors. **[Figure 1]**

**Review of the Literature**

The role of bicycle messengers in American history and culture has not gone entirely unnoticed. Dr. Gregory Downey from the University of Wisconsin-Madison has published several articles on telegraph messenger boys that culminated in his 2002 book, *Telegraph Messenger Boys: Labor, Technology, and Geography, 1850-1950*. Bicycle messengers are featured on the cover of Downey's book, but his book is focused on the wider world of telegraph messenger boys rather than the special problems of bicycle messengers. Ross D. Petty, on the other hand, was very much focused on bicycle messengers when he presented on "The Bicycle as a Communications Medium" at the 16th (2005) International Cycling History Conference. Petty's work focuses primarily on comparing messengers from the US Postal service and Western Union. Downey only briefly touches on the impacts of messengers on labor laws, while Petty does not discuss it at all. This paper also focuses on all types of bicycle messenger boys- not just those employed by Western Union or the U.S. postal service. There are a number of recent books about modern bicycle messengers, but none of these include any substantial history of the trade. Likewise, the published histories of Western Union (which historically employed the most bicycle messengers) do not cover bicycle messengers in any detail.

**An Overview of American Labor Law**

The impact of child bicycle messengers on American labor law can only be established by first reviewing the major historical milestones in the evolution of these laws. This paper is concerned with two separate, but related, areas of the law: labor law and child labor law. Examples of general labor law include workers compensation, regulating hours worked, workplace safety and so forth. Child labor law is a subset of labor law and refers to any laws which regulate the work of children. The deepest roots of American labor law lie with the first workers unions, beginning in 1794 with the formation of the Federal Society of Journeymen Cordwainers (shoemakers) in Philadelphia. Eleven years after its formation, this shoemaker's union called for a major strike which eventually landed its leaders in court. One of the earliest rulings regarding labor law resulted from The Commonwealth v. George Pullis, *et al* (1806). This case ruled that striking was a federal crime. It took another thirty-five years for another case, Commonwealth v. Hunt, to reverse the decision and grant unions the legal right to strike.[3] Unions continued to expand during the 1800s as the industrial revolution changed the nature of work in the United States from agrarian to industrial.

Child labor wasn't regulated by law until 1842 when Massachusetts limited children to working ten hours per day- hardly a humanitarian effort. Other states followed suit, but the laws still allowed for long hours of work, dangerous conditions, and had rampant enforcement problems. For the rest of the nineteenth century, child labor was only regulated by selected states who enacted their own laws. President Benjamin Harrison was a champion of legislation that would offer some protections to railroad workers. In an 1889 speech to congress he declared, "It is a reproach to our civilization that any class of American workmen, should in the pursuit of a necessary and useful vocation, be subjected to a peril of life and limb as great as that

of a soldier in time of war." [4] Similar to today, Congress moved slowly on major legislation, so it wasn't until 1906 that the Federal Employers Liability Act (FELA) became law. The FELA enabled injured railroad workers to sue their employers for damages. This act differed from workers compensation laws, which were governed by the states, in that it did not automatically award compensation unless negligence could be proven. Even so, it was a major step forward in labor law. As of 1912, twenty-two states still permitted children under the age of fourteen to work in factories and thirty states allowed boys under sixteen to work in mines, and thirty-one states still authorized children under sixteen to work more than eight hours a day.[5] Clearly, federal legislation was needed to deal with this problem. Congress managed to pass the Keating-Owen Act in 1916 which (among other things) regulated the number of hours children could work. Unfortunately, it was found unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1918. In 1924, Congress tried a different strategy by passing a constitutional amendment barring child labor, but not enough states signed on to ratify the bill. In a major step forward the 1936 Walsh-Healey Act set safety standards, minimum wage, and child labor regulation on all federal contracts. Finally, in 1938, Congress passed a major piece of legislation: The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). The FLSA fixed minimum ages of sixteen for work during school hours, fourteen for certain jobs after school, and eighteen for dangerous work. It also set maximum work hours.[6] Child bicycle messengers of all ages were in their heyday during this formative period of American labor law. Many types of child labor contributed to the passing of the Fair Labor Standards act, but bicycle messengers deserve closer scrutiny because of their large numbers, public visibility, and the various hazards of the job.

**The Earliest Bicycle Messengers**

The velocipede was invented around 1861 in the Parisian workshop of the Michaux family. The major technological innovation of the velocipede was the addition of cranks on the front wheel. Pierre Lallement, a former employee of the Michaux's, was awarded a U.S. patent for a velocipede in 1866. It was only a scant three years before the use of velocipedes was suggested for message delivery services. In 1869, the *Journal of the Telegraph,* recommended velocipedes for deliver boys: "It has all the elements of excitement which would suit and captivate a spirited boy-a boy of pluck and metal… He would glory in showing to admiring crowds how he




*Figure 1. Western Union messenger boy holiday advertisement. Author's collection.*

could spin along on his mission, blowing this whistle at crossings, and would claim 'good time' on his return." [7] This account and many of those that follow were identified by Ross D. Petty in "The Bicycle as a Communications Medium." It is unclear whether anyone actually took up the *Journal of the Telegraph's* suggestion to use a velocipede as a delivery vehicle. In any case, the U.S. velocipede craze died down by the end of 1869. The next documented mention of the use of a bicycle for delivery purposes came in the *New York Times* in 1884 when there was an account of a private messenger service using bicycles -these would have been high wheel / ordinary bicycles- for message delivery. The first documented use of bicycles for telegraph delivery came from the colossal telegraph company, Western Union in 1884: they would go one to be one of the largest employers of bicycle messengers.[8] The use of ordinary bicycles for message delivery had to be incredibly limited due to the cost of the machines and condition of most roads at the time. This all changed with the coming of the safety bicycle.

The Starley Rover safety bicycle was invented in 1885. Soon the basic safety bicycle design with a double-diamond frame and small wheels of equal size made its way to the United States. Throughout the ensuing bicycle boom of the 1890s, production soared, and prices fell drastically making it far more economical to use bicycles for all sorts of delivery services. By 1894, the American District Telegraph (ADT) company was using safety bicycles for message delivery. In 1896, the trade periodical, *Telegraph Age*, ran a picture from an Omaha, Nebraska telegraph company that included a picture of fifteen bicycle messenger boys. This same article claimed the same company started using bicycles for delivery in 1893. An even earlier claimed date of 1892 was made by a Western Union manager from Syracuse, NY in 1897.[9] The actual first individual or company to use safety bicycles for message delivery more than likely went unnoticed and undocumented.

Even during these early days of child bicycle messengers, social reformers began to take note of the various hazards of the job. Jacob Riis was one of the first of the "muckraker" journalists, who documented the underbelly of late nineteenth century urban life and work. Riis was a Danish immigrant who used photography and writing to advance the causes of the progressive reform movement. In his 1892 book, "Children of the Poor" he notes:

*There is still another kind of employment that absorbs many of the boys and ought to be prohibited with the utmost rigor of the law. I refer to the messenger service of the District Telegraph Companies especially. Anyone can see for himself how old some of these boys are who carry messages about the streets every day; but everybody cannot see the kind of houses they have to go to, the kind of people they meet, or the sort of influences that beset them hourly at an age when they are most easily impressed for good or bad.*[10]

One would expect that the majority of messenger boys Riis was referring to in this passage were delivering messages on foot due to the still high costs of bicycles. What is clear is that as bicycle prices

plummeted following the great bicycle market crash around 1900, bicycle use by delivery boys began to skyrocket. **[Figure 2]**

**Western Union Bicycle Messenger Boys**

In 1844, the inventor Samuel Morse sent his first telegraph message, from Washington, D.C., to Baltimore, Maryland. This was a massive leap forward in speeding up communications and it didn't take long before the new technology was commercialized and became widespread. The Western Union Telegraph Company of New York was incorporated in 1851. Following several consolidations, Western Union had two thousand offices and 37,380 miles of telegraph wire by 1866. Western Union was large enough to be one of the first eleven businesses to be added to the New York Stock Exchange in 1865. By 1921, the company had bought out 535 other corporations to create a near-monopoly on the telegraph business.[11] In 1929, a personnel study of Western Union in New York City and Long Island found that around two thousand messengers handled an astounding thirty-three million messages a year.[12] The employment of telegraph messenger boys peaked during the 1930 census count at around fifteen thousand nationwide. Significantly, this was number was only around nine percent of the larger category which included messengers of all types, errand boys, and office boys. Any consideration of bicycle messenger boys' impact on American labor law should extend beyond just telegraph messengers to include all these other types of messengers. **[Figure 3]**

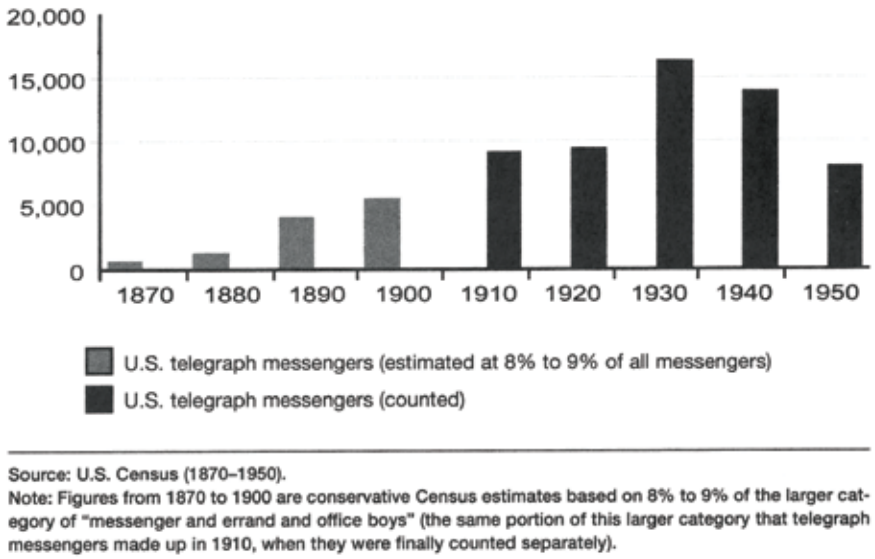



*Figure 3. Telegraph messenger census data from Telegraph Messenger Boys: Labor, Communication and Technology, 1850-1950 by Gregory Downey, p. 4.*

Western Union published a *Manual for Messengers* that outlined most aspects of the job including equipment, duties, making deliveries, answering calls and safety. Since many Western Union delivery boys utilized bicycles, the manual spelled out bicycle-specific rules:

*6. Shoes, bicycles, and tires are for sale to messengers at prices much lower than the same quality equipment can be purchased in the stores. The company contracts for these articles in large quantities and sells them to you at cost so that you can get the benefit of the best equipment for the least money.*

*7. The work you do -walking or riding a bicycle- is the healthiest kind you will ever be offered because you are out in the fresh air practically all the time.*

*42. If you ride a bicycle, it will pay you well to keep both hands on the bars, your head up AND EYES TO THE FRONT. Don't try to beat another vehicle to a crossing.*

*43. Do not hitch on trolley-cars, automobiles or other vehicles.*[13]



*Figure 2. Photograph of a night messenger service boy by muckraker journalist, Jacob Riis. Museum of the City of New York.*

More than likely, most bicycles used by Western Union messenger delivery boys were simply whatever they had access to. **[Figure 4]** These bicycles were distinguished as messenger bikes by a placard that was wired to the top tube of the frame. As the *Manual for Messengers* indicated, Western Union also contracted for specific Western Union branded bicycles which were sold to messenger boys on installment plans that were garnished from their wages. There is mention of an 1896 Western Union Bicycle Mfg. Co. incorporated in Chicago. The initial capital stock of the business was $150,000, but it appears to have gone out of business later the same year.[14] In *Telegraph Messenger Boys*, George Downey notes that "During the 20s and 30s Western Union bicycles were produced on contract from Westfield Manufacturing. Westfield at the

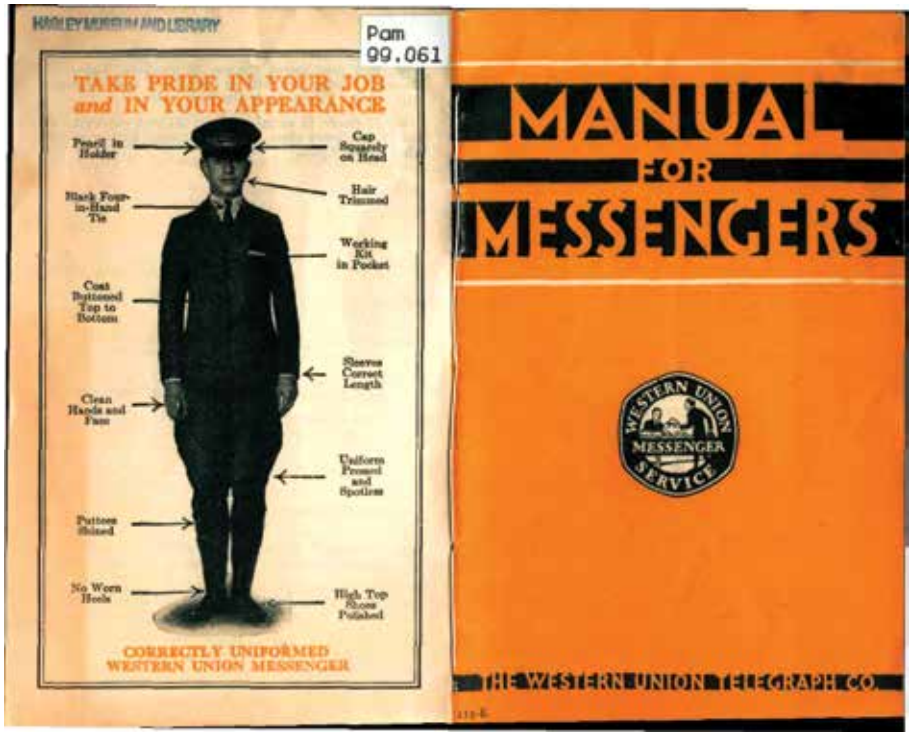



*Figure 4. Western Union Manual for Messengers, c. 1920. Hagley Museum.*

time owned the rights to the Columbia, Westfield, Tribune, Rambler, Crescent, and Pope Brands." [15] In 1929 and 1930, Western Union placed orders for five thousand bicycles costing between $20 and $25. Besides featuring distinctive Western Union head badges and color schemes, these special-order bicycles often featured heavy-duty frames, built in racks, and thick tires. The heavy construction was warranted, as messenger boys that delivered primarily within city limits could rack up twenty or more miles a day. Bicycle messengers like John Dickson of Dallas, Texas who worked full-time and delivered to outlying areas could ride an unbelievable number of miles. In 1915, *Western Union News* reported that Dickson covered 16,000 miles between April and September of that year.[16]. **[Figures 5 &6]**

Other companies such as Columbia, manufactured bicycles specifically targeting the messenger and delivery markets. These bikes featured heavy-duty construction as well as rear (and sometimes front) racks as standard equipment. Between 1910 and 1920 Columbia produced Pope Daily Service bicycles. According to a 1912 Columbia Bicycle Catalog, "The 'Pope Daily Service' is specially designed throughout for everyday hard practical use and possesses greater strength and durability than the ordinary pleasure machine. The frame is made from extra heavy gauge seamless steel tubing and is strengthened at the joints by our Pope method of internal reinforcements...EVERY PART has been designed or selected for the hardest kind of service and comfortable riding." [17] **[Figure 7]**




*Figure 5. c. 1940 Western Union Messenger Special. Photographer and owner Colin Kirsch, www.oldbike.eu*

**National Child Labor Committee and Lewis Hine**

Another major development in the move towards establishing federal child labor laws was the founding of the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC) in 1904. Chairman Felix Adler, laid out the broad goals of the NCLC during its first meeting: "It should be plainly said that whatever happens in the sacrifice of adult workers, the public conscience inexorably demands that the children under twelve years of age shall not be touched; that childhood shall be sacred; that industrialism and commercialism shall not be allowed beyond this point to degrade humanity."[18] Throughout the early 1900s, this committee was highly influential in advocating for child labor regulations. During this period photography was becoming more mainstream. The NCLC recognized that photographs of child labor could do more for their cause than any number of books, pamphlets, or speeches, so in 1908 they hired an up-and-coming photographer named Lewis Hine.

Lewis W. Hine was born into a working-class family from Oshkosh, Wisconsin in 1874. He attended the University of Wisconsin and then the University of Chicago. In 1901, he found work at the progressive Ethical Cultural School in New York. Three years later he began to




*Figure 6. Western Union Messenger Special headbadge. Photographer and owner Colin Kirsch, www.oldbike.eu*

learn photography to document school activities. Hine also frequently traveled to Ellis Island to document newly-arrived immigrants. His work eventually caught the attention of the NCLC who would go on to employ him from 1908 to 1918. Hine's assignment was to document the dangerous working conditions of American children. This tenure with the NCLC resulted in over five thousand photographs and sometimes required Hine to travel fifty thousand miles per year.[19] If you have ever seen troubling black and white photos of children working in mines, fields, or factories, chances are you have seen the work of Lewis Hine. These were among the first widely-published social documentary photographs and they had a marked effect on the broader American public. Hine's photographs were persuasive because they dragged the horrors of child labor out of the shadows and onto the pages of the nation's newspapers and into pamphlets produced by the NCLC pamphlets. In 1909, Hine wrote, "Perhaps you are weary of child labor pictures. Well, so are the rest of us, but we propose to make you and the whole country so sick and tired of the whole business that when the time for action comes, child-labor pictures will be records of the past." [20]

Hine's documentation of child labor atrocities included trips to oyster shucking factories, coal mines, and tobacco farms, but Hine also chose to photograph and interview bicycle messenger boys. The hazards of the coal mine or factory were obvious, but prior to Hine, not much attention had been given to bicycle messenger boys who were commonplace in cities large and small. The work of the messenger did come with its own set of perils. Life and limb were at constant risk as messengers traversed busy city streets. Beyond this, many messenger boy's work exposed them to all the vices which could be found in a city's red light district: prostitution, drugs, gambling, and violence were just the tip of the iceberg. Hine and the NCLC seemed to recognize that to move public opinion regarding child labor they needed to take something everyone was familiar with -child bicycle messengers- and show how they were corrupted by the seedy underbelly of contemporary cities. True, the bicycle messengers in Hine's photos don't look as downtrodden as some of their counterparts in the mines and factories. Critically, Hine did not just take photographs, but also conducted interviews with his subjects. This interview material coupled with the stark reality of Hine's photographs made for a powerful combination. The images that follow are from the Lewis Hine collection at the Library of Congress.**[Figures 8, 9 & 10]**



*Figure 7. 1912 Pope Daily Service Bicycle manufactured by Columbia. Note the heavy-duty racks that came as standard equipment. Photographer and owner Colin Kirsch, www.oldbike.eu*



*Figure 8.. "Luther Wharton, drug store delivery boy, twelve years old. Works from 4:00 P.M. to midnight in Sommers Drug Store. I saw him working at midnight. He goes to school in the daytime, then works from four to twelve. Sundays half a day. Gets $5.00 a week. "I take medicines to the Red Light places several times a day. Yes I know some of the people there." This is a pretty heavy burden, both physical and moral, to place on this adolescent boy. San Antonio, Texas." Lewis Hine. Library of Congress, National Child Labor Committee Collection. LOT 7480, v. 3, no. 3565.*

Hine's photos made an impact with the reform-minded. Newspaper reporters who saw an exhibit of his child labor photos wrote:

*There has been no more convincing proof of the absolute necessity of child labor laws...than these pictures showing the suffering, the degradation, the immoral influence, the utter lack of anything this is wholesome in the lives of these poor little wage earners. They speak far more eloquently than any [written] work -and depict a state of affairs which is terrible in its reality- terrible to encounter, terrible to admit that such things exist in civilized communities.*[21]

Due to pressure from the NCLC and changing national sentiments, president William Howard Taft created the Federal Children's Bureau in 1912 and charged it with "...investigat[ing] and report[ing] upon all matters pertaining to the welfare of children and child life among all classes of our people." [22] This was another important step forward in regulating child labor in the United States.

**Bicycle Messenger Boys and the Courts**

Court cases often help to refine existing laws or prod the legislature into enacting new law. The direct impact of bicycle messenger boys on American labor law is nowhere more evident than the multitude of court cases filed for and against bicycle messenger boys. A search of state court cases from 1895 to 1940 yields one hundred thirty-three cases that include the terms "bicycle" and "messenger". By and large these cases resulted from a bicycle messenger being injured or killed on the job or a messenger killing

or injuring a pedestrian while at work. As the largest employer of bicycle messengers, Western Union figures into many of these cases. The company's *Manual for Messenger Boys* seems to indicate that their primary concern was limiting liability rather than the safety of their messengers: "#47. If you should meet with an accident or run into someone, be sure to secure the names and addresses of any witnesses and report fully to delivery clerk, or manager immediately upon your return to the office." [23] Western Union -and other businesses that employed bicycle messengers- had good reason to be concerned as injuries were all too common. What follows is just a sampling of some of the court cases involving bicycle messengers. In 1901, an ADT bicycle messenger was killed by an automobile around midnight in New York. In 1904, Albert Jahn, a fifteen-year-old bicycle messenger boy for the Western Union Telegraph Company in Louisville Kentucky, was struck and instantly killed by a delivery wagon drawn by a runaway horse. In 1924, Western Union was required to pay twelve thousand dollars for a personal injury suit on behalf of Thomas Malarkey who died after being struck by one of their bicycle messengers. That same year, another bicycle messenger who was working illegally after 7PM was killed by a car in Tennessee. In that case, Western Union was found liable and the mother of the deceased was awarded $13,500.[24] In the 1938 Simard v. W. Union Tel. Co, case a bicycle messenger was employed by Western Union on a short-term basis delivering seasonal advertisements. The plaintiff was hit by the messenger in the course of his work. Western Union argued that the short-term nature of his employment made him a private contractor and absolved the company of any liability. The courts did not side with Western Union and found in favor of the plaintiff.[25] This sort of case was important in establishing employer liability. Liability cases that hinge on employee versus private contractor status continue to be common in today's courts. For example, at the time of this writing major court cases from ride sharing companies Uber and Lyft are being debated to decide if drivers are private contractors or employees.



*Figure 9. "Preston De Costa, fifteen year old messenger #3 for Bellevue Messenger Service. I ran across him and took photos while he was carrying notes back and forth between a prostitute in jail and a pimp in the Red Light district. He had read all the notes and knew all about the correspondence. He was a fine grained adolescent boy. Has been delivering message and drugs in the Red Light for six months and knows the ropes thoroughly. "A lot of these girls are my regular customers. I carry 'em messages and get 'em drinks, drugs, etc. Also go to the bank with money for them. If a fellow treats 'em right, they'll call him by number and give him all their work. I got a box full of photos I took of these girls - some of 'em I took in their room." Works until 11:00 P.M. Location: San Antonio, Texas." Lewis Hine. Library of Congress, National Child Labor Committee Collection. LOT 7480, v. 3, no. 3568.*




*Figure 10. "Isaac Boyett, 'I'm de whole show.' The twelve year old proprietor, manager and messenger of the Club Messenger Service, 402 Austin Street, Waco. The photo shows him in the heart of the Red Light district where he was delivering messages as he does several times a day. Said he knows the houses and some of the inmates. Has been doing this for one year, working until 9:30 P.M. Saturdays. Not so late on other nights. Makes from six to ten dollars a week." Location: Waco, Texas. Lewis Hine. Library of Congress, National Child Labor Committee Collection. LOT 7480, v. 3, no. 3638.*

In the United States, workers' compensation for everyone but federal employees is regulated at the state level. These important labor laws were being implemented and refined during the same period that bicycle messengers were being widely used. Wisconsin passed the first comprehensive workers' compensation law in 1911, while Mississippi was the last state to jump onboard in 1948. Clearly workers' compensation cases that involved bicycle messengers were only a small fraction of all workers compensa-

tion cases. Still, it should be equally clear that bicycle messengers were routinely being injured or killed while working. These cases contributed to the entirety of workers' compensation case law and were frequently covered in local newspapers.

While it never resulted in a court case, a 1913 bicycle messenger accident bears mentioning. Sixteen-year-old Robert Crawford was working as a bicycle messenger boy when he was hit by President Woodrow Wilson's personal "White House" car. Crawford was examined by the White House physician and taken to Providence Hospital. The young messenger was distraught over the loss of his bicycle, but the President paid him a visit in the hospital and promised to replace the damaged bicycle. After the President's visit, a contemporary newspaper article recounted Crawford's excitement: "I'm going to have a wheel given me by the President of the United States. I'd take a broken ankle, or three broken ankles, for that." [26]

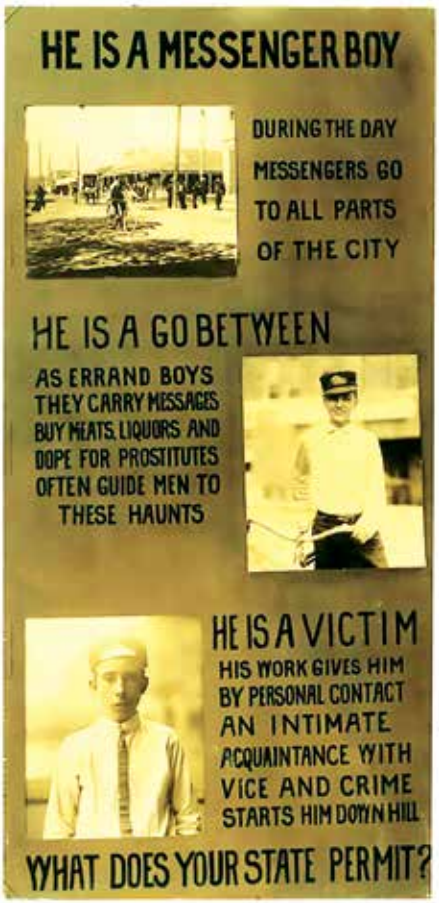
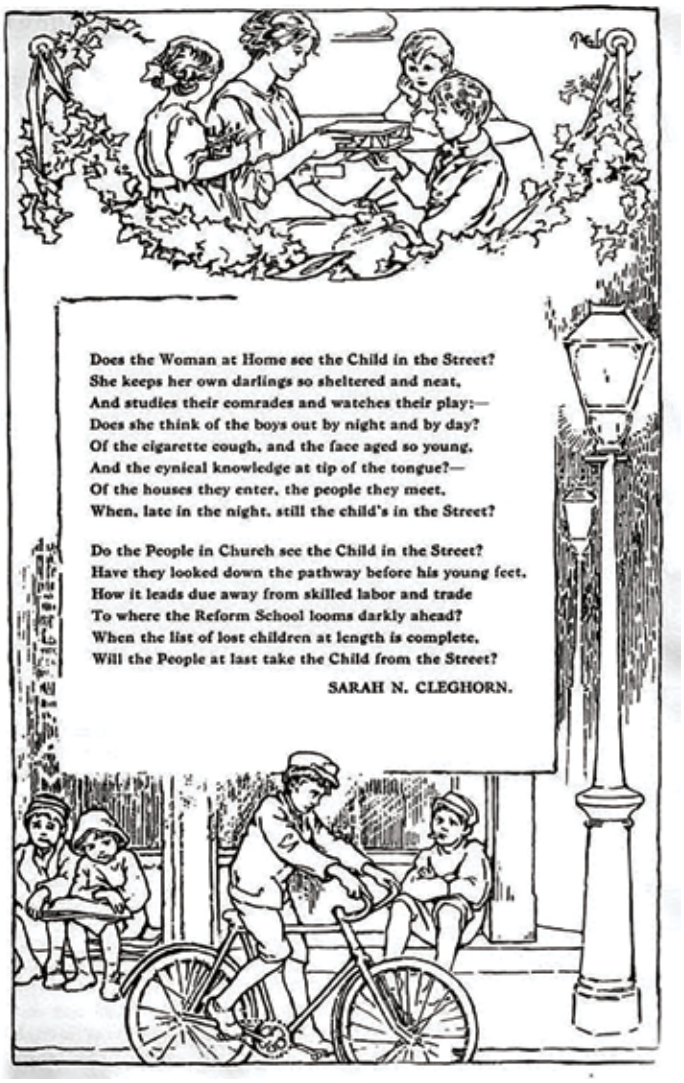



*Figure 11. National Child Labor Committee pamphlet. Lewis Hine. Library of Congress, National Child Labor Committee Collection.*

**Red Light Districts**

Physical harm resulting from accidents was only one of the hazards facing child bicycle messengers of the day. The messenger's account of his work in the red light district that introduced this paper highlights hazards of another sort. Beginning in 1910, the NCLC hired investigators to conduct interviews with bicycle messengers regarding the "night service" in many of the country's largest cities. The messenger quoted above went on to explain that after nine or ten at night seventy five percent of the night messengers' business was to the whore houses of the red light district. Not only that, but the pay for night service work tended to be much higher than regular day work. A Philadelphia messenger boy claimed to be make between one and two dollars on each night shift- this amount would have been a good salary for most adults of the day. During one NCLC interview, a sixteen-year-old and a fourteen-year-old messenger from Lynchburg, Tennessee elaborated on night shift work:


Does the Woman at Home see the Child in the Street?
She keeps her own darlings so sheltered and neat,
And studies their comrades and watches their play:—
Does she think of the boys out by night and by day?
Of the cigarette cough, and the face aged so young,
And the cynical knowledge at tip of the tongue?—
Of the houses they enter, the people they meet,
When, late in the night, still the child's in the Street?

Do the People in Church see the Child in the Street?
Have they looked down the pathway before his young feet,
How it leads due away from skilled labor and trade
To where the Reform School looms darkly ahead?
When the list of lost children at length is complete,
Will the People at last take the Child from the Street?

SARAH N. CLEGHORN.

*Figure 12. "The Child in the Street" by Sarah N. Cleghorn from Stories About the Other Child; Supplement to the Child Labor Bulletin, Vol. II No. 3, December 1913.*

*"Do you boys know where the 'red light' houses are?"*

*"Sure, Go down there every night! Gee! See some great sights too!"*

*"What do you see?"*

*"Gee! They come out stark naked sometimes!"*

*"Do you ever see men in there?"*

*"Shure, when the bell rings they hide inside, and let the whores open the door."*

*"What do you boys do down there?"*

*"We can do anything they want. See everything they've got, and would see more if they had it…"*

*"Are they all young girls there?"*

*"Shure, lots of young girls, some no older than I am."* [27]

Along with the moral degradation resulting from exposure to the drugs, gambling, and violence of the red light district there were additional physical hazards since the night service messenger boys were not always paid in cash. When asked about fear of getting a disease from one of the prostitutes a messenger replied: "I guess I have had all the doses I want. ... I have had three doses of 'clap' one right after the other. Just as soon as I got over the first I got the second, and when I was cured of the second, I got the third." Some of the NCLC reports were so lurid that within the organization, they were had to be designated as restricted access. These interviews combined with Hine's photographs forced some states to act quickly to ban children messengers from working night shifts- a small victory

in the long battle against child labor **[Figure 11]**

**Conclusion**

Ironically, it wasn't a child labor law per se that finally had a significant impact on the number of children working; it was the Social Security Act of 1935. This act was signed into law by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on August 14, 1935. Among other things, the law established a social safety net for the unemployed, disabled, and elderly. This greatly reduced many families' needs for additional income from their children. The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 did finally regulate the age at which children could work and set a maximum number of weekly hours. The FLSA and other failed federal labor regulations that eventually led up to the passage of that law were all influenced by bicycle messenger boys. The extent of that influence is certainly small, but messenger work of all types was a very common form of employment for boys in the early twentieth century. Messenger boys and newspaper boys would have been visible daily in any major city. It would have been easier for the average person to empathize with the plight of the messenger or newspaper boy than it would for those hidden behind factory walls or in rural fields. This visibility combined with Hine's photos contributed to the growing public outrage over child labor.

The wide-ranging effects of child labor laws are reflected in the percentage of children completing high school. In 1900, only 6.3% of American children completed high school. After the passage of Social Security and the FLSA that number had jumped to 40%. In 2010, it was up to 90%.[28] It is important to note that technological advances also drastically reduced the need for telegraph delivery boys. By 1970, 43% of seventy million telegraph messages were received by teleprinter or facsimile with no need for delivery. Another 25% were delivered by telephone, leaving only 27% to be delivered by messengers.[29] Likewise, the work of bicycle messengers has evolved. Their numbers fell rapidly with as telegraph technology advanced, but bicycle messengers saw a resurgence in the 1980s as people realized they could move small packages in urban areas faster and cheaper than the major shipping companies.

The FLSA act did not completely erase the exploitation of child laborers in the United States. For one thing, the initial law had many exemptions for children employed in agriculture. A 1971 report from the United States Department of Labor found that one-fourth of the country's seasonal farm workers (about 800,000 out of 3.1 million) were under the age of sixteen, and half of those were between ten and thirteen years old. Exact figures are impossible to pin down, but recent estimates indicate that four million children are currently legally employed in the United States while another two million work illegally.30 The National Child Labor Committee exists to this day and still works to improve the lives of child laborers. Lewis Hine passed away in 1940, leaving behind him a massively influential body of photographic work. Every year since 1985, the NCLC has presented the Lewis Hine Awards for Service to Children and Youth. Hine's bicycle messenger photographs helped their plight resonate with the average citizen. Thanks to his work and to the labor of child bicycle messengers in the early twentieth century, the United States has become a better place for children. ●

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**End notes**

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