

Child Labor

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It was 1896. The New York State Senate had begun hearings on child labor. Working children and others were called to testify. State law said children under 15 could not work in factories but that didn't stop many children, whose families need them to earn money, from seeking employment at much younger ages. One of the children who testified was Fannie Harris, a young immigrant garment worker on Manhattan's Lower East Side.

Senator: Can you read?

Fannie: I can read a little, not much.

Senator: Do you know how to spell dog?

Fannie: I have forgotten . . .

Senator: Did you ever have a birthday?

Fannie: . . . [W]e have not any money to make a birthday . . .

Senator: And your mamma wants you to go to work?

Fannie: Yes, sir; sure she does; and I want to go to work myself . . .

The Senator then held up Fannie's age certificate. It said she was 15. But Fannie looked more like a 12-year old.

Senator: And this paper your mamma gave you, did she?

Fannie: I went to a lawyer and paid twenty-five cents and he gave me it . . .

Like thousands of others, Fannie spent more time in factories than in school. In 1902, reformers founded the New York Child Labor Committee. Slowly, they won bans against dangerous work, night work, and long hours for working children.

"The Chimney Sweeper," from *Songs of Innocence*

When my mother died I was very young,
And my father sold me while yet my tongue
Could scarcely cry " 'weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep! "
So your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep.

There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head
That curled like a lamb's back, was shaved: so I said,
"Hush, Tom! never mind it, for when your head's bare
You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair."

And so he was quiet, & that very night,
As Tom was a-sleeping he had such a sight!
That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned & Jack,
Were all of them locked up in coffins of black.

And by came an Angel who had a bright key,
And he opened the coffins & set them all free;
Then down a green plain, leaping, laughing, they run,
And wash in a river and shine in the Sun.

Then naked & white, all their bags left behind,
They rise upon clouds and sport in the wind.
And the Angel told Tom, if he'd be a good boy,
He'd have God for his father & never want joy.

And so Tom awoke; and we rose in the dark,
And got with our bags & our brushes to work.
Though the morning was cold, Tom was happy & warm;
So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.

—William Blake