

## “The Most Beautiful Sight”

**A**sa Candler, a soft drink manufacturer, once wrote, “The most beautiful sight we see is the child at labor.” He wasn’t talking about homework.

Child labor in the Victorian age was considered normal and necessary. Businessmen like Mr. Candler could pay working-class children lower wages than adults and boss them around more easily. Politicians knew that fast-growing industries needed cheap workers for 10- to 12-hour-a-day unskilled jobs. When factory owners broke the few child labor laws that did exist, politicians looked the other way.

Boys began their apprenticeship in a trade as early as the age of 10. As preteens, they went to war as drummer boys and buglers. They also carried drinking water to train passengers, sold newspapers, worked as night messengers and office boys, and toiled in the cotton mills and coal mines. Girls worked as street vendors selling matches, flowers, or hot corn, and as babysitters for their younger sisters and brothers while their parents worked. Farm children were expected to pitch in and were often hired out to other farmers.



Didn’t children have to go to school? Not necessarily. In the first half of the century, parents who could afford it sent their children to private schools. State-funded, free public schools began opening in the 1830s. (Slave children weren’t allowed to learn to read and write.) By 1889 most states had passed laws making it compulsory for children to go to school, although the laws weren’t always enforced.

Boys and girls were burnt, cut, mangled, and poisoned in accidents on the job. But then, adults were burnt, cut, mangled, and poisoned on the job too. It wasn’t until late in the century that children began to be treated as children rather than as small adults.



# Forced Laborer

African-American slaves in the 19th century performed many jobs from laundress to skilled craftsperson. In 1860, three-quarters of slave laborers worked on the land. Only a small minority worked in mills, ironworks, and machine shops. The wealth of Southern slave states came mainly from agriculture, not industry.

If you are doing railroad work for the Union Pacific pushing east from California, you are probably a Chinese immigrant. If you work for the Central Pacific railroad heading west from Nebraska, you are likely an Irish immigrant or an ex-soldier.

As a Native American, you do the hard, dirty work that Anglos don't want to do. Under an 1850 California state law, you have been arrested for being a dangerous "vagrant"—this is someone who doesn't have a job and is considered a public nuisance. In your case, the law is an excuse for forcing you to work on a farm or in a mine. Native children are also seized and forced to work.

A group of kidnapers with nine children under the age of 10 once claimed that they had taken the children as "an act of charity" because their parents had been killed. They were asked how they knew the parents were dead. "I killed some of them myself," replied one man.

By 1870 the Native-American population of California had fallen to 30,000 from about 150,000 in 1848, as a result of racial violence, forced labor, and epidemics.



## Canal Hoggee



You are the least important worker on the new canals, but without you, the boats wouldn't move. Canal boats are towed by two or three horses that walk along a towpath beside the canal. Your job is to lead the horses for about four hours at a time; then another driver and team take over. Sometimes the relief horses are kept on board and sometimes they are waiting in a shed along the way.

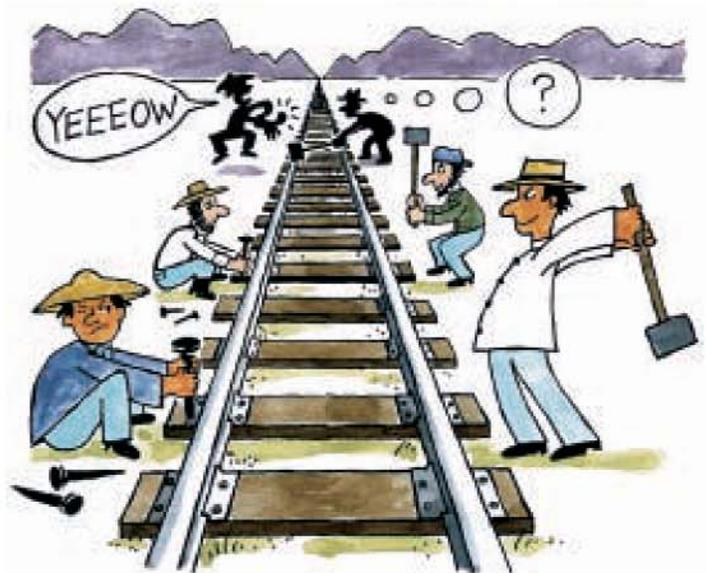
Like you, many hoggees are boys, some as young as 12. Most of the time, the captain is telling you to hurry up, so you look forward to stopping for a while at a lock—one of the watery “steps” inside gates that let boats move up- or downhill. As your canal boat waits its turn, you sing with the crews of the other barges in line. Your favorite song is “The Raging Canal.” You particularly like the lines, “We trusted to our driver, although he was but small, for he knew all the windings of that raging canal.” (Probably best not to think about a later verse where he and his team fall into the canal during a storm and the horses drown.)

## Construction Laborer

You are a laborer on one of the construction crews building the transcontinental railroad in the late 1860s. If you work for the Union Pacific pushing east from California, you are probably a Chinese immigrant. If you work for the Central Pacific heading west from Nebraska, you are likely an Irish immigrant or an ex-soldier.

Building the line is backbreaking labor done mostly by hand. Engineers and surveyors stake out the exact route. You cut down trees, blast through foothills with explosives, and dig tunnels through granite mountains so hard that it takes a day to drill eight inches (20 cm). Once the roadbed is level, you put down the tracks.

You work fast. The government has turned the building of the line into a race between the two railway companies. The one that builds the most track will make the most money. On the Plains, your crew can put down the wooden ties, lay the heavy iron rails on top, pound the spikes into the rails, and bolt on the connecting plates as quickly as a man can walk.



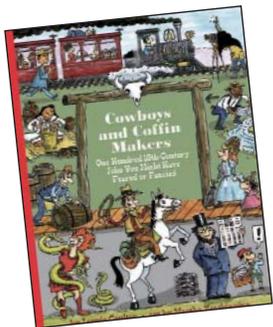
# Laundress



During the gold rush, you run a successful business washing men's clothes. In the days before washing machines, doing the laundry is long, hard work, usually women's work.

Here's how to do it: haul water in pails from a lake, creek, or well. Fill a large washtub. Use a washboard to scrub the dirt out of the clothes with soap. Boil the clothes in an iron pot over a fire, then rinse them in another pot. After wringing out the wet clothes, hang them to dry. Heat up the heavy iron over a fire and press out wrinkles. Repeat last step many times.

In 1825, Hannah Montague of Troy, New York, became so tired of washing her husband's shirts when only the collar was dirty that she invented a detachable collar. Less imaginative women who could afford it hired a laundress.



**COWBOYS AND COFFIN MAKERS**  
**One Hundred 19th-Century Jobs**  
**You Might Have Feared or Fancied**  
by Laurie Coulter • illustrated by Martha Newbigging

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# Telephone Operator

You are excited to be one of the first telephone operators, a new career for women. On your head you wear a metal-and-rubber headset that connects you to the switchboard in front of you. Your job is to connect and disconnect callers with cords and plugs. You must have a nice speaking voice and be "ladylike" talking to customers—no rude sighs or hanging up. Callers ask all sorts of questions, the most common one being, "What time is it, please?"

You could be promoted after many years to chief operator or office manager. However, because this is "women's work," your salary is kept low. The company assumes that you live with your parents and will leave as soon as you find a husband, so you don't qualify for a "family wage" as men do.

In 1876, only 3,000 telephones exist in the United States. By 1900, there are 1.4 million. Now that's a big business!





# Assignment

## Kids' Work in the 21st Century

Laurie Coulter wrote about children's work in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, from the canal era at the beginning of the 1800s to the railroad era at the end of the 1800s.

Your assignment is to write about children's work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. That's now. What kinds of jobs are children allowed to do today? What trends do you see? Are there new jobs for children that didn't exist way back in the 1990s?

Divide your classroom into teams of one to five persons. With your team members, write down as many jobs as you can think of that children have today. That will be the opening paragraph of your history of "Kids' Work in the 21st Century."

Next, assign each team member to write about one job on your list. Try to write about the job the same way Laurie Coulter does in the reading selection. For example, for the job, Newspaper Delivery Person, you might begin like this:

You get out of bed when it's still dark, before your brothers and sisters, before your parents or grandparents. You ride your bike through dark streets until you reach the newspaper station. You roll up dozens of newspapers into plastic bags because it might rain and people don't want their papers to get wet. Etc.

Each team turns in a final history that includes the job list and one job description from every team member. How many different jobs did the class come up with? What was the most unusual one? What are the hardest jobs? What are the easiest jobs? Are kids' jobs still segregated by gender into "boys' jobs" and "girls' jobs"? How is 21<sup>st</sup>-century children's work different from 19<sup>th</sup>-century children's work?



# Quiz

NOTE: Quiz answers are available on the next page.

## 1) Multiple Choice

Which is the best definition for the term, "canal hoggee"?

- A. A long, skinny sandwich.
- B. A pig that eats the weeds growing on canal embankments.
- C. A boat captain trained to sail boats through canals.
- D. Someone who guides the horses that pull boats through canals.

## 2) Matching

For each job listed, indicate whether it was considered a "boy's job" or a "girl's job" or both in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

- A. newspaper seller
- B. hot corn seller
- C. babysitter
- D. farm chores
- E. war drummer

## 3) Matching

Much hard labor in 19<sup>th</sup>-century North America was done by slaves, indentured servants, prisoners, immigrants, and Native Americans for little or no wages. Match the groups (numbers) with the jobs they most often did (letters) in the two lists, below.

- |                       |                                    |
|-----------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1. Native Americans   | A. Agricultural Labor in the South |
| 2. Slaves             | B. Railroad Labor in the West      |
| 3. Irish Immigrants   | C. Railroad Labor in the East      |
| 4. Chinese Immigrants | D. Farm or Mine Labor in the West  |

**4) Multiple Choice**

What is Hannah Montague best known for?

- A. Inventor of the detachable shirt collar.
- B. Inventor of the washing machine.
- C. Inventor of the telephone switchboard.
- D. Inventor of the foot-long "canal hoggee" sandwich.

**5) Multiple Choice**

At the beginning of the 19th century, no one had a phone. How many people in the United States had phone lines at the end of the century?

- A. Four
- B. Four Hundred
- C. Four Hundred Thousand
- D. One Million, Four Hundred Thousand



# Quiz

## 1) Multiple Choice

Which is the best definition for the term, "canal hoggee"?

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- B. A pig that eats the weeds growing on canal embankments.
- C. A boat captain trained to sail boats through canals.
- D. Someone who guides the horses that pull boats through canals.

*Answer: D. Someone who guides the horses that pull boats through canals. Hoggees were often boys as young as 12 years of age.*

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- B. hot corn seller
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- D. farm chores
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*Answer: A. boys B. girls C. girls D. both E. boys*

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*Answer: 1-D, 2-A, 3-C, 4-B*

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*Answer: A. Inventor of the detachable shirt collar. Many women and girls performed hard labor doing laundry. Hannah Montague was one of those women, an inventor who helped modernize clothes washing.*

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- D. One Million, Four Hundred Thousand

*Answer: D. One Million, Four Hundred Thousand. Telephones spread like wildfire after their invention mid-century. From only 3,000 phones in 1876, the U.S. added over one million phone lines in less than 25 years.*



# Discussion Questions

- Should children be allowed to work? What are the benefits of having children in the workplace and what are the drawbacks? Should there be any limits on the kind of work children are allowed to do? What sort of limits would you suggest?
- Are jobs still divided by gender? What jobs are still all or mostly female? What jobs are still all or mostly male? Do you think it's fair to segregate jobs by gender?
- Can you think of anywhere in the world that children are forced to work? Where? What kinds of work do they do? Can you find the name of an organization that is working to end forced labor?
- Do you have any jobs now? Do you have paying work? Do you have non-paying work you must do? What work do you like? What work do you hate? Do you have a choice whether to work?
- If you had to choose, would you rather have a job that's fun or a job that pays well? When you finish your schooling some day, what job or work or career would you like to pursue? Why?