Researcher tracks down name of young girl in 1908 photos

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Research by author and historian Joe Manning has helped identify the people in this 1908 photo taken in a Lincolnton, N.C., textile mill. They are (left to right) Lalar Blanton, her mother, Susie, and her sister, Ellen. Photo: Lewis Hine/ Library of Congress/MCT

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Lewis Hine, the father of a type of American photography that showed people’s daily lives, captured a haunting image of a young textile employee in 1908. She was just a little girl of 9 or 10, staring out a window in the Lincolnton, N.C., cotton mill where she worked.

It became one of the historic pictures among more than 5,000 he made while working for the National Child Labor Committee, documenting abuses of child labor laws in textiles and other industries. His work gave birth to the documentary style of photography.

Most of Hine’s photos had names attached to them, but the Lincolnton girl was identified only as a “spinner” at the Rhodes Manufacturing Co. A second photo of her in the same mill, standing with an older girl and a woman, also had no names.

Now, a Massachusetts researcher who has tracked down descendants of 350 people in the Hine photos believes he’s solved the mystery of both images.
Author and historian Joe Manning spent five years trying to find the names of the people in the Lincolnton photos. He posted the pictures on his website and ran an ad in the Lincolnton Times-News, but got no responses.

Then he came up with the idea of searching the 1910 Lincolnton census, a count of the population the government does at least every 10 years. He made a list of all white girls who were born about 1898 and had a sister who was about two years older. He found 12 names, including a girl named Lala Blanton.

Manning realized that thousands of people search online every day for information about their ancestors. So he published the names under the mystery photos on his webpage.

Two months later, he got an email from Myra “Carol” Cook of Louisville, Ky. She thought the person identified as Lala Blanton might be her late grandmother, who spelled her name Lalar Blanton.

Cook sent Manning pictures of Blanton as an adult in Shelby, N.C., and he took them to Maureen Taylor, a face-recognition expert he’d relied on in the past. Taylor has been called the nation’s best historical photo detective by The Wall Street Journal. She said the faces matched perfectly.

Manning and Cook feel confident the little girl in the photo is Lalar Blanton.

“I never cease to be amazed when I find descendants of people in the photos,” said Manning, 72, a retired social worker in Florence, Mass. “I’m not only giving them back their history, but I’m giving the children (in the photos) back their dignity.”

"Not Just A Picture" Anymore

For 105 years, the unidentified girl by the window has been seen as “nothing but a child laborer,” said Manning. “Now, we’re finding out she was a person, not just a picture. She becomes a human being."

Manning became interested in Hine nine years ago through a friend, author Elizabeth Winthrop. A Hine photo of a young girl in a textile mill inspired a fictional character for her children’s book "Counting on Grace."

Winthrop asked Manning to try to find out what happened to the real girl.

“It was an exciting idea,” he said. “I tracked down descendants and found her granddaughter in 11 days."

Manning has been hunting descendants of subjects in Hine photos ever since.

“I’m in awe of his ability to retrieve these faces from history,” said UNC Chapel Hill professor Robert Allen. He has also traced relatives of mill children in the Hine pictures.
A Gastonia native and professor of American Studies, Allen found Gaston textile images in the Hine collection at the Library of Congress. In 2008 he helped spearhead a community project exploring that history.

Nearly 30 descendants of children in the mills came to a Gastonia gathering that marked the 100th anniversary of Hine’s picture-taking.

**Child Laborers In Factories**

The photos shed light on the role of children in the factories.

“It’s so foreign to us today,” said Allen. “The photos bring a shock of recognition that these children are all part of our history.”

Federal regulation of child labor began in 1938, when the government passed the Fair Labor Standards Act. It was the first time the government told businesses that people had to be older than a certain age to work. The law also set limits on the number of hours children could work.

As an adult, Cook was familiar with the famous Hine photo of the girl by the mill window. Studying old family snapshots, she always thought the child resembled her grandmother Blanton, who’d died when Cook was 10.

Cook, now 50, remembers her grandmother as a “kind, generous, godly woman, but not the quintessential sweet old lady. She was no shrinking violet. She had a sharp tongue and was real feisty. She could be tough.”

Blanton talked about hard times during her childhood and having to quit school in second grade and go to work.

“If granny ever mentioned working in a mill, I don’t recall,” said Cook. “But I do know she was very protective of children, especially little girls. She was determined I would have pretty things — clothes, dolls — all the things she didn’t have as a little girl. She spoiled me rotten. She wouldn’t let Mother spank me.”
Quiz

1. Select the paragraph from the article that shows how abusive child labor practices were put to an end in the U.S.

2. Based on the text all of the following are direct outcomes of Hine's photography EXCEPT:
   (A) Hine gave birth to the documentary style of photography.
   (B) The photos shed light on the role of children in the factories.
   (C) Hine's photos caused the federal regulation of child labor in 1938.
   (D) A Hine photo of a young girl in a textile mill inspired a fictional character for her children’s book "Counting on Grace."

3. Which of the following contains a word that means "the perfect example of something"?
   (A) As an adult, Cook was familiar with the famous Hine photo of the girl by the mill window.
   (B) Cook, now 50, remembers her grandmother as a "kind, generous, godly woman, but not the quintessential sweet old lady."
   (C) Lewis Hine, the father of a type of American photography that showed people’s daily lives, captured a haunting image of a young textile employee in 1908.
   (D) It became one of the historic pictures among more than 5,000 he made while working for the National Child Labor Committee, documenting abuses of child labor laws in textiles and other industries.

4. Read the sentence from the article.

   She thought the person identified as Lala Blanton might be her late grandmother, who spelled her name Lalar Blanton.

   What is the meaning of the word "late" as used in the sentence above?
   (A) Dead
   (B) Delayed
   (C) Overdue
   (D) Punctual
Answer Key

1 Select the paragraph from the article that shows how abusive child labor practices were put to an end in the U.S.

Paragraph 21:
Federal regulation of child labor began in 1938, when the government passed the Fair Labor Standards Act. It was the first time the government told businesses that people had to be older than a certain age to work. The law also set limits on the number of hours children could work.

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