

In 1900, about a fifth of the workforce in the United States was under the age of sixteen. Frequently a family needed all the income it could bring in just to survive, and employers could get away with paying children even less than poorly paid adults. From the start of the 20th century, social reformers endeavored to regulate or eliminate child labor in the United States. Many state laws were passed, but significant gaps remained. It was not until the passage of the federal Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 that employing children in manufacturing and mining was finally prohibited.

Mary Louisa Chamberlain, a young graduate of Vassar College, worked for several weeks in the canneries of upstate New York in order to obtain firsthand knowledge of the conditions. In the following article, which appeared in *Good Housekeeping* in May 1913, she describes her experiences in Albion, a town where the wages and working conditions in the fruit and vegetable canneries were typical.

Mary Louisa Chamberlain on “Children in Bondage”

(“Children in Bondage in New York Canneries,” by Mary Louisa Chamberlain, *Good Housekeeping*, Volume 56, Number 5, pages 618-625.)

Like most canning factories, the cannery at Albion, N.Y., sprawls along the railroad track, a low, irregular line of buildings invariably painted red and punctuated at one end by a tall, black smokestack. The trail to its doors is marked by stray bean-pods, fallen here and there along the way, or by straggling bits of pea tendrils broken from the sagging loads which the farmers drive in for threshing. And during the bean season when the “snipping” or stringing goes on in the sheds, this trail is signaled by the confused hubbub of voices, a hubbub which breaks upon the passerby even before he turns the corner and finds the low open building packed with its jabbering welter of humanity.

The benches are jammed with a motley crew of all ages, of all sizes, of many nationalities. Bright colors, a flash of orange, or a bawdy red bandanna, flare from a background of drab dingy browns and faded blues. A cry in English there, a curse here in Irish, now thick mutterings of Syrian, then the sibilants of Polish, intermingle with the constant chitter-chatter of Italian. Bearded grandfathers sit crooked over canes; Italian grandmothers, shriveled and wrinkled, snip elbow to elbow with full-busted young girls and swarthy young men, clad in striped jeans or dusty corduroy.

Knots of American women, conspicuous by lighthearted laughter and raillery, cluster apart from the others, snipping leisurely, gossiping carelessly. And everywhere, tucked in between parents or squatting on boxes along the cluttered aisle, are more than a hundred children—all kinds and varieties of children, from round-eyed ten-year-olds bubbling over with the effervescence of youth to mature “little mothers,” who can snip beans with one hand and tend to baby sister with the other. The families group together, chattering together, swelling the family income together, conspiring together how they may tuck limitless supplies of beans under family aprons and petticoats.

Standing among the motley crew and loudly commanding quiet is a tall, lean fellow in overalls, unmistakably the boss of the outfit. I timidly approach. He waves me off

impatiently. "For ____ sake, don't talk to me! You'll have to wait till a load of beans comes in. There ain't no work till they get here, so you might as well sit down."

I slink off and take my place beside a group of American women who sit gossiping apart from the Italian riffraff. They eye me curiously and a bit ungraciously as an intruder into their clan. But it is impossible to let the advent of a stranger from the outside world go unquestioned and not many minutes pass before a blowsy, fair-haired young female leans toward me.

"Do you live in Albion?" she inquires. "I ain't never seen you before. Thank heaven you ain't another one of them dirty Dagoes! I was telling my mother this morning that I didn't believe I could stomach working here this year with such folks around. Look at 'em over there, clawing like cats and dogs jest for a few cents! They used to work here during pea season every day from 7 o'clock in the morning for only eight cents an hour. Think of it! It never used to be like that when I worked here steady a couple of years ago."

A dumpy little person with pleasant eyes speaks up: "You're right there, Annie McGaffe, I'll be going home along with you if they get any more furriners in here. Sometimes though, I'm real sorry for the poor things bunched up in them shanties behind the factory with nothing to eat except that macaroni stuff. And them poor kids! Of course it ain't bad sometimes, because there ain't enough beans to last, but look at 'em today! They pulled 'em out of bed at 4 o'clock in the morning when the feller they call the 'padrone' knocked on the door and I bet they'll keep those tots up after 9 and 10 o'clock at night till they drop asleep over the beans. Ain't that awful! I fer one have got too much self-respect to associate with folks like that."

At this point the outburst of race antagonism is suddenly interrupted by the appearance of two big wagons heavily stacked with boxes of beans. My opportunity is at hand. Shouts go up from the waiting crowd and everybody pushes frantically toward the end of the shed where the boxes are being distributed. Pandemonium is loose. We fight and struggle and clamor until we have secured a box, and then hugging the box tightly we rush back to find a vacant place in which to sit and a vacant box into which to string. The larger the family, the greater the supply of beans, for not only does each member of the family grab a box, but as soon as this family group has established itself, Tony or Fortunata hands over the original box to Mother Pollino and returns straightway for a second helping.

"Look at them steal boxes when they're sitting on two or three filled ones now!" Annie McGaffe complains to me as I pull an empty box over by her and sit down. "But then," she adds, "I suppose they have to live on this money and we only come up here for fun. Of course we don't have to work. If we did I guess we'd have to get something more'n a penny a pound for stringing beans!"

So we sit together, stringing leisurely, talking noisily and laughing merrily. But across the cluttered aisle an Italian family, the Muscarellis, bend over their work—cheap new machines installed to run long hours without a hitch, without a break. Occasionally they

chatter together in a strange language, but for the most part they sit silent, too busy to talk, sullen and cowed.

A withered grandma keeps guard over twelve-year-old Jack and ten-year-old Marina. Jack has trudged in from the fields where, since the night dew dried on the grass, he has stripped row after row of endless vines clean of the hanging fruit. But Marina, uncombed, unwashed, unbuttoned, just as she was dragged from the family bed at 4 a.m. has been working beside her grandmother all the livelong day.

It is useless to rebel. There is Tony across the aisle, who worked since the break of day like some well oiled machine, until the belt around his wheel of mischief just slipped off and he threw a handful of the useless "ends" at a playfellow nearby. But a stinging smack across the face, and threats of harder blows to come, have driven him to hunch closer and closer over the half-filled box. This is no play, it is sober, serious business. It is useless to rebel.

Halfway down the shed sits Mrs. Vacanti rolling in fat, fairly bursting from out her flower-figured kimono and covering innumerable piles of beans under her spacious apron. On her one side sits Annie, stoop shouldered and old at sixteen, usually employed at sorting beans upon the "tables," but today overcome with nausea by the heat, the noise, the never-ceasing jiggle-jiggle of machinery. At the mother's other elbow, half hidden behind a tower of boxes, poor little Milly droops over her work, her heavy eyes sagging out of a pale, pinched face.

It has been a wearisome day for ten-year-old Milly. It was half past three in the still hours of the morning when the "padrone" beat upon the windows of the shack behind the factory and yelled, "*Sta shu, potonne gente, sta shu!*" ("Get up, lazy folks, get up!"). It only seemed as if she'd "been asleep a minute" when her mother jerked her from the warm hollow of the feather bed, yanked on her clothes and hustled her out to the shed in the shivering gray of dawn. She whimpered a little and begged a little and shuddered with cold under her woolen shawl. But it is useless to rebel. With cuffs and shakes she was soon propped up between the others, half dazed, half asleep, but snipping steadily into the greedy box.

The mist grew thin and pale and wasted away. The sun peeped into the shed and found little Milly there. At 7 o'clock the factory whistles shrieked their summons and men and women hurrying past the sheds to workrooms and to the warehouse found Milly there. Breakfast time came, but brought Milly no hot breakfast with it; only a hunk of bread to be munched down between intervals of snipping. At 9 o'clock, when beans were slack, for one short hour Milly ran quickly home to see Baby Benny, who was not allowed "to help mother" in the shed since the visit of inspectors a few days before. She washed his sticky face, brushed down his hair and then left him with the "teacher," who tends tiny folks like Benny while big boys and girls are hard at work outside. Such was the only sniff at freedom in the never-ending August day. All through the other sluggard hours Milly and her friends have sat like tireless dumb automatons screwed tight to wooden benches.

The long afternoon drags itself painfully out, one minute creeping after the other. Time is paralyzed and halt. The hubbub of voices dies down into a dull monotonous drone, broken

now and then by the noisy laughter of American women or by the noisy squabbling of American children. For they only can afford to laugh, they only have the time to squabble. They have come up from the village to work a few hours to earn a few pennies for ribbons, for laces, for luxuries. They are lingering survivors of the small country cannery where Mrs. Brown “dropped in to help” Mr. White with the peas or the beans, when no law existed but where there was regulation stronger than law—the neighborly friendship between employer and employee.

But these women are a small minority in the crowded shed. The big corporation is filling their places with ignorant foreign labor, brought from the nearest city and housed on factory lands right under the thumb of the boss. They line the benches of the shed, talking together in a strange language; sullen and cowed if the boss calls them down, instead of quick with retort of “Oh you Charlie!” like the American girls. Old women and young children bend tensely over their task, for on this summer’s work depends cheese and macaroni, not ribbons and jimcracks and gewgaws.

Tump, tump, tump, the beans drop into the boxes. The wooden bottom soon is hidden beneath a layer of beans. The work seems to go like lightening. Then suddenly each added bean makes no impression; the chinks and crevices are filled, but the beans seem to rise no higher. It is like a pail of berries, after an inch or two is picked. Almost an hour drifts by in uninterrupted snipping, before the quantity really seems to grow and swell near to the edge of the box. Another dragging hour and then at last the beans lie flat, packed on a level with the brim. And then it takes but little time in which to round them out and heap them high for weighing. Here and there, all up and down the aisle, the children stagger under loaded boxes, down the long shed they are tugging weights of more than twenty pounds.

Unfounded though it is, a strange notion prevails among these Italian children that “for two box at once the boy he pays you more.” So down the line waiting at the scales, stand the boys and girls struggling to carry two or three heavy boxes. (Woe, if a box be overturned!) Or they try to balance loads upon the head after the manner of their race. A penny a pound for each pound snipped—that is the law whereby the work of two hours and a half brings to each child about the sum of twenty cents. But by this double burden they dare to hope the fingers of the scale will jump a pound when the two boxes are emptied out together.

Occasionally a wagon, stacked high with swaying boxes, draws in from the fields and fresh supplies of beans are then unloaded. Occasionally the boss stalking up and down among this hurly-burly pries beneath an apron and finds a stolen heap of beans thus stowed away in family vaults. These represent unlawful gains, for distribution is not made until a box is fully snipped, and so the beans are toted back to the base of supplies amid a great commotion—loud words and imprecations, even kicks and blows and scratches. But gradually this outbreak simmers down, it boils away in scowls, in muttered curses, and threats behind the back as the boss stalks up and down, the feudal lord among his serfs. Yet plainly the spark of discontent is smoldering against a wage so low that stolen goods must be obtained to make a living wage; that boys and girls must sacrifice their childhood by eking out the family income; that women must toil more than a hundred hours a week to earn enough to live a self-respecting life.

But not yet is their dull insensibility quickened into actual revolt. They stolidly accept their fate; they stolidly endure this revolving wheel of snipping beans and doing housework, doing housework and snipping beans. They sit there through the long, hot day, mechanically snipping beans, mechanically watching their neighbors, mechanically wondering if the deluge of beans will never cease. The afternoon slowly wears itself away. The mellow sunlight slants through the open shed, it burnishes the yellow beans, it caresses the tired children with its cheer and brightness.

But in a little while it vanishes and instead the darkening shadow of the warehouse engulfs the busy crowd with a chill foreboding of a toiling, tiresome evening. At 6 o'clock the whistle's shrill dismissal, and workers pour from the factory, pulling on caps and jackets, hurrying for home. Italian girls employed in the factory a few feet away, troop over to the shed to add more pennies to the family purse by snipping between the periods of actual canning. The American women give way before this throng of foreigners; they fold their aprons, weigh their beans and hasten home to cook their husbands' evening meal. The American children receive their pennies and scamper off to supper, hungry and healthy. A few Italian children are permitted to run around and stretch their legs, but the majority are kept at work while some member of the family goes out to buy cheese and bread and fruit, to be gulped down like breakfast and lunch, without a minute's loss of time.

So the hours crawl by until sunset dims into twilight and twilight darkens into a starlit evening. The women from the town climb back up the hill to spend a few hours more in snipping. Dark-skinned youths and men saunter in to join the family groups half ashamed to do this "woman's work," yet feeling that such vacant time must needs be spent in earning. Under the glare of electric lights fastened about the shed the snipping goes on steadily, ruthlessly. The children drowse and drop over their boxes. Little Rosie leans against the rail, fallen sound asleep, one grimy fist clutching tight a half-strung bean. Milly stares straight ahead with glazed, unseeing eyes; her head droops to one side, lower and lower, her body sways forward, till finally she crumples up beside her mother, completely worn out. Every one of those tiny children, like Milly, is sick and tired. Exhaustion saps the puny strength, fatigue and undernourishment destroy the energy needed for play, for learning, for life. Yet parents prod them to their work and rouse them to fresh supplies of beans until the last box is given out, until the last penny is collected.

At 10 o'clock the floor at one end of the shed is still carpeted by boxes lying side by side. The prospect of a day of lighter labor is scattered by the heavy stock of beans on hand.

"Ain't no more boxes given out tonight!" yells the boss. "Up at 4 o'clock tomorrow fer the rest!"

So the last boxes are heaped up and weighed and paid for. Family after family trails away, the children hobbling on behind blinded with sleep, dreaming of the rattle of the window-pane and cries of "*Sta shu, potonne gente, sta shu!*" . . .