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CHILD LABOR IN RHODE ISLAND.

By JOSIAH B. BOWDITCH.

The labor of children has always been a prominent factor in textile manufacturing in this state, and but little objection to their entry into the mills at an early age, or to their working long hours was made during the first half of the past century. Many of our most successful manufacturers began their life-work in the mills when scarcely past the present kindergarten age. The earliest agitation against this immolation of the innocents upon the altar of greed seems to have emanated from an educational, rather than a humanitarian view point. An act passed the General Assembly in 1840, forbidding the employment of children under twelve years of age in factories unless proof had been given that such children had attended school at least three months during the previous twelve months. This law soon became practically a dead letter, and in 1851 a resolution was passed providing for the investigation of child labor in manufacturing establishments by a special commissioner.

Elisha R. Potter, the State Commissioner of Public Schools, in his report for 1852, expressed the opinion that absenteeism was due in part to the rate bill system (the assessment of parents for a portion of the cost of carrying on the schools), and to religious or sectarian feeling; but that the "most considerable" cause was the employment of children in factories. "The improvements of modern times," he said, "have rendered the labor of children valuable to a degree that could not have been anticipated. Hence the temptation to parents in destitute circumstances is strong to take their children from the schools early and put them in some establishments where they can aid them by their labor. Many who have health and strength and ability to support themselves and families by their own labor yield to this temptation to live upon the labor of children, and support themselves this way. Any one familiar with our schools must have noticed the small number of large scholars in all of our ordinary schools. As soon as they are able to labor they are taken from the schools."

The resolution passed in 1851, required the government to appoint a Commissioner, "to ascertain, as nearly as may be, the number of persons employed in the manufacturing establishments and corporations in the state, under the age of fifteen years, twelve years and nine years, respectively; what are their hours of labor per day, the number of months thus devoted to labor per year; and to what extent they are deprived of the benefits of our public schools." Governor Allen appointed Welcome B. Sayles as such Commissioner, and his report was made at the January session, 1853. He found the number of children employed in the manufacturing establishments to be: Under the age of nine years, 59; over nine and under twelve, 621; over twelve and under fifteen 1177; total under fifteen years, 1857. This was a total of nearly 15 per cent. of the number of hands employed in the textile mills. The average hours of labor per day were 12 to 12½, and the average months per year, 11 to 12, "the only variation from continued employment being the stoppages of the mill for water, or repairs, with an occasional holiday, and absence from sickness, for rest, or to attend school, all alike forming at most establishments the exception and not the rule." Commenting upon the employment of children

in the mills, the commissioner stated that there had been a great change for the better within the last four years, the improvements in machinery, rendering the employment of young children far less desirable than formerly, and that there were then few good establishments that cared to employ children under twelve years of age. "At a much earlier age," he said, "they are frequently urged upon the employer against his will, and taken, perhaps, as a condition to obtaining or retaining others, and more desirable members of the same family." He found the hours of labor and the opportunities for education far worse than he anticipated, and such, as it seemed to him, could not fail to awaken the attention of the public to the subject, and to call for legislative action.

There was a great disparity in the hours of labor of different establishments. A few mills averaged but little more than 11 hours a day; many did not exceed 12 hours, perhaps the majority of them not more than 12½, while there were mills that, from the best data that could be attained, worked 14 hours per day. He found mills that during the previous winter commenced work at 5.30 A. M. on all days but Saturday, and on that day at 4.30 A. M., as they left work earlier in the afternoon of that day, making more than 13 hours of labor in the very shortest days. But a small portion of the mills worked less than the whole day, however long, and most of them endeavored to come as near to the same hours as possible, in the shortest days. "The only relaxation," he said, "that great numbers of children so employed find is that of occasional stopping of mills for water repairs, or an occasional holiday." "It needs no student," he added, "of physiology to understand to some extent, what must inevitably be the consequences of such toil. It matters not that the labor be light. It generally requires close attention and constant standing upon the feet, and gives nothing like the requisite amount of time for the recreation and rest that all children require, and must have, to retain their physical health, to say nothing of their opportunities for mental culture."

Mr. Sayles recommended legislation forbidding the employment of any children under twelve in any manufacturing establishment in the state; that none between twelve and fifteen be employed more than nine months in any one year, and not at all, without first exhibiting the certificate of some teacher that he or she had attended school at least three months within the year; and that no minors between twelve and eighteen be employed more than 11 hours in any one day. The General Assembly promptly passed an act—at the January session in 1853—forbidding the employment of children under twelve in the factory portion of mills, of children between twelve and fifteen more than 11 hours a day, or before 5 A. M., or after 7.30 P. M.

Commissioner of Public Schools, Robert Allyn, reported in May, 1856, that but 54 per cent on an average of the children of the state between six and fourteen years, inclusive, were attending school, and that 22 per cent were apparently growing up in ignorance. A truancy act was passed at that session authorizing towns to make all needful provisions and arrangements concerning habitual truants; permitting town and city councils to annually appoint three complaining officers to look after the truants; and providing for fines, not to exceed \$10 in any one case, or the sending of the truant for, not

to exceed, one year in any institution of instruction or suitable institution. This action on the part of town or city councils was not made mandatory, but was optional, and the act provided that such regulations as should be made by councils must receive the sanction of the Commissioner of Public Schools before being put in operation. The act was amended in 1874 so as to allow the sending of truant children to the Industrial School in Providence.

For many years, as before intimated, objection to child labor was from an educational, rather than a humanitarian standpoint. As the chief cause of absenteeism, it was regarded as an impediment to the cause of education. The late Dr. Snow, the superintendent of the Providence census of 1855, and of those of the state in 1865 and 1875, in his report of the census of 1865, in discussing educational conditions, makes no allusion to child labor, but charges the large percentage of illiteracy in towns like North Providence (28.1) — then the second municipality in population in the state — and Burrillville (26.8), to the large proportion of foreigners which they contained. He found that one in 8.6 of the inhabitants of the state could not write, and that one in 12.5 could neither read nor write. In Providence, where the school accommodations had been largely increased during the previous twenty years, he reported a gratifying decrease of absenteeism. The percentage of absentees in the city as shown by the several municipal censuses was: In 1835, 30.8; 1845, 45.8; 1855, 32.4; 1865, 9.6.

The state census of 1875 found an alarming increase in the percentage of absentees from the school, an increase which was co-incident with the increase of foreign population. The census showed that 26.54 per cent of the children between 5 and 16 years, in the state, did not attend school at all; or, taking those between 5 and 15 (the age periods of the census of 1865), the percentage of absentees had risen from 12.9 per cent in 1865 to 19.05 per cent in 1875. In Providence the percentage had increased from 9.6 per cent in 1865 to 11.3 per cent in 1875. In North Smithfield the percentage of absentees in 1875 was 46, in Lincoln, 43.83, and in Woonsocket, 39.45 per cent. Dr. Snow discussed the educational problem as follows:

"It seems that there are 1258 children — 715 boys, and 543 girls — under the age of twelve years, employed, mostly in manufacturing establishments; the employment of whom in any manufacture is expressly forbidden by the laws of the state. Besides these there are 1172 employed who are twelve years old and under thirteen; also 1465 who are thirteen and under fourteen; and 2238 who are fourteen and under fifteen, making a total of 4875 children with regular employment who are twelve years old, but less than fifteen. These are nearly all in manufacturing towns, and in the same towns that show the very large percentage of absentees from school. There can be very little doubt that nearly all these 4875 children are illegally deprived of the opportunity to obtain an education which the laws of the state provide for them. It cannot be said that no one has sinned, when these children grow up in ignorance, and with the tendency to wrong that ignorance so often produces. It is certain that both the parents and the employers of the children have grievously sinned, both against the children and against the state.

Looking at the ages of the children employed, we find 599

who are eleven years and less than twelve; also 433 who are between ten and eleven; 146 between nine and ten; 64 between eight and nine; eight between seven and eight; five between six and seven; and three children between five and six years old, who are reported as having a regular occupation in manufacturing establishments.

"The objections to the employment of young children in manufacturing or mechanical occupations do not relate alone to the question of education; but pertain to every interest, physical, intellectual, spiritual and moral of the child. The children are unfitted physically for such employment. Their growth is stunted by it, and their health is injured. Besides, the children have not the judgment necessary to work among the machinery of the mills, and they must be specially liable to accidents. We take much interest in the prevention of cruelty to animals; but by the employment of children in manufactories we permit cruelty to children far more revolting in its nature, and infinitely worse in its consequences, than any cruelty that can be inflicted on dumb animals. We do not permit parents to abuse their dumb animals, but we do allow them to abuse the physical and intellectual natures of their children, so as to keep them as near as possible in the condition of brutes."

At the January session in 1883, an "Act Relating to Truant Children and of the Attendance of Children in the Public Schools," was passed. It provided that no children under ten should be employed in any manufacturing or mechanical establishment, and that none under 14 should be employed, except during vacations of the public schools, unless he should show a certificate certifying that he had attended school at least twelve weeks during the preceding year. Nor could any child between the ages of ten and fifteen be employed in any factory during the time the public schools were in session unless it could write its name legibly. This act reduced the age limit from twelve to ten, but absolutely prohibited the employment of children under ten years of age. In 1887 even this prohibition was partially withdrawn by an amendment of the act, which extended its provisions to telegraph and telephone establishments, but allowed the employment of children under ten, without limit, during vacations. No child between ten and fifteen could be employed during school time unless it presented a certificate showing that it had attended school at least twelve weeks, six of which must be successive, during the previous year, or unless it had mastered the elementary branches of learning. This act was also slightly amended in 1893, the "twelve weeks" requirement being changed to eighty days. In 1894, the act providing for factory inspection raised the age limit absolutely to twelve years. At the January session, 1902, the Truancy act was amended. Sections four and five of this amendment were as follows:

Sec. 4. No minor child who has not completed thirteen years of life shall be employed to labor, or at service, or engage in business, except during the vacations of the public schools of the city or town wherein such child resides, or as provided for by section one of this chapter.

No minor child who has not completed fifteen years of life shall be employed to labor or at service unless he shall present to his employer a certificate made by or under the direction of the school committee of the city or town wherein such child resides.

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The effect of this amendment was to relieve children between thirteen and fifteen from the necessity of presenting certificates declaring that they had attended school at least eighty days during the previous year, or had already acquired the elementary branches of learning.

On March 9, 1905, an act was passed in amendment of the Factory Inspection law. It provided that on and after its passage, no child under thirteen years of age should, on or before, December 31, 1906, and no child under fourteen years of age, should, after December 31, 1906, be employed or permitted or suffered to work in any factory, manufacturing or business establishment within this state, and no child under sixteen years of age should be employed or permitted, or suffered to work in any factory or manufacturing or business es-

tablishment within this state between the hours of eight o'clock in the afternoon of any day and six o'clock in the forenoon of the following day: Provided, however, that this restriction as to hours of work should not apply to mercantile establishments on Saturdays, or on either of the four days immediately preceding Christmas in each year. It also provided that children under sixteen and above the age limit could not be employed unless they presented certificates proving their age. At the present time, therefore, no child under fourteen years of age can be lawfully employed in any manufacturing or business establishment, and none between fourteen and sixteen, unless it presents written evidence that it is over fourteen years of age.

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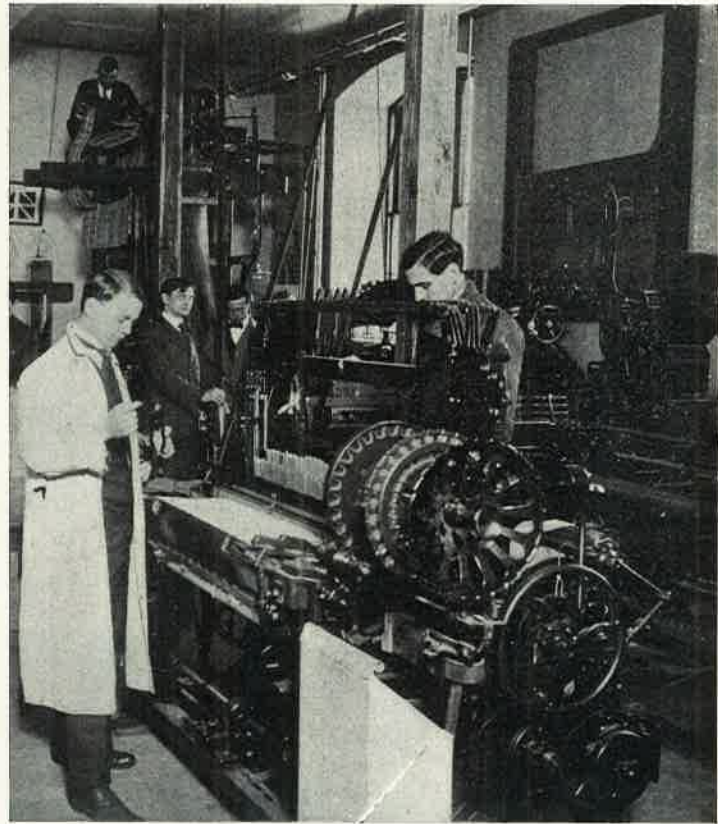
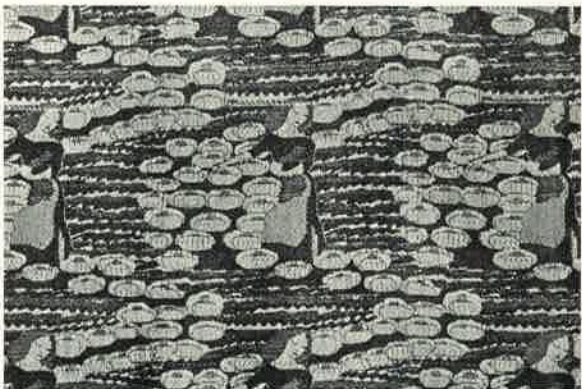
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