



**Viewer's Guide to the 30-minute documentary
by the American Social History Project**

The dramatic story of the "Uprising of the 20,000," the 1909 shirtwaist strike, is told through vignettes that explore immigrant women's lives in turn-of-the-century New York. The experiences of young Jewish and Italian working women address subjects including immigration, intergenerational conflict, "romance," ethnic tensions, industrial conflict, and the creation of a new consumer and entertainment culture.

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www.ashp.cuny.edu

THE *WHO BUILT AMERICA?* MATERIALS

Heaven Will Protect the Working Girl and nine other documentaries are a part of the *Who Built America?* series, which explores the central role working women and men played in key events and developments of American History. See also the two-volume *Who Built America?* textbook, *Freedom's Unfinished Revolution*, a high school text on the Civil War and Reconstruction, and the *WBA?* interactive CD-ROM.

Complete list of *WBA?* documentaries:

History: The Big H— This film-noir detective story introduces the history of working people and the challenge of understanding the past.



Tea Party Etiquette— Boston shoemaker George Robert Twelves Hewes narrates his experience of the Boston Tea Party, Boston Massacre, and the American Revolution.

Daughters of Free Men— Lucy Hall leaves her New England farm to work in the Lowell textile mills of the 1830s and confronts a new world of opportunity and exploitation.

Five Points— The story of 1850s New York City and its notorious immigrant slum district, the Five Points, is seen through the conflicting perspectives of a native born Protestant reformer and an Irish-Catholic family.

Doing As They Can— A fugitive woman slave describes her life, work, and day-to-day resistance on a North Carolina cotton plantation during the 1840s and 1850s.

Dr. Toer's Amazing Magic Lantern Show— The struggle to realize the promise of freedom following the Civil War is told by ex-slave J.W. Toer and his traveling picture show.

1877: The Grand Army of Starvation— In the summer of 1877 eighty thousand railroad workers went on strike and hundreds of thousands soon followed. The Great Uprising began a new era of conflict about equality in the industrial age.

Savage Acts: Wars, Fairs and Empire— The story of the Philippine War (1899-1902) and turn-of-the-century world's fairs reveal the links between everyday life in the U.S. and the creation of a new expansionist foreign policy.

Heaven Will Protect the Working Girl— Framed by the 1909 New York shirtwaist strike, this program presents a panoramic portrait of immigrant working women in the turn-of-the-century city.

Up South: African-American Migration in the Era of the Great War— Narrated by a Mississippi barber and a sharecropper woman, *Up South* tells the dramatic story of African-American migration to industrial cities during World War I.

WHO WERE IDA AND ANGELICA?

- THEY WERE YOUNG.
- THEY CAME THOUSANDS OF MILES TO LIVE IN A GREAT CITY.
- THEY WERE POOR, AND WORKED TO SUPPORT THEIR FAMILIES.
- THEY FACED DISCRIMINATION AND STRUGGLED AGAINST INJUSTICE.
- AND THEY LIKED TO GO OUT DANCING.

Who were Ida and Angelica? They were among the millions of immigrants who flooded U.S. cities in the early 20th Century. Jewish and Italian in origin, they helped create a new urban youth culture. Struggling to overcome ethnic division, these young women joined a strike, the “Uprising of the 20,000,” that challenged the way others saw them—and the way they saw themselves.

Turn-of-the-century immigration is often recalled through the golden glow of nostalgia: everyone was good, families always pulled together and new immigrants were welcomed to America. But such a view leaves out the rough spots—the crime, the conflict, the

prejudice—and simplifies many other aspects of the immigrant experience.

The workplace was not the only battleground for young immigrants like Ida and Angelica. They were also caught in a generational conflict. They were torn between the needs of their families and the attractions of an unfolding urban youth culture, including dance halls and moving picture shows.

Ida and Angelica are “composite characters,” based on the lives of real women. Looking at their lives and experiences in the 1909 strike, *Heaven Will Protect the Working Girl* explores how young immigrants worked and played in the turn-of-the-century city.



“Lunchtime.”

A 1915 photograph by reformer Lewis Hine shows young immigrants taking a break from work. *Heaven* uses historical photographs and drawings, some of which have been animated and retouched. (See Seeing Is Believing section for more information).

WHO MAKES HISTORY?

By 1900 America's industrial growth had transformed the U.S. into a world power. The nation's wealth and population were growing rapidly. Yet poverty, corruption and economic instability were widespread. Responding to these problems, Americans created a new and more active form of government that would shape American life for the next 100 years.

The importance of reform efforts in this period has led historians to call it "the Progressive Era." History texts often focus on Presidents and exceptional individuals who sought to "clean up" the cities and modernize government. Immigrants are usually shown only as passive recipients of—or even as obstacles to—reform and change.

But recent research suggests that immigrants also played active roles in reform campaigns. Examining oral histories, census documents, and foreign language newspapers, scholars have uncovered immigrants' own efforts to create a society that could provide new independence, equality, and opportunity.

Seeking to improve their own lives, immigrant women like Ida and Angelica made alliances with reformers and suffragists and joined trade unions. Struggling to bring about change, they became part of a diverse and turbulent social movement that transformed their own lives and those of millions of other Americans.

"No Molly-Coddling Here."
A political cartoon presents reform as the work of an individual leader. In this case, it is President Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1908) fighting the abuses of powerful corporations.

General Research Division, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations



Spanish-Cuban-
American War 1898

1900-
1914 U.S. Averages
one million
immigrants a
year

NYC has 400
nickel movie
houses 1908

1909-
1910 "Uprising of
the 20,000"

National
Association for
the Advancement
of Colored People
founded 1910

1911 146 garment
workers die
in Triangle
Shirtwaist
fire

38 states pass
child labor
laws. Reformer
Woodrow Wilson
elected president 1912

1914-
1918 World War I
interrupts flow
of immigrants

The Great Migration:
500,000 African
Americans migrate
from South to North 1914-
1920

1920 19th
Amendment:
women win the
right to vote

New federal laws
sharply restrict
immigration 1924

THE WORLD THEY CAME FROM

Many of the millions of immigrants arriving in the U.S. in the early 20th Century came from Italy and eastern Europe. The cultures of their homelands affected immigrants' actions in the U.S.

Italian families had worked together on the land for centuries. For the most part, fathers ruled the household and mothers and children obeyed. Formal education was minimal, as all children had to help in the fields. Girls also did sewing, spinning, and cooking. Italian elites in the industrial north scorned the less educated and darker-skinned peasants of the underdeveloped south.

In eastern Europe, Christian majorities pushed Jews to the fringes of society. Most Jewish men were artisans. Some were religious scholars whose work was considered of utmost value, as was education. Like Italian women, Jewish women managed the household. Jewish mothers and daughters also worked as merchants, taking part in the market life of bustling but ghettoized communities.

Economic and political changes undercut these preindustrial cultures. In Italy, an agricultural depression uprooted thousands of peasants, who then sought a better life in the U.S. At first, eight out of ten



Pre-WWI Europe

American Social History Project

Italian immigrants were men who came to the U.S. without families; more than half of these immigrants returned to Italy.

Economic turmoil in eastern Europe, coupled with brutal repression, prompted a mass exodus of Jews to America. Many Jews were killed in pogroms (state-sanctioned massacres). Job and residential restrictions forced others to leave. Daughters often emigrated first, finding jobs and paying the passage for other family members.



An Ellis Island official interrogates newly-arrived immigrants. Would the myths of a golden life in America be enough to counter the trauma of leaving home?

General Research Division, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations

THE WORLD THEY CAME TO

"I never saw so many people on the streets, shouting, going in all directions. Having come from a little bit of a village with a few houses, it was, to say the least, disturbing."

—GARMENT WORKER PAULINE NEWMAN RECALLING HER 1901 ARRIVAL FROM LITHUANIA.

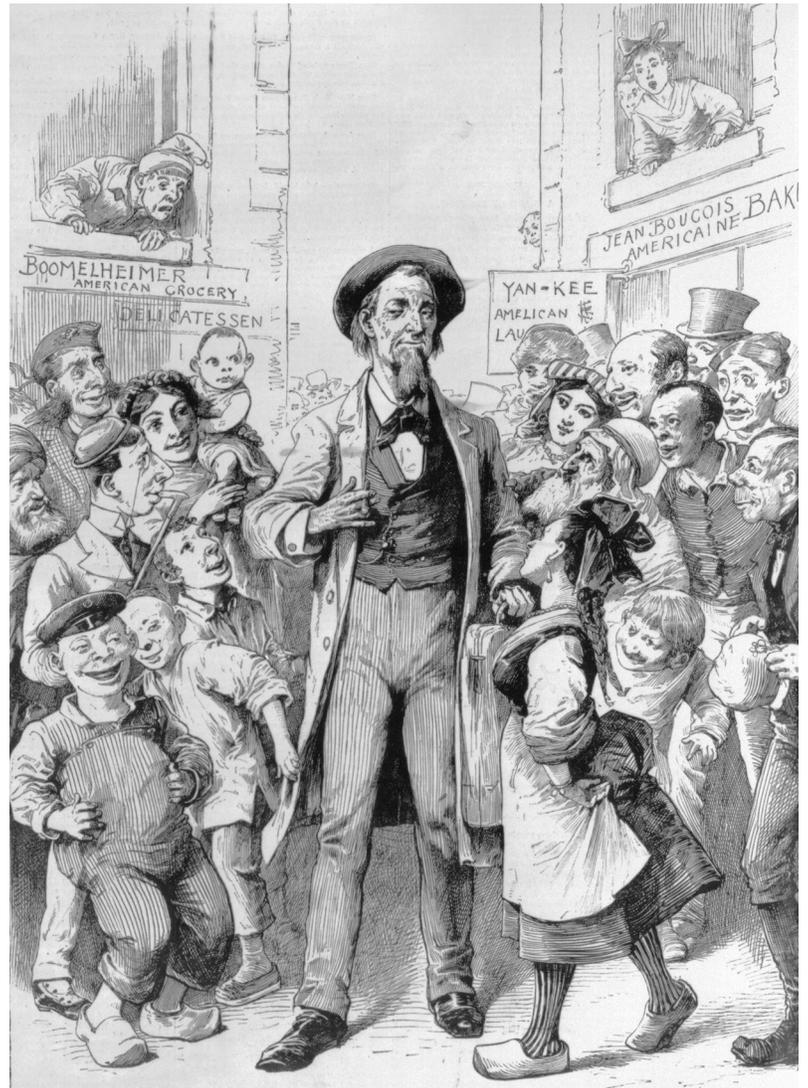
As the 20th century began, millions of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe poured into Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, and other U.S. cities. In New York, the nation's largest city, more than half of the population was foreign-born.

The pace and size of U.S. cities were different than anything experienced by Italian and Jewish immigrants. Whether they came from villages or small cities, little in their past prepared them for the crowded streets, blaring traffic, towering skyscrapers, and roaring subways of New York.

Like other U.S. cities, New York was marked by great diversity. Neighborhoods were defined by class, religion, ethnicity and race. Bias forced most of the city's 50,000 African-Americans into Hell's Kitchen, Harlem and pockets of Brooklyn. Southern Italians, who were considered "black" by some New Yorkers, were also targets of racial discrimination.

As new immigrants settled downtown, New Yorkers with older roots in the city moved uptown or to the city's outer boroughs, such as the Bronx. Subways, trolley lines, railroads, bridges, and ferries made possible this escape from the inner city.

Yet for all their differences, millions of New Yorkers read some of the same newspapers, saw the same movies, laughed at the same comic strips, mixed in public spaces like Coney Island, and wore mass-produced fashions that blurred class distinctions.



"The Last Yankee."

A cartoon in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* argues for immigration restriction. Showing a lonely figure (reminiscent of the national symbol Uncle Sam) surrounded by a range of ethnic and racial stereotypes, the cartoon's caption read: "A Possible Curiosity of the Twentieth Century: The Last Yankee."

Matthew Somerville Morgan, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, September 8, 1888

LIFE IN THE 'HOOD

New York's chief immigrant neighborhood, the Lower East Side, was dark, dirty and crowded, with one of the highest population densities in the world. Survival depended on mutual support.

The streets teemed with peddlers selling goods and ethnic foods. Down every street were immigrant clubs, theaters, and cafes. There, Lower East Siders shopped, gossiped, debated politics, and sought entertainment. Neighborhood ties and kinship networks helped immigrants preserve old cultures while adapting to new realities.

But not all immigrants shared the same self-interests, nor the same vision of American life. Socialist organizers, small businessmen, and Democratic party politicians competed for the allegiance of new immigrants. Jewish and Italian gangsters exploited immigrants' ignorance and vulnerability.

Meanwhile, "Progressive" reformers established settlement houses to aid new immigrants and instill "American middle class" values. Some social workers, like Lillian Wald and Mary Simkhovitch, were sympathetic to the immigrants' problems and helped publicize their plight. Others were critical of immigrant cultures and sought to cleanse newcomers of their "backward" customs.



A Settlement house worker visits a newly-arrived family. "Old standards must be changed," wrote one social worker, "if we are sincere in our desire to attain a higher form of civilization. The strangers from across the water must be taught to discard un-American habits and conventions, to accept new ideals."

People's Institute papers - General Research Division, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations



"Hester Street."

The streets of the Lower East Side teemed with people seeking relief from the close confines of their tenement apartments.

63 Hester Street, 1898 - Byron Collection, Museum of the City of New York

CHEAP AMUSEMENTS

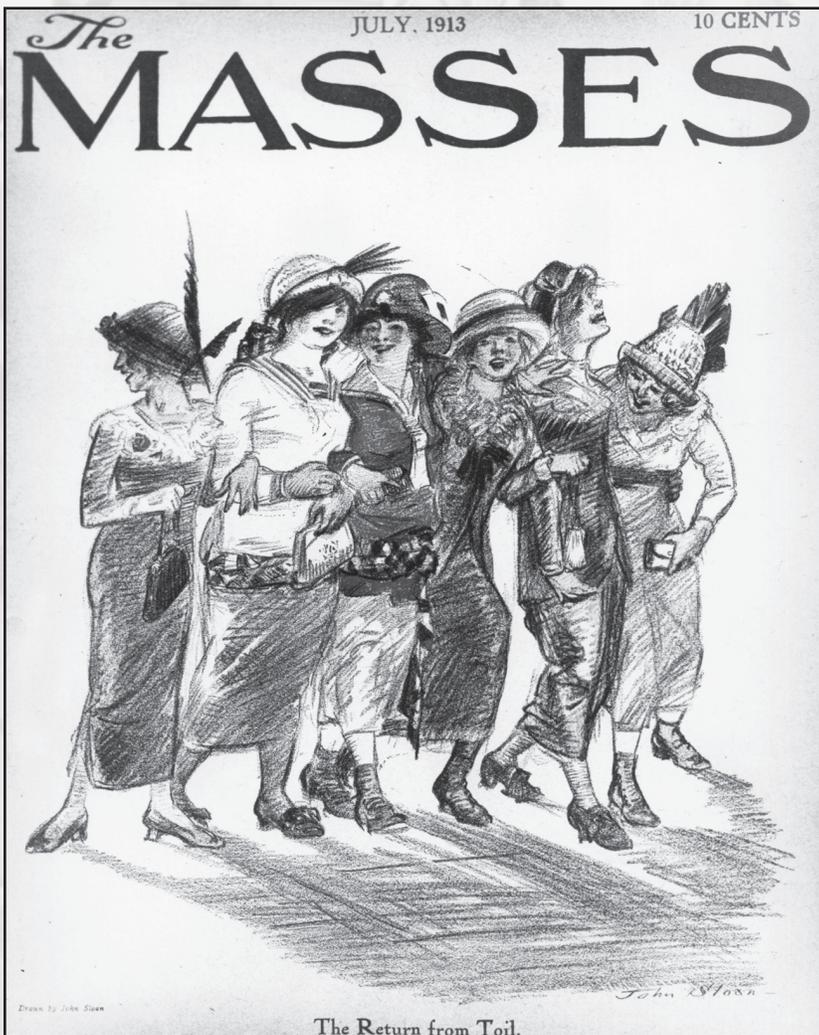
Immigrant life was not all drudgery and hard times. America's turn-of-the-century cities were the birthplace of a new commercial culture, filled with new amusements. Young immigrants like Ida and Angelica were drawn to the freedom and romance promised by the new culture.

Fancy shirtwaists, moving picture shows, bustling dance halls—there were endless ways to spend the few dollars that working girls like Ida and Angelica found in their pay envelopes. But such leisure pursuits involved more than buying. As they wore stylish clothes or went to Coney Island young women redefined themselves and reshaped their relationships to men.

In traditional Italian and Jewish cultures—and in American working-class culture as well—single women had socialized mainly with other women. Contact with men was limited and generally took place under the supervision of the family.

“Looping the loop amid shrieks of terror or dancing in disorderly saloon halls are perhaps natural reactions to a day spent in noisy factories...but the city which permits them to be the acme of pleasure and recreation to its young people commits a grievous mistake.”

—JANE ADDAMS,
CHICAGO REFORMER



“The Return from Toil.”

John Sloan's cover illustration for the radical magazine *The Masses* presented working women in a new way. Women were often portrayed in reform and popular magazines as the victims of oppressive working and labor conditions; but some illustrators tried to break away from the standard sentimental or wretched stereotypes, instead showing working women as strong, independent and exuberant.

Prints and Photograph Division, Library of Congress

*"If you are tired of life,
go to the movies,
If you are sick of troubles rife,
go to the picture show,
You will forget your unpaid bills,
rheumatism and other ills,
If you stow your pills and go to the
picture show."*

—MOVIE THEATER ADVERTISEMENT

In contrast, going out dancing and enjoying amusement parks involved women in unsupervised leisure activities with men. Parents and reformers feared the consequences of young women's exposure to such "cheap amusements." This fear was not unfounded. Immigrant girls sought independence and pleasure in the new world of mixed-sex socializing, but they also ran a risk of rape and pregnancy. Defying the danger, many young women followed their own wishes. In so doing, they helped invent modern forms of "dating."

Ida and Angelica's actions reflected the vast changes affecting the way American women participated in family life, in the workplace, in politics, and in romantic relationships. The early 20th century saw the rebirth of the women's suffrage movement, which soon drew the support of many immigrant women. The actions of young immigrants were part of the emergence of the "New Woman" and the coming sexual revolution of the 1920s.



"The line at the ticket office."

An illustration in a 1911 issue of *Outlook* magazine shows young women and men outside one of New York's 400 movie theaters. With little money of their own, young working women often looked for young men to "treat" them by buying them tickets to movies or dance halls.

Wladyslaw T. Benda, *Outlook*, June 24, 1911
American Social History Project

THE RAG TRADE

Immigrants were the backbone of the industrial workforce. Though poorly paid, their jobs supported their families and communities and opened the way for the growth of the new commercial culture.

The nature of immigrants' work lives depended in part on where they lived. Many American cities were known for particular industries. Pittsburgh was a steel town; Chicago's economy centered on meatpacking. And the garment or clothing industry dominated New York's economy.

In the garment industry, unlike steel or meatpacking, there was no giant company towering over all rivals, controlling pay scales and working conditions. Instead, the garment trade was characterized by a few large firms and hundreds of small shops, most located in lower Manhattan, competing for a share of the clothing market.

New Yorkers with roots in northern Europe, particularly German Jews, owned the biggest factories. Working on contract to big companies, tailors from





Large shops like the Triangle Shirtwaist Company (pictured here) were located on the fringes of the immigrant neighborhoods. In these workplaces, young women could meet more worldly contemporaries, hear about American fashions and styles, talk about family problems, exchange advice about dealing with the opposite sex, and practice English rarely spoken in their homes.

New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University

Eastern Europe set up small “sweatshops” in the Lower East Side and hired women and men from the neighborhood. Competing with other small shops and meeting seasonal deadlines, these contractors operated with little capital. Their profits depended on speeding up production, ignoring safety, stretching already long working hours, and paying low wages.

Most garment workers were young immigrant women like Ida and Angelica. By 1910 the workforce was 70 percent women. Over 56 percent were Jewish and 34 percent were Italian. About 50 percent of the women were under the age of 20. Men dominated higher paying skills like cutting and pressing while women toiled at lower paying assembling and finishing work. African-American women were a small percentage of garment workers. Most of these workers sewed at home, barred from factory work by racism.



In sweatshops, like the one in this 1908 picture, men outnumbered women workers and, as a result, women were more likely to face sexual harassment. In contrast, bigger companies hired more female than male employees. Many young women preferred working in the larger garment companies.

Lewis Hine, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, 1908

“THE UPRISING OF THE 20,000”

In 1909, immigrant shirtwaist workers like Ida Land and Angelica led a major strike—the “Uprising of the 20,000”—that revealed to the public the low pay, harsh supervision, and unsafe conditions that plagued garment workers. To achieve their goals, the strikers had to assemble a coalition that crossed ethnic, gender, and class lines.

When the strike began, the garment workers’ union—the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU)—was tiny and weak. Many labor leaders thought that organizing a union among women was futile. But the strike proved this notion false.

It was the female strikers’ courage, confronting police arrest and beatings by hired thugs, that won the public’s heart. Employers hired prostitutes to taunt picketers, knowing that working women feared falling into the brutalized life of the streets. Judges and police also preyed on the young women’s fears through sexual harassment and severe prison sentences.

“What the woman who labors wants is to live, not simply exist—the right to life as the rich woman has it, the right to life, and the sun, and music, and art. You have nothing that the humblest worker has not a right to have also. The worker must have bread, but she must have roses too.”

—GARMENT WORKER
ROSE SCHNEIDERMAN IN THE WOMEN’S
TRADE UNION LEAGUE MAGAZINE *LIFE
AND LABOR*, AUGUST 1912



“Shtarkes.”

Employers hired neighborhood thugs to guard strikebreakers and attack picketers. By December, female strikers had taken over picket duty from men in the mistaken belief that the shtarkes would refrain from attacking women.



"On the picket line."

Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress

The striking women were supported by male ILGWU members, Socialist Party activists, and community organizations that helped strikers' hungry families. The strikers' other key ally was the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), a group of college students and prominent New York women. Founded in 1903, the WTUL united middle and upper-class women's activism (aimed at winning the vote) with working women's struggles in the workplace. This unusual alliance across class lines drew the attention of the mainstream press to the strikers' plight.

Ethnicity shaped many workers' response to the strike. Young Jewish women, some with family ties to the socialist Bund in Russia, spearheaded the strike. While some Italian women joined the strike, fear of losing their jobs and the ILGWU's failure to organize in the Italian community led others to "break" the strike (or "scab"). Similarly, some African-American seamstresses, blocked from employ-

ment by racism and ignored by union organizers, took the jobs of striking workers.

The strikers and the union held together enough of a coalition to win important gains from 300 companies. At Triangle Shirtwaist, one of the biggest shops, women won a 52-hour week and a 12-15 percent wage

increase. But Triangle and other large companies rejected workers' safety demands and refused to recognize the union as the workers' representative. Later strikes (and the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist fire) led to union recognition and the passage of state and city laws forcing industry-wide reform.

Learning from its mistakes in the 1909 strike, the ILGWU built a more multi-ethnic union by hiring Italian organizers. Though firm commitment to black work-

ers was slower in coming and women were long denied union leadership positions, by 1920 the ILGWU claimed more than 100,000 members and was one of the nation's most powerful industrial unions.

"It isn't that they [working girls] do not want to think, but they are too tired to think and that is the best thing in the union, it makes us think. I know the difference it makes to girls and that is the reason I believe in the union...it makes us more interested in life..."

—LETTER TO WOMEN'S TRADE UNION LEAGUE MAGAZINE *LIFE AND LABOR*, APRIL 1912

SEEING IS BELIEVING?

Most of the images in *Heaven Will Protect the Working Girl* are photographs taken at the turn of the century (some of which ASHP has retouched and animated). To understand these photos—and the ways visual images shape public attitudes—it is helpful to explore ways that the original photos advanced reform movements at the turn of the century.

Soon after photography's invention in 1839, people began taking pictures of American cities. But city photographs did not provide an "objective" view of urban life. Early urban photography focused on grand buildings, park views, and street vistas. Few photographers depicted the life and labor of the working class. Up to the end of the 19th century, even as picture-taking technology improved, photographers avoided "unpleasant" subjects such as poverty or industrial work.



Lewis Hine, "Italian immigrants on ferry," 1905

International Museum of Photography - George Eastman House



Dr. Henry Piffard or Richard Hoe Lawrence (for Jacob Riis), "Bandits Roost," 1888

Jacob A. Riis Collection, Museum of the City of New York

During the 1880s, newspaper reporter Jacob Riis used photography to reveal "how the other half lives." With the aid of newly-invented flash powder, Riis went into dark alleys and basement rooms to reveal poverty and hardship. Riis's pictures encouraged the passage of laws to improve social conditions. But, as this photograph of a Mulberry Street gang indicates, his photographs depicted the poor as "dangerous" and as a threat to "decent" citizens.

In the 1900s, social documentary photographers like Lewis Hine began to look at immigrants and workers in a different way. Hine's pictures also powerfully documented oppressive working and living conditions, yet portrayed his subjects sympathetically. Unlike Riis, Hine showed immigrants and workers as people who deserved the same rights as other Americans. The work of the documentary photographers of the Progressive Era strengthened the movement for social change. The poverty they portrayed was no different than earlier images of urban hardship, but the ways they showed the poor reshaped public understanding of why reform was necessary.

LEARN MORE ABOUT HEAVEN

Scholarly Works

American Social History Project, *Who Built America? Working People and the Nation's History*, Volume II, Chapter 4 (2008). Places the experiences of immigrant women into a social and political context.

Enstad, Nan, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (1999). Analyzes how working females incorporated fashion and popular culture into their identities as laborers who could affect political change.

Ewen, Elizabeth, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1890-1925* (1985). Italian and Jewish women's lives and experiences of acculturation.

Gabaccia, Donna, *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street: Housing and Social Change Among Italian Immigrants, 1880-1930* (Albany: State University Press, 1984). The move to tenement life in New York profoundly changed how Italian migrants performed work and play, and how women adapted.

Glenn, Susan A., *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990). The story of Jewish immigrant women from Eastern Europe who migrated between 1880-1914 and became garment workers and trade union activists.

Kasson, John F., *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (1978). Examines Coney Island as a symbol of the changes that took place in American culture and leisure.

Kessler-Harris, Alice, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982). Women have reconciled their domestic roles with wage work, including protective labor legislation, suffrage activism, and with various types of unions.

Nasaw, David. *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (1993). Cheap public amusements (which brought together white immigrant groups but excluded African Americans in many ways) flourished with the rise of American cities between 1870 and 1920, but declined thereafter.

Orleck, Annelise *Common Sense and a Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the U.S. 1900-1965* (1995). Analysis of the 1909 Uprising and the context of organizing women garment workers in the years between 1907 and 1915, told through the eyes and experiences of Rose Schneiderman, Pauline Newman, Fannia Cohn & Clara Lemlich.

Peiss, Kathy, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (1986). Working women's experiences in nickelodeons, dance halls, and amusement parks.

Stein, Leon, *The Triangle Fire* (1962). A very readable, dramatic account of the famous fire.

Tax, Meredith, *The Rising of the Women: Feminist Solidarity and Class Conflict, 1880-1917* (1980). Examines links between feminism, trade unionism, and socialism.

Von Drehle, David, *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America* (2004). The Triangle Shirtwaist fire and its effects on urban politics and industrial reform.

Literature

Malkiel, Theresa S., *The Diary of a Shirtwaist Striker* (New York, 1910). The diary is fictional, though written by an eyewitness to the actual shirtwaist strike at turn of the century in New York City.

Yeziarska, Anzia. *America & I* (Boston, 1990). A collection of short stories, Yeziarska presents a first-person account as a Russian Jewish girl who immigrates to America, including her first American work experience.

Yeziarska, Anzia, *The Breadgivers* (1925). Autobiographical story of a young Jewish women's life on the Lower East Side.

GLOSSARY

MISHEGAS - CRAZINESS
GONIF, GANOVIM - THIEF, THIEVES
TSHEPPEN - TO "MONKEY" WITH
GEVALT - GOOD GOD!
KHOKHM - SCHOLAR
TSIMMES - MAKING A FUSS
NUDNIK - STUPID PERSON
SHTARKES - THUGS

LA SCORTA - ESCORT, CHAPERONE
SCORTATA - ESCORTED
PUTANE - PROSTITUTES
BASTA - ENOUGH (SILENCE!)
LA FAMIGLIA SOPRATUTO - THE
FAMILY ABOVE ALL ELSE
VI PREGO - PLEASE
UNA SOMARA - DUNCE

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HEAVEN WILL PROTECT THE WORKING GIRL

Words by Edgar Smith
Music by A. Baldwin Sloane

"Heaven Will Protect the Working Girl" was the title of a hit song performed by Broadway star Marie Dressler in the 1909 musical comedy, *Tillie's Nightmare*.

Although tame by today's standards, the song's popularity was based in part on the raciness of the lyrics, which satirized the romantic ballads of the 1890s.

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