



AMERICA ON THE WORLD STAGE

ALBEMARLE | CHARLOTTESVILLE | GREENE | MADISON | ORANGE

A
TEACHING
AMERICAN
HISTORY
GRANT PROGRAM

PROJECT TITLE: “What Was Life Like for Children in the 19th Century (150 years ago) and How was it Different From the Lives of Children Today?”	
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SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

1. **Primary Investigative Question(s)** – “What was life like for children in the 19th century (150 years ago)? How was it different from the lives of children today?”
2. **Contextual Essay** –

Life was not easy for many children during the 19th century. While wealthy families did exist, the average family depended on its children to help provide a living. Children began working at an early age. Their skills were honed to make them useful in many areas, from farm production to manufacturing, and street sales. The average child was afforded little time for play, and the toys available to them were few and simple. Many toys were homemade. Children of wealthy families, however, experienced a very different life. They were not only sheltered from the harsh realities of life known to low or middle class children, but from most of the outside world.

During the early and middle 1800’s, many families operated family farms. In fact in 1840, 85% of the Illinois work force was farmers. Farm families tended to have many children. Older children were charged with helping to care for the young as well as with many other responsibilities. Children were considered an asset to their families as soon as they could begin working to help out with the family farm. “In short, children were expected to begin working for their families as soon as possible. At age seven, typically, boys joined their fathers to work in the fields and to learn farming while girls took their place beside their mothers to learn the household chores or “women’s work” that constituted their lot” (Fornieri and Gabbard, 97).

The subsistence farm was typical in the 19th century, wherein farmers focused on self-sufficiency, and grew only enough food to feed their families. The chores of men and women on the farm were clearly delineated, and women and their daughters played an important role in the subsistence farm. They typically managed dairy and poultry operations, made soap, candles and spent a great deal of time producing cloth. Cotton and wool made up most of the family’s clothing, with the women providing one set of clothes for each family member, every season. In fact, “as late as 1840, farm women produced more cloth at home as all American textile mills combined” (Fornieri and Gabbard, 96).

Women usually cared for the kitchen garden, but Men typically farmed the fields. Men and boys also cared for the livestock, cut and split wood, built the house and barns and constructed

and maintained the fences. Families reproduced their households by setting up their grown children in households on adjacent farms. This allowed them to co-op their farming efforts and made offspring available to care for parents in their old age. In short, children worked during the day almost as much as their parents. Working alongside parents and older siblings was how children learned the necessary skills they would use to run their own farms in adulthood. Many people continued to live this way right up to the Civil War.

However, there were children who were not raised on farms, and this small minority of Americans lived an upper-class existence, usually in large, Eastern cities and the plantation south. Families considered the upper class, experienced a dramatically different family life. The families of the 1860s, who could afford it, had a nursery for the children. The nursery protected children from accidents and disease which claimed the lives of almost half of all children before the age of five. Many of these nurseries were on the third floor of the house and served as the sleeping quarters of the children as well. The more affluent families had a separate nursery for daytime play as well as a nursery for nighttime slumber. Day nurseries doubled as school rooms for those children taught by a governess and the room contained tables and chairs as well as maps globes, and sometimes a chalkboard and other teaching materials. Children of affluent families enjoyed a great deal of autonomy from their parents and spent much of their time in the nursery. Working class and farm children, however, enjoyed more parental supervision and spent much of their play time out of doors (Volo and Volo, 241).

The industrial revolution and the Civil War would drastically change the face of working people, but poor and working class families would continue to depend on children to help support the family. The results of war for most urban working-class children was work-not an increase in simple household chores, but hard, sweat producing, back-breaking labor. American industry consciously sought the cheap labor of children, and millions of children ages 10-15 were "gainfully" employed. Most of the child labor was agricultural, but approximately one child in six worked in coalmines, textile mills, garment industry sweatshops, or factories of all kinds. Children between the ages of 10 and 19 often provided a quarter of the family income. Many youngsters-especially urban boys-were forced by circumstances to leave school, or home, or both in order to make a living for themselves on the streets as bootblacks, scrap collectors, dishwashers, construction drudges, manure collectors, and newsboys (Volo and Volo, 357).

When there was time for play, toys also varied by social class. Manufactured toys and games were available to children in wealthy families, but children of poorer families played with simple homemade toys. Fathers would often whittle toys out of wood or mothers would fashion toys from fabric scraps (Volo and Volo, 262).

Board games were beginning to show up in America at this time and were usually created and manufactured in the Northeast. A variety of board games were available and many agree the game, *The Mansion of Happiness, an Instructive Moral and Entertaining Amusement*, is generally considered to be the first board game. *The Game of Goose* was another such game and served to inspire other games produced by Milton Bradley in the 20th century (Varhola, 97).

Many of these games found their origins in Europe. *The Game of Pope and Pagan* and *The Siege of the Stronghold of Satan by the Christian Army* were both based on the centuries old board game *Fox and Geese* which originated in Scandinavia.

Other popular games included cribbage, an English import, and checkers for which the origin is unknown (however, a similar game "draughts" was also brought from England, but originated in

Egypt. Tangrams which were brought to America from China in the first quarter of the 19th century were very popular as was lotto- a forerunner of bingo-which was played with cards of three horizontal and nine vertical rows. Five numbers from 1 to 90 appeared on the cards, with the remaining spaces blank. Children's versions of the game were developed to teach spelling, multiplication, botany, and history". We might recognize this game as "Memory" (Volo and Volo, 262).

Many of these games were still popular during the 20th century and some are still in use today. This is the case for the African game of Mancala and the game of jacks, or jack rocks, which originated in Ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome (Jensen, 2003).

Poorer children made toys from found objects also. These included corn kernels, acorns or pieces of discarded pottery. Some simple commercially produced items such as dolls with papier-mâché heads or dolls made entirely of fabric were available at a nominal cost to even the poorest children (Volo and Volo ,242-243).

On Sundays, children were not allowed to play with any toy other than those few of a religious nature. They could read or listen to the Bible or other religious literature. Play sets that were fashioned to resemble Noah's Ark and the animals were one such allowed "Sabbath Toy." Noah's Ark toys date back to the 17 century but reached a peak during the Victorian Era. The wooden toy known as a Jacob's ladder was also allowed on Sunday.

While the Industrial Revolution and the Civil War caused many changes in America during the mid 1800s, it changed little for children of subsistence farmers and the working class poor. These children continued to be charged with the responsibility of helping their families provide a living.

Although in the mid 1800s, some states would begin to require children to attend school during the day to keep them out of the workforce. It would not be until the early 20th century that child labor laws would pass to protect children from the stress and dangers of work. Disparities in the daily lives of children persist today. While it is illegal for children to formally hold a job, there are many children who work in their homes and on their family farms. Farming families continue to depend on offspring to help maintain and produce goods for sale as well as their family's subsistence. As in the 1800s, children of affluent families enjoy the luxuries their families can provide without the need to work. Likewise, the toys of contemporary children vary greatly, with low and middle class children left to their own devices and affluent families able to subsidize their children's play time with the latest electronic toys and games. One might ask why, during this age of equality, such disparities in the lives of children persist.

Annotated Bibliography – Works Cited

Jensen, Jennifer. "Teaching Success Through Play: American Board and Table Games 1840-1900."

antiques Feb. 2003: 21-25. Print. This simple article from a trade magazine explains the origins of some toys popular across the history of the U. S.

Fornieri, Joseph R., and Sara Vaughn Gabbard. *Lincoln's America, 1809-1865*. Carbondale, Ill: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008. Print. This book was written on the occasion of Lincoln's 200th birthday and provides a snapshot of Lincoln's life, politics, and accomplishments. It describes Lincoln's accomplishments as he progressed from a self taught youngster through his marriage and on to his political aspirations. Fornieri and Gabbard attempt to explain Lincoln's motivations as well as the political climate of the time. It is a comprehensive biography which describes the man and his unique persona.

Varhola, Michael J.. *Everyday life during the Civil War*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 1999. Print. This comprehensive description of life during the Civil War focuses mainly on the soldiers' experience rather than that of the civilian. It is written in short "chapters," which allow the reader specific slices of daily existence, with regard to every area of the human experience. There are many illustrations which will help the adult reader understand the climate of the time, but which may not be suitable for young children. It does, however, provide some good descriptions of games of the 19th century and the birth of the board game.

Volo, Dorothy Denneen, and James M. Volo. *Daily life in Civil War America*. 2nd ed. Santa Barbara, Calif.: Greenwood Press, 2009. Print. This comprehensive picture of American life during the Civil War captures the realities of wartime life for soldiers and citizens, slaves and free persons, women and children on both sides of the conflict. It provides numerous illustrations and photographs which enhance the descriptions of the chapters. This book uses primary source

documents to provide a thorough log of the impact of the Civil War, and the vast changes that America underwent during this tumultuous time.

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