

"Kids at Work" Essay from *The Goldfinch*, 1996

Most kids in the past, like now, helped out around their homes and learned by working closely with their parents. Their jobs — whether picking berries for jelly, helping set fence posts, or watching younger siblings — made their homes better places to live. Everything a kid made, planted, fed, or fixed was one less thing parents had to buy or do. Rural families sometimes hired out kids to neighbors who needed laborers. Only older boys usually inherited land or money from parents, so other children needed to make their own way in the world.

Hired girls cooked, cleaned, and took care of children. They also emptied chamber pots, did laundry, tended gardens, and canned fruits and vegetables. Girls received little pay for all this work — about \$1.50 a week at the turn of the century. Although girls gave most of their money to their parents, they sometimes kept a few dollars for themselves. Earning money made them feel independent.

Hired boys (also known as “plowboys”) also received low wages. Boys chopped wood, hauled water, sorted seed, and took care of livestock. They sometimes worked beside their employer, planting, plowing, and hoeing. At haying time, they would pitch hay until every muscle ached. Still, they hoped to save enough money to buy their own farm someday.

Why work? Some boys and girls worked to put themselves through school. Frank Wilson, a 12-year old who lived near Sioux City, hated farming. He wanted to go to high school instead. He arranged to work as a hired hand for a town family so he wouldn't have to ride his bicycle 20 miles a day to school. To pay for books, he took an extra job at a boarding house. He made beds every morning and waited tables every evening. Frank even found time to write a high school news column for the Sioux City Journal. Other children, however, were not as lucky as Frank. They worked to earn money so their families could survive. Odessa Booker, the daughter of a coal miner in Buxton, Iowa, peddled fresh vegetables around her town for a quarter a basket. Odessa's brothers started working around the mines when they were ten years old. By the age of 16, they worked underground with their father. All the Booker children gave their money to their parents. Because they started work so early in life, they didn't graduate from high school.

Farm to factory City children also worked. Some kids had jobs that did not pay wages. Many kids walked along railroad tracks and picked up coal for the family fireplace. Others sorted through garbage piles looking for stuff to fix up or sell. Other jobs paid cash. Boys as young as seven years old could sell papers on street corners. Young girls might sell candy or magazines. Older children worked as delivery boys, clerks, cigar rollers, and soda jerks. Factory work, although dangerous, employed thousands of Iowa kids in the early 20th century. Children routinely lost limbs and fingers to the whirring machinery.

The 1902 Factory Act prohibited all children under the age of 16 from cleaning machines in motion, but allowed most kids to go on working. By 1915, a stricter set of laws made it illegal for most kids to skip school in order to work. Safety conditions were not much improved, but younger children were barred from factory work.

Today, children work in a variety of jobs. Some work as babysitters, others mow lawns and work in fast-food restaurants. Most kids help with household chores. Their labor contributes to Iowa's economy, just as it has in the state's past.