

The Goldfinch

*Iowa History
for Young People*
Volume 10, Number 3
February 1989



Labor in Iowa

The Goldfinch

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Iowa History
For Young People

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Editor: Deborah Gore

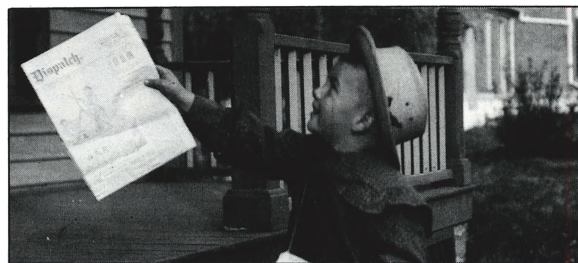
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***ON THE COVER:** These Muscatine welders were so proud of their work that they signed it and even posed for a photographer in 1921. Photo from the Oscar Grossheim Collection, Musser Public Library, Muscatine, Iowa.*

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Workers at the Morton Frozen Food Company struck for higher wages and additional benefits in 1959. These workers wore sandwich boards that showed their demands.

Labor in Iowa

HAVE YOU or your friends ever delivered newspapers on crisp winter mornings? Have you detasseled corn or hoed beans in the scorching summer heat? Maybe you've spent some evenings babysitting toddlers for extra cash. Kids in Iowa and the rest of the United States often work when they are not in school. Some donate their wages to their families, others save it

for college. Many use the money they earn to buy school clothes or just for fun stuff.

The way children and adults work has changed greatly in Iowa over the years. The laws that govern work and the development of labor unions have created safer workplaces and brought many rights to workers.

Workers struggled to win many of these gains

in the early 20th century. Boys as young as six sold newspapers on streetcorners. Some of them in Iowa even went on **strike** (stopped working) in the 1890s for higher wages. Women, men, and children who often worked grueling 12-hour days in poorly ventilated factories and shops struggled for higher pay and better working conditions. Coal miners organized unions to reduce the hazards of working in Iowa mines.

In this issue of the *Goldfinch*, we will see how Iowa men, women, and children joined together in a labor movement to fight for equality and fair treatment in the workplace.

Industry comes to Iowa

Iowa is not just people working on farms. Factories and industries developed in Iowa soon after the Civil War (1861-65). The lumber business flourished along the Mississippi River. Railroads began to cross the state. People came to mine coal to fuel railroads, heat homes, and power factories. Many new businesses associated with agriculture also arrived with the railroad. Meat-packing plants were started in Cedar Rapids, Ottumwa, Sioux City, and other cities.

With the new industries came workers from all over the world. Men, women, and children often worked 12 and 15-hour days, six or seven days a week. Seldom were there fringe benefits such as accident or health insurance for employees in the late 19th century. If you got hurt or lost your job, you were out of luck. Some workers formed **labor unions** (groups of workers joined together to protect their interests). As groups, unions had better chances to bargain with employers for higher wages, shorter hours, or better working

conditions.

Probably the first labor unions in Iowa were organized by the printers in Dubuque and Davenport in the 1850s. During the Civil War workers in such trades as cigarmaking, iron molding, tailoring, and printing also formed unions.

Some of these unions recognized a need to create central organizations. Among the first major national unions was the Knights of Labor created in 1869. Its motto was: “an injury to one is the concern of all.” The Knights welcomed children, women, and men of all ethnic and racial groups into its ranks. The Knights began organizing in Iowa in the late 1870s. By 1888 the Knights of Labor in Iowa claimed 200 **Local Assemblies** (local unions) and 30,000 members. The Knights of Labor worked in the legislature to pass laws creating the Bureau of Labor Statistics. They also helped to pass laws protecting coal miners and other workers. The Knights of Labor helped workers organize to bargain collectively for higher pay, shorter hours, and better working conditions.

By 1893 the Iowa State Federation of Labor became the main voice for labor in Iowa. It was chartered by the American Federation of Labor (AFL), a national federation of unions made up of skilled craftspersons from various trades. The Iowa State Federation of Labor worked with legislators to help pass many laws dealing with inspections of factories, required school attendance, and the regulation of child labor.

Children at work

In Iowa most children worked on farms.



A Muscatine button worker operated a radically different machine. This button-cutting device allowed one worker to cut several blanks at once.

However, some were employed in factories or street trades such as newspaper selling, selling merchandise, or delivering messages. Children often worked the same hours as adults and in the same kinds of jobs. For many bosses, kids were good employees. They were readily available, and they worked cheaper than adults. In 1892 workers at the Lansing Lumber Company in Lansing, Iowa, worked 11-hour days for the following pay:

20 boys	50-60 cents each per day
12 girls	75-85 cents/day
12 boys	75 cents/day
117 men	\$1.25/day
10 men	\$1.40-1.50/day

You can clearly see how boys and girls were paid less than the men employed by the lumber company.

Iowa's famous labor leader

One of the most famous leaders of American labor unions was an Iowan. John L. Lewis was born in southern Iowa, near Lucas, in 1880. His parents' unionizing activities forced them to move frequently. They lived in Beacon, Colfax, and Des Moines. Lewis joined the United Mine Workers in 1900 when he was 20 years old. He went on to become president of the United Mine Workers of America. In 1935, he began the movement that led to the establishment of the Committee for Industrial Organizations (CIO).^{*} The two unions united in 1955 as the AFL-CIO and still exist today.

In the 1950s, the Iowa Federation of Labor included members of both the AFL and CIO. The Iowa Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO still helps workers in their struggles for higher wages and



This woman sewed overalls in a Pella, Iowa, factory during the 1930s.

better working conditions. Today this group endorses political candidates, helps raise money for the poor, and gets involved in community projects.

This issue of the *Goldfinch* will explore the early working conditions of Iowa men, women, and children. Read a play about real newsboys from Des Moines who went on strike in 1898. A rare photo essay shows young women working in Dubuque around the turn of the century. Read about one of the youngest child unions in the U.S.—the Juvenile Button Sewers' and Carriers' Union of Muscatine. They joined a strike of button workers in 1911. Finally, Iowa workers tell their own stories about why they joined labor unions and what the labor movement has meant to their lives.

^{*}Later the CIO became known as the Congress of Industrial Organizations.

Children at Work

*Ten little children working in a mine,
One was blown up in the air, then there were nine.*

*Nine little children through the factory gate,
One was caught in the machine, then there were eight.*

Eight little children in the sweatshop heaven,
One of them pined away, then there ~~were~~ seven.*

*Seven little children; orphans in a fix,
One of them starved to death, then there were six.*

*Six little children in a glass works strive,
After the explosion there were only five.*

*Five little children in a department store,
One got consumption then there were four.*

*Four little children go to work in glee,
Trolley killed one of them, then there were three.*

*Three little children in the mill did stew,
One caught pneumonia then there were two.*

*Two little children all the spindles run,
One inhaled cotton dust then there was one.*

*One little child forlorn skipped a day for fun,
But he was soon put in jail, then there were none.*

*Suffer little children to come unto Me,
For they pay a bigger profit than the men you see!*

*Sweatshops were small factories with unhealthy working conditions.

Children at Work

by Chris Annicella

The horrors of working conditions for children were exposed in this poem called “Nursery Rhymes.” It was first published in about 1911 in the newspaper, *The Progressive Woman*. Many young people in the United States and in Iowa worked long hours in dark factories, on cold streets, and in dangerous mines. At the time some employers said, “Why hire a man for a dollar when you get a kid for a dime?”

In the late 19th century many people thought that **idleness** (not working) was not good for children. If children were not in school, they should be at work. Iowa children worked in coal mines, button and candy-making factories, laundries, department stores, and other types of shops. Boys sold newspapers on the streets of Des Moines and other cities. Girls worked as **domestic servants**—washing, cleaning, cooking, and caring for children. Both boys and girls worked endless hours on Iowa farms.

Laws to protect

States were slow to adopt laws to protect children from injury and unhealthy working conditions. Iowa passed its first child labor law in 1874. It stated that no females, and no males under 10 years of age were allowed to work in mines. The 1902 Factory Act prohibited any person under 16 and all females under 18 from cleaning machinery while it was in motion. But the law still allowed children to work if they signed a paper that said employers were not responsible if the children were hurt.

Gradually more protective laws were passed. By 1915 a child labor law was passed prohibiting

employment for children under 14 in amusement places. Kids under 16 could not work in mines, bowling alleys, or at dangerous occupations. Some children in Iowa were not allowed to skip school because they had to go to work. Yet children working in agriculture and in street trades—such as selling newspapers—were not protected by these laws.

Working on the farm

In the late 19th century many children who lived on farms were kept out of school during the spring and fall to help plant and harvest crops. Farmers thought child labor was an economic necessity. They believed they needed the extra hands to help with the work.

Farmers who could afford to employ extra labor often hired boys and girls to help with the farm and domestic chores. For \$1.50 per week hired girls cooked meals, cleaned houses, washed clothes, and took care of children. Hired boys helped to build fences, care for livestock, plant, cultivate, and harvest crops, and “do the chores.”

Many laws protecting children have been passed since the days when Iowa children worked 10 hours a day, six days a week in dangerous jobs. But even today Iowa kids working on farms and in other jobs sometimes face dangers just as youngsters did one hundred years ago. Almost every week an Iowa child is seriously injured in an agricultural accident. For information on safety for children working on farms, send a self-addressed, stamped, business-size envelope to: Farm Safety for Just Kids, Route 3, Box 73, Earlham, IA 50072.



Hidden Objects Game

This is an illustration of a 19th-century family working on a farm. Find the hidden objects

leather purse

heeled shoe

compact disc (CD)

modern silo

airplane

remote phone

soda pop can

light pole

car

television

(items from today) that do not belong in the picture. (Solution on page 31.)

television antenna

fan

washing machine

chain saw

35mm camera

floppy disk

satellite dish

map of Iowa



Art by Brenda Robinson

Strike! A Play to Read or Perform

By Katharyn Bine Brosseau

Cast:

Narrators A-E

*Isaac “Red” Oransky, 16

*Louis Lazarus, 14

*John Ronsky, 15

*Robbie Clayman, 13

*William Byrnes, a manager for the *Daily News*

*Lafayette Young, a manager for the *Capital*

Anna Oransky, Red’s mother

Abby Oransky, 17

Jenny Oransky, 12

} Red’s sisters

Sarah Marsden, a customer

Clara Tupper, 12, Jenny’s friend

Police

Note: The words in italics and parentheses (*like this*) tell the actors what they should be doing as they speak lines or what tone of voice they should use.

The characters with * by their names are real. We don’t know exactly what they said, but the events were taken from newspaper accounts.

Props:

table

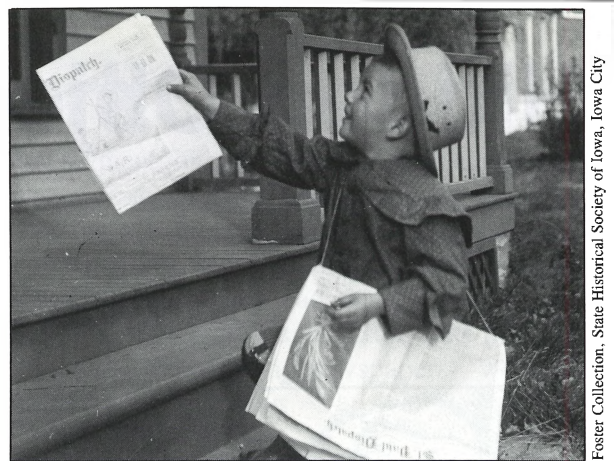
6 chairs

newspapers

watermelon or orange rinds

whistle

a few pennies



Foster Collection, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City

EXTRA! EXTRA! Read all about it! Newsboys on strike! Why do people **strike** (stop working at their jobs)? One reason—they think employers are unfair. In 1898 Des Moines newsboys went on strike because they wanted to make more money. At that time people bought their newspapers from children.

The *Capital* and the *Daily News* were two Des Moines afternoon newspapers. To sell these newspapers, the boys first had to buy them. If they sold 100 copies of the *Capital*, they made one dollar. If they sold 100 copies of the *Daily News*, they made 40 cents. Read the play to find out why the newsboys went on strike.

ACT ONE

Narrator A: It is August 8, 1898. Lafayette Young of the *Capital* sits around a table with the newsboys. He has just told the newsboys that if they wish to sell the *Capital*, they cannot sell any other afternoon newspaper.

Robbie Clayman: Mr. Young, does this mean if I take your dime, I can’t sell the *Daily News* anymore?

Lafayette Young: No, Robbie. You can sell whatever morning paper you want, but I’m

offering you an extra dime per week to sell only the *Capital* in the afternoon.

Robbie (*shakes his head*): Mr. Young, I can't do that. I sell both papers!

Young: No dime for you then, Robbie. (*He looks at Red Oransky.*)

Red (*stands up and puts on his cap*): Nobody buys your rag! Newsboys know better than to sell it. You can keep your stinking dimes!

Narrator A: The boys throw the dimes back at Young, who hides his head in his arms.

Young (*looks up*): You'll pay for this, Red!

ACT TWO

Narrator B: Out on the street, the boys gather in a circle.

Louis Lazarus: What are we going to do now?

Red: Don't worry. Young won't sell his own papers. He needs us more than we need him.

John Ronsky: Let's ask the *Daily News* if they will lower our price for their paper!

Robbie: Yeah! We could tell them we will boycott (*or won't sell*) the *Capital* if the *Daily News* drops the price to us!

Narrator B: The next day, Red talks to the *Daily*

Newsboys gathered in front of the Iowa City Citizen. This photograph was made from a film shot about 1923.



STRIKE OF NEWSBOYS CONTINUES

"Red" Oransky Announces That a Point Has Been Gained and Expects a Victory.

The newsboys continued their boycott of the *Daily News* yesterday in their effort to secure a reduction of the wholesale price of the paper to half a cent a copy. No concessions were secured and the boys came pretty near holding their own.

Yesterday morning the *News* issued an extra containing a report of the battle between American and Spanish troops on Manila bay. The paper was sold to the newsboys at half a cent a copy, and they circulated it, but were told that the price of the regular editions would not be reduced to them. They refused to take out copies of the noon edition and continued their organization to dissuade others from buying or selling the paper. The boys stood to.

Another Des Moines newspaper published an article about the strike

News newsboy manager William Byrnes.

William Byrnes: I'm sorry Red. The paper cannot drop its prices for you boys.

The boys are pretty upset. They won't like this. We might just quit selling your rag.

Byrnes (*looking worried*): I wouldn't do that if I were you. . .

Narrator B: Out on the street, the boys gather.

John: Let's just quit selling the papers! We'll go out on a strike!

Robbie: If I don't sell the *Daily News*, how will my little sister get shoes for school?

Louis: I'm worried about what Ma will say when she finds out that I can't help pay for food.

Red: We can't sell the *Daily News*. If we give in too soon, Byrnes is going to think that we ain't got backbone! He might even try to up our prices. If that happens, we'll be worse off than where we started.

ACT THREE

Narrator C: Later that night the newsboys sit at tables in an alley by the *Daily News* and eat watermelon.

Louis (*whispers*): My pa says I've got to sell newspapers.

John: But Louis, you can't sell papers until the strike is over.

Louis (*shows his full bag of papers to John*): I've bought the papers already. I'm going out tonight to sell them.

John (*loudly*): Oh, no you're not! We've got to stick together, you traitor—you scab!

Narrator C: The two boys wrestle. Copies of the paper fly around the alley. The other boys jump up.

Robbie: Get them!

Narrator C: Louis heaves a watermelon rind at John but hits a table. The other boys aim rinds at Louis. John hangs onto Louis, who is trying to reach the end of the alley.

Louis: Let me go! I've got to sell my papers! Help!

Robbie: John, duck. I'm going to get him. (*Robbie aims another rind at Louis but hits John*).

Narrator C: The boys hear whistles. Police try to break up the fight. It ends in a pulpy mess. The police jail John and Louis for starting it.

ACT FOUR

Narrator D: Red finally gets home that evening after the fight.

Jenny Oransky: Reddy! You smell like a watermelon!

Anna Oransky (*screeches*): Isaac Oransky! What in the world? You look. . .

Narrator D: Anna, Abby, Jenny, and Clara

begin to laugh. Watermelon rinds stick to Red's clothing and hair.

Red (*quietly*): Sorry, Ma. I tried to clean it off.

Narrator D: Red explains about the fight.

Jenny: It must be fun to be a newsboy! I'd like to work outside!

Anna: Jenny, you are too young to work on the street. I know you'd like to make money. Red makes more money than your sister. And he gets out in the fresh air. Abby has to work in that old factory ten hours every day. When she comes home, she looks like she's been in a pigpen!

Abby: It's not fair! I should make more money.

Clara: Maybe we should ask the boss for a raise. It's dangerous to oil working machines. It's so noisy and dirty. You can hardly breathe in there. We don't even earn enough to make it worthwhile. I don't know what to do.

Abby: If we had enough money, we could quit. We could tell the boss just what we wanted. We could ask for a raise. He'd have to give it to us.

Clara: But the bosses would hire other people to do our jobs, and probably pay them more than they paid us! The boss says a lot of people want to work in the factory. He says people come looking for jobs every day.

Anna: We couldn't make ends meet if Abby didn't work at all. (*She sighs.*) Isaac, wash that stuff off and go to bed.

ACT FIVE

Narrator E: On another hot day, the newsboys are selling another local morning newspaper, the *Leader*. One of Red's customers comes up. . .

Red: Hi, Sarah. The paper has a story about our strike.

Sarah: I'll take one. (*She pays Red and reads aloud the story about the strike.*) "Well, well, well; the *Daily News*, *Daily News* we will not sell, sell, sell. . ."

Red: We can't make a living wage selling their rag!

Sarah: That's for sure! Good luck!

Narrator E: Sarah waves and walks away. John walks up.

Red: Hey, I thought you were in jail? How did you get out?

John: Mr. Byrnes of the *Daily News* bailed Louis and me out.

Red: But we're striking against the *News*!


John: It was that or rot in jail.

Red: Maybe Byrnes is an okay fellow after all. I'll try talking to him again.

Narrator E: Red and the other newsboys talk with Byrnes again. Byrnes says that the day's extra edition will be sold to them at a half-cent. But he still demands that the newsboys pay full price for the regular edition. The boys decide to sell the extra, but refuse to sell the regular edition. They hope one more day of the strike will bring them victory!

Write Your Own Ending

The Goldfinch wants to know how you would end the story. None of the newspapers explained how the strike was resolved. Write your ending. Here are some ideas to include:

- did the boys win the strike?
- did Abby and her coworkers go on strike?
- did Jenny grow up to work in a factory or as a newspaper carrier?
- did Red work for a newspaper someday? 

Dubuque's Working Women

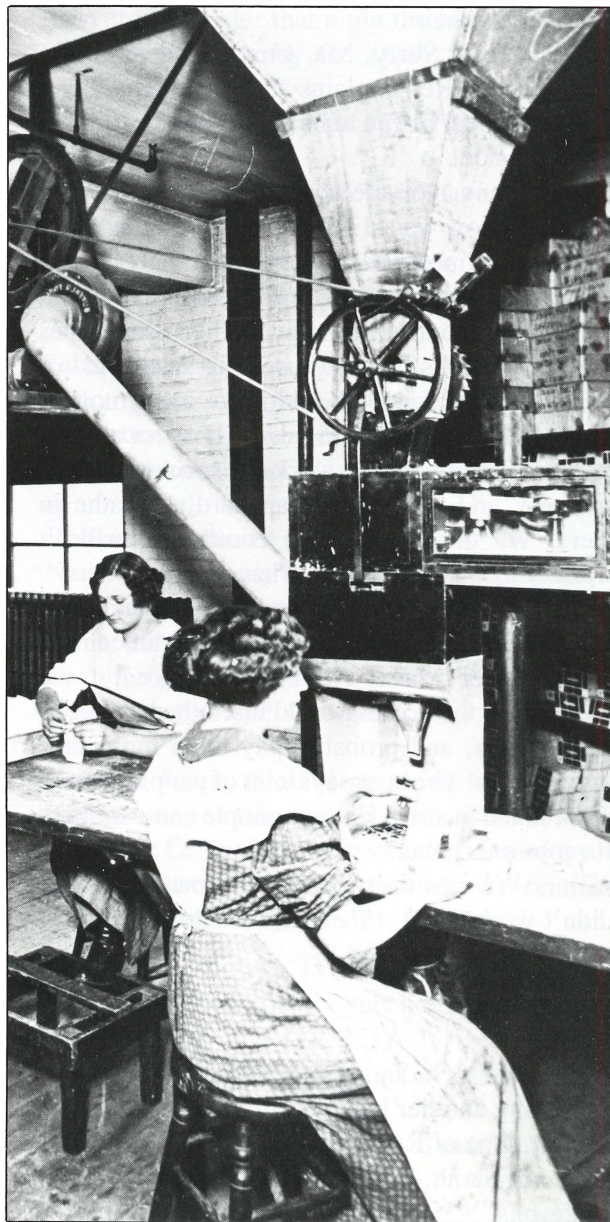
JOHANNA BUSHMAN, 14, began working at the Bradley Bros. Cigar Factory in Dubuque in 1906. By the time Johanna was 18, she worked more than 50 hours a week. Johanna rolled cheap cigars with other young women. She lived at home and gave most of her three dollars in pay to her mother each week.

Johanna was like other Dubuque and Iowa women who were **gainfully employed** (working for an employer and receiving cash wages). Around the turn of the century, most people thought women should be at home taking care of families. If women worked, many people thought it should not interfere with home life. In reality, many young women helped to support themselves and their families. Some other women worked because they enjoyed the money, the friendships, or the work itself.

Employers had many reasons for hiring women. Women were less likely than men to join unions. (Even though women clothing workers in Dubuque joined the Knights of Labor in the late 19th century.) Women were paid less than men, because of the “**family wage concept**.” Employers felt that because men should support families, men should receive higher wages.

These rare photographs show Dubuque women at work at the beginning of the 20th century. How do these work conditions compare to work today?

At right, women worked at the McFadden Coffee and Spice Company in Dubuque in 1912. What do you think they are doing? Far right, these young women worked with butter boxes at the Meadow Gold—Beatrice Creamery.





All photos courtesy of Center for Dubuque History, William J. Klauer Collection, Loras College, Dubuque, Iowa.



In 1913 Miss Ellen M. Rourke, a factory inspector, investigated working conditions in Iowa laundries. She found that standing all day, plus using heavy steam irons, made ironing a difficult job. Women

reported suffering from headaches and sideaches from the ironing machines' gasses and fumes. How do the women ironing above look?



At left, women dipped candy into chocolate and then packaged it at the William Lawther Company. Men working on another floor were paid higher wages than women to mix up the batches of candy. Before holidays employees had to work extra hours. What kind of candy were these women making? Below, women made wigs. What do you suppose the man in the background did?



In the Mines

by Katharyn Bine Brosseau

AFTER SCHOOL every night, Hucey Hart helped his mother by bringing coal, wood, and water into their house. Odessa Booker babysat her little brothers and sisters, and washed dishes.

Both of these children lived in Buxton, a coal mining town in southern Iowa. For more than 100 years, Iowa coal powered railroad locomotives and other types of steam engines. Coal also heated stoves and homes. Many coal mines opened because of the growing need for coal.

Afro-American and **Euro-American** (people of African and European ancestry) adults and children lived and worked side by side in Buxton. Unlike in other parts of the country, black people and white people generally received equal treatment both in the Buxton mines and in the town of Buxton.

Kids in the mines

Mining coal is hard and dangerous work for adults and especially for children. That's why

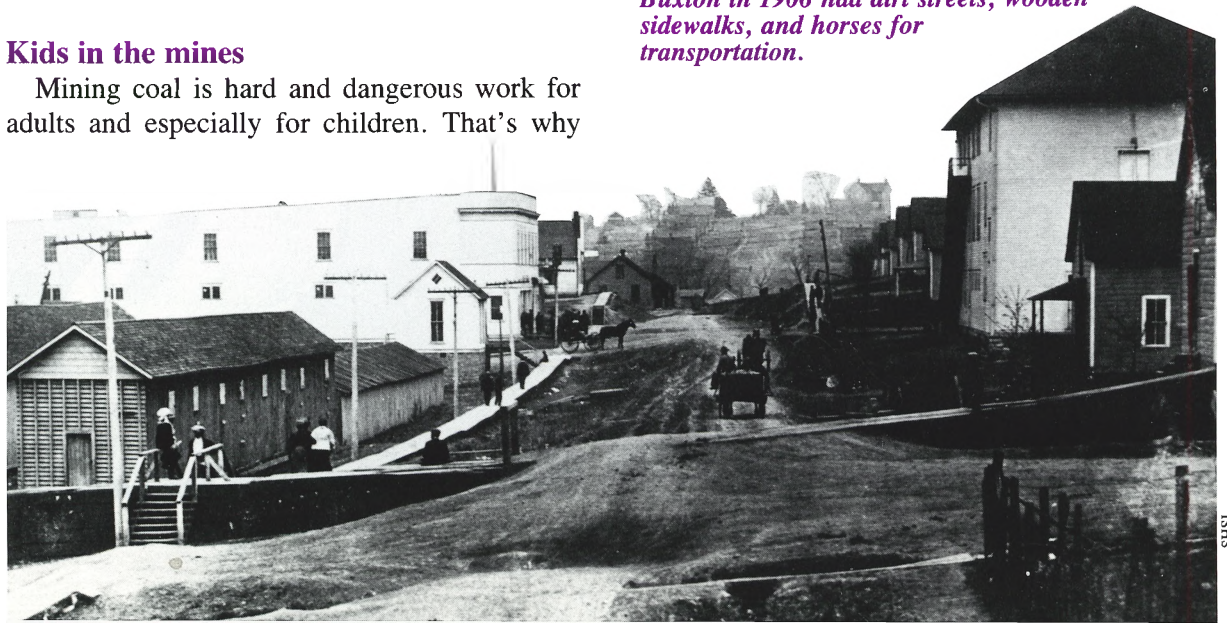
Iowa's first child labor law, passed in 1874, said that only boys over 10 years of age could work in the mines. Later, laws prohibited boys from working in the mines under the age of 16.

What made coal mining so dangerous? Accidents! If the roof of the mine was not propped up correctly, it could fall and injure or kill the miners. Gasses sometimes suffocated miners. Runaway cars of coal crushed people. Miners used gunpowder to loosen coal, and many miners died from explosions.

Children found many jobs in the mine. **Trappers** opened and closed doors to allow the air to circulate and to permit the mule drivers who hauled the coal cars to enter and leave the mines. **Couplers** hitched coal cars together to be taken into or sent out of the mines. **Oilers** greased the axles of the coal cars so that they would easily roll.

When boys turned 15 or 16, they often went to work in the mines with their fathers or older

Buxton in 1906 had dirt streets, wooden sidewalks, and horses for transportation.



brothers. Miners usually worked 10 hours each day, six days per week—much longer than they work now. But by 1900, when most Iowa miners had joined the United Mine Workers of America, most Iowa miners worked only eight hours per day, six days per week. The eight-hour day was a great victory for working people.

Buxton kids usually gave all of their money to their parents, as did the children in other mining camps. Odessa Booker remembered selling baskets of mustard greens for a quarter. She also recalled how hard her mother worked.

Odessa had eight brothers and sisters. Her mother cooked, clothed, washed, and cared for them without inside running water, an electric or gas stove, or any of the conveniences of today's homes.

Many families also had **boarders**, or people who paid money to stay in the families' homes. It was one way for women to make money, but it meant extra clothing to wash, people to feed, and work for women and children.

A dirty job

Coal mining is a dirty job. Many people discriminated against miners in the early days because they thought the men couldn't find any better work. Since nearly everyone in Buxton mined coal, few people made fun of the miners there.

Racial discrimination (people treating others differently because of skin color) was not a big problem in Buxton. Most black miners and their families liked Buxton and did not want to move away.

Residents enjoyed Buxton's roller-skating



These kids lived in a coal camp in Iowa. Compare the houses in the background and see if they are different.

rink, basketball court, baseball team, and many stores, clubs, and organizations.

Moving away

Buxton died in 1924. Coal deposits began to run out. Iowans also began to buy more and more of their coal from Kentucky or Illinois, believing that it burnt more cleanly than Iowa coal. People moved from Buxton to Haydock, Des Moines, Waterloo, or to other states. Some blacks began to suffer from racial discrimination for the first time. They felt scared, sad, and angry. "In Buxton, we didn't want for nothing," said Hucey Hart. He and other children from Buxton wished they could find something like it again.



Coal Mine Map

This is a historical map showing the Consolidation Coal Company mines in southeastern Iowa. It shows railroad lines, political boundaries (such as county lines), and some towns that no longer exist. Answer the questions below by filling in the blanks. (*Answers on page 31.*)

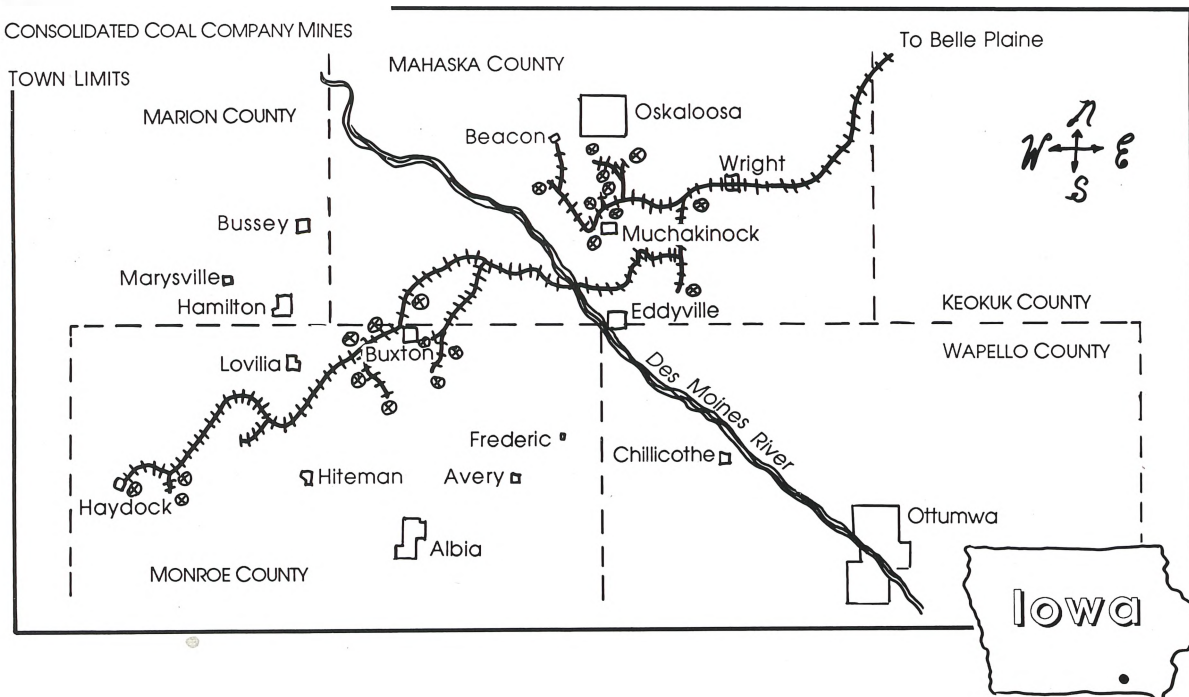
1. Find Buxton on the map. What county is it in?
2. Consolidation Coal Company towns were located near mines and railroad tracks. Which three towns were owned by the company?
3. Why are the coal mining towns by railroads?
4. What political boundaries does the Des Moines River pass through?
5. What direction would you travel from Buxton to Haydock?

KEY: MAP CHALLENGE: Look at a current Iowa map. Which towns on the *Goldfinch* map still exist today?

--- COUNTY LINES
 CHICAGO AND NORTHWESTERN RAILROAD

CONSOLIDATED COAL COMPANY MINES

TOWN LIMITS



“Little Willie’s Sewing Buttons”



The short-lived Juvenile Sewers' and Carriers' Union gathered for a photograph in 1911. Only a few of the 700 members of the children's union posed.

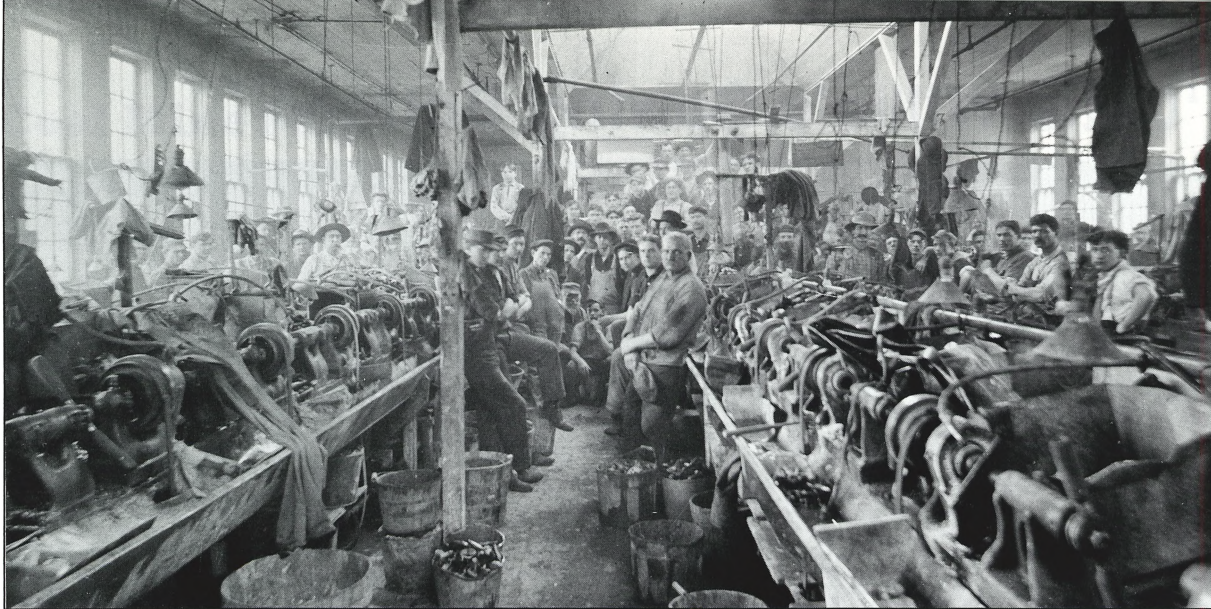
by Terry Ofner

*Little Willie's sewing buttons
So is Sister Ann,
Pa and Ma sit up nights
Helping all they can.
Up early in the morning
Never stop for lunch
And the pay
Is not a dollar a day
For the whole blamed bunch.
To the factories we will never hike
As long as the button workers are on strike.*

The above poem was printed on the membership forms of what may have been the

labor union with the youngest members ever to be organized. Nearly 700 children joined the Juvenile Button Sewers' and Carriers' Union of Muscatine, Iowa, when it was formed in 1911. The members of this union, some younger than 14 years of age, worked in the industry that made buttons from fresh-water clam shells.

In 1891 a German immigrant named John F. Boepple discovered that inexpensive buttons could be made from fresh-water clam shells. The Mississippi River was packed with fresh-water clams. Soon the demand for fresh-water “pearl” buttons (so called because the buttons had a shine that made them look like pearls) caused



Oscar Grossheim Collection, Musser Public Library, Muscatine, Iowa

These 1907 button cutters posed with their “state of the art” work stations. Do these machines look safe? Why or why not?

something like a gold rush around Muscatine.

People realized that a great deal of money could be made by making buttons from fresh-water clam shells. But by 1911, not everyone that worked in the button-making industry earned what they felt was a fair wage. Many workers did not feel that the factory owners were treating them fairly.

From fishing to sewing

It took many people to make buttons. Whole families, including young children, fished for clams. Then the clams were boiled, the meat removed, and the shells torn in half. In this cleaning stage, workers looked for pearls. Some pearls were very valuable, bringing in over \$200 each. Once the clams were bagged, they were sold to the factories for about \$14 a ton.

In the button factories rough buttons were cut from the shells by men or boys. These “blanks” were then ground down to specified widths by

machines operated by women or girls. Women also ran machines that drilled holes in the buttons. After the buttons were polished and sorted, they were sewn by hand onto cards and shipped to clothing makers.

Most of the workers in the factories labored under the **piece-work system**. They were paid for each button they cut, or each set of buttons they sewed onto a card. The factory owners forced the laborers to work faster and faster, increasing the factory’s output. A full-time button sewer, for example, made only three to seven dollars a week. In some cases people took work home in order to make enough money to live on. The factory inspection laws did not protect kids working in the home. Kids often worked long hours at home sewing buttons.

Lost fingers and arms

According to workers, the working conditions in the button factories were often very bad. When

the clam shells arrived at the factory they were placed in vats of water to soften. The bits of clam flesh still left on them would decay, making the water poisonous. The button cutters then had to reach into the water, which often poisoned their blood and covered their arms and hands with sores.

Many of the buildings were dark and poorly ventilated. Because of the dust that rose from cutting and polishing the buttons, many workers complained of throat trouble and other illnesses.

To add to these problems, women were required to clean their machines while the machines were still running. Some workers lost fingers and arms in the machinery.

Why were children allowed to work in such conditions? In 1911 there were few laws against children working in factories. One law said that no children under 14 could work in a mine, factory, mill, or shop employing more than eight people. Another Iowa law said that children under 14 must attend school for 12 consecutive weeks during the year. But these two laws were difficult to enforce, and some employers simply ignored them. Some children were encouraged by their parents to find jobs so they could bring home extra money. Other children looked for ways to get out of school.

Union demands

By 1911 many of the button workers were getting tired of working long hours for low pay in unhealthy conditions. They began to organize themselves into a union. By organizing into a union, they could bring their complaints to the attention of the factory owners. If they



Oscar Grossheim Collection, Musser Public Library, Muscatine, Iowa

After the buttons were sewn onto cards, workers put them into boxes for shipping. The Hawkeye Button Company employed these workers.

complained as individuals, it would be easy for the bosses to fire them.

About this time, the factory owners claimed there was less demand for buttons from the large clothing makers in the East. Styles had changed. To keep profits up, the bosses cut workers' wages. To discourage the workers from joining the unions, some of the bosses even closed factories temporarily.

Many workers said the owners were just trying to keep the unions from forming. A strike was finally called. Most of the button workers stopped working. This was the time when the Juvenile Sewers' and Carriers' Union formed. Little is known about this union, because it did not survive long. But we can tell from the poem above that the distrust between workers and bosses touched even the hearts of children.



Voices From the Past

WHY DO PEOPLE join unions? How do unions work? How do they assist employees? How do unions help communities? The Iowa Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO conducted one thousand interviews with Iowa workers to find the answers. The following excerpts are from the Iowa Labor Oral History Project and are used with the kind permission of Mark L. Smith, Secretary-Treasurer, Iowa Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO.

The following excerpt is from an interview with a Keokuk worker. Why was a union formed at his company?

“When we formed a union in the 1930s, the things we were looking for were better working conditions and better wages. That’s what caused us to organize. We had no fringe benefits. We had no vacation pay.

“I remember one time I got laid off, and I had more seniority than my father. But the company would keep him working during the slack periods, and I’d be laid off. It happened throughout the plant. If management liked the color of your hair, you got to work. If you were a good friend of the boss, you could work.”

What do you think caused this former worker at a chair factory to join a union?

“I was a teenager, and they was paying me thirty cents an hour. The older people that was doing the same job was getting thirty-five. The



Maytag washing machines had a seamless washtub which made them popular. This photograph of a Maytag employee was taken in 1938. The same year a strike was called at the Newton plant. The Iowa National Guard was called out for the strike.

fellow that I worked for was a life-long resident of Burlington and a striker that went on strike in 1922 at the railroad shops. He raised so much trouble with the company for taking advantage of a kid that they did raise me to thirty-five cents an hour. They was only giving me thirty because I was single and a teenager. . . .”

An industrial worker from a Quad Cities plant joined a union in 1940. Why did he join?

“Well, working conditions were mighty bad. Things weren’t clean—restrooms, machinery, work areas were in bad shape. Lighting was bad.

There was no heat. . . . It was terrible working there. That's one of the first things the union got. We got the union in and the first thing we did was clean the shop up."

How did this Waterloo woman and other employees of a large department store form a union?

"We organized very hush-hush. We started probably around July 1959. One of the girls contacted a man from [a retail department store union] in Cedar Rapids, and he helped us get organized. He talked to us away from the store, and then we met in one of the hotels near the store, and that's where our group organized. Most of our husbands were union members, and this, of course, spurred us on. We had backing from them. . . .

"We asked the company to let the union in. Of course, they tried to keep us from getting the union. They tried to discourage us in every way, shape and form. They threatened us that we'd lose our jobs and things like that. We finally had the election, and we won, and there was no way they could keep the union out. The vote for the union was overwhelming. It covered the girls that worked in the coffee shop and the tea room, as well as those of us that worked in the store.

"When we finally got organized enough, we presented a list of demands. We were asking for a forty-hour work week, with time-and-a-half over forty hours. A dollar an hour was what we were asking for in wages. And we wanted some sort of insurance benefit."

A union member from Waterloo recounts some

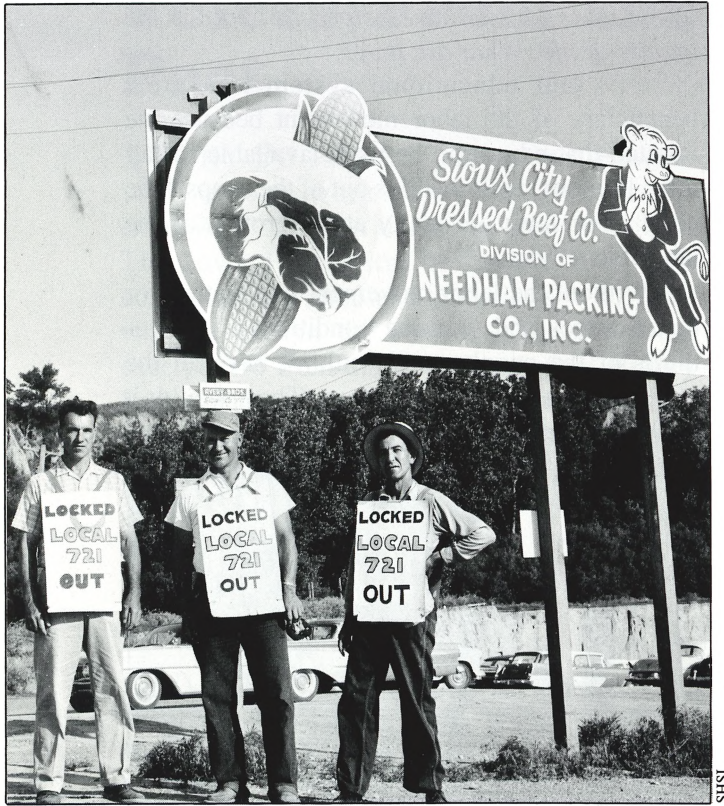
of the ways unions have helped to improve the quality of life. What are they?

"... Our educational system is a great beneficiary of the labor movement because we insisted that education be made available for all kids. [Unions] took the kids out of the shops. The child labor laws are really an outgrowth of the labor movement.

"Without the labor movement negotiating for better wages and working conditions . . . two-thirds of the people . . . wouldn't have all the conveniences they've got now. They wouldn't



Everyone in a family is affected when workers strike. In the 1961 strike against the Sioux City Dressed Beef Company, kids and parents alike picketed the company.



Workers don't sit around when their union goes on strike. Like these 1961 Sioux City strikers, some people picket, wear sandwich boards, and talk to others in order for the strike to work.

have bathrooms in their homes, electricity . . . or refrigerators. . . .

"The American people are much healthier now than when I was a kid. Our unions cleaned up these plants [that is, those that sweated labor from children and were dirty, ugly, unsanitary and unsafe workplaces.] They've cleaned up the mills and garment shops.

"Food stamps are a result of the labor

movement demanding that hungry people be fed. Because of the labor movement, working people can afford health insurance, life insurance, home insurance. My dad didn't even know what the word 'insurance' meant. There wasn't such a thing for the poor farmer or working man when he died in the early 1930s. . . ."

Many union members sponsor a wide variety of activities to improve community life. A union member from Burlington describes some of her local union's community work:

"We sponsor Little League ball teams, both a boys' and a girls'. We sponsor a few bowling leagues for both men and women. . . . Right now, the Women's Committee of our local is in the process of setting up a scholarship program at the local community college for any young person who wants to learn more about the labor movement. . . ."

A Cedar Rapids woman tells about the community activities of her local union. Are unions in your area involved in community activities? If so, what?

"Our people become involved in all sorts of community affairs. We have people who are involved in the Kinship Program. That's a program sort of like the Big Brother and Big Sister programs, where you take a child or young person under your wing, and you donate some of your time to helping the child. You can take the child to your home or take her/him out to places and be friends with her/him."



Interviewing Grandma

Or how to do an oral history

by Katharyn Bine Brosseau

HAS YOUR grandparent ever told you a story about working at a first job, or going to school as a child? Stories like these are called **oral histories**. Professional historians, students, and amateurs collect oral histories because oral histories tell us what it was like to live at a certain time. **Narrators** (people who tell the stories) help us to understand what past events meant to them. Read on to find out how you can be an oral historian!

1. **Choose a topic and time period.** Read about your topic (such as working in the 1940s) before the interview. Books can tell you what happened, but only a person can tell you how it felt.
2. **Use a tape recorder.** If you don't own one, check out a tape recorder from your local library. You can listen to your narrator better if you use a tape recorder. Know how to use it. Use a fresh tape, check the batteries, and be sure the microphone works. Get permission from the narrator to use the tape recorder.
3. **Interview one person at a time.** It's hard to tell who is speaking if more than two people are recorded at one time.
4. **Eliminate extra noise.** Noise distracts people, and your microphone hears noise, too. Turn off the television or radio, and close windows. If it is still noisy, move the microphone closer to the narrator. Be sure that your voice can still be heard on the tape.
5. **Explain why you are collecting memories.**

Tell your narrator that other people will hear the tape. Offer to replay the completed tape for the narrator, so that some parts may be erased if necessary. Emphasize that he or she may refuse to answer any question.

6. **Get background information.** Begin by asking something like, "I'm Sharon Smith. I am recording an oral history interview with my grandma. What is your name, Grandma?" Let Grandma say her name. Begin with simple questions such as age, date of birth, place of birth, and education. Ask about brothers and sisters and parents.

7. **Ask good questions.** Beforehand write down questions that begin with *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why*, and *how*. These kinds of questions can be answered more completely than yes and no questions.

8. **Ask for more explanation if you are confused.** If you don't understand your narrator, others won't either. When you have finished with a topic, ask "Is there anything you want to add?" Oral historians use this question because quite often the narrator thought of a story, but didn't mention it.

9. **Ask for important dates.** If the narrator cannot remember the date of something important, ask if he or she can date it by another event (like the date a neighbor's barn burned). Check the narrator's memory of dates against local newspapers, old photographs, and letters. You can keep the interview on tape, or **transcribe** it (write out the words on paper).

10. **Thank the narrator.** He or she has shared personal memories with you—memories that will help you understand the past.



Iowa Labor Word Find

by Ellen Stoltz

Can you find these words in the puzzle? Words go up, down, diagonal, frontward, and backward. (Solution on page 31.)

newsboys
Labor Day
strike
coal mines
benefits
Muscatine

button
federation
Knights of Labor
AFL-CIO
insurance
contract

hired hands
Buxton
wages
picket
child labor
machinery

piece
Bread and Roses
factory
domestic
Taft-Hartley Act
printers

protective laws
equal
Lewis
union
hours

T	A	F	T	H	A	R	T	L	E	Y	A	C	T	R	P	O	N
C	I	T	S	E	M	O	D	M	A	C	H	I	N	E	R	Y	A
A	O	P	I	M	O	L	N	E	W	S	B	O	Y	S	O	L	R
R	P	I	C	K	E	T	O	N	Q	M	R	Y	R	I	T	X	O
T	R	E	C	K	L	E	T	T	A	U	E	O	O	R	E	F	B
N	I	C	K	L	R	A	X	A	T	S	A	B	T	U	C	S	A
O	M	E	A	S	F	H	U	N	E	C	D	L	C	L	T	N	L
C	H	I	L	D	L	A	B	O	R	A	A	B	A	N	I	O	F
M	I	H	U	R	A	E	P	S	O	T	N	L	F	S	V	I	O
O	R	R	S	E	G	A	W	T	N	I	D	D	R	S	E	T	S
D	E	O	E	T	C	B	M	I	R	N	R	U	Q	R	L	A	T
C	D	S	U	N	H	V	E	F	S	E	O	D	K	E	A	R	H
O	H	T	S	S	G	O	L	E	N	H	S	N	A	T	W	E	G
L	A	B	O	R	D	A	Y	N	A	S	E	G	O	N	S	D	I
L	N	A	T	A	L	U	D	E	N	V	S	T	R	I	K	E	N
T	D	N	N	O	T	T	U	B	O	D	R	H	U	R	N	F	K
Y	S	E	N	I	M	L	A	O	C	X	E	E	V	P	A	U	I
P	I	C	K	U	L	M	E	C	N	A	R	U	S	N	I	L	V

Disk Detective by Jean E. Wulf

Can you help Wild Rosie solve Dr. Arc E. Ology's Labor Fact Hunt? Load BASIC on an Apple IIe or IIc (with an 80-character screen) and enter this program. (NOTE: Type in all characters below as shown.)

```
10 HOME
20 PRINT TAB(30) "Welcome to"
30 PRINT TAB(27) "Dr. Arc E. Ology's"
40 PRINT
50 PRINT TAB(26) "***LABOR FACT HUNT**/"
60 PRINT
70 PRINT
80 INPUT "Dr. Ology has been searching for years
for the correct answers to many questions about
labor in Iowa. He needs your help to answer three
questions. Will you help him? (Type the word yes or
no and hit the return key)"; X$
90 IF X$ = "yes" GOTO 150
100 IF X$ = "no" GOTO 600
110 PRINT
120 HOME
130 PRINT "PLEASE type the word yes or no and
press the return key."
140 GOTO 70
150 HOME
160 PRINT "QUESTION #1: Women have often
earned less money than men because of"
170 PRINT "a. the 'family wage concept'"
180 PRINT "b. division of labor"
190 PRINT "c. protective legislation"
200 PRINT "d. both a & b"
210 INPUT "Choose the best answer (Press
a,b,c,d, or q for quit and hit the return key)"; A$
220 IF A$ = "d" GOTO 490
230 IF A$ = "q" GOTO 600
240 PRINT
250 PRINT "INCORRECT ANSWER PLEASE TRY
AGAIN"
260 GOTO 160
270 PRINT "QUESTION # 2: The first Iowa child
labor law was passed in"
280 PRINT "a. 1874"
290 PRINT "b. 1896"
```

```
300 PRINT "c. 1902"
310 PRINT "d. 1920"
320 INPUT "Choose the best answer (Press
a,b,c,d, or q for quit and hit the return key)"; E$
330 IF E$ = "a" GOTO 490
340 IF E$ = "q" GOTO 600
350 PRINT
360 PRINT "INCORRECT ANSWER PLEASE TRY
AGAIN"
370 GOTO 270
380 PRINT "QUESTION #3: Why did Muscatine
button workers go on strike?"
390 PRINT "a. Unhealthy working conditions"
400 PRINT "b. for higher wages"
410 PRINT "c. both a and b"
420 PRINT "d. none of the above"
430 INPUT "Choose the best answer (Press
a,b,c,d, or q for quit and hit the return key)"; B$
440 IF B$ = "c" GOTO 560
450 IF B$ = "q" GOTO 600
460 PRINT
470 PRINT "INCORRECT ANSWER PLEASE TRY
AGAIN"
480 GOTO 380
490 PRINT
500 PRINT "CORRECT! GREAT JOB! Hit the
return key when you're ready for the next
question."
510 INPUT G$
520 HOME
530 V=V+1
540 IF V=1 GOTO 270
550 IF V=2 GOTO 380
560 PRINT
570 PRINT "GOOD JOB! CORRECT ANSWER!"
580 PRINT
590 PRINT "CONGRATULATIONS!! You have
successfully assisted Dr. Ology in finding the
answers to each question!"
600 PRINT
610 PRINT "If you want to play FACT HUNT, type
the word RUN and hit the return key"
620 END
RUN
```



History Makers



Kurt Zaske

BE A HISTORY maker! *The Goldfinch* wants to hear about your discoveries in Iowa's history. Have you read about Iowans in history class? If you have traveled in Iowa, did you see something that reminded you of its history, such as a monument, glacier-made hills, or historical sites?

Women were pioneers, farmers, builders, and leaders, but few women appear in history books. That's why March was named "Women's History Month." Many kids in Iowa entered the "Write Women Back into History Essay

Contest." The winning essay in the sixth-seventh grade division will be published in the next issue of the *Goldfinch*. Sixth-grader Sayde Brooker won third place in her division last year with the printed essay below.

Before television, telephones, records, and computers, pioneers entertained their friends by telling tall tales. The April issue of the *Goldfinch* will cover Iowa folklife. Do you know an old story? Or can you create a new one? Write it down or draw it, then send it to History Makers, *The Goldfinch*, 402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, Iowa 52240. You may see it in print!

A History Lesson

Our teacher taught
us history
It was one great
big mystery

It told of our
past
I finally learned
at last

Columbus traveled
to
Pioneers traveled through

There was one that
interested me
It was how life
used to be

It was a land
of farmers
That was one of
the charmers

We learned of a
one-room school
It was so cool

That was one history
lesson
It was a blessin'
—Emily Stephens, 10,
Marshalltown, Iowa

My Mom, the '80s Kind of Woman

History. "His" story. Well now, it's time to talk about *Her* story. We are going to write women back into history. I think my mother, Charlene Brooker, should be written into history.

She has done many things to live up to the '80s woman.

She is a single parent. She is self employed, working as a painter and wallpaper hanger. She also has a real estate license, was a cab driver, a lifeguard, worked as a waitress on the Alaskan pipeline and worked on a salmon fishing boat as a fisherwoman.

I'm proud of my mom. She's doing what traditionally was considered a "man's job." She has taught me to be a liberated person, and not to feel restricted by my sex, to try out for a sport, even if there are only two or three other girls on the team, to freely socialize with boys, even if there aren't any girls in the conversation and to be who I want to be.

When people consider the 1980s historically, I think my mom should be included in the profile of an '80s woman, a truly liberated woman.

—Sayde Brooker, Cedar Rapids, Iowa

Pass It On

Read More About It

How to Take Instant Oral Biographies by William Zimmerman (NY: Guarionex Press). A journalist tells kids how to do oral history interviews. Also included are creative exercises for kids and their grandparents.

In Coal Country by Judith Hendershot (NY: Knopf, 1987). An unforgettable story about an Ohio coal-mining town in the 1930s.

John L. Lewis: Young Militant Labor Leader by George Korson (Indianapolis: 1970). This book is part of a series called "The Childhood of Famous Americans." It tells the story of Lewis's growing up in Iowa.

Bread and Roses: The Struggle of American Labor, 1865-1915, by Milton Meltzer (NY: Knopf, 1967). An easy-to-read book about the history of American labor.

See a Film

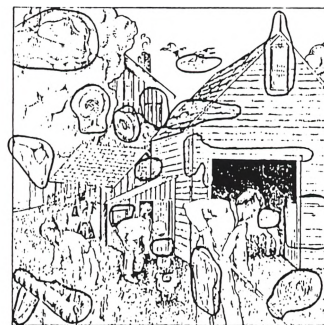
"Yesterday and Today: The Labor Movement in Iowa" (1978, 16mm, 23 minutes) follows the development of labor unions in Iowa. Teachers can rent the film from the University of Iowa Media Library, C4 Seashore Hall, The University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa 52242 (319/335-2567). Cost: \$19.40 plus UPS charge.

Celebrate Black History Month

February is Black History Month. You can research and write stories or poems about black Americans such as: Martin Luther King, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Gwendolyn Brooks, Langston Hughes, Washington Irving Carver, Oprah Winfrey, Jesse Jackson, Florence Griffith Joyner, Jesse Owens.

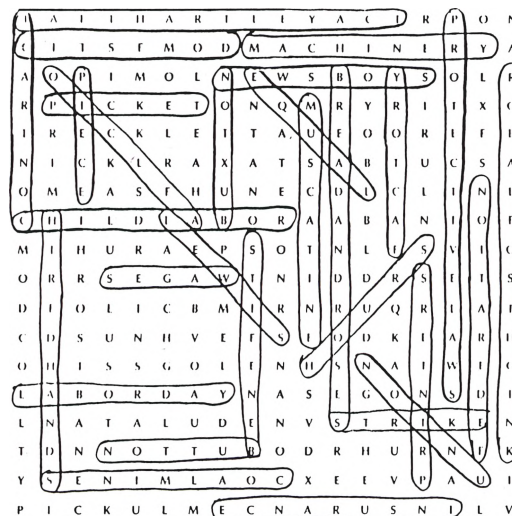
Answers

Page 9:



Page 20: (1) Monroe County; (2) Muchakinock, Buxton, and Haydock were all owned by the Consolidation Coal Company; (3) Railroads and mines appear together because railroads were used to transport coal; (4) The Des Moines River passes through Marion, Mahaska, Monroe, and Wapello Counties, just past Eddyville and through Ottumwa; (5) Southwest MAP CHALLENGE: Only Buxton, Muchakinock, Haydock, and Frederic no longer exist.

Page 28:



History Mystery

CLUES:

1. These people are working in a Buxton, Iowa coal mine about 1912.
2. They are using picks, shovels, and sledgehammers to get coal from the face, or back wall.
3. This was one of Iowa's few mines where miners could actually stand up as they worked.
4. Most Iowa miners worked on their hands and knees because the mine roofs were so low.
5. At the time, males under 14 and females were not allowed to work in mines.

What is unusual about this photograph?

(Answer on page 31.)



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