

Searching for Addie: The Story behind a Famous Photograph

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I first saw the picture of Addie in the summer of 2002 at the Bennington Museum in Bennington, Vermont.

In the photo, she leans on her spinning frame, staring out at the camera, dressed in a filthy, spotted smock. Her one pocket is stuffed so full that it seems to be pulling the right strap of her dress off her narrow shoulder. Her left arm rests easily on the frame, but it is crooked, at a strange angle, as if perhaps a bone had been broken and was never set properly. Her hair is pulled up away from her face. Her bare feet, planted firmly, are slick with black grease. She seems to look directly at you, her eyes wide open and solemn, her expression resigned, a little wary. She is beautiful.

Addie's picture was just one in an exhibit of child labor photographs taken by famed photographer Lewis Hine in northern New England. The note Hine had scribbled in his pocket notebook reads, "Anemic little spinner in North Pownal Cotton Mill, 1910."

Once I saw Addie's face, I never forgot it. I wrote a work of historical fiction, *Counting On Grace*, because of that photograph. Even though I created my main character, Grace Forcier, from my imagination, and she grew to be her very own person, I always wondered about Addie. In addition to the individual portraits Hine took that day, he had gathered the children together



Credit: Photograph by Lewis Wickes Hine, courtesy of the Library of Congress.

for group shots, and Addie appears in two of them. In both, she is pressed up against an older girl, who is wearing a white shirt, a grease-stained skirt, and heavy shoes. They do not look alike, but the way Addie is leaning on the girl's shoulder gives the impression they might be sisters.

But who was Addie? A note from a child labor investigator named E. F. Brown, who visited the mill in February of 1910, listed her as Addie Laird. Apparently, the people in North Pownal, Vermont, were always puzzled by that name. Most of the workers in New England mills in the early 1900s had been recruited from Canada, and Laird is a Scottish name. Then in 1998, at the urging of North Pownal officials, the U.S. Postal Service issued a stamp of Addie's picture to commemorate child labor laws in its "Celebrate the Century" series. At that time, researchers at the Department of Labor admitted they could find no trace of Addie Laird anywhere.

I decided to go looking for her myself. And here is what I found. Starting in 1790 and every decade thereafter, the United States has conducted a census of its citizens. I was told that the Conte Archives in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, has those records on microfiche. They are linked to a computer program called Ancestry.com, which allows you to type in a name, place, and date to narrow your search. (Ancestry.com can be used from home computers, for a yearly or monthly fee.) The broader your parameters for a search, the more likely the "net" will sweep up something interesting. So, I decided I would simply work with Addie's first name.

But when I typed "Addie, North Pownal, Vermont, 1910" into the computer program, nothing came up. What about her full first name? I tried Adeline. No luck. I had one more idea. Adelaide. Bingo! The computer screen directed me to an Adelaide with a slightly different spelling: Adalaid Harris, Bennington County, Vermont, Roll 1612, page 111, Sheet 12B. I found the designated roll and, with trembling



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fingers, fed it into the microfiche reader. Then I scrolled through page after page of names scrawled in flowery, faded handwriting until I found sheet 12B.

There she was. On the 4th day of May, 1910, in Pownal, Vermont, a George E. Corey had recorded the names of two Card sisters: Anna, female, white, 14 years of age, single; and Addie, female, white, 12 years of age, single. Both were living with their grandmother, Mrs. Adalaid Harris, listed as head of household.

I had found Addie. Her name never was Laird: it was Card.

(In fact, the computer program should have popped her up based on the name Addie, but the individuals who input the data seem to have concentrated on the heads of households.)

Apparently, back in 1910, some shy-ster sold watered down ink to the U.S.

Department of Labor and Commerce, who were charged with taking the census, so to my despair, much of the critical information on Sheet 12B has simply faded away. But this much I could make out: Anna and Addie were both born in Vermont; they both spoke English; and they were both listed as spinners in the cotton factory.

That first piece of information led me down a path with many twists and turns. Now that I had the correct name, I found Addie again in the 1900 census, still living with her grandmother, but there I gleaned another fact. Her father, Emmett D. Card, was listed as a widower. So Addie's mother had already died by the time Addie turned two, and in 1910, when she was 12 years old, her father was no longer living with her. Then I tried 1920, Addie Card, Vermont. Nothing. Addie Card, United States, 1920. No luck. The Addie Cards I found were all the wrong age. This meant one of three things. Addie had either died by the 1920 census, or she had married and her name had changed. Or, she had simply slipped through the cracks as often happens, especially with poor, rural families.

At this point, I went to the Pownal Town Office to go through its records. Town offices are treasure troves of information, but you have to be patient and thorough. Most of the records are kept safely stored in a walk in vault; but the clerks in the office were used to requests such as mine and cheerfully dragged out dusty tomes and laid them before me on the long, oak table.

I started with the cemetery records, as I was so convinced that this frail little girl could not have lasted long, considering her 12-hour days in the cotton mill. Perhaps she was buried near her mother who, it turns out, had died of peritonitis. But there were no matching cemetery records. I scanned lists of births and deaths and found lots of information that filled out the picture of Addie's life. Her cousin, a three-year-old named Rose Harris, burned herself to death, playing with matches. Her grandfather, William Harris, died when Addie was

eight years old. There were natural deaths and violent deaths, births and stillborn babies, burials and interment permits. But no Addie.

Then, just as I was ready to give up, one of the town clerks offered to look through one more record book in the large vault. Sure, I said, but I was already packing up, thinking the road had ended, and that I had simply lost Addie.

But I was wrong.

There came a shout from the depths of the vault, and the clerk rushed out with a look of surprise and wonder on her face.

"The book fell open at this page," she said.

It took me a moment to focus on what she was showing me: Addie's marriage certificate

On February 23, 1915, Addie married one Edward Hatch, another spinner in the cotton mill. They were both 17. Five days later, her grandmother died of apoplexy, perhaps content at last that Addie would be taken care of.

Now, I had her new last name. And I found Addie again in the 1920 census when I searched under Hatch. She was living with the Hatches and working as a spooler, still in the cotton mill alongside a pack of in-laws. Her husband, Edward, had joined the navy and was stationed in Boston on the S.S. *New Jersey*.

Soon the trail died again. Addie did not appear in the 1930 census. And because census records are closed for 70 years after they are taken, we won't be able to check the 1940 census until 2010. The odd thing was that the 1930 census showed an Edward Hatch, born in Vermont in 1898, living in Detroit, Michigan, with his wife, Elvina Goguen. According to the records, Elvina was his first wife. I dismissed this Hatch without another thought.

At this point, as other deadlines called, I hired a friend and fellow writer, Joe Manning, who was located in the area and could more easily pursue what few leads were left. Joe soon felt as strongly as I did about finding Addie. Within weeks, he had tracked down every pos-

sible lead and had made some brilliant intuitive leaps. By searching cemeteries, obituaries, and city directories, by haunting town offices and dusty historical societies in the little mill towns of upstate New York and neighboring Vermont, Joe traced the entire arc of Addie's life. It was not an easy life, indeed.

Addie's first child by Edward Hatch, a girl named Ruth, was taken from Addie early on and given to Edward's sister to raise. It turns out that the Edward Hatch living in Detroit was Addie's first husband. They had divorced in 1925, and both were soon remarried. Addie and her new husband, Ernest Lavigne, adopted another little girl. By the late 1960s, Addie had lost her second husband to alcoholism.

There were so many times when either Joe or I felt as if Addie were calling to us from just around a corner. Perhaps the most remarkable of all was the day, exactly four weeks from our first meeting over this project, that Joe found Addie's gravestone in the St. Agnes Cemetery in Cohoes, New York. He called me from his cell phone to read me the inscription. "Adeline M. Lavigne, 'Gramma Pat', 1898–1993." That little spinner in North Pownal had lived close to a century. And she had been loved by grandchildren. Who were they? Did they know about the photograph? Or the postage stamp? Or the Reebok advertisement? Or the dozens of books in which Addie's picture has been reprinted?

On January 7, 2006, Joe and I sat down at Addie's great granddaughter's dining room table. Her family showed us photographs and filled us in on her story. We, in turn, handed over precious documents containing birth dates, divorce records, and obituaries. In a matter of hours, we pieced together the arc of one little girl's life.

We learned that Addie was put in the mill when she was eight years old, and that she had a nervous collapse at the age of thirteen, just one year after the picture was taken. Addie never knew

her birthday, so we told them it was December 6th. They wanted to know what had happened to Addie's biological daughter, Ruth, so we told them she had died just four years earlier and that she had a daughter of her own living in the next town.

Although Addie might have remembered that day back in 1910 when a strange man made her stand in front of the spinning frame to take her picture, she never mentioned it to her descendants. She certainly knew nothing of her fame as a symbol of child labor reform and, until I walked into their lives, neither did they.

In the end, it has to be said that the frail, intense mill girl photographed that day in North Pownal lived the dark side of the American dream. She never broke out of the cycle of poverty that started in the mill; however, while she ended her days in public housing, she was rich in the love of her family. Her great granddaughter wrote me recently that she was "truly blessed to have shared so many wonderful years with such an extraordinary woman."

Lewis Hine once said that he was "more interested in persons than in people." By photographing his subjects at their level, he forced viewers to look directly into the eyes of the children whose health, education, and futures had been sacrificed so that middle class Americans could live comfortable lives.

The children in Hine's pictures stare out at us with a remarkable mixture of pride, sorrow, and pluck. Because he saw each one of them as separate human beings, he forced viewers to do the same. That is why his pictures haunt us to this day. That is why I had to find Addie. 📷

ELIZABETH WINTHROP is the author of more than 50 works of fiction for both adults and children. Her novel, Counting On Grace, based on the photograph of Addie Card, was released by Wendy Lamb Books/Random House this spring, 2006. Her website is www.elizabethwinthrop.com.