Between 1900 and 1910, laboring families in northeastern Pennsylvania began to change their strategy for economic survival. Even though many of them depended on the wages of their children for subsistence, or at least for comfort, many families started keeping their younger children out of the wage labor force. Careful study of workers in Carbondale’s silk factories, which employed large numbers of adolescents, reveals that the average age of workers increased dramatically during the first decade of the twentieth century. Additional evidence clearly indicates that this change happened not only in Carbondale but in other silk-producing towns and cities. (See map.)

Progressive reformers fought long and bitterly to keep children and adolescents in school and out of the factories. Historian Walter I. Trattner chronicled their efforts in his 1970 book *Crusade for the Children*. During the Progressive Era, roughly defined as the period of social and political agitation between the Spanish-American War and World War I, journalists, activists, settlement house workers, and a philanthropic organization called the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC) studied, documented, and publicized the dangers of the work place for growing children. In state after state, the committee pushed for legislation limiting hours of work and types of employment for young people and setting a minimum legal working age. The movement suffered many setbacks in the courts. Employers easily circumvented the law. State factory inspectors enforced restrictions only sporadically, and the fight continued, with uneven results, throughout the 1920s and into the years of the Great Depression. But the reformers may have succeeded better than they imagined.

In Pennsylvania’s silk mills, the change the reformers sought and that they continued to fight for through the 1920s and 1930s, began quietly to happen between 1900 and 1910. Reform occurred not only in the laws and the courts but in people’s minds, in the choices they made under difficult circumstances. Life did not suddenly become easier for silk workers and their families. Children’s wages did not become superfluous by 1910, but children of twelve and thirteen, fourteen and fifteen came less frequently to the mill.

Historians have recently suggested that, to some extent at least, adult female workers replaced child workers in America’s factories. Lynn Weiner has divided
the history of women’s wage labor into two phases. The first phase, between 1820 and 1920, she has called the era of the working girl. The second phase, from 1920 to the present, she has characterized as the era of the working mother.4 Louise Lamphere, in a book entitled From Working Daughters to Working Mothers, described this transition in the cotton and silk mills of Central Falls, Rhode Island, between 1900 and 1980. At the beginning of this period, she argued, girls entered the work force at an early age, but remained workers for only a limited period. Most girls left the mills when they became wives and mothers. By 1980, however, women entered the work force at a later age and remained there for much longer periods, even after marriage and childbearing.5

The crusade against child labor in the early twentieth century inspired a significant number of families to keep children and younger adolescents out of the Pennsylvania silk mills, opening the way for adult single women and, eventually, married women and mothers to take their place. This study demonstrates a direct connection between the protest against child labor and an increase in the number of adult women in the labor force. By illuminating this connection, the present work helps to explain when, how, and why the transition from child labor to adult female labor occurred. Study of Pennsylvania’s silk workers indicates that the change began well before 1920 and that, in fact, the transition started at the very beginning of the period studied by Louise Lamphere.

By a vast margin, Pennsylvania’s early twentieth century silk workers were neither husbands or wives but unmarried young people, living in the households of their birth and contributing to the family income.6 These young workers helped to support families headed by coal miners, railroad workers, other male laborers, and their widows. More than 60% of them were female. Most were in their teens or early twenties. Some were eleven or twelve years old, and some were single people in their mid- to late-twenties or older, still living with the families of their birth. A few were boarders or residents in the houses of relatives. Only a few were either self-supporting or heads of households, and these few were generally not factory operatives, but bookkeepers, clerks, or managers.7

Child labor in the Pennsylvania silk mills sprang from the same economic and social forces that brought the silk industry into the northeastern region of the state in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Mill owners searched for the cheapest possible form of labor to maximize profits in a competitive market. Communities that depended upon a single, disaster-prone industry, typically coal mining, sought alternate forms of productive activity. The hard-pressed families of coal miners, railroad workers, and other laborers needed additional sources of income to subsist. Silk mills provided jobs for the sons and daughters of laboring men and held out the promise of social and economic stability for a volatile region.
THE SILK INDUSTRY

Silk-making began in America during the colonial period. Virginia colonists tried unsuccessfully to raise silkworms in the 1620s. Several colonies produced silk fabric before the Revolution, but this early industry faded by 1780. Between 1780 and 1820, the new nation produced only a very small quantity of silk fabric. Women made plain silk fabric, comparable to other types of homespun, in their own households, using simple hand looms. Between 1825 and 1844 entrepreneurs in the textile industry conducted experiments in raising silkworms, which secreted the raw material for the making of silk thread. Harsh weather, the labor-intensive nature of the enterprise, the Panic of 1837, and the subsequent depression forced most American silk growers out of business by the end of the 1830s. American manufacturers subsequently relied on imported raw fibers for the production of silk yarn, thread, ribbon and broad silk fabric. Importation of finished silk fabrics also increased steadily in the years preceding the Civil War.

Tariffs on imported silk during the 1860s boosted the small, struggling American silk industry. In Philadelphia, where W. H. Horstmann had begun producing silk in the 1820s, an upsurge in production occurred in the 1870s. The city's Sixth Ward became known as the Silk District. Paterson, New Jersey, outstripped Philadelphia, however, and dominated domestic silk production, as English mill owners opened factories in the well-located town, only seventeen miles from the major silk buyers of New York City. Skilled workers emigrated to Paterson from England, Germany, Switzerland, and France. These skilled operatives demanded decent wages, prompting a movement of the industry to the small towns and mining villages of northeastern Pennsylvania, where water, fuel, and labor abounded.

In 1876 fewer than thirty silk manufacturers operated plants in Pennsylvania, most of them in Philadelphia. The first mill in the hard coal region began operating in Scranton in 1872. During the next two decades, many Paterson silk manufacturers established branches in and around Scranton, along the Lackawanna River, throughout the hard coal region, and in the industrial area of the Lehigh Valley. In the twenty-five years between 1880 and 1925, the value of silk products manufactured in Pennsylvania increased tenfold. During the early years of the twentieth century, the process of silk throwing (i.e. the production of thread from raw fibers) became concentrated in Pennsylvania's factories. By 1905, New Jersey ranked first and Pennsylvania ranked second among the states in silk production. In 1907, of a total of 79,601 employees in America's silk industry, nearly 27,000 worked in Pennsylvania's mills. By 1914, Pennsylvania had become the leading state in the industry.

Increasing mechanization spurred the movement of the industry from Paterson to Pennsylvania. Mechanized processes for throwing silk, such as converting
raw silk fibers into silk yarn, developed as early as the eighteenth century, but mechanization of silk weaving came much later. During the 1860s, skilled immigrants came to Paterson, where they produced fine silks in small shops, often using hand-looms. Wives and children assisted them by winding the thread on quills and performing other ancillary tasks. The invention in the 1870s of a power loom with an automatic device that stopped the machine when a thread broke began the process that eventually destroyed the artisan tradition. Women and girls without lengthy training or highly-developed skills could tend the new machines. In 1889, the invention of a high-speed automatic ribbon loom added to the mechanization of the industry. By 1905, the hand-loom had virtually disappeared, although many of the Paterson silk weavers clung tenaciously to their craft. Paterson, however, began to lose its place as the silk-making center of the United States.\textsuperscript{15}


Silk manufacturers moved their operations to Pennsylvania largely because of the availability of cheap labor there, and the cheapest of all labor was child labor. In testimony before the United States Industrial Commission, meeting in New York in May 1901, Franklin Allen, secretary of the Silk Association of America, com-
mented on the reasons for the movement of the industry from Paterson to Pennsylvania. He cited labor militancy and incidents of violence in Paterson, and continued:

As a result these manufacturers began to look around for possibilities of the industry in other places, and that is inherently the reason why Pennsylvania has grown as a center of the silk industry, as represented in my report [of 1900], whereas Paterson has practically stood still. In Pennsylvania the labor laws regarding child operatives and the number of hours employed are different from those in force in the city of Paterson. Allen went on to emphasize that the availability of child labor was an important factor in the decision of mill owners to locate their operations in Pennsylvania.

In 1886, according to the Pennsylvania Bureau of Industrial Statistics, more than two hundred thousand children between the ages of six and fifteen did not attend school regularly. The legal working age was twelve in most industries, including the silk industry. Cigar-making and several other industries operated under no legal age requirements. According to the 1880 census, 72,000 children between the ages of ten and fifteen were gainfully employed, and this is surely a very low estimate. In 1885 alone, at least twenty-three children (aged 10-15) died of injuries from working in the mines and coal breakers.

The state factory inspector persistently underestimated the total number of child workers, while condemning the trend toward child labor. Of more than 700,000 factory laborers in the state in 1905, the inspector estimated that only some 41,000 were children. Nearly half of these young workers were girls, and the inspector's report commented negatively on the total disregard of sexual differences in hiring young laborers. As causes of the transition from adult to child labor, this state official listed mechanization, lowering of skill requirements for many jobs, cupidity, and the poverty of parents.

In the hard-pressed anthracite region north of the Lehigh Valley, families needed a source of income to supplement the inadequate and insecure wages of coal miners. Rowland Berthoff has vividly described this region as an area of roughly four hundred square miles, north of the Blue Mountains, between the Susquehanna and Lehigh rivers, stretching northeastward along the Wyoming and Lackawanna valleys. The discovery and exploitation of rich beds of hard coal transformed the region from a sparsely settled wilderness in 1825 to a booming late-nineteenth-century industrial center, dotted with villages, towns, and mining patches, and dominated by the grimy, buzzing, greedy, and enterprising city of Scranton. Throughout the region, Berthoff found, community ties were weak. The economy suffered from frequent upturns and depressions. The labor force was transient; populations were shifting. Strikes, lock-outs, and violent confrontations occurred with regularity. Death and injury were tragic facts of a miner's life. Poor and unfortunate members of society were left to their own devices or to the
charity of churches and fraternal organizations. Young boys tended to be unruly, and young girls were sometimes wayward. Yet, somehow, traditional family units remained strong. They remained so partly because they depended for subsistence upon the work and wages of all their members.

More diverse industries flourished in the growing towns of the Lehigh Valley, where an influx of immigrants in the late nineteenth century created an abundance of labor. Steel, zinc, and cement companies provided work for adult males, but these industries suffered periodic slumps. To help support struggling families,
young single men and women, and sometimes children, sought gainful employment. By the early 1880s, silk manufacturers began to tap this labor supply in Allentown, and by 1890 the industry had branched out to neighboring communities, such as Bethlehem, Easton, Palmerton, and Coplay.22

Pennsylvania communities actively encouraged the establishment of silk mills, which they hoped would bolster struggling economies, provide work for young people, strengthen the fragile social fabric, and preserve traditional families. In 1881, an editor of the Wilkes-Barre Daily Record of the Times fretted that “hundreds of girls are driven from this valley every year to become harlots.”23 In 1886, citizens of Hazleton raised $90,000 capital to attract a silk mill,24 and in 1897 the Hazleton Improvement Society successfully attracted the Duplan Silk Company to the town.25 The new industry added a crucial margin of stability to laborers’ families, who in turn supported local businesses.

Processions of girls and young women, leaving the silk mill at quitting time, became familiar sights in Pennsylvania towns and villages. Writing in McClure’s magazine in 1903, Francis H. Nichols described a typical mill in a coal mining community:

Sometimes in a mining town, sometimes in a remote part of the coal fields, one comes upon a large substantial building of wood or brick. When the six o’clock whistle blows, the front door is opened, and out streams a procession of girls. Some of them are apparently seventeen or eighteen years old, the majority are from thirteen to sixteen, but quite a number would seem to be considerably less than thirteen. Such a building is one of the knitting mills or silk factories that during the last ten years have come into Anthracite.26

CHILD WORKERS

Silk strikes in the winter of 1900 and the spring of 1901 brought many workers out into the streets and placed on public view the characteristics of the industry’s labor force. A strike that began in December 1900 at the Klots throwing mill in Carbondale spread “like wildfire” in February 1901, as silk workers in Scranton held mass meetings. Male organizers urged weavers to form a branch of the Silk Weavers of America and all other workers to join a local of the Textile Workers. However, the Scranton daily paper commented: “To organize silk workers is a difficult task, as the bulk are girls from 12 to 16 years of age and are very enthusiastic.”27 These young strikers were raucous and insistent about preventing their co-workers from breaking the strike, and by mid-February five mills had closed down, after 2,800 workers left their jobs.28

Mary Harris “Mother” Jones, who arrived in Scranton in mid-February, organized several parades and demonstrations. The youngest strikers headed a parade
on March 8, prompting the Scranton Republican to comment that there were "nearly 500 of an age not beyond wearing short dresses." The feisty Mother Jones led a group of older girls in the procession, which reportedly included nearly three thousand marchers. After the strike ended on the last day of April, with very slight gains for the workers (including a half-holiday on Saturday), Mother Jones staged another parade of little girls, accompanied by boys who belonged to the news-boys' and bootblacks' union.

The seventy-year-old Mother Jones, veteran of many battles between labor and capital, took an unequivocal stand against child labor, but placed much of the blame on beleaguered parents, who filed false affidavits in order to place their children in the mills. The Scranton Republican quickly echoed her position, stating that child labor laws were ineffective in that city because of the evasiveness and greed of parents. The editor theorized: "If child labor cannot be had adult labor will supply it at adult wages."

Blaming the parents for the labor situation was hardly fair. Mill owners threatened repeatedly during the strike to close down their operations if workers insisted on a higher pay scale. Clearly, management was unwilling to pay "adult" wages. As the owner of the Cambria Mill at Dunmore pointedly stated:

> There is the best of feeling, and everything is fully understood between us [management and workers]. But if this trouble is going to keep up, and we are obliged to accept the strikers' wage scale, we shall have to go out of business. It will pay me better to take my mill back to New Jersey than keep on.

In the month following the end of this strike Franklin Allen testified to the Industrial Commission that the silk mills had come to Pennsylvania precisely because of the availability of child labor.

The great anthracite coal strike of 1902 and the resulting government investigation brought national attention not only to the young boys who worked in the coal breakers, but also to their sisters who worked in Pennsylvania's mills. Clarence Darrow, representing the mine workers, questioned several miners' daughters who were mill operatives. Annie Denko testified in December 1902 that she was thirteen years old and that she had been working in a silk mill in Dunmore, northeast of Scranton, for more than a year. She worked twelve-hour shifts, beginning at half-past six in the evening. Her father was a coal miner, who supported four children younger than Annie. Six other siblings had died within a period of five years. Annie's mother had suffered from the death of these children and had spent some time in an asylum. John Denko, her father, had a store debt to pay. The debt had grown while he was injured and unable to work. At the time of the investigation he was working and earning decent wages. But the debt remained, and his daughter continued to supplement the family income by working at the mill.

Judge George Gray, chairman of the Anthracite Coal Commission, reacted angrily to the testimony of Annie Denko and her father. He questioned the father
sharply and wondered aloud what sort of parent would send out a young girl to work nights in the mill. While admitting that economic hardship might drive someone to this extremity, he obviously placed blame on the parents for allowing this to happen. "There is no use in disguising the fact that it may be a necessity, but there must be many cases in which the fathers allow this and give their own consent to coin the flesh and blood of their children into money to help their income when there is no absolute necessity for it."  

Darrow had a different explanation for the hard lives of young girls like Annie Denko. He believed he knew why the young girls went to work in the mills. He knew why owners built their mills in the region:

Is there any man so blind that he does not know why that anthracite region is dotted with silk mills? Why are they not on the prairies of the West? Why are they not somewhere else? Why is it that the men who make money that is spun from the lives of these little babes, men who use these children to deck their daughters and their wives—why is it that they went to Scranton and to all those towns? They went there because the miners were there. They went there just as naturally as a wild beast goes to find its prey. They went there as a hunter goes where he can find game.  

Despite a rising tide of anger, child workers played an important role in the family economy and the Pennsylvania silk industry. In 1907 children made up as much as thirty percent of the labor force in silk-throwing operations. A government study, conducted in 1907 and published in 1911, reported on conditions in thirty-six Pennsylvania silk mills. The study, printed as Volume Four of the nineteen-
In the Pennsylvania mills the differences in the percentage of men, women, and children employed in the several branches of the industry are even more striking [than in Paterson]. In the 36 Pennsylvania mills investigated the males 16 years of age and over were relatively most important in the ribbon mills, where they constituted 36.5 per cent of the total wage-earners, while in the throwing mills they were only 8.7 and in the broad-silk mills 6 per cent. Females 16 years of age and over were most numerous in the broad-silk mills, being 75 per cent of all, while in throwing mills they were 61.1 per cent and ribbon mills 52.7 per cent. Children were most largely employed in the throwing mills there, reaching 30 per cent, although in the broad-silk mills also they were 19 per cent, as against 10.8 per cent in the 2 ribbon mills investigated.36

The wages of young mill workers fell far short of the amount needed to support a family or even an individual. In 1903 William S. Waudby, a special agent for the United States Department of Labor, reported that little girls in the silk mills worked for the “miserable pittance” of $1.80 to $2.10 per week.37 Payroll records of the Klots Throwing Company in Carbondale for the years 1903 to 1912 show that hourly wages for mill operatives ranged from three cents for bobbin boys and some winders to six, seven, or eight cents for winders, doublers, and twisters, and as high as seventeen or eighteen cents for foremen and foreladies.38

Young workers participated in an intricate system that minutely divided the process of manufacturing silk thread, silk ribbon, and silk fabric, and allocated the many tasks involved in that process to workers according to their sex and age. Wages for the different tasks reflected not only complex and elusive variations in skill requirements, but the gender and age of the workers most likely to perform those tasks. In 1904, these wage differentials boiled down to an average yearly wage for males of $485.11, for females of $345.44, and for minors of either sex of $143.64, at a time when the average annual rent paid by the head of a household was $165.00.39 Clearly this wage differential made child workers attractive to mill owners, while the general level of wages made it difficult or even impossible for a family to subsist on the single income of even one of the most highly paid operatives.

PROTEST

In the early twentieth-century, reformers passionately criticized this system of child labor. Francis H. Nichols exposed the grimy realities of life among the breaker boys and factory girls of the anthracite region in an article entitled “Children of the Coal Shadow,” published by McClure’s in February 1903. The mill girls,
he revealed, worked ten hours a day, and during most of this time they had to stand at their machines. This often caused lameness among young workers. The girls often joined local unions, putting on their Sunday best to attend meetings, and frequently and boisterously participating in strikes.40

Nichols' “Coal Shadow” children were miniature adults. Far from carefree, joyous children, they were feisty, sullen, and ultimately hopeless. Schools in the coal mining communities were generally dilapidated. Children attended sporadically. The boys' school was the coal breaker, where they prepared to become miners. The girls' school was the mill, where they bided their time until they became the wives of miners.41

Mother Jones drew attention to the plight of the child workers in Philadelphia during a textile strike in 1903. In July of that year, she guided a pathetic band of children on a protest march from Philadelphia to New York. Rallies at Trenton, Princeton, and Peterson spurred the marchers toward their goal. In August, Jones and a delegation of mill children tried to visit President Theodore Roosevelt at his vacation retreat at Sagamore Hill, Long Island. Although the children had walked one hundred miles on short rations in summer heat, the President declined to see them, and the march ended in disappointment.42

The longest and most widespread strike in the Pennsylvania silk mills flared in the summer 1907, when more than five thousand workers, including many boys and girls between twelve and sixteen, walked off their jobs. Summer heat helped instigate the protest, which focused on the length of the working day. As a reporter for the Scranton Republican admitted on July 25: “The main question in the trouble is the time. Ten and a half hours in a hot mill on a sultry day is more than any child of tender years can endure, the strikers claim.”43 With support from the United Textile Workers, the United Mine Workers, and prominent citizens of the anthracite region, the youthful strikers won a fifty-four-hour work week and a slight readjustment in wages. But the arbitrated settlement left the question of child labor unresolved.

Reformers did not leave the issue of child workers alone. John Spargo's book The Bitter Cry of the Children, published in 1909, cataloged the evils of child labor and pressed the cause of compulsory education. Of work in the silk-winding mills Spargo reported that the moist hot atmosphere, required to keep the fibers supple, frequently caused the mill girls to faint. Children working in dye shops often had their skin permanently stained with toxic substances. But the moral atmosphere of the factories, according to Spargo, was at least as poisonous as the physical environment.44

Spargo, a socialist, contrasted twentieth-century child labor with traditional forms of apprenticeship and domestic industry. The advent of machine production had altered the relationship of children to their labor. Work in factories did not
prepare young people for a productive life. Rather, Spargo insisted: "On the contrary, it saps the constitution of the child, robs it of hope, and unfit it for life’s struggle. Such child labor is not educative or wholesome, but blighting to body, mind, and spirit."  

Journalist Florence Sanville, who went under cover in 1910 to expose conditions in the Pennsylvania silk mills, censured parents for failing to keep their children in school. The law was powerless, she asserted, because parents pushed their offspring into the breakers and the mills at an early age. Sanville wrote:

The teacher has a fair chance at them [the children] for three or four years, when the pressure begins at home to utilize them by diverting their young feet into more lucrative paths. These paths lead but in two directions—for the girls, into the silk-mill; for the boys, into the breakers. For those children whose teachers are persistent enough to hold them within the protection of the law the possibilities of school life continue until they are fourteen; for others—and in Pennsylvania these have numbered uncounted hundreds—at eleven or twelve years old the way is blocked, brutally and impassably, by an eternal succession of days and nights of toil.

The National Child Labor Committee, organized in 1904, cooperated with the National Consumers League in 1914 to study the lives of wage-earning girls in Wilkes-Barre, Luzerne County, Pennsylvania. Of approximately 256 girls surveyed, 202 were employed in silk and lace mills. Only 14% of the girls reported that they had an opportunity to choose other work. A majority favored dressmaking as the most desirable occupation. But few apparently had this option open to them. Most would have preferred to remain in school, with many expressing the desire to pursue the "business course." But most left school out of necessity to add to the income of their families.

The Wilkes-Barre study revealed much about the social system that supported child labor in the Pennsylvania mills. Survey results indicated that approximately 40% of Pennsylvania girls aged 14-16 were employed in industry, while 60% were in school. The silk industry depended upon girls under sixteen for 12.5% of its labor force. More children of miners worked in the silk industry than children of men in other occupations. Approximately half of the families of the factory girls received less than two dollars per week per capita income. Nearly all the girls' parents made use of the girls' wages. Of the girls' mothers, over 80% were at home, and only eleven per cent worked outside the home, with the remaining being deceased (5.9%) or deserters (0.7%).

While protests and problems continued, the character of the work force quietly changed during the first decade of the twentieth century. Careful study of
silk workers in Carbondale between 1900 and 1910 suggests that this was a transitional period in the evolution of the family and society. Census data for all Carbondale residents identified as silk workers in 1900 and 1910 reveal a significant increase in age. In 1900 the average age of silk workers was 16, and the median age was also 16. Ten years later the average age of silk workers in Carbondale was 20, and the median age was 18. It should be noted that only a very few of the workers identified in the 1900 census remained listed as silk workers in 1910; the increase in age cannot be attributed to the aging of the same individual laborers. The change occurred in the general population of silk workers during this period, and the change was of major importance. In 1900, workers aged eighteen and older constituted only 21% of the labor force. By contrast, in 1910, workers aged eighteen and older made up a full 57% of all silk workers. At the lower end of the age range, in 1900, there were significant numbers of workers aged eleven through thirteen. By 1910, however, only a small number of Carbondale silk workers were children under fourteen years of age.49 Table One graphically illustrates this shift in the distribution of workers by age.

This change was all the more significant in light of the fact that in all other respects the characteristics of Carbondale's work force remained very stable. In absolute size the work force of the silk mills remained roughly the same—246 in 1900 and 239 in 1910. In 1900, approximately 61% of Carbondale's silk workers were female; in 1910 females comprised more than 69% of the work force. A vast majority of the workers in both years were native-born, although a sizable number had foreign-born parents. Ethnic groups included Irish, Welsh, English, German, and Austrian, with the largest group being Irish. By 1910 small numbers of Eastern European and Italian workers had entered the mills. Ethnic composition of the work force closely resembled that of Carbondale as a whole. A significant group of workers (25% in 1900 and 32% in 1910) were the children of coal miners. Another significant group (17% in 1900 and 22% in 1910) lived in female-headed households. Many of the workers had siblings who were also employed in silk mills, but only a handful had mothers employed outside the home. Most of the employed mothers were housekeepers or laundresses. The one salient difference between the labor force in 1900 and 1910 was that in 1910 the workers were markedly older.50

Why were the workers so much older? Had some Pied Piper appeared to lead all the child laborers out of Carbondale? Did changes in the law have something to do with this? Had the factory inspectors become more vigorous in enforcing labor regulations? Did coal miners earn more money? Were they now able to support their families on their own wages? Were fathers suddenly more provident? Did employers change their policies and seek older workers? Was Carbondale an oddity, or were the changes that occurred in Carbondale part of a general trend?
How did this change come about?

No Pied Piper had led all the child workers from Carbondale. The Klots mill continued to employ some minors under the age of fourteen. Thirteen-year-old Albert Corrigan worked nights as a spinner. In all, the 1910 census for Carbondale listed one eleven-year-old, three thirteen-year-olds, and sixteen fourteen-year-olds as silk mill workers. But this was a dramatic reduction from 1900, when two eleven-year-olds, eight twelve-year-olds, sixteen thirteen-year-olds, and forty-four fourteen-year-olds reported working in silk mills.

The law had changed. In 1901 the Pennsylvania General Assembly passed a compulsory school attendance law, requiring that all children between the ages of eight and sixteen attend school. However, the act did not apply to children between the ages of thirteen and sixteen, who could read and write, and who were gainfully employed. The law required working children to obtain a certificate from a principal or teacher, verifying their literacy.

Factory inspectors attempted to enforce the law, but employers often disobeyed it. For instance in May 1903, Deputy Factory Inspector E. W. Bishop charged A. E. Burdick, superintendent of the Harvey Silk Mill at Olyphant, with violating the provision requiring work certificates. Burdick pleaded guilty, with extenuating circumstances, claiming that most of the girls he employed told him they had certificates, but that the certificates were in the hands of their former employer. The court fined Burdick fifty dollars and costs. In 1905, the state factory inspector reported that inspections of 16,589 factories had revealed more than 41,000 employees between the ages of thirteen and sixteen, approximately half of whom were girls. Most of these worked legally, but nearly three thousand of them had no certificates or affidavits. Of these, 107 proved to be illiterate and therefore barred from wage labor.

In 1905, the general assembly passed a law specifying that no child under fourteen years of age should be employed in any establishment. Four years later, a new law required that minors between the ages of fourteen and eighteen obtain certificates for employment. This law, which barred minors from certain dangerous occupations, became the model for future Pennsylvania child labor statutes. The 1909 law allowed males, but not females, over fourteen to work at night and limited minors to a ten-hour work day. However, these provisions were consistent with common practices in the silk industry.

Changes in the law undoubtedly had an effect on employment policies in the silk industry, but, by themselves, they do not explain the dramatic change in the work force in Carbondale’s mills. Legal restrictions would explain the drastic reduction in the number of eleven-, twelve-, and thirteen-year-olds in the mills. But the number of fourteen-year-olds, who were still legally employable, also fell substantially as did the numbers of fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds. Conversely, the
number of adult workers who were eighteen years of age and older rose tremendously, as Table One graphically illustrates.

Were miners and other male laborers better able to support their families in 1910? The answer to this question would appear to be, no. The great anthracite strike of 1902 resulted in a ten percent increase in wages for miners and some improvement in working conditions. However, between 1903 and 1910, the miners won no further increases in wages. In 1912, the cost of living for a family of six in the anthracite region was approximately $700 per year. A miner, working to his full physical capacity, might earn $800 per year. But a mine laborer, making $2.50 per day, and working an average of 257 days, would earn less than $650 per year. Mining remained a hazardous occupation, which meant that injuries and illness often limited the laborer’s earning capacity. Widows of miners frequently had to depend upon their children for support.

The wages of silk workers rose, but only very slightly. Wages in 1910 were not the “adult” wages that Mother Jones envisioned for adult workers. It would have been impossible to support a family on the income of a mill hand, or even a foreman or forelady. In 1910, many Klots workers earned about five-and-one-half cents an hour, just as Annie Denko did in 1902, although more were earning seven or eight cents per hour. Klots workers in 1904 earned between three cents and nine cents per hour, and this had changed very little in 1910. Foremen and foreladies earned between fifteen and twenty cents per hour, with no apparent gender differential. The only Klots employees who could, and did, support families were males who worked as loom fixers, machinists, or in management positions above the level of foreman.

Klots Throwing Company on Duncliff Street near the railroad roundhouse in Carbondale, photographed by the author in July 1991.
Legal and economic changes do not fully explain the change that occurred in the division of labor in families between 1900 and 1910. Many families continued to depend upon the labor of several of their members for survival. Fourteen- to sixteen-year-old children could still legally go out to work, and many still did. But their numbers were dwindling. Instead, older minors and adults reported to work at the silk factory and brought home their wages. This meant that many unmarried daughters in their twenties and even thirties contributed to the support of parents and siblings.

Who made the decision to keep younger minors out of the silk mills? Did employers begin refusing to hire younger workers? During the early years of the century, many employers evaded or ignored the law. But perhaps they could see the handwriting on the wall; perhaps a few fifty dollar fines gave them a scare. Perhaps they refused to hire younger workers. But the evidence indicates that they continued to seek the cheap labor of children and adolescents. As New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania tightened child labor laws, silk mill owners opened branches in southern states, where child labor remained more readily available. The 1911 Senate report on female and child labor in the silk industry reported that the silk "throwsters [operators of throwing mills] are casting their eyes southward, where the laws are more liberal in age and hours. Many have gone; many will follow." But even with the risk of losing the silk throwing industry, Pennsylvania families began keeping their children out of the mills.

In order to make up for lost, and needed, income, families found other strategies for survival. At least a few mothers went out to work or found additional sources of income. The Carbondale census for 1900 listed no silk mill workers as wives or mothers. In the households of silk workers in 1900, none of the mothers whose husbands remained in the household went out to work. Even in female headed households, the mothers stayed home, occasionally supplementing the family income by sewing, dressmaking, taking in laundry, or keeping a boarder. The Carbondale census for 1910 reveals that a small number of the mothers of silk workers went out of the house to earn money as laundresses. Two single mothers earned money by keeping candy stores. One married woman, Mrs. Sims, the wife of a coal mine laborer, and the mother of four children, worked in a silk mill. In most cases, families chose to rely on the earning power of unmarried sons and daughters, with older minors bringing their wages home so that younger children could go to school. But in an increasing number of households, mothers went out to earn a living.

This change extended beyond Carbondale. Whatever it costs them, families in other Pennsylvania towns and cities kept their children in school past the elementary grades. By 1915, the Pennsylvania Bureau of Industrial Statistics reported that more than ninety per cent of the state's children, aged ten to fourteen, regularly
attended school. Expanding the age range to include children aged ten to seventeen produced the figure of 73%. Even allowing for optimistic reporting, the situation had certainly improved since 1899-1900, when figures indicated that in many cities and towns more than half of the children aged ten to fourteen apparently failed to attend school.

Between 1900 and 1920, as families tried to survive, while giving their children the chance for an education, more and more adult married women went out to work. Perhaps it was inevitable that a work force composed substantially of women in their late teens, twenties, thirties, and even forties would come to include married women and mothers. Between 1900 and 1920, the number of mature women working the Pennsylvania silk industry skyrocketed. A study of immigrant women conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor Women’s Bureau in 1925 in the Lehigh Valley revealed that substantial numbers of wives and mothers held jobs in various industries, including silk mills. Findings of this study reinforce the information gleaned from the Carbondale census. Women’s Bureau Report #74, published in 1930, contained data on the change in the female work force:

Girls not yet 18 predominated in the industry in each of the communities reported in 1900. In Allentown and South Bethlehem in that year there were two or three times as many girls under 18 as their were women of 25 or more, but in some of the communities in 1920 the number of older women was more than twice as large as the number of girls under 18.

As the work force aged, according to this report, the number of employed married women increased to “a striking degree.”

What caused this change in the pattern of work within families? Legal reforms certainly contributed to the shift. Writers and activists who agitated against child labor certainly contributed to changes in the law. But they also helped to change people’s minds. They managed to convince working fathers and struggling mothers that, no matter how hard it was to support their families, adolescent children needed and deserved a scholastic education. Reformers like John Spargo and Florence Sanville stressed the idea that teen-aged children belonged in school. Clarence Darrow blasted employers for hiring children and paying their fathers’ wages that were too low to maintain a family. Mother Jones and Judge Gray blamed the problem on the parents. Gray’s rough questioning forced John Denko to apologize and try to justify his decision to send a twelve-year-old girl to the mill, even though laboring children had been the norm rather than the exception for many centuries in Europe and America. But the norm was beginning to change.
CONCLUSION

Progressive reformers almost certainly never envisioned a shift from child labor to the labor of adult married women. John Spargo, one of the most radical reformers, railed just as loudly against the employment of mothers as he did against the employment of their offspring. Mother Jones and Clarence Darrow agreed that the wages of male breadwinners should rise to a level sufficient to support families. Between 1900 and 1910, however, wages in northeastern Pennsylvania rose only slightly. Families continued to require more than one income. Silk mill owners continued to pay wages far below the level needed to support a family. Legal restrictions on child labor forced families to devise new strategies for survival. Surprisingly enough, the change in families' behavior went beyond what would have been necessary to comply with the law. Parents began keeping their children out of the work force until they were well past the legal age of fourteen. To make this possible, older siblings continued to bring their wages home. By 1920, however, more and more women chose to work outside the home after marriage and childbearing, and more and more children attended school.

Notes

1. Sources used in arriving at this conclusion included records of the Klots Throwing Company of Carbondale housed at the Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, Delaware, as well as the United States Census, 1900, Carbondale (Lackawanna County), PA, and the United States Census, 1910, Carbondale (Lackawanna County), PA.
2. An important source of information on women's work in the silk industry, as well as other industries, in Pennsylvania is United States Department of Labor, Women's Bureau Report #74 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1930).
7. U.S. Census, Carbondale, 1900 and 1910.
13. Ibid., 49.
14. United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Census of Manufacturers
17. Ibid.
21. Ibid., 261-291.
22. Women's Bureau Report #74, p. 5.
24. Ibid., 59.
25. Duplan Corporation, These Fifty Years 1898-1948 (New York: Duplan), unpaginated.
27. Scranton Republican, February 2, 1901.
28. Ibid., February 6, 1901.
29. Ibid., March 8, 1901.
30. Ibid., April 30, 1901.
31. Ibid., February 26, 1901.
32. Ibid., February 9, 1901.
34. Scranton Republican, December 16, 1902. For transcripts of the Anthracite Coal Commission Testimony, see the Michael J. Kosik Collection, Historical Collections and Labor Archives, Pattee Library, Pennsylvania State University.
38. Klots Throwing Company Papers, Hagley Museum and library, Wilmington, DE.
41. Ibid.
43. Scranton Republican, July 25, 1907. For coverage of the strike, see the Scranton Republican for the months of July and August 1907.
45. Ibid., 174.
48. Ibid.
49. United States Census, 1900, Carbondale (Lackawanna County), PA, and United States Census, 1910, Carbondale (Lackawanna County), PA.
50. Ibid.
52. Carbondale Census, 1900 and 1910.
54. Scranton Republican, May 13, 1903.


59. Klots Payroll Records.


64. Women’s Bureau Report #74, p. 7.