

# Childhood and Toys

**A Pittsburgh Perspective**

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The McKee Glass Co., Jeannette, Pa., c. 1895.

Some of these child laborers gathered and shaped the molten glass, heated to 1,500–2,000 degrees, from the furnace behind them.

HHC Detre L&A, gift of William Kindelan.





*J. Snares*

**“Work days were  
long and James  
bore the brunt of  
a brutal master”**



*W. Miteer*





Carte-de-visite images of iron workers at Lyon, Shorb & Company, Pittsburgh, Pa., c. 1864. These photographs are from an album of more than 260 images that document the managers, men, and boys employed at Lyon, Shorb. Pictured with their tools, they detail the training system for skilled trades, before machines replaced boys on the factory floor.

HHC Detrie L&A, Lyon, Shorb Company Photographs, PSS 6.

**T**he experience of childhood documented by the objects in our newest exhibition, *Toys of the '50s, '60s and '70s*, is very different from the world a young James Bryce found when he arrived in Pittsburgh in 1820. After emigrating from Scotland, the Bryce family made its way here and James' father found work in the Bakewell glass factory, mixing the materials used to manufacture the glass. Both James, age 11, and his older brother William also found work at the factory as common laborers. In a journal he later wrote, James describes himself as the "youngest boy about the place," proud to bring home his dollar and a quarter each Friday night to contribute to the family accounts. He worked directly for a blower, probably as a carrying boy taking objects to the annealing oven to cool. He wrote that he "was there nearly two years before I began to gather." Work days were long and James bore the brunt of a brutal master, recording his treatment:

He never beat me because he could find no reasonable excuse to do so, but he made me miserable by a continual system of petty annoyance and vexation and scolding and swearing.... After I left him he wished me to go back to work for him again. I refused, and from that time he became my bitter enemy using every means in his power to injure me. and even, with forecasting malice trying to hinder me from learning my trade by falsehoods to the masters. As well as by endeavoring to destroy what little confidence I had in myself, but let it pass. I had the satisfaction of knowing him thoroughly and despising him heartily.<sup>1</sup>



In 1826, James' father lay dying. On his death bed, he asked the partners in the Bakewell firm to apprentice his son James. Within the year, James signed a formal indenture to apprentice as a glassblower and learn the "art, trade, and mystery" of glass.<sup>2</sup> He began his career in the "smalls" department, where wine glasses, salts, and other table items were produced. He then progressed to working in the castor pots. He both came of age and completed his apprenticeship in 1833, but it was not until two years later that he was offered a place as a master blower. James Bryce, age 23, had already spent 12 years in the glasshouse, yet was ambivalent about "the place I hold now," a station in life that once was the "bound of my ambition but now when it is attained it gives me little pleasure."<sup>3</sup>

While the experience of James Bryce is not a universal one, children's life experiences owe much to their class, ethnicity, gender, and religion. It was typical of 19th century industrial Pittsburgh that boys had always

been a part of the glasshouse workforce. Elbridge Gerry, visiting Pittsburgh in 1813, recorded in his diary: "Small boys with facility, completely formed a cruet, in the glasshouse in less than 30 seconds."<sup>4</sup> The 1820 U.S. Census of Manufactures records in detail the face of the factory workforce, which at Bakewell's shrank from 30 men and 30 boys earning about \$20,000 in 1815 to 10 men and 12 boys earning about \$6,000 by 1820.<sup>5</sup> Children provided the unskilled laborers, and in the craft system, the apprentices, who did the many jobs deemed appropriate for younger hands. The same proved to be true in the iron industry—the Pittsburgh city directory from 1839 lists 59 men who worked for Lyon, Shorb & Co., and 26 boys whose names are not given. Like James Bryce, many of the boys had a relationship to the other workers—they were sons and grandsons learning the family trade.<sup>6</sup>

As industry boomed in the 19th century, so too did the demand for these young workers. By 1885, of 6,053 glassworkers in Allegheny County, boys under the age of 16



**Postcard, Blowing Bottles, c. 1905.**  
Notice the mold boy seated in the foreground—he opened and closed the mold hundreds of times a day for the blower standing above. All the workers pictured are boys or young men.  
HHC Detre LAA.



**Wormser Glass Co., Pittsburgh, 1908.**  
Arrested in 1890 for employing boys under the age of 12 in his factory, owner Isaac Wormser pled guilty to four counts in 1891 and paid a \$5 fine. The boy in the foreground of this image is listed as age 17.  
Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-10961.



(Inset) Sarah and Rachel McClelland, 1887.  
Photographs of young girls from this period often  
picture them with their dolls—here Sarah holds  
her new baby sister and her doll.

HHC Detre L&A, gift of Rosemary Meyerjack Campbell.

Sarah McClelland's doll Betsy, c. 1895.  
Betsy's worn face shows the evidence of much  
handling and play.

HHC Collections, 92.116.700, gift of Rosemary Meyerjack Campbell.

Photo by Liz Simpson.



accounted for 1,470 of those workers.<sup>7</sup> They served as the mold boys in the bottle factories, crouching at the feet of their masters, opening and closing the blow molds hundreds of times a day. Others were gatherers and “carrying boys,” “tending boys” and packers, “sticker-ups” and cleaning boys. In James Bryce’s day, they brought home \$1.25 a week, while in 1885 their pay ranged from 30 cents to \$1 a day.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, the work and wealth created by industry led to the expansion of the middle class—the managers, salesmen, and accountants who oversaw the business of industry and the growing ranks of professionals such as doctors and lawyers. In fact, the number of middle managers and professionals nearly doubled every decade in

Pittsburgh after the Civil War.<sup>9</sup> In households such as Sunnylee, the Shadyside home of homeopathic physician Dr. James McClelland, children had a very different experience from those on the factory floor. The McClelland girls, Sarah born in 1885 and Rachel two years later, attended school, traveled with their parents, and had the time and toys to occupy themselves in play. Across Fifth Avenue, the seven children of the Spencer family filled their days in similar ways. In her memoir, daughter Ethel Spencer recounted time spent in imaginative play with siblings and neighbors, the schools attended by the Spencer children, and the toys and games that filled the third floor playroom of their Amberson Avenue home. She also recalled the leisure time that

in essence prepared the children for their later roles in society—the working gas stove in the playroom where the girls could cook and the evenings spent sewing and knitting as their mother read the classics to them.

Economics drove the divisions in the two worlds. The income generated by child laborers such as the glasshouse boys proved necessary to sustain many immigrant and working class families. But changes in technology that made some of these jobs obsolete, and more importantly in social and political thinking, brought national visibility to the issue of child labor. Organizations founded to eliminate child labor pointed to the example of the region’s glasshouses. A full-page advertisement in the *Saturday Evening Post* placed by the





Harry and his mule Sallie, Grafton,  
West Virginia, 1908.

A driver for the Maryland Coal  
Co. mine, Harry was about 12  
years old. This is one of hundreds  
of photographs taken for the  
National Child Labor Committee  
documenting child workers in  
mines, factories, on farms, and  
even as pin setters in Pittsburgh  
bowling alleys.

Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-43792



National Child Labor Committee began,

If you could look for a moment into the great glass factories of New Jersey or western Pennsylvania ... and see the pinched faces and the shriveled forms of little children who are doomed to spend their childhood years at work ... your heart would go out to the children and your purse would be opened to the people who are trying to pass laws to rescue these little ones from disease and premature old age.<sup>10</sup>

Glass factory owners who battled to contain the reform movement in the state legislatures in hopes of heading off federal action lost to the journalists, documentary photographers, and social activists who took the issue directly to a national audience. At the same time the attention of Congress and the public was focused on restrictive laws, machines were being created to replace the jobs held by children. In 1903, Michael Owens introduced the first automatic machine that produced narrow mouth vessels such as beer and soda bottles. Owens and Edward Libbey

established a new company (Owens Bottle Machine Co.) to build and license the machines that gathered the glass, as well as mechanically blowing and forming the bottles. Within seven years of introduction, 100 Owens machines were in use producing 360 million bottles a year.<sup>11</sup> As a result, child laborers in the glass industry dropped nationally by almost half, from 6,435 to 3,561, with the manual work increasingly done by conveyor belts and other mechanical devices. Legislation did its part in removing children from the factory floor, but so too did technology.<sup>12</sup>

Economics alone does not explain the complex changes in the evolving definition of childhood in the first decades of the 20th century. The cultural definition of childhood and the worth or importance of the nonworking child also changed. Progressive reformers, who first built settlement houses and then urban playgrounds, also advocated for school as the new workspace for children. By 1918, all states in the U.S. had compulsory education laws on the books.



William D. Stevenson at age 5,  
Wilkinsburg, Pa., 1917.

HHC Detre L&A, gift of Anne Stevenson, 2000.0104.



Schoenhut toy camel, hippo, elephant, and alligator, c. 1920. William Stevenson received a Humpty Dumpty Circus set, which included these pieces, for Christmas when he was eight or nine years old. With more than 30 figures and animals, as well as accessories, children could build a toy collection that encouraged imaginative play.

HHC Collections, 2000.47.35, 2000.47.10, 2000.47.5, 2000.47.1, gift of Anne Stevenson. Photo by Liz Simpson.



As the development of skilled, educated children became increasingly valued, those laws were more strictly enforced.<sup>13</sup> In addition, historians have argued that as children's economic value as workers decreased, their cultural and emotional value increased.<sup>14</sup> Childhood became an elongated period of life, separate in activities and expectations from the world of adults. Indoor and outdoor play became an important part of that world, filling the day after school ended and the leisure days created by a five day school and work week.

These are the children, with time for play, who became consumers of the toys produced by Pittsburgh companies in the 20th century such as the Wolverine Toy Company. The baby boom that accompanied the end of World War II provided millions of new customers eager for the products of the toy industry. It is their world that the exhibit *Toys of the '50s, '60s and '70s* recalls.



Knox School, Pittsburgh, June 12, 1918.  
Pennsylvania enacted its compulsory  
education law for ages eight to 17 in 1895.

IHC Deline LAA, Pittsburgh Public Schools Photographs,  
MSP117 B022.F06.108

<sup>1</sup> All quotes from James Bryce's journals, transcript and copy, author research files, Pittsburgh.

<sup>2</sup> Copy of indenture reproduced in Lowell Innes, *Pittsburgh Glass 1797-1891: A History and Guide for Collectors* (Houghton, Mifflin, 1976), 37.

<sup>3</sup> Bryce journal, author research files.

<sup>4</sup> *The Diary of Elbridge Gerry, Jr.* (Brantano's, 1927), 107.

<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to Arlene Palmer Schwind for providing transcribed copies of the 1820 U.S. Census of Manufactures.

<sup>6</sup> "Lyon, Shorb & Company Photograph Album," *The Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 71, no. 3/4 (July/Oct. 1988): 264.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Weeks, *Report on the Manufacture of Glass* (David Williams, 1883), 17.

<sup>8</sup> Weeks, 6-7.

<sup>9</sup> Ethel Spencer, Weber, Michael P., Stearns, Peter N., *The Spencers of Amberson Avenue* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1983), xvi.

<sup>10</sup> *Saturday Evening Post*, Nov. 17, 1906.

<sup>11</sup> Dennis Zembala, "Machines in the Glasshouse: The Transformation of Work in the Glass Industry, 1820-1915" (Doctoral dissertation, George Washington Univ., 1984), 342.

<sup>12</sup> John W. Lerner, "The Glass House Boys," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 48, no. 4, (October 1965): 355.

<sup>13</sup> Michael S. Katz, *A History of Compulsory Education Laws*. Fastback Series, No. 75. Bicentennial Series, abstract.

<sup>14</sup> Viviana Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).



(Opposite Page) "Wolverine Family,"  
by John Knowles Hare, oil on canvas,  
c. 1915.

This image indicates the customers  
the Wolverine toy company sought—  
families with the time and the money  
to invest in play. The starched  
white clothing worn by the children  
contrasts with the rough, worn work  
clothes of child laborers.

IHC Collections, 2006.68.37, gift of Spang & Co.

Panama Pile Driver, made by  
Wolverine Supply & Mfg. Co.,  
Pittsburgh, c. 1910.

Patented in 1905, the pile driver  
became one of the first popular metal  
toys made by Wolverine in its North  
Side plant.

IHC Collections, 96.110.1, gift of Marilyn M. Erwin.  
Photo by Liz Simpson.



