

A Journalist Visits a Chicago Sweatshop

Joseph Kirkland

Introduction

By the late Gilded Age, big-city newspapers had begun looking into the darker side of the new industrial order. One such investigative reporter was Joseph Kirkland, a novelist who studied poverty in city life. In the early 1890s, he described conditions in the clothing industry. Chicago's sweatshops were no worse than those in any other major city's garment district.

Source: Joseph Kirkland, "Among the Poor of Chicago," *The Poor in Great Cities* (New York: 1895), quoted in Paul M. Angle, *The American Reader From Columbus to Today* (New York: Rand McNally & Company, 1958), 399–400.

Excerpts

The sweat-shop is a place where, separate from the tailor-shop or clothing-warehouse, a "sweater" (middleman) assembles journeyman tailors and needle-women, to work under his supervision. He takes a cheap room outside the dear and crowded business centre, and within the neighborhood where the work-people live. Thus is rent saved to the employer, and time and travel to the employed. The men can and do work more hours than was possible under the centralized system, and their wives and children can help, especially when, as is often done, the garments are taken home to "finish." (Even the very young can pull out basting-threads.) This "finishing is what remains undone after the machine has done its work, and consists in "felling" the waists and leg-ends of trousers (paid at one and one-half cents a pair), and, in short, all the "felling" necessary on any garment of any kind. For this service, at the prices paid, they cannot earn more than from twenty-five to forty cents a day, and the work is largely done by Italian, Polish, and Bohemian women and girls.

The entire number of persons employed in these vocations may be stated at 5,000 men (of whom 800 are Jews), and from 20,000 to 23,000 women and children. The wages are reckoned by piece-work and (outside of the "finishing") run about as follows:

Girls, hand-sewers, earn nothing for the first month, then as unskilled workers they get \$1 to \$1.50 a week, \$3 a week, and (as skilled workers) \$6 a week. The first-named class constitutes fifty per cent of all, the second thirty per cent, and the last twenty per cent. In the general work, men are only employed to do button-holing and pressing, and their earnings are as follows: "Pressers," \$8 to \$12 a week; "under-pressers," \$4 to \$7. Cloak operators earn \$8 to \$12 a week. Four-fifths of the sewing-machines are furnished by the "sweaters" (middlemen); also needles, thread, and wax.

The “sweat-shop” day is ten hours; but many take work home to get in overtime; and occasionally the shops themselves are kept open for extra work, from which the hardest and ablest workers sometimes make from \$14 to \$16 a week. On the other hand, the regular work-season for cloakmaking is but seven months, and for other branches nine months, in the year. The average weekly living expenses of a man and wife, with two children, as estimated by a self-educated workman named Bisno, are as follows: Rent (three or four small rooms), \$2; food, fuel, and light, \$4; clothing, \$2, and beer and spirits, \$1

A city ordinance enacts that rooms provided for workmen shall contain space equal to five hundred feet of air for each person employed; but in the average “sweat-shop” only about a tenth of that quantity is to be found. In one such place there were fifteen men and women in one room, which contained also a pile of mattresses on which some of the men sleep at night. The closets were disgraceful. In an adjoining room were piles of clothing, made and unmade, on the same table with the food of the family. Two dirty little children were playing about the floor

The “sweating system” has been in operation about twelve years, during which time some firms have failed, while others have increased their production tenfold. Meantime certain “sweaters” have grown rich; two having built from their gains tenement-houses for rent to the poor workers. The wholesale clothing business of Chicago is about \$20,000,000 a year.