For the first time since its opening, Museum L-A has dedicated their gallery space to discussing a grim part of America’s industrial labor history: child labor. This topic has been highly requested for educational tours at the museum for many years, especially for younger student groups, as a way to open the eyes of newer generations and highlight how different their way of life is compared to that of their ancestors.

This new full-scale exhibition explores the historic use of children as laborers in industries such as textile mills, sardine canneries, and family farms not only in the Lewiston-Auburn area, but throughout Maine. Photographs and collections from 10 historical organizations with locations throughout the state are featured as a way to share each region’s labor history during Maine’s Bicentennial year. Portraits taken by Lewis Hine at the turn of the century are on display as an integral piece of the child labor reform story. Genealogical research into the identities of the children in those photographs completed by historian Joe Manning as part of his ongoing Lewis Hine Project bring the tragedy of child labor into perspective.

“With the negative connotation of the use of child labor in textile mills in other parts of the country and the world, visitors to the museum often ask about whether or not children worked at the Bates Mill,” Emma Sieh, Museum L-A’s curator explains. “We thought it was time to address this difficult topic and help our visitors understand the reality of what it was like to be a child laborer historically, in the hopes of starting new and important discussions about its practice today.”

Over 100 people attended the free opening reception for this exhibit on January 30 and almost 700 students are scheduled to visit in the first two months of its opening! This exhibit will remain in the gallery until mid-June so make sure to visit Museum L-A before it’s gone!
By the time this reaches your mailbox, I will have been at Museum L-A for almost six months. My office is located in the main gallery, next to the museum shop, and I love being in the midst of the hubbub! On a daily basis I interact with visitors, overhear conversations, and witness smiles and tears, as folks guide themselves through the temporary exhibit, learning, pondering, and reminiscing.

When I arrived, this massive space was full of shoes – old shoes, new shoes, and ceramic shoes. The text on the walls told the extensive history of the shoe industry in Auburn and its role as the fifth largest producer of footwear in the United States. Space was dedicated to describing shoe shops and shoe workers. It seemed that everyone in L-A knew someone who had worked in the shoe industry, and the stories flowed easily.

And then – as if by magic – the space was transformed again by Emma Sieh, our talented curator, and her small team of dedicated volunteers. Shoes came down and were replaced by photos and stories of child laborers throughout Maine. Child labor is a complicated subject, to be sure, but one that is historically significant. On the night of the exhibit opening, the gallery was packed, and again, I felt a wave of déjà vu. It seemed that everyone attending had a friend or family member who had regaled them with stories of working as a child in the mills, canneries, brickyards, or on a family farm. “Being in here,” said one elderly visitor contentedly, “feels like old home week.”

The beautiful thing about Museum L-A, I am learning, is that we are dedicated to telling stories that help people experience the rich history of work and community, especially those that have defined the Lewiston-Auburn area and Maine. And in doing so, generations and cultures are fused together inexorably. When hundreds of students visit this exhibit in the next few months, they, too, will be committing to memory the stories that will eventually be passed down. And so the cycle continues.

Soon we will be sharing more details with the community about plans for the new museum. Stay tuned; you will want to be a part of this exciting chapter for the museum and for Lewiston-Auburn. And you will be proud to have this wonderful gem right here in your backyard!

I like where I sit. I have the privilege of observing children learning about the heritage of their families and communities, and observing adults reconnecting with their roots and their ancestors. How fortunate am I!

Audrey Thomson
Executive Director
A trip to Museum L-A’s gift shop is more than just a shopping trip; it’s a cultural experience. We offer a unique and innovative selection of merchandise from Bates bedspreads and antique shoe lasts to exhibit-related gifts, books and historical folk toys.

A number of designs from our non-archival collections have been reproduced on items such as plates and tote bags. Posters representative of the products of the design department at Bates Mill are also in the gift shop. Signed copies of “The Enclave,” by local author Suzanne Roy, are available.


“There are people who know exactly what a Bates bedspread is and may well have grown up with one on their bed. However, they probably don’t know about all the other textiles that the Bates Manufacturing Company produced.” – Diane Fagan Affleck, author of “Just New From the Mills: Printed Cottons in America.”

The book is available in the Museum L-A gift shop, as well as through other museum stores and online.

All proceeds from gift shop purchases support exhibits, preservation efforts, and educational programs at Museum L-A.

**Programs at the museum continue to engage visitors**

Beginning in 2019, Aroha Philanthropies funded three programs at the museum that met with great success. Our final workshop is traditional old-time New England and French-Canadian folk dancing with Cindy Larock and over 50 students have enrolled in the eight-week workshop.

Schools from across the state have requested field trips to the museum for educational tours of its exhibits. To schedule your class trip, call 207-333-3881 and ask for Denise Scammon. Our educational programs vary and include Canals; Immigration; Industrial Revolution; Looms & Weaving; and Simple Machines.
Your gift matters.

Museum L-A relies on the donations from individuals and businesses to further its mission.

Your contribution helps us to continue providing outstanding educational programs for people of all ages. Our exhibits are second to none and your donation enables us to create truly unique experiences for everyone.

Your gift is an investment in preserving history and keeping the stories accessible for generations to come.

Visit www.museumla.org to make your secure online donation. We also encourage you to take advantage of recurring giving: an easy payment plan that fits your philanthropic schedule.

For more information, contact Audrey Thomson, executive director, at athomson@museumla.org or 207-333-3881.

OUR MISSION

Museum L-A connects generations and cultures, fosters a spirit of discovery and human ingenuity, and helps people experience the rich history of work, the arts, and community.

Be the first to know about what’s happening at Museum L-A!
Sign up for our mailing list at www.museumla.org.

VOLUNTEER WITH US!

There are many ways to get involved and volunteer at Museum L-A, both in the galleries and behind the scenes. To learn more about our volunteer opportunities and the application process, please contact Camden Martin at cmartin@museumla.org or 207-333-3881.