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Addie Card: The Search for Lewis Hine's “Anemic Little Spinner”¹

Joe Manning

If you drive about two miles north on Route 7 from Williamstown, Massachusetts, you cross the border into Pownal, Vermont. As the road curves around to the left, there is an abrupt change in the topography. The land opens up to the Green Mountains and the vast valley formed by the Hoosic River. The road rises gently for several miles, making it feel like you are taking off in a light plane. Looking west into the valley, the uncluttered, rural landscape looks magical — a church steeple here — a barn there. You are tempted to reverse direction and turn down the road you just passed, Route 346, and see Pownal close up.

That is when the magical becomes the melancholy. Almost immediately, it appears that the area has somehow been untouched by the celebrated economic and cultural changes of the twentieth century. Except for the (mostly) paved roads, cars, telephone poles, and an occasional satellite dish, the scene looks like an old postcard, or even the Appalachia towns of depression-era Kentucky and West Virginia.

The road passes a few farms and then comes to a crossroads in the village of North Pownal. The first thing you notice are the shacks and tiny houses on French Hill Road and the badly maintained wood-frame duplexes that look like what they once were: mill housing. The mill itself is long gone, but has left its legacy. By the river, there is a glass-enclosed sign on the spot once occupied by the North Pownal Manufacturing Company, a cotton mill that prospered in the 1800s and early 1900s, later becoming a tannery. It was demolished after closing in 1988, resulting in a daunting and expensive hazardous waste cleanup project.

The sign includes a picture of the mill and another of a young mill girl. Once erroneously identified as Addie Laird, she was photographed by Lewis Wickes Hine, one of the world's most renowned and influential documentary photographers. In his notes he referred to her as “an anemic little spinner.” From 1908 to 1917, Hine took thousands of pictures for the National Child Labor Committee, exposing the dangerous and unhealthy conditions that children endured working in textile mills, coal mines, vegetable farms, fish canneries, and as late-night “newsies” on urban streets.

¹ I have withheld the names of many of Addie's family members in order to protect their privacy.

Photographed in 1910, Addie would become one of Hine's most famous subjects, her 12-year-old frail body leaning against a spinning machine, her tired eyes staring out as if to say, "Hey, mister, what are you gonna do about me?"

Addie's iconic photo appeared on a US postage stamp in 1998, in a Reebok advertisement, and has hung quietly on the walls of museums for decades. One of those is the Bennington Museum, just up the road from Pownal. In 2002, during a special exhibit of Hine's work, author Elizabeth Winthrop saw the photo, and subsequently wrote *Counting on Grace* (Random House, 2006), a haunting novel about the life of a fictional mill girl who has an encounter with Hine when he takes her picture.

I met Elizabeth in the summer of 2000. She came to North Adams, Massachusetts, to begin research on *Dear Mr. President: Letters from a Mill Town Girl* (Winslow Press, 2001), a children's book that was to focus on a fictional Italian-American girl named Emma who writes to President Franklin Roosevelt during the Great Depression. I had recently moved from Torrington, Connecticut to the Florence section of Northampton, Massachusetts, and was working on *Disappearing into North Adams* (Flatiron Press, 2001), my second book about the city. Elizabeth was living in the Berkshires as a summer resident. We became good friends, frequently meeting in coffee shops to compare notes and talk about our books.

Several years later, Elizabeth showed me Addie's photo and told me about *Counting on Grace*, which she was just starting to write. After the book was finished in the summer of 2005, she confided that she was overwhelmed with curiosity about what the life of the real mill girl had been like, but had been unable to find a record of anyone in Pownal named Addie Laird, or for that matter, anyone at all with the surname of Laird. When the postage stamp was created, the US Dept. of Labor had suffered the same frustration with their research: both leading to dead ends.

Shortly thereafter, however, Elizabeth made a startling discovery. By searching the US census from 1900 and 1910, she realized that although Hine had written down "Laird," Addie's correct surname was Card. With this new information, she learned through town records that Addie was born in 1898 and that she had an older sister named Annie, who also worked at the mill and later married Eli Leroy of Cohoes, New York. Annie moved to Cohoes, where she and Eli had three children.



Figure 1.
Addie Card

The census revealed that in 1900, when Addie was two years old, her mother died and her father left home. Addie and Annie went to live with their grandmother in North Pownal. In 1915, Addie married fellow mill worker Edward Hatch. In the 1920 census, she was apparently childless and living with her mother-in-law, while Edward was serving in the navy. However, Elizabeth could find no further records of Addie or Edward, not even in the 1930 census, which is the last one currently available to the public. That subject came up immediately when she invited me for dinner in Williamstown, on October 17, 2005. She dropped the search for Addie in my lap and offered to hire me to find out the rest of the story.

How long did Addie work at the mill? Did she finish school? Did she have children? How long did she live? Could she have living descendants? Had she been aware of Hine's famous photo? That is what Elizabeth wanted to know — and at that moment, so did I. As a historian, author and genealogist, I had experienced the excitement of the hunt and the elation of turning over the right rock at the right time. I wanted to forget dessert and just bolt out the door and start looking.

Elizabeth assigned me one special task for starters: take photos of all the gravestones of people named Card that I could find in the cemeteries in Pownal. I started my research the next morning, excited, confident, but unaware of the many serendipitous and “eureka” moments that were to follow.

I have a paid subscription to Ancestry.com, which has the most comprehensive data bank of genealogy information on the Web. So before my first trip to the cemeteries, I camped out in front of my computer. Elizabeth had identified Edward Hatch's eight siblings, including Margaret, whose married name was Harris. It occurred to me that if I could find an obituary for one of his siblings, Edward might be listed as a survivor, and I might then learn where he had been living at the time. While searching Pownal-related websites, I discovered a list of the names and dates of death of Pownal residents from 1921 to 1980. One of those was Edward's sister Margaret, who died in 1954. I called the Bennington Library and learned that it had the *Bennington Banner* archived on microfilm.

On October 20th, I left early on a chilly, foggy morning. Around 9:00, I entered Addie's dreary little world. I parked at the spot along the Hoosic River where the cotton mill once stood and where Addie's photo stares out toward the hovels on French Hill. There is a bench next to the sign, so I sat there and listened to the river and wondered about her life. Then I headed for the cemeteries. I spent the whole morning walking past rows and rows of family history, anticipating that at any moment, I might discover Addie's grave, although there were no records of her death in Pownal.

I headed to Bennington. A half-hour later, I was in front of the microfiche at the library with Margaret Harris's obituary staring back at me. There it was: “survived by a brother, Edward Hatch, of Millerton, New York.” On the way home, I thought, “If Addie was still married to him then, she might be buried in Millerton.”



Figure 2.

Minnie and Mattie Carpenter, 1908

The next day, I called the only funeral home listed in Millerton. They looked up Hatch and found only one, Edward, who had died on December 12, 1982. He was buried at Irondale Cemetery, but his surviving widow was listed as Elvina (maiden name Goguen), not Addie. So now I knew that Edward had married a second time. Had Addie died, or had her marriage ended in divorce? I called the local paper and ordered a copy of Edward's obituary.

I went back to the 1930 census. That is when I found Edward Hatch in Detroit, living with wife Elvina, but no children. His occupation was listed as automobile mechanic. I assumed that he had moved out there to work for General Motors or Ford. I looked up Elvina, and learned that she was born in New Brunswick, Canada, and had immigrated to Bennington in 1922.

My wife, Carole, and I talked about Addie all evening. Carole thought out loud: "If Addie had any children by Edward and then died soon after, or in childbirth, the children might have been placed in the care of one of his relatives. In those days it wouldn't have been traditional for the father to raise them alone." That intuitive thought turned out to be a turning point in the search.

The next morning, I was up before sunrise searching the 1930 census. I put in only Hatch as a last name, Vermont as the state, and 1915 to 1930 as the birth year. I found a ten-year-old girl named Hatch in Bennington, living with her aunt, a Mrs. Remington.

The name was familiar, and I thought I knew why. I looked again at Margaret Harris's obituary. Mrs. Remington was another one of Edward Hatch's sisters. The girl had to be Addie's daughter, unless one of Edward's brothers had fathered a daughter and placed her in the Remington home. But if the girl was Addie's daughter, where was Addie? Had she died before 1930?

On Friday, the 28th, I was scheduled to go to North Adams. As I do at least once a week, I met my friend Carl for breakfast, and I updated him on Addie. He was already emotionally involved with the search, getting teary-eyed every time he looked at her photo. I had brought all my notes with me, figuring that I would wind up in Pownal sometime that day, if only to sit by the river again and think about Addie. At this point, I was not sure what to do next. "Go to Bennington," said Carl, "When you get there, you'll think of something." An hour later, I was in the Bennington town clerk's office, feeling like I might be on the verge of making a slew of discoveries.

They allowed me to park myself at a table and search their files, which included birth, death and marriage records for Bennington County, all catalogued alphabetically by name, on index cards, plus an incomplete collection of annual directories, which listed all residents by name of head of household and street address. I started with the directories.

Mrs. Remington was in the directories in 1920, but since only heads of household and single adults were listed, there was no way to verify what children lived in the home. In 1937, the Hatch girl was listed, still living with her aunt. I thought, "She probably turned 18, and earned her own listing as an adult." Same for 1939, but in 1941, she was no longer listed.

"I'll bet she got married," I mused, and looked in the marriage records. There she was, married in 1940 to a man from Hoosick Falls, New York, a town just across the border from Bennington. Her parents were listed, Edward Hatch and Addie Card, and it was noted that they were divorced. So now I knew that the Hatch girl really was Addie's child, and that her placement in her aunt's home was not because Addie had died. Had Addie somehow lost custody of the child?

A few minutes later I had a copy of Addie's daughter's birth certificate, born June 26, 1919. But I could find no records for any other Hatch children after 1919, so it appeared that Addie and Edward had only one child. Then I checked birth records to see if any children had been born to Addie's daughter and her husband. Sure enough, a daughter had been born in Bennington in 1944 — Addie's granddaughter! If living, she would be 61 years old. Great news, but what if she had married? How would I find her if I did not know her last name?

I wanted to see Addie's divorce record. The clerk sent me over to the Bennington County Family Court. They looked it up and gave me a copy of the decree. I raced back to my car and read it. Edward Hatch had sued Addie for divorce, charged her with desertion, and won custody of the daughter, who remained with Edward's sister. But the

decree noted that Addie did not appear at the hearing. I wondered about that. What really happened?

I took a quick detour to North Pownal on my way home. I sat down on the bench, looked back at the mountain and the row of tiny houses on French Hill, where Addie might have lived. Then I stared at the river and shouted out, “Addie, tell me where you are!”

All the way home, I held out hope that Addie’s granddaughter had retained the same last name — the one she was born with. As soon as I walked in the door, I headed for the computer and Googled her name. Fortunately, I got a hit. A woman with the same name was listed on FreeGarageSale.com. She was selling something, and her phone number and email address were listed. The phone number was in the Hoosick Falls area, so that was encouraging. I emailed her, explaining about Elizabeth’s book and Addie’s famous photo. I held my breath. Was she the right person — Addie’s granddaughter? If so, was she interested? Would she have any information?

The next day I received a reply. She was, indeed, Addie’s granddaughter, and she wanted me to call her, which I did right away. She said that she had been unaware of Addie’s photo and that she had seen her grandmother only once in her life, when Addie was very old. She told me that her mother (Addie’s daughter) had died in 2002, and that she and Addie had been estranged all their lives because of Addie’s apparent abandonment of her as a baby. She also mentioned that Addie was buried in Cohoes, NY, a town near Albany, but she did not remember which cemetery. However, she added one final important piece of information: Addie married again and had a child with her second husband, but she did not remember their names.

The next day, I received Edward Hatch’s obituary. It said he joined the Navy just after WWI ended, had been an assembly worker for General Motors, retired in 1948, and moved to Millerton. He was survived by wife Elvina, and a daughter (Addie’s daughter), of Hoosick Falls. The daughter’s last name indicated that she must have married a second time. I checked the archives in the *Troy Record* and found a 2002 obituary for Addie’s daughter. She was buried in Schuylerville, NY. It named her husband as a survivor, plus two daughters — one in California, and the one I had just talked to.

I also checked the Social Security Death Index for Addie’s sister, Annie Leroy, and learned that she died in Cohoes in 1954. I requested her obituary from the New York State Library in Albany. I figured that if Addie had been listed as a survivor, I might find out where she was living then, and what her second married name had been.

Then I started calling all the funeral homes in Cohoes to find out where Addie was buried. The first one I called was the right one. Addie (wife of the late Ernest Lavigne) was buried in St. Agnes Cemetery in Cohoes. That “anemic little spinner” lived to be 94! They gave me the section and plot number, and Carole and I made plans to drive up to photograph the gravesite.

The city of Cohoes (pronounced “Ca-hose”) was once the home of Harmony Mills, one of the largest in the world. The yarn-producing factory along the Mohawk River was powered by Cohoes Falls, which was the subject of a famous painting created from a seventeenth century sketch by, oddly enough, a man named Thomas Pownal. Most of the mill buildings still stand, housing some small industry and a large outlet store. Recently a developer has received approval and partial government assistance for his plan to convert the buildings into apartments and retail shops.

Carole and I visited Cohoes a few years ago on a weekend trip through the Mohawk Valley. Its downtown was all but deserted, and a recently closed Woolworth’s seemed to symbolize the city’s hard times. We walked around, purchased some sheets at the Harmony Mills outlet store, and headed to Troy.

Addie spent most of her last fifty years in Cohoes, where she struggled with various factory jobs and lived in subsidized housing. But it is also where she was given a second chance at motherhood and wound up endearing herself to three generations of grandchildren.

On November 14, Carole and I made the two-hour drive to Cohoes, arriving at St. Agnes Cemetery by mid-morning. It took about two minutes to find Addie's gravesite where there was a surprise waiting for us. It was a flat gravestone. Next to her name and years of birth and death, there was the following in quotation marks: “Gramma Pat.” Carole remarked, “Now we know that when she died, there must have been someone who loved her very much.” But why the name “Pat”?

I pulled out my cell phone and called Elizabeth. It had been exactly four weeks since my search had begun. She responded, “You’ve gone from A to Z now.” But the journey was far from over. I took some photos, and then we went to the funeral home. They found a newspaper obituary which listed her daughter (by Edward Hatch); a second daughter, deceased; three grandchildren; three great-grandchildren; and two great-great-grandchildren (all descended from her second daughter). This added a whole new list of contacts, with the prospect for photos and plenty of information about the last half of Addie’s life.

We went to the public library and searched through a large collection of city directories. We found that Addie and Ernest were living as a married couple in Cohoes as early as 1940. We also established that she lived in a public housing facility in Cohoes for most of her last twenty years. Armed with a good city map, we drove to all of her known past addresses and took photos of several houses, including the last one she lived in.

When we got home I began the search for Addie’s second family. I tried the Internet white pages and came up empty. One of her great-granddaughters had an unusual name, so I thought it would be the easiest one to search for on Google. Right away, I came up with her picture and an article about her receiving an award from a local college. The award was presented by the registrar, whose email address I found

on the college website. I wrote a letter to the great-granddaughter, and emailed it to the registrar, asking her to forward it.

While doing research on Ernest LaVigne, I had found his WWI draft registration record from 1918. He had listed North Adams as his address, and his father, who lived there, was listed as his nearest relative. Ernest was working at the Beaver Mill, one of the oldest textile mills in the city. In the 1930s, it was the first location of Sprague Electric Company. It now houses the Contemporary Artists Center. It occurred to me that Addie might have met Ernest in North Adams, since at that time, it was just a short trolley ride from Pownal. I searched the directories for Addie Hatch and found her living by herself in the city in 1921.

I continued to search the Internet for the surviving members of Addie's second family. A week went by, and there was no reply to my email to the great-granddaughter. I was beginning to get discouraged. Then one evening, the phone rang, and it was the great-granddaughter with the unusual name, the one in the photo getting the award. She was very excited and wanted to tell me all about Addie, whom she called "Gramma Pat." She had never seen Addie's famous photograph, and apparently Addie had not seen it either. She told me that Addie and Ernest adopted a baby daughter soon after getting married, and lived for a while in New Jersey and then New York City. That adopted daughter died a few years ago in Cohoes. The young woman I was talking to was the granddaughter of Addie's adopted daughter.

After notifying Elizabeth, we made arrangements to interview members of Addie's adopted family. Waiting for us would be photos of Addie, including one of her as a teen, one when she was in her nineties, and one of her in New York City on VE Day.

Shortly after the New Year, Elizabeth, Carole and I traveled to Troy, NY, to interview members of Addie's adopted family. It was an illuminating and emotional three-hour visit, both for us and for the family. We learned so much about "Gramma Pat" (she changed her name to Pat because she never liked Adeline). As an added bonus, our research provided much new information about Addie that the family did not know.

It had been a whirlwind three months since my dinner with Elizabeth in Williamstown. In that short time, it felt like Addie had become a member of my family. As we said our goodbyes to Addie's family, I noticed two framed photos side by side on a nearby shelf: Lewis Hine's photo of Addie when she was 12 years old, and Addie when she was 90 years old. If only Hine could have been there with us.

In April, *Counting On Grace* was released to critical acclaim. In May, Elizabeth made a presentation about the book and the search for Addie at the Solomon Wright Public Library in Pownal before an overflow crowd that included many of Addie's descendants. In September, *Smithsonian Magazine* published Elizabeth's article about the search. And finally, Elizabeth made sure that Addie's name was corrected, both at the Library of Congress, which displays Addie's photograph on its website, and on the sign at the site of the former North Pownal Manufacturing Company, where she worked.

Several months after my work with Addie Card was completed, I took a peek at some of the 5,000 Hine child labor photographs that are displayed on the Library of Congress website. On each of its 250 pages, there are 20 thumbnail images. One can click on the photos to enlarge them or download them (no copyright limitations exist). One can click on the abbreviated captions to see the entire caption and the date and location of the photo. After about an hour of clicking on photos, one by one, and staring at them for minutes at a time, I began to feel as if the children were staring back at me. It suddenly occurred to me that I had the power to do for some of them what I had done for Addie.

Among the ones I printed out was an especially haunting photo of two girls, only one of them identified. Hine's caption read: "Oldest girl, Minnie Carpenter, House 53 Loray Mill, Gastonia, N.C. Spinner. Makes fifty cents a day for 10 hours. Works four sides. Younger girl works irregularly."

After a month of obsessive and painstaking research, I obtained a copy of Minnie's obituary from the public library in Gastonia, NC. I learned that she died more than 30 years ago, single, with no children. A nephew, a Mr. McDaniel, of Gastonia, was listed as one of the survivors. In the Internet white pages, I found a man with the same name living in Gastonia. I called him, and he was the right person. He expressed great surprise about the photograph, and was very pleased when I told him I would send him a copy. I thanked him and dropped the photo in the mail.

When I called him two weeks later, he said with excitement, "I was hoping you would call me sooner. I've got some incredible news for you. The other girl in the photo is my mother. Her name was Mattie. I'm 84 years old, and this is the first time I have seen a photo of my mother as a little girl." At that moment it occurred to me that this project was not just about getting information, perhaps of historical and sociological importance, but it was also about connecting people to their past, to a family history about which they may have known very little, or even nothing at all.

By that time, I had already filled four loose-leaf notebooks with printouts about fifty of Hine's photos: census information, emails, newspaper articles, obituaries, and other information I had collected from hundreds of hours of almost daily research. In three months, I found and contacted descendants for about fifteen children. In nearly all cases, the astonished descendants had known nothing about the photos. And nearly every descendant was excited and eager to be interviewed for my project. In one case, a granddaughter was so interested that she went to her local library and checked out three books about Lewis Hine.

As of 2008, I succeeded in identifying and tracking down more than 100 children and have interviewed descendants for most of them. These children reflect a variety of occupations, locations, ethnic, religious, and nationality groups, and are almost equally divided between boys and girls. However, Hine photographed and identified very few African-American children. Despite my attempts to include a

cross-section of children, the results generally represent the ones who have left the most easily followed trail. Perhaps this means that most of the children I have traced were the “survivors”: the ones who reached at least middle age and produced several generations of descendants.



Figure 3.

Eli and Morris Mark (middle-right), 1912.

All the stories I have uncovered about these children are typical American stories, but many have resulted in surprising outcomes. One boy, Eli Marks, was the son of Russian immigrants. When he was eight years old, Hine photographed him selling chewing gum on the streets of Washington, DC. I found Eli’s son, currently a chemistry professor at a prestigious university. The son was thrilled at seeing the photo, but told me that his father also worked as a newsboy and used to tell him stories about it. As the son related it, Eli and his brother (also in the photo) later invested in cheap land in then-rural Montgomery County, near Washington, and made a killing during the post-war flight to the suburbs.

An entirely different fate awaited Willie Tear, who was also photographed in Washington. Hine’s caption reads: “5 yr. old Willie, one of Washington’s youngest news-boys. He is a kind of free-lance, helps other boys out, and roams around the city on his little velocipede, with all the recklessness of extreme youth. Gets lost occasionally. He was so immature that he couldn’t talk plain, and yet he was pretty keen about striking people for nickels. William Frederick Tear, 490 Louisiana Ave., Washington, D.C.”

Although I have been unable to locate any of his descendants, I found a few articles in the *Washington Post* digital archives that revealed that Tear went to prison several times for armed robbery and other offenses. Census records indicate that he attended the same reform school in Baltimore that Babe Ruth attended, possibly at the same time. He died in Los Angeles in 1975, but an obituary is not available.

One of the most heartwarming stories resulted from contacting Pamela, the granddaughter of Elsie Shaw, who was six years old when she was photographed in Eastport, Maine. This is Hine's caption: "Elsie Shaw, a 6 year old cartoner in the summer, Seacoast Canning Co., Factory #2. Her father is boss of cutting room in Factory #1. He asked me to take some photos of her, as he has her do a singing act in vaudeville in the winter, 'and she's old enough now to go through the audience and sell her own photos.'" Pamela was amazed by the photo, since she had no idea that Elsie had worked in a cannery. She told me that she was virtually raised by her grandmother, who often told her stories about performing in vaudeville as a child. The granddaughter had always had doubts about these stories. She said it gave her "goose bumps" to find out that they were really true.

Elsie married, had two children, and divorced, then moved to Portland, ME. She worked for many years as manager of the cosmetics and lingerie department at a department store. When her second husband died, she moved to California, where she was employed as a caregiver for a retired military man. She died in Arizona, just weeks before her 90th birthday, her daughter and granddaughters at her bedside.

As for Minnie and Mattie Carpenter, the sisters in Gastonia, Mr. McDaniel told me that his mother had six children and worked at the Loray Mill "between children." His Aunt Minnie worked at the mill from about the age of six until she retired at age 70. She never married and lived with sister Mattie all of her adult life. Mr. McDaniel also worked at the mill, which was owned by Firestone by that time, and he retired from there around 1992. Nearly all of his relatives still lived in Gastonia.

In February 2007, my project was the subject of a news story on National Public Radio. I have tentative plans to write a book about it but believe that the search process and results would make a compelling documentary film, or perhaps make for an interesting traveling exhibit at the Smithsonian Institute. Meanwhile, I am enjoying every moment of this all-consuming venture. Like all my projects over the past few years, I am guided by one principle motivation: to dignify the lives of ordinary people.²

² Lewis Hine's photos, including many that were taken in Massachusetts, are on the Library of Congress website: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/pp/nclquery.html> (after accessing the site, scroll down and click on Preview: 5,000 Images).

Joe Manning's website: www.morningsonmaplestreet.com/lewishine.html.