

Lesson 4 The Winds of Change

Pictures Worth a Thousand Words

As quickly as a camera captures a scene, an image can grab hold of our emotions. Through speech or written text, it can be difficult to convey a complex message quickly. Yet photographs can change people's hearts and minds in an instant. And when the magic of photography sparks an emotional reaction in a great number of people, it can change history.

The Burning River That Started a Movement

In the 1880s, industry began to grow rapidly along the Cuyahoga River in the city of Cleveland. This industrial growth provided steady jobs to people in the area. Meanwhile, steel mills and factories started dumping large amounts of waste into the river.

Although the river became polluted, most people simply regarded this as a sign of the area's economic success.

In June 1969, the polluted river caught fire. The likely cause was a burning flare falling from a train, which set fire to oil-soaked waste beneath a bridge. At that time, few people in Cleveland cared. This was because fires had been recorded on the Cuyahoga more than ten times before, and some of them had been much worse.

However, it wasn't long before the 1969 fire became famous. This was thanks to an article published in Time magazine that year. The article featured a shocking photograph of flames and smoke rising from the river. But this was not a photograph of the 1969 fire, which was put out so quickly that nobody took a picture of it. In fact, it was a picture of a much worse fire that had occurred on the river several years earlier. Still, the image had a great impact on people.

Around that time, the attitudes of Americans toward environmental problems were starting to change. More and more people were becoming aware of the need to protect the environment, and the shocking image of the burning river sparked public anger about water pollution. As a result, the Cuyahoga River fire of 1969 became a symbol of pollution. A national environmental awareness event was held on April 22, 1970, which later became known as the first Earth Day. And in 1972, national water quality standards were established with the passage of the Clean Water Act.

Exposing the Harsh Reality of Child Labor

In the 19th century, the Industrial Revolution led to a dramatic increase in factory production in the United States. The demand for workers increased, and many new positions were filled by children. By 1900, about twenty percent of all children in the United States were employed, and some of those working in factories were only four years old. The work was difficult and dangerous, leaving many child laborers with health problems.

Factory owners turned to child labor for several reasons. For example, children could be paid less than adult workers. They were also less likely to go on strike.

Lewis Hine, a teacher and photographer, wanted to reveal how cruel this system was. So he quit his teaching job and started to work for the National Child Labor Committee as an investigative photographer. He gained access to factories by pretending to have different jobs like insurance agent or fire inspector.

Once inside, he would photograph the children working there. He would also ask their names and ages and record information about their living and working conditions. From 1908 to 1912, he secretly gathered information and took photographs to expose factory owners who were taking advantage of helpless children.

Hine's photographs captured young children doing all sorts of jobs. These included picking vegetables, weaving baskets, and even handling dangerous equipment. What is more, the children's faces showed the tragic impact of hard labor. When people saw the children's joyless expressions, they could not help but feel heartbroken.

The pictures were later shown in exhibitions, lectures, magazine articles, and so on. As a result, the public realized just how serious the situation was. Soon, many states passed stronger laws to ban the employment of children. In 1938, the United States Congress passed an act that made it illegal for children under sixteen to work in factories during school hours.

These examples show that photographs can bring meaningful change to society. They prove that, sometimes, a picture truly is worth a thousand words.

Culture Notes

Literature That Changed the Course of History

Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* contributed to historical change in the United States. The novel mainly follows Uncle Tom living a hard life as an African American slave. It also features Eliza and her son, who escape from slavery. The novel exposes the horrors of the slavery system and treating humans as property. After it was published, people in the North became increasingly against slavery. However, because the Southern economy relied on slave labor, people in the South still wanted to keep it. This conflict led to the Civil War, which contributed to the end of slavery. Although Stowe's novel didn't get rid of slavery by itself, it played an important role in bringing about its end.