Women in Cleveland

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Childhood may be the most photographed stage of life. These photographs illustrate the changed meanings of growing up for children in Cleveland.

The city’s first children, like those in frontier settlements elsewhere, endured the same hardships as their parents. During the first quarter of the nineteenth century, however, when communities such as Cleveland had resources enough to survive without the labor of young people, Americans “discovered childhood” as a stage of life that differentiated young people from adults. Daguerreotypes of the 1860s reflect this discovery: the little girls of the Harris family, posed stiffly for the photographer, dressed formally, but in clothing which was distinct from their mother’s—with shorter skirts and without bustles or hoops. Although male and female infants were dressed the same way, older children’s clothing distinguished boys from girls and native-born from immigrant children such as those in the 1911 “steamer class.”

Child labor continued into the first two decades of the twentieth century for working-class children, but increasingly, photographs showed casually dressed children on playgrounds or at settlement houses such as Cleveland’s Hiram House or Friendly Inn. These images reflect the economic and social realities of a prolonged childhood and the accompanying cultural expectation that education and recreation, not work, were appropriate activities for children. Children were also expected to learn adult roles while they played, as in activities at Karamu House, the West Side Community House, and Shapero Dancing School.

Today children often enter educational institutions such as the Church of the Covenant Day Care Center at an early age because both parents work, and children stay in school longer than ever before because an increasingly technological economy requires sophisticated job skills.
Opposite: Young girls pose in their best clothes for an 1850s daguerreotype. Western Reserve Historical Society

An infant wears a unisex gown for an upcoming special occasion. Western Reserve Historical Society

A visit with grandfather is always a treat, ca. 1890. Western Reserve Historical Society
A young girl tentatively experiments with a new-fangled bicycle, ca. 1890. Western Reserve Historical Society

Little girls show off their best hats at the Hiram House. Western Reserve Historical Society
Newly arrived immigrant children enroll in a "steamer class" in 1911. Western Reserve Historical Society

Dressed for warmth and elegance, ca. 1910. Marian J. Morton Collection
Despite their cumbersome costumes, teenagers enjoy a summertime visit to Euclid Beach Park.
Western Reserve Historical Society

Girls and boys swing perilously on the bars at a Cleveland Day Nursery playground, ca. 1910.
Western Reserve Historical Society
Portrait of an artist as a young girl, ca. 1910. Western Reserve Historical Society

Many of the female workers at Joseph and Feiss Company in 1932 were adolescents. Western Reserve Historical Society
Opposite top: In the 1940s, Friendly Inn Settlement welcomed children of all ethnic backgrounds. Western Reserve Historical Society

Opposite bottom: A young actor and actress rehearse grown-up roles in a play at Karamu House, 1949. Western Reserve Historical Society

Girls learn domestic skills in cooking classes at West Side Community House in the 1930s. Western Reserve Historical Society

“Dress Up Like Your Mom” day in 1954 at West Side Community House. Western Reserve Historical Society

A young girl races her bike across a Cleveland playground. Western Reserve Historical Society
Children learn ballroom dancing and proper etiquette at the Shapero Dancing School in the 1970s. Western Reserve Historical Society

A family stroll at Lakefront State Park. The Plain Dealer
In the 1980s, growing numbers of children enrolled in daycare centers like this one at the Church of the Covenant. The Plain Dealer