

A Historical Overview of Disability and Employment in the United States, 1600 to 1950
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Abstract: Through a preliminary review of existing literature and archival source materials, this brief overview begins the task of compiling existing data about the history of disability and employment in the United States. A chronological framework is used that includes employment-related phenomena. The major topics covered are pre-industrial rural life, post-industrial work opportunities and the government's response to the employment needs of disabled veterans. In addition, due to relevance to the topic, there is a brief mention of freak shows and the dawning disability rights movement after WWI.

Key Words: Disability, labor, US history

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Introduction

“If anyone will not work, let him not eat.”
2 Thessalonians 3:10 (*The Holy Bible*)

Communities thrive when individuals band together, pooling skills and talents, to empower the group. Parents teach children this concept through assigning chores, and teachers reinforce it through group projects. The expectation that individuals must contribute, perform labor in some way, in order to be viable members of society can be found in both developed nations and in tribal cultures. Some national identities were developed on the foundation that citizens excelled at productivity and competition. For example, from the beginning of the United States (US) as a republic, male citizens viewed themselves as being “supremely normal” by being physically fit and able to fully participate in free-enterprise capitalism (Thomson, 1997, p. 42).

This connection of worth to the community and one's ability to work continues today and has as far-reaching consequences for people with disability¹ as those without. Research indicates that through the centuries, disabled people have been important members of the United States workforce, adding their skills, unique abilities, and hard labor alongside able-bodied worker's to manifest “the American Dream.” Yet, just as minority and ethnic groups have raised the issue of having their histories barred from textbooks (Scharrer, 2010), this is no less true for records about the careers of disabled people.

Historically, countless people with disability have joined, maintained and strengthened the ranks of the United States labor pool. Literature and archival materials exist representing disabled people as productive members of their community's workforce, but this information has never been systematically compiled, leaving many stories untold. As noted in the Handbook of Disability Studies, there are three key

problems to writing disability history – 1) the lack of primary sources, 2) most of the material that is available is written from the perspective of service providers and 3) much information is disability-specific rather than covering a broad spectrum of disabilities (Albrecht, 2001). All three of these factors were relevant to the endeavor of writing this article. In addition, pertinent information had to be painstakingly gleaned out of works devoted to other topics, much like a miner sifts through dirt for gold.

This effort begins the process of consolidating existing information into one document for easier reference. The selected time periods were chosen arbitrarily in an attempt to “start somewhere” to provide an overview. The illustrative examples were chosen for interest and readability and are, by no means, exhaustive. Due to the space limits placed on this particular paper, it can only indicate the scope of research needed, not accomplish the task.

Pre- Industrial Work Opportunities

Due to individual cultures and beliefs, there is no unified Native American response to disability but many tribes modeled the full inclusion of disabled workers in their societies. According to Arizona Community Health Representatives working with North American native populations, the Ojibwe culture was “broadly accepting” of people with physical disabilities and seizure disorders; among the Hopi and Mohegan tribes, there was little stigmatization for disabilities such as epilepsy, diabetes, or hypertension (“Closing the distance,” 2010). In the Mohawk tribe, Kateri Tekakwitha, a woman who survived smallpox in the 1600’s, was left almost blind but performed the same work as her peers, participating in cooking, sewing, basket-weaving, and farming (Chauchetière, 1695/2007).

Among the North American Plains Tribes, a universal sign language was developed to assist tribesmen to effectively perform their main occupation of hunting. It was also very useful in battle (Mallery, 1881). Although this language had no origins connected to deafness or speech impairments, it inadvertently provided a means of inclusion for individuals with those disabilities and has been used by both deaf and hearing Native Americans for over 200 years (“Hand Talk: Preserving a language legacy,” 2010).

From the 17th to mid-19th centuries, the US economy was primarily farm-based, and many disabled people contributed to their family’s income. Depending on the nature and severity of the disability, individuals “were generally able to make a contribution, in varying degrees, to a largely rural production process” (Malhotra, 2001). In 19th century Canada, family members worked to the level of their capacities and there were many tasks that someone with a mobility impairment or a learning disability could perform well. In this environment, an individual with disability was not necessarily considered a burden and there was no concept of such a person being “disabled” (Hanes, 2004). People with disability of the same era were productive on farms and in households in the United States, as well. Others worked in trades requiring precision handcrafting, making and repairing goods. Such employment allowed control of personal work schedules according to physical or psychological conditions (Russell, 2000).

Circumstances of daily life required teamwork to meet survival needs, causing community members to rely on each other to live. The practice of pooling talents despite inabilities and highlighting personal strengths to work together was not only common, but crucial. If capable individuals assumed leadership positions planning and directing tasks, it mattered little if someone had a learning disability or mental illness when brute strength was needed. If the willingness to contribute was present, such teamwork had great value. Consequently, the perception that, historically, all people with disability were burdens on their families and communities is inaccurate. In North America, disabled and non-disabled neighbors supported each other (Hanes, 2004).

This is not to say that people with disability did not experience difficulties and discrimination. Life was hard for poor people in general. Those unable to work had to rely on others and such assistance was not guaranteed. By the mid-1600's, the American colonists established laws reflecting those in the English legal system determining "worthy" and "unworthy" poor status based on the ability and willingness to work. These laws were almost exact replicas of the Elizabethan Poor Laws (Trattner, 1994). Many who were considered societal problems were forced onto ships going back to Europe (Murray, 2003). In some places, disabled people were not welcomed to participate in community activities and some were disowned, hidden away or fatally neglected by family members (Fleischer, 2002). Despite this, many disabled people were productively employed.

Due to financial resources, children with disability born to affluent parents had enhanced career opportunities. Youngsters might be sent abroad for specialized training (Barnartt, 2001). Afforded the benefits of education, prosperous landowners, lawyers and merchants held positions of political, legal, and social importance. Since wealth and status were inherited, there was a vested interest in providing even heirs with poor health the opportunities to fulfill these roles (Brobeck, 1976).

If an individual had developed a trade before becoming disabled, depending on the nature or severity of the disability, s/he might possibly continue working at that job or at similar work because the necessary expertise was already developed. One example is the career of Edward Green, a railroad capitalist in Texas, who continued working years after his leg was amputated in 1887 (Cottrell, 2010). There were many officers, like Lieutenant General John Bell Hood, who, during the Civil War, continued his military career after being disabled and then upon discharge pursued other ventures (Hickman, 2010). Disabled people with prior work experience and familial or financial support systems had opportunities to be productive members of the workforce, fully assimilated into their communities.

On the southern plantations, enslaved workers were considered property with monetary value based on their ability to work. Consequently, many individuals, despite serious disabling conditions resulting from harsh treatment and lack of medical care, were assigned significant duties. For example, in Florida, after slaves became too disabled to work in cotton fields, they were shipped to New Orleans to work for the rest of their lives in the sugar houses (Weld, 1839). Many disabled slaves, barred from the opportunity to leave plantations after emancipation, continued their work in gardens and

households. Those individuals with disability, who did leave the plantations only to find themselves as patients in Freedmen Bureau's asylums, became the resident workforce performing tasks from "cultivating vegetable gardens to laundering clothes to building additional facilities" (Downs, 2008, para. 26).

Industrial Revolution

As the United States economy became industry-based, masses of people left their farms and migrated to the cities for work. With large machines performing tasks that previously required the cooperation of many people, the need for teamwork and reliance on a group's combined abilities diminished. Workers were required to master specific, repetitive tasks within limited timeframes. Individual intelligence, strength, and talent became highly prized as the skillset required by employers. This effectively separated the "able" from the "unable"- soon to become classified "disabled" (Russell, 2000).

In a manufacturing environment based on a salary system, if one could not work, one could not survive. Unlike farm life, where, even in rough years, the land provided shelter and small communities cared for their own, city life rendered no such guarantees. In addition, factory environments were unhealthy and unsafe. Many workers, initially able-bodied and productive, were injured on the job. Without the unions and medical benefits of today, these individuals joined the ranks of "the disabled" by the hundreds. Thus originated and solidified the economic definition of disability as an "inability to work" (Barnartt, 2001, p. 5).

With a developing public education system that fostered obedience and uniformity to assure the compliance of a lower, working class (Gatto, 2003) and a growing interest in analyzing the political aspects of economics by categorizing "productive" and "unproductive" labor (Mill, 1885), it can be surmised that such concepts transferred to the definition of the traits of productive and unproductive workers. Almost overnight, these socially-created categories intentionally manipulated the workforce, allowing the capitalist elite to amalgamate wealth. Creating (and subsequently oppressing) the new group called "disabled" was foundational to corporate success (Russell, 2000). As this redesigned economic system thrived, unemployment increased and many people, with and without disability, had no means of support. Urban problems of overcrowding, slums, homelessness, begging, prostitution, and crime sprawled throughout US cities, disturbing the sensibilities of those in power. Seen as a major component of this troubling situation, disabled people now required management.

The Rise of Institutions

As the number of people needing assistance grew, a harsh public view of the poor and disabled emerged and a "reluctant welfareism" evolved. Political and bureaucratic measures to manage the situation were devised utilizing the methods of segregation and institutionalization (Hanes, 2004). The creation of disability-specific institutions in the 19th century served many purposes, not the least being the isolation and "management" of disabled children and adults. This design, thought charitable at the time, had its roots in a caring paternalism that made decisions on "what was best" for people in need and society

in general (Grizzard, 2004). Initially, many such facilities had inspired beginnings, the product of the labors of love of radical, free-thinkers of the day. These founders included vocational training programs to their curriculum. Manual training was an essential component of the coursework for deaf and/or blind boys and girls, with an emphasis on the rudiments of certain trades and the use of tools. In addition, the formation of habits of “industry” was as important as acquiring specific skillsets (Fay, 1893). Technical and mechanical arts were taught, resulting in many skilled occupations such as cabinetry, shoe-making, knitting and sewing. Such education was indeed experimental and did not guarantee successful careers in the community. While there were facilities that asserted that their graduates were seldom unemployed, as today, some business owners were hesitant to hire them. Consequently, alumni might choose not to leave the institution at all, continuing on as employees and living in homes nearby (Barnartt, 2001). Even in institutions where residents were never expected to live and work out in the community because they were labeled “feeble-minded” (p. 105) or “mental defectives” (p. 103), farming, cooking, sewing, and maintenance skills were taught. Such duties were then performed in-house, effectively lowering facility labor costs (Trent, 1994).

Samuel Gridley Howe, a person deeply dedicated to assisting poor and disabled people, established the Perkins School for the Blind in 1832. In an address to the public, school administrators discussed potential employment opportunities as teachers, craftsman, clergyman, tailors/seamstresses, and musicians for educated blind students (Brooks, 1833). This belief that children with blindness were not pathetic invalids, doomed to a life of ignorance and begging, was extremely empowering at the time. Howe and his wife, Julia, also worked towards establishing special education and training for those with developmental disabilities and mental illness (Magner, 2000). Despite the growing belief that people with disability were incapable of industry and productivity, institutional programs in the US clearly demonstrated that with training and support, disabled individuals had marketable skills. By working effectively, they had the capacity to lead independent and productive lives without relying on charity.

During this time period, even if not affiliated with a specific institution, having the benefit of an education could lead to vocations as teachers and clergy. Religious ministries were instituted by disabled people for disabled people. For example, the Methodist Church has a long tradition of a ministry for Deaf African Americans. Philip J. Hasenstab, the first black, deaf clergyman, began a mission in Chicago in 1894. He later collaborated with a fellow Deaf African American clergyman, Daniel Moylan, to found a similar interracial deaf mission in Baltimore. This historic enterprise later became known as The Christ Church, setting the example of racial integration in worship for the region ("Baltimore Deaf Church," 2004).

Freak Shows

Although much current research has been conducted on the freak show phenomenon and many stories have now been told, a brief mention of their significance to this discussion is important. Despite present day distaste, in the 1800's, many of these shows provided viable employment for disabled people. For some, being onstage proved extremely lucrative. Two of the highest paid entertainers were the beautiful and musically

talented conjoined twins, Violet and Daisy Hilton. It is reported that at their zenith in show business, they earned a combined salary of \$5000 per week (“Freaks of nature,” 2000). Even today, such an income is noteworthy.

Ironically, though the performances reinforced racial and able-bodied superiority myths and set the entertainers apart from mainstream society, behind the scenes, belonging to the troupe was a venue for some participants to live fairly conventional lives. In the best scenarios, when the last curtain fell and the audience went home, the satisfied entertainers were left with each other - belonging, appreciated, each having a unique role in the show. Together they were not freaks, they were stars. In spite of abusive circumstances, children being sold by their parents for exhibition, and general mistreatment, there were performers who enjoyed happy marriages and family lives (Stanton, 1997). With all that can be said about the exploitation of people with disability, some individuals with little means of support and no chance of experiencing a sense of normalcy had a reason to feel important as a freak show performer. By the 1950’s, most shows had closed due to increased sensitivities to disabled people. But as “states began crackdowns...they were often opposed by the very people they were meant to protect” (Wolf, 2005). Even now freak show entertainers defend their careers. Performers claim that they live typical lives, working routine jobs and entertaining in the carnies on the side for added income. Popular shows like the one reincarnated at Coney Island and HBO’s former television hit *Carnivale* indicate continued public interest; and Jennifer Miller’s *Circus Amok* clearly demonstrates that performers are still willing and eager to earn money satisfying the public’s continued fascination with freaks and geeks (Aponte-Gonzalez, 2006).

Employment Legislation for Veterans with Disability

Beginning in the 1600’s, North American colonists felt a responsibility to provide for the well-being of those soldiers who, upon returning home from active duty after being wounded in battles with Native Americans, would need assistance to secure housing, find and maintain employment and assimilate fully back into society.

As a result of the war with the Pequot Indians, the Pilgrims passed a law in the late 17th century that provided benefits to disabled veterans. In a rural environment where physical stamina and prowess could mean life or death, colonists knew that without supports, veterans and their families might not be able to survive. The root of legislation directly related to the employment of people with disability in the United States today lies in this civil act passed in 1693 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2010).

After the Revolutionary War, veterans were granted pensions paid out of individual state funds by the Continental Congress of 1776. By 1789, the United States federal government began allocating resources for this purpose. Since many wounded died, benefit rolls were relatively low until the Civil War. Due to improved hygiene and medical techniques, such as the prevalent practice of amputation, soldiers began sustaining injuries rather than succumbing to death (Adams, 2004). At the end of the Civil War, over 1.9 million veterans were added to the government rolls (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011).

It was not until just before WWI that rehabilitation programs for US veterans were initiated, connecting employment needs with services for people with disability. “Among the provisions of the War Risk Insurance Act Amendments of 1917 was the authority to establish courses for rehabilitation and vocational training for veterans with dismemberment, sight, hearing, and other permanent disabilities” (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, n.d., pg. 7). Before that time, service provision was based on the paternalistic assumption that veterans, like all disabled people, were unable to take care of themselves; therefore benefit funds were spent on domiciliary, hospital, and medical care. This belief in the veterans’ dependent status was also reflected by the emphasis on providing family benefits. It was accepted that returning soldiers with disability were no longer able to support their families (Gross, 2005). The addition of vocational rehabilitation to government provisions for veterans not only positively affected the lives of WWI soldiers, but had far-reaching ramifications for other disabled United States citizens.

A series of laws addressing employment issues for veterans with disability established a federal-state vocational education program. Soon, this program was open to non-veterans. In 1920, the Smith-Fess Act (referred to as the Civilian Rehabilitation Act) began rehabilitation programs for all disabled US citizens (“A brief history,” n.d.). Only physical disabilities were covered; disablement being defined as a “physical defect or infirmity.” US federal vocational program services focused on those which would yield the best employment outcomes, such as vocational guidance, counseling, education and training, occupational adjustment, and job placement services (Elliott, 2005).

Combined with the Social Security Act passed in 1935, such laws brought many disability issues to the forefront of US national affairs (Thompson, 1994). In addition, between WWI and WWII, there were numerous advances in medical procedures and medicines. The result was millions of veterans returned home in need of services after WWII. “In World War I, only about 2% of veterans with spinal-cord injuries survived more than a year, but three decades later during World War II, the discovery of antibiotics and more sophisticated medical interventions brought the survival rate up to 85%” (Welch, 1995).

These individuals were welcomed home by a grateful nation willing to provide them with education, housing, and vocational rehabilitation. Hardened and well organized warriors, these US veterans brought their energetic militancy into the arena of disability rights and their issues became prominent in the public eye. “Disabled soldiers were a difficult group to ignore” (Pompano, 2006). Veterans created support groups and foundations demanding assistance for individuals with physical and emotional disabilities.

In 1945, the Truman Administration, through the creation of the President’s Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, directly encouraged employers to hire disabled people (Jennings, 2007). This move clearly and dramatically supported the veterans’ campaign. But these strides were not only a result of the hard work of the returned military; while soldiers were fighting far from home, civilians with disability began waging a war of their own.

Employment Concerns in the Dawning Disability Rights Movement

In between the World Wars, during the Great Depression, the increasing popularity of the 20th century medical model resulted in narrowing the possible life experiences of people with disability, keeping the focus on what individuals could not do as a result of an impairment (Thompson, 1994). Times were financially challenging and disabled people wanted to work. If it was difficult for able-bodied workers to find jobs, it was next to impossible for those with disability. This caused anger and unrest.

In 1935, a militant New York City group of disabled people protested discrimination against workers with physical disability by the federal Works Progress Administration (Longmore, 2000). It was discovered that a job screening process eliminated all people with disability for work opportunities, regardless of their qualifications. When the news became public, instead of accepting the discriminatory practices, six people staged an immediate, impromptu sit-in. Soon, they were joined by other disabled demonstrators demanding jobs. The group eventually mobilized into the League of the Physically Handicapped. Their efforts resulted in over 1,500 jobs nationwide (Brown, 2000).

During the US Depression, protests were common, but militancy by people with disability was unprecedented. "Following the 1930's model of militant trade union protests," League members staged labor actions such as demonstrations, picket lines, and sit-ins in New York City and Washington, DC (Barnartt, 2001, p. 59). For the participants, more important than the jobs generated was the experience of emerging out of the closet of shame into the US mainstream. When interviewed years later, one woman said, "The protest transformed our view of ourselves" ("Scholar Uncovers," 1991). It was this new view that gave birth to the disability rights movement and fueled its progress towards the goal of full inclusion in US society and into the world of work.

In the wake of the 1950's polio epidemic and as veterans assimilated back into society, national attention focused on civilian needs. Federal rehabilitation management was moved from the United States Veterans Administration to the new Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (Welch, 1995). There were more programs and support systems in place than ever before for disabled people who wanted to work, but many barriers remained. While there were laws in place to encourage employers to hire disabled candidates, there was no concurrent legislation addressing building or transportation accessibility. While a prospective employee might have all the qualifications for a position, acquiring and maintaining employment was not possible if s/he could not (1) arrive at the work location, (2) enter the building and while there, (3) use the restroom facilities. These issues would be addressed, although still not successfully remedied, in the decades ahead.

Many US civilians added their efforts to secure equal employment opportunities for disabled people. One person who was instrumental in bringing about positive change with employment initiatives was Henry Viscardi. Since childhood, Mr. Viscardi had artificial legs and used Canadian crutches. In 1944, while volunteering for the American Red Cross, it became apparent that he would be a wonderful coach to soldiers who had

sustained amputations. Not only was he an expert on assistive devices, but his positive outlook and rich life experiences gave veterans hope for the future (Kiernan, 2004). In 1952, Viscardi started Abilities Inc. in Albertson, New York, a not-for-profit corporation that assisted disabled people to find jobs. Since then, as a result of his efforts, thousands of people with disability have secured work. In 2011, Abilities remains one of the world's foremost facilities for employment education, training and job placement (Abilities Inc., 2006).

Conclusion

Currently, many employers in the United States perceive people with disability as “incapable” (Nelson, n.d.) and believe that a disabling condition renders someone unemployable (“Economics,” 2010). Without historical information about the careers of significant numbers of disabled people, it is hard to dispel such myths. But, people with disability can work, do work and have always been an active part of the United States workforce despite misperceptions and discrimination. Throughout US history, countless disabled individuals have participated in daily tribal work activities, hunted, farmed, labored in cottage industries, maintained careers in business, academic and legal professions, performed plantation operations, learned skilled trades in institutional settings, and supported themselves as entertainers. After military conflicts, disabled veterans returned to previous jobs or were re-trained to explore other careers.

Future investigations are needed to chronicle the even broader range of work experiences in the US after the 1950's and subsequent civil rights movements and employment-related legislations. Since many historical examples could not be included here, this paper serves as a preface to the body of work to come, providing a foundation upon which that future research can stand. Surely, this data will continue to demonstrate that, in many cases, being disabled does not have to result in being unemployed. In addition and of much more importance, it will reveal that the employment records of people with disability, though noteworthy, are neither astounding nor heroic—simply “business as usual.”

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