ABSTRACT
In Harm’s Way: Wisconsin Workers and Disability
from the Gilded Age to the Great Depression

Karalee Surface
Marquette University, 2015

During the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the American workplace proved especially dangerous to its workers’ lives and limbs. The introduction of mass-production, coupled with a lack of safeguards on mechanized equipment and a dearth of workplace safety or sanitation regulations, ensured that an ever-growing number of workers were maimed or killed. Wisconsin legislators initially sought to remedy the issue of workplace violence by issuing a series of safety laws in the late 1870s and early 1880s. This, however, failed to stem the number of accident victims. Furthermore, the common law liability system through which injured workers could seek restitution from their employers was woefully inadequate for aiding disabled workers in their time of greatest need. In the early 1900s, as communities were increasingly unable to provide financial assistance to these workers and their families, Wisconsin was among the first states to introduce a no-fault workmen’s compensation law that ensured the injured parties quick and reliable reimbursement for their losses.

This project explores the impact of work-related injuries on turn-of-the-century Wisconsin workers, restoring disabled workers to the narrative of nineteenth-century industrialization. At a macro-level, it recounts hazardous working conditions of the farms, lumber operations, and manufacturing enterprises of the state, giving particular attention to the havoc that working wrought on the human body. It also explores both the worker’s efforts to seek legal redress and the prejudices often directed at them by their “able-bodied” peers. The study concludes with a micro-level analysis that documents the experience of industrial violence at a personal level. It draws on a wide variety of sources, including institutional records from the state’s Industrial Commission and Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, newspapers, magazines, philanthropic journals, and four surveys of disabled Wisconsin workers that were conducted between 1907 and 1926. Ultimately, it reveals how disabling work injuries thrust individuals into a complex and often contradictory post-accident world, making an indelible impact—for better or for worse—on their lives.