

## *Packingtown*

Soon after the publication of *The Jungle* in 1906, Upton Sinclair lamented that in writing his novel about Chicago's meat packing industry that he had aimed for the public's heart and had hit instead its stomach. The American public had in fact responded with considerable alarm to Sinclair's graphic descriptions of processing practices in the plants. President Roosevelt responded by harnessing that outcry and successfully forced through Congress the Meat Inspection Act of 1906. Whether he intended to or not, Roosevelt had reinforced the public's inclination to ignore the actual focus of Sinclair's novel.

Sinclair himself was far less concerned with sanitation than he was with the plight of factory labor. Two years before the publication of *The Jungle*, he had arrived in Chicago, hoping to write a novel for the industrial worker equal to what Harriet Beecher Stowe had written for slaves. He succeeded, at least seemingly. His novel depicted the fate of Jurgis Rudkus, a Lithuanian immigrant who, like tens of thousands of other immigrants, had found his way to Chicago and was soon working within the meat processing factories. While the reading public was shocked at the appalling sanitary conditions in the factory where Rudkus worked and worried about what went into their sausage, Sinclair was concerned with the conditions under which workers like Rudkus produced the sausage. Little matter though, as the packinghouses themselves focused instead upon the high cost labor that went into producing that sausage. Workers struggled as a result, but the packers may have had little choice but to exploit their own workers.

By the early 1900s Chicago's Packingtown had taken mass production to its rational extreme. Unlike many other industries that were increasingly dependent upon technology, the packing industry was highly labor-intensive and its factories did not easily lend themselves to advances in technology, although its factories were increasingly dependent upon refrigeration and the packers did introduce conveyors to shift carcasses from worker to worker. Soon, even the most skilled butchers within the factories were doing nothing more than cutting a carcass into two halves and most other workers were assigned even less demanding tasks. With little skill being required within the plants, the packers could easily replace any worker by any of the hundreds of immigrants that waited each day for work outside Packingtown's entry gate. Wages dropped steadily as a result but with competition between the packers being severe—no one packer could increase wages to a livable level without risking bankruptcy. None were tempted to do so in any case and, as might be expected, the packinghouses fought every effort by workers to better their lot, viciously targeting any attempt to unionize the industry. The packers workforce was diverse, with Rudkus's fellow Lithuanians working side-by-side with Sicilians, Slovenes, Poles and Russian Jews. Though the plants were integrated, when its workers finished their shifts they returned to neighborhoods that were deeply divided, with workers and their families living lives defined by their ethnicity.

While each ethnic group took pride in its culture, ethnicity cost the workers and their families plenty. Often suspicious, if not hostile to one another, immigrants were more easily divided than united. While union organizers worked to cross ethnic boundaries, the

packinghouses pitted one immigrant group against the other whenever they could and when that strategy threatened to fail, one race against another.

It was in this environment that Sinclair's Rudkus struggled. Working and living in squalid conditions, he is injured and loses his job and takes to drink. His wife dies in childbirth, and Rudkus drifts from job to job, eventually regaining his health as a migratory farm worker. He returns to Chicago and finds work beneath the city digging tunnels. Injured once again, he ends up a beggar, soon finding himself in jail. From a fellow inmate he learns safecracking and upon his release he at long last begins to make good money as a thief but returns to Packingtown where he faces a strike. He stumbles across his lost wife's cousin, a prostitute, and she gives him some money for food. At that low point he hears a socialist speaker and comes to realize that this movement could remedy the ills of the world through political action and the restructuring of society. He dedicates himself to the cause.

First published as a serial in the socialist *Appeal to Reason*, *The Jungle* sold well in novel form, making Sinclair a household name. He had hoped to see the novel attract members to the Socialist Party, which had been organized in mid-1901. The party did benefit from its publication, growing rapidly for a few years before stagnating in the years following the elections of 1912 and eventually collapsing under government repression during World War I. The chief beneficiaries of the novel's popularity, however, were undoubtedly Roosevelt and, ironically, the packinghouses. Somehow the public's attention had—despite Sinclair's hope—failed to focus upon working conditions and had instead fell upon sanitation. The bill that he forced through Congress was so compromised that it did little to address the public's health concerns, though it perhaps did set a precedent for much-stricter government regulation. If Roosevelt's actions were tepid, he nonetheless did much to add to his growing reputation. As for the packinghouses, they also benefited. Facing regulations that were easy to ignore, no packer lost its competitive advantage and they continued to thrive. Once more, the regulations also made it easier for the Packers to market their products overseas. And, needless to say, the industry successfully fought off the unions, having no fear of government intervention on the workers behalf.