

Popular Reactions to Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*

by Lidia Rubio

In the early 1900s, Chicago was the largest meat packing industry in the whole world. With the implementation of new machinery and modern processes, large companies were able to treat 7,000 pigs in just one day. A 1902 news report published by Scientific America stated, "Yearly 3,000,000 cattle and 5,000,000 hogs are slaughtered and converted into packinghouse products in what is known as 'Packing Town.'"¹ Undoubtedly, Chicago's economy was booming and the need for workers was increasing. However, even though the journal article describes the growing industry, it did not describe the unsanitary working conditions that went on in the meat industry.

In 1906, the meat packing industry was growing drastically and the need for workers increased even more. However, the novel by Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*, published in 1906, revealed the horrifying and unsanitary working conditions that employees lived through. The working class of America faced gruesome working conditions and they did not have any rights or say in the matter. For example, one worker's job was to kill cattle, but it was not just any type of cattle. "There were cattle which had been fed on "whisky-malt," the refuse of the breweries, and had become what the men called "steerly" —which means covered with boils. It was a nasty job killing these, for when you plunged your knife into them they would burst and splash foul-smelling stuff into your face; and when a man's sleeves were smeared with blood, and his hands steeped in it, how was he ever to wipe his face, or clear his eyes so that he could see?"² Workers went through many disgusting experiences that caused them to be infected with diseases and become severely injured by the machinery.

Even though the working conditions were extremely terrible, the most unimaginable ingredients were processed along with the meat. Companies would make sausage from spoiled meat and grind anything that crossed the meat grinders way. "This is no fairy story and no joke; the meat would be shoveled into carts, and the man who did the shoveling would not trouble to lift out a rat even when he saw one—there were things that went into the sausage in comparison with which a poisoned rat was a tidbit."³ Meat packing plants would sell spoiled meat along with many other disgusting ingredients to the public and did not care, nor did not intend to fix anything. Even though there were government officials that would go out to inspect the plants, they remained silent, as if no law was being violated, because they were bought by the government. "The people of Chicago saw the government inspectors in Packingtown, and they all took that to mean that they were protected from

¹ "50, 100 & 150 Years Ago." Scientific American, vol. 286, no. 6, 2002, pp. 14–14. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/26059703.

² Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle : A Novel*, (Open Road Media, 2015), 70-106. ProQuest Ebook Central.

³ Sinclair, 70-106.

diseased meat; they did not understand that these hundred and sixty-three inspectors had been appointed at the request of the packers, and that they were paid by the United States government to certify that all the diseased meat was kept in the state. They had no authority beyond that; for the inspection of meat to be sold in the city and state, the whole force in Packingtown consisted of three henchmen of the local political machine!"⁴ Upton Sinclair did a tremendous job in revealing such horrifying conditions, yet his novel did not mention how the wealthy class felt about such conditions, nor their thoughts about having rats in their meat for dinner.

The revelation of Sinclair was a success. The activist can be given credit for influencing the establishment of the Pure Food and Drug Act as well as the Meat Inspection Act, passed June 30, 1906; six months after *The Jungle* was published. However, Upton Sinclair was not the only activist pushing for a reform. Through the help of muckraking journalism, the public was starting to realize that industries cared more about their money than consumer's health. As Ilyse D. Barkan, a Harvard University law graduate and graduate student in History at Brown University mentions, readers of Ladies Home Journal, who were mostly women, tried to get the attention of the president himself. "Readers of the Ladies Home Journal responded to such articles as 'The Great American Fraud' with letter writing campaigns that some historians have credited with bringing the issues of product adulteration and industrial fraud to the attention of President Roosevelt. Many of the writers were women. The Pure Food Committee of the General Federation of Women's clubs petitioned and wrote letters to the president, the Secretary of Agriculture, and members of Congress."⁵ The American public was beginning to realize that companies were committing fraud and demanded a change from the government and the president himself.

Furthermore, Sinclair's novel made a great impact in the meat industry, as ninety years later, new laws and regulations are followed in a meat packing plant to achieve safety and sanitation. Alpha Meat Packing Co., in South Gate, California, promised clean meat to consumers and described the various inspection regulations that are being used, as well as safety for their employees. Steve Sayer, vice president and superintendent of production at Alpha, mentions that "The branch of the USDA that inspects meat and poultry establishments is the Federal Safety Inspection System" (FSIS). This agency's primary goal is to ensure that only wholesome unadulterated meats are manufactured for commerce. Federal OSHA's primary goal is to ensure the safety and health of workers in the workplace."⁶ Looking back to Packingtown in 1906, Alpha Meat Packing Co. does not compare one bit to it. This source was useful because it gave information about meat plants ninety years after Packingtown, except it did not mention how Americans reacted to the discoveries of *The Jungle*.

Throughout my research, I found many interesting details about how Americans reacted after reading *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair. The horrible and unsanitary working

⁴ Sinclair.

⁵ Ilyse D. Barkan, "Industry Invites Regulation: The Passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906." *American Journal Of Public Health*, vol. 75, no. 1, Jan. 1985, 18–26. EBSCOhost,

⁶ Steve Sayer. "Cleaning Up the Jungle." *Occupational Health & Safety*, vol. 66, no. 5, 1997, 22. ProQuest.

conditions in the meatpacking industry, caused a tremendous panic in the public. By writing letters directly to the president and congress, the public obtained the establishment of the Pure Food and Drug Act passed by president Theodore Roosevelt in 1906.⁷ However, even though all the sources helped me answer different parts of my question, I still did not have enough details as to how Americans really reacted. In order to thoroughly answer my research question, sources such as a diary, a letter, a news headline, could have helped me to obtain more details about the public and their thoughts. Obtaining other perspectives as well, would have helped me answer my question fully. For example, knowing what the political machines thought, exactly how much money they got paid to remain silent, and details about whether or not they ate meat; and if they did, where else did they purchase their meat from? Lastly, finding lawsuits that might have occurred during this time period against a meat packing plant, would also be extremely beneficial, allowing for further research.

⁷ Barkan, "Industry Invites Regulation," 18–26.