

from How the Other Half Lives
by Jacob Riis

Jacob Riis, a Danish immigrant, worked for 12 years on the Lower East Side as a police reporter for the New York Tribune. In 1890 he published How the Other Half Lives, a shocking glimpse of slum life.

Be a little careful, please! The hall is dark and you might stumble over the children pitching pennies back there. Not that it would hurt them; kicks and cuffs are their daily diet. They have little else. Here where the hall turns and dives into utter darkness is a step, and another, another. A flight of stairs. You can feel your way, if you cannot see it. Close? Yes! What would you have? All the fresh air that ever enters these stairs comes from the hall door that is forever slamming, and from the windows of dark bedrooms that in turn receive from the stairs their sole supply of the elements God meant to be free, but man deals out with such niggardly hand. That was a woman filling her pail by the hydrant you just bumped against. The sinks are in the hallway, that all the tenants may have access—and all be poisoned alike by their summer stench. Hear the pump squeak! It is the lullaby of tenement house babes. In summer, when a thousand thirsty throats pant for a cooling drink in this block, it is worked in vain. But the saloon, whose open door you passed in the hall, is always there. The smell of it has followed you up. Here is a door. Listen! That short hacking cough, that tiny, helpless wail—what do they mean? They mean that the soiled bow of white [a sign of a recent birth] you saw on the door downstairs will have another story to tell—Oh! a sadly familiar story—before the day is at an end. The child is dying with measles. With half a chance it might have lived; but it had none. That dark bedroom killed it.

Little Spinner (1908)

The photographs of Lewis Hine, as he worked for the National Child Labor Committee, were instrumental in changing child labor laws. In Hine's own words about this photograph in a South Carolina mill, "she was tending her 'sides' like a veteran, but after I took the photo, the overseer came up and said in an apologetic tone that was pathetic, 'she just happened in'."



from The Shame of the Cities
by Lincoln Steffens

Muckraking journalist Lincoln Steffens investigated political corruption in American cities. As you read this excerpt from his 1904 book, consider why he viewed Philadelphia as “a disgrace not to itself alone, nor to Pennsylvania, but to the United States.”

Rudolph Blankenburg, a persistent fighter for the right and the use of the right to vote (and, by the way, an immigrant), sent out just before one election a registered letter to each voter on the rolls of a certain selected division. Sixty-three per cent were returned marked “not at,” “removed,” “deceased,” etc. From one four-story house where forty-four voters were addressed, eighteen letters came back undelivered; from another of forty-eight voters, came back forty-one letters; from another sixty-one out of sixty-two; from another forty-four out of forty-seven. Six houses in one division were assessed at one hundred and seventy-two voters, more than the votes cast in the previous election in any one of two hundred entire divisions.

The repeating is done boldly, for the machine controls the election officers, often choosing them from among the fraudulent names; and when no one appears to serve, assigning the heeler [local political party worker] ready for the expected vacancy. The police are forbidden by law to stand within thirty feet of the polls, but they are at the box and they are there to see that the machine’s orders are obeyed and that repeaters whom they help to furnish are permitted to vote without “intimidation” on the names they, the police, have supplied.

The editor of an anti-machine paper who was looking about for himself once told me that a ward leader who knew him well asked him into a polling place. “I’ll show you how it’s done,” he said, and he had the repeaters go round and round voting again and again on the names handed them on slips. “But,” as the editor said, “that isn’t the way it’s done.” The repeaters go from one polling place to another, voting on slips, and on their return rounds change coats, hats, etc.

Five Cents a Spot (1889)

Jacob Riis book, How the Other Half Lives, was accompanied by photographs. In this picture, highlighting the overcrowded conditions inside tenements, Riis goes inside an apartment where an individual could rent a spot for five cents a night.



from The History of the Standard Oil Company

Journalist Ida M. Tarbell exposed John D. Rockefeller's ruthless building of Standard Oil Company, the first major industrial monopoly in the United States, in her 1904 book.

When Mr. Rockefeller began to gather the oil markets into his hands he had a task whose field was literally the world, for already, in 1871, the year before he first appeared as an important factor in the oil trade, refined oil was going into every civilized country of the globe. Of the five and a half million barrels of crude oil produced that year, the world used five millions, over three and a half of which went to foreign lands. This was the market which had been built up in the first ten years of business by the men who had developed the oil territory and invented the processes of refining and transporting, and this was the market, still further developed, of course, that Mr. Rockefeller inherited when he succeeded in corralling the refining and transporting of oil. It was this market he proceeded to organize.

The process of organization seems to have been natural and highly intelligent. The entire country was buying refined oil for illumination. Many refiners had their own agents out looking for markets; others sold to wholesale dealers, or jobbers, who placed trade with local dealers, usually grocers. Mr. Rockefeller's business was to replace independent agents and jobbers by his own employees. This system, inaugurated in the seventies, has been developed until now the Standard Oil Company of each state has its own marketing department, whose territory is divided and watched over in the above fashion. The entire oil-buying territory of the country is thus covered by local agents reporting to division headquarters. These report in turn to the head of the state marketing department, and his reports go to the general marketing headquarters in New York.

But the Standard Oil agents were not sent into a territory back in the seventies simply to sell all the oil they could by efficient service and aggressive pushing; they were sent there to sell all the oil that was bought. "The coal-oil business belongs to us," was Mr. Rockefeller's motto, and from the beginning of his campaign in the markets his agents accepted and acted on that principle. If a dealer bought but a barrel of oil a year, it must be from Mr. Rockefeller.

Breaker Boys (1911)

The photographs of Lewis Hine, as he worked for the National Child Labor Committee, were instrumental in changing child labor laws. "Breaker Boys" were used in the anthracite coal mines to separate slate rock from the coal after it had been brought out of the shaft. They were usually 8-12 years old and often worked 14-16 hours a day.

