

In terms of food safety, perhaps the most notorious of these revelations came in 1906 from the then-28-year-old novelist, Upton Sinclair. The outrage caused by his novel *The Jungle* is often credited with hastening the passage in 1906 of the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act. While often considered solely in U.S. domestic political terms, these events had implications far beyond Progressive era politics. This story can be followed around the globe, from the slaughterhouses of Chicago to British colonial South Africa. Our guides on this journey will consist of government reports, Presidential correspondence, and the satirical set of postcards that caused Graycroft such agitation.

***The Jungle* and Government Investigations**

In 1904, Upton Sinclair spent roughly seven weeks in Chicago conducting research for what would become *The Jungle*. His fictional depiction of Jurgis Rudkus, a Lithuanian immigrant stockyard worker, and his family revealed poor working conditions and unsanitary meat processing techniques. In a letter to President Theodore Roosevelt, Sinclair described his own observations upon which he had built the fictional Rudkus story:

I saw with my own eyes hams, which had spoiled in pickle, being pumped full of chemicals to destroy the odor. I saw waste ends of smoked beef stored in barrels in a cellar, in a condition of filth which I could not describe in a letter. I saw rooms in which sausage meat was stored, with poisoned rats laying about, and the dung of rats covering them.²

The novel appeared in serial form in 1905 editions of the socialist journal *Appeal to Reason*. On January 25, 1906, Sinclair gained a wider audience when Doubleday published *The Jungle*, catapulting it to near instant national and international notoriety. The New York Public Library reported it as one of its “books most in demand” in June of that year.³ The novel’s influence, however, quickly spread far beyond American shores. The British publishers of the novel, for example, stopped importing copies from the United States in June 1906 and began printing their own edition “due to the big demand for it.” The *New York Times* reported that it was to appear serially in several languages: “Arrangements have been completed for its publication in *L’Action*

²Upton Sinclair to President Theodore Roosevelt, March 10, 1906, page 3; *Letters Received, 1893-1906*; Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, 1839-1981, RG 16; NACP.

³“Books in Demand,” *The New York Times*, June 16, 1906.

of Paris, *Il Tempo* of Milan, in an underground revolutionary paper in Russia, and in a Dutch paper at Amsterdam."⁴

The issue of food safety had been a heated one for many years. In 1895, Congress passed a food inspection law, although it was relatively weak. Several investigations followed, including one in 1898 that looked into the "embalmed beef" allegedly sent to U.S. troops serving in the Spanish-American war. Yet, Sinclair's novel captured the attention of America and the world. A committed socialist, he had hoped that his work would encourage Americans to enact sweeping changes in the U.S. economic system. Instead, his work led to regulatory reforms that left capitalism intact. In Sinclair's words, "I aimed at the public's heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach."⁵

The federal government responded to Sinclair's and others' claims by launching several investigations. On March 10, 1906, staff from the Agriculture Department's Bureau of Animal Industry traveled from Washington to Chicago "for the purpose of conducting an investigation ... [into] the manner in which the meat-inspection work is carried on at that place." A.D. Melvin, Chief of the Bureau, noted that this was necessary due to "discussions during the past several months regarding the conditions existing at the Union Stock Yards." These "discussions" had appeared in medical journals but got spread by "certain persons who had apparently made only a superficial inquiry."⁶

These "certain persons" likely included Upton Sinclair. Indeed, the Bureau's Chicago inspection committee took Sinclair to task for numerous statements in his novel, from which the report quoted. For example, Sinclair had written:

This Government inspector did not have the manner of a man who was worked to death. He was apparently not haunted by the fear that a hog might get by him before he had finished testing. ... This inspector wore a

"The Publishers," *The New York Times*, June 30, 1906.

⁴See Upton Sinclair, "What Life Means to Me," *Cosmopolitan Magazine* (October 1906), 594. This citation is provided in Arlene Finger Kantor, "Upton Sinclair and the Pure Food and Drugs Act of 1906," *American Journal of Public Health*, 66 (December 1976), 1202-1205.

⁵"Report of the Department Committee on the Federal Meat-Inspection Service at Chicago," 23rd *Annual Report of the Bureau of Animal Industry for the Year 1906*, U.S. Department of Agriculture (Washington, DC: GPO, 1908), 406.

blue uniform, with brass buttons, and, as it were, put the stamp of official approval upon the things which were done.⁷

The Bureau of Animal Industry report noted, however, that "The Government inspectors ... do not wear blue uniforms with brass buttons ... It is, therefore, not unlikely that the person referred to in the above statement was not a Federal inspector, but a house policeman or fireman."⁸

Sinclair also had written that:

There would be meat stored in great piles in rooms, and the water from leaky roofs would drip over it, and thousands of rats would race about on it. It was too dark in these storage places to see well, but a man could run his hand over these piles of meat and sweep off handfuls of the dried dung of rats.

However, the Bureau inspectors observed:

[M]eat piled upon the floor in many places, and in some cases a small amount of water ... was dripping upon it. The committee visited each and every room in the 21 establishments which have Federal inspection ... In all of the rooms in which meat was stored the committee made it a point to observe carefully to see if any rat dung could be detected. The committee was unable to find any rat dung on meat.⁹

The Bureau's report did find, however, that those facilities without Federal inspection were less sanitary than those with such oversight. Regarding one non-inspected slaughterhouse they reported, "A general air of slovenliness pervades the place.... The interior bears evidence of having been whitewashed at some time in the remote past. The windows were dirty ... [s]ome ... were covered with cobwebs. The water closet

⁷"Report on Certain Publications," 23rd *Annual Report of the Bureau of Animal Industry for the Year 1906*, U.S. Department of Agriculture (Washington, DC: GPO, 1908), 454.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Ibid.*, 456.

was located on the ground floor, and contained one seat. It was without any flush and appeared filthy and unkept."¹⁰

The Bureau's committee praised the quality of its inspectors, who operated under adverse conditions. It concluded that "the [federal inspection] force at Chicago is doing its full duty intelligently, squarely, and unflinchingly. But ... the force employed at Chicago is ... inadequate numerically."¹¹ Further, the Bureau's inspectors conducted their work under an 1895 law that required ante-mortem (pre-slaughter) inspections of all cattle, sheep, and pigs whose meat would be involved in interstate commerce. However, "no specific provision was made for funds with which to perform this work, and the annual appropriation has never been sufficient to enable the Bureau to cover all establishments carrying on an interstate business. Indeed, many establishments which applied for inspection had to be refused on account of lack of money to carry on the work."¹²

President Roosevelt, after receiving the Bureau's report in April 1906, decided to send two investigators of his own, James Bronson Reynolds and Charles P. Neill, to determine the state of Chicago's stockyards. In part, the President sent these additional investigators because of complaints that he received not only involved "the packing houses, but also to a certain extent reflected upon the action of the Government inspectors, and I came to the conclusion that it was best to have an investigation by outside individuals who could not be charged with being in any way interested in the matter."¹³ Had the Bureau cast its own inspectors in an unrealistically positive light, the President seems to have been wondering? On June 2, 1906, Reynolds and Neill reported back to Roosevelt that they had found generally unsanitary conditions:

[W]e saw meat shoveled from filthy wooden floors, piled on tables rarely washed, pushed from room to room in rotten box carts, in all of which processes it was in the way of gathering dirt, splinters, floor filth, and the expectoration of tuberculous and other diseased workers. Where comment

¹⁰"Report of the Department Committee on the Federal Meat-Inspection Service at Chicago," 23rd *Annual Report of the Bureau of Animal Industry for the Year 1906*, U.S. Department of Agriculture (Washington, DC: GPO, 1908), 431.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 442.

¹²"Report of the Chief of Bureau," 23rd *Annual Report of the Bureau of Animal Industry for the Year 1906*, U.S. Department of Agriculture (Washington, DC: GPO, 1908), 11.

¹³Message from the President of the United States Transmitting the Report of Mr. James Bronson Reynolds and Commissioner Charles P., Neill, Special Committee Appointed to Investigate the Conditions in the Stock Yards of Chicago, June 4, 1906, 49th Cong., 1st Sess., H.Doc. 873, 1 [Serial Set Volume 4990].

was made to floor superintendents about these matters, it was always the reply that this meat would afterwards be cooked, and that this sterilization would prevent any danger from its use. Even this ... is not wholly true. A very considerable portion of the meat so handled is sent out as smoked products and in the form of sausages, which are prepared to be eaten without being cooked.¹⁴

The investigators found, however, that overall the federal inspectors were doing their jobs well. Nevertheless, they agreed with the Secretary of Agriculture that "the present number of inspectors is certainly inadequate."¹⁵

International Impact

Reynolds and Neill's report was not immediately made public; still Sinclair's and others' exposés had a broad audience. Apart from any public health concerns, the U.S. government and corporations such as Armour and Company also feared the economic effect of such adverse publicity. After all, if American goods were less popular or even banned, other nations' meat industries stood to gain at U.S. expense.

These were not ungrounded concerns. In Germany, for example, the German Butchers' Association petitioned the government not to enter into a treaty with the United States that would allow for increased imports of American beef. Their petition included "copious extracts from Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*."¹⁶ The London *Daily Telegraph* supported British import duties that would favor British colonies' meat products over those from the United States.¹⁷ If the *Daily Telegraph*'s position gained support, U.S. meat packers stood to lose a prime customer, the British Empire.

Reynolds and Neill had reported that a "particularly glaring instance of uncleanness was found in a room where the best grade of sausage was being prepared for export." A worker transported sausage meat in a wheel barrow that was "filthy with grease." He then threw the meat out on tables and proceeded to climb on the table and handled the meat with unwashed hands. Reynolds and Neill noted that "there was no

¹⁴"Conditions in the Stock Yards of Chicago," June 4, 1906, 59th Cong., 1st Sess., H.Doc. 873, 6 [Serial Set Volume 4990].

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁶"Argue Against Our Meat: German Butchers Quote Accusations of Lax Inspection Methods," *The New York Times*, June 3, 1906.

¹⁷"London View of Message: Englishmen Urged to Avoid American Meats, Pending Sweeping Reform," *The New York Times*, June 5, 1906.

water in this room at all, and the only method the man adopted for cleaning his hands was to rub them against his dirty apron or on his still filthier trousers."¹⁸

This news would not have been comforting to British importers of American sausages. Indeed, Arthur Giles, Secretary of the Federation of Grocers' Associations of the United Kingdom, wrote to Roosevelt that "The present state of alarm is almost paralyzing the trade in American canned meats." Apparently the British public had read Sinclair's descriptions of the Chicago meat industry if not the Reynolds and Neill report. Giles was unclear as to the efficacy of the recently passed Meat Inspection Act of June 30, 1906, for he hoped that "we shall receive some intimation from you that you are satisfied that such alterations have been made in the methods of packing canned meats in the United States, that we may be assured that the Government will now give its Certificate [of safety] to all such goods, so that the distributors in this country may be able to assure the British public."¹⁹ President Roosevelt quickly informed the U.S. ambassador in London that he was "at liberty to inform [the] Grocers' Federation that under the new law we can and will guarantee the fitness in all respects of canned meat containing [the] Government stamp. If any trouble comes therewith, protest can be made not merely to sellers of goods but to [the] United States Government itself."²⁰

However, legislation and presidential pronouncements did not immediately alter perceptions either at home or abroad. In July 1906, the British government sent Lt. Colonel Percy E.F. Hobbs of the United Kingdom's Army Service Corps to Chicago. His task was to inspect the quality of American canning factories since the British government purchased U.S. "preserved meat" for its troops.

Hobbs found that the inspection regimen instituted through the Meat Inspection Act had "very materially added to the protection of the purchaser and show[s] that the United States Government is determined to greatly strengthen, and if necessary purify, the inspection service." He also observed that "Although the Plants vary very much,

¹⁸"Conditions in the Stock Yards of Chicago," June 4, 1906, 59th Cong., 1st Sess., H.Doc. 873, 6-7 [Serial Set Volume 4990].

¹⁹Letter of Arthur Giles, Secretary, Federation of Grocers' Associations of the United Kingdom to President Theodore Roosevelt, July 3, 1906; *General Correspondence, 1906-75* (Entry PI-191:17), Box 4; Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, 1839-1981, RG 16; NACP.

²⁰Telegram from President Theodore Roosevelt to Whitelaw Reid, U.S. Ambassador to Great Britain, July 7, 1906; *General Correspondence, 1906-75* (Entry PI-191:17), Box 4; Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, 1839-1981, RG 16; NACP.

so far as the *handling* of the product is concerned, the methods, *on the whole*, are satisfactory and not universally disgusting, as has, I am told, been suggested."²¹

Nevertheless, Hobbs recommended that "at a time when thousands of live cattle are annually imported into the United Kingdom from both North and South America, the question of establishing in England a Government Factory for canning meat for the British Army and Navy should be given serious consideration." In spite of American safety improvements, England would be better off (from both a health and cost perspective) if it controlled the canning process itself, Hobbs argued. "Such [a canning] establishment would free us from dependence on foreign—as opposed to Colonial purchase" and "would give employment to a considerable amount of British labour."²²

Hobbs's investigation did not go unnoticed at the highest levels of the American government. On August 17, 1906, Roosevelt met with him at the President's summer residence in Oyster Bay, New York. The President was interested to hear, wrote Hobbs, if there "were any matters connected with my investigations which I considered should be brought to his notice." The President also wished to see a copy of Hobbs's report.²³ The President realized that the United States' economic well-being—in addition to its physical health—could be affected by unsanitary industrial practices.

U.S. industrialists also reacted with dismay to the possible loss to the American economy from the publicity regarding meatpacking processes. Sinclair himself estimated that the "canned meat trade had dropped off 17 per cent" since the publication of *The Jungle*.²⁴ The exact effect of his novel and other reports on the meat industry is likely too difficult to measure with any precision.²⁵ Industrial giant John D. Rockefeller, however, implicitly berated Sinclair for any damage to U.S. trade:

We are giving the enemy ammunition to fire at us ... Take the attacks we made upon our own packing business.... Those fellows abroad snatched at our own charges against our own business with the greatest glee. They

²¹Lt. Col. Percy E.F. Hobbs, Army Service Corps, "Report of Inspections at Certain of the Meat Canning Factories in the United States of America as Affecting the Supply of Preserved Meat to the British Army," July and August 1906, 37. Located in *General Correspondence, 1906-75* (Entry PI-191:17), Box 6; Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, 1839-1981, RG 16; NACP.

²²*Ibid.*, 38.

²³*Ibid.*, 38-39.

²⁴"The Boycott of *The Jungle*: Upton Sinclair's Book in Trouble in the Packing Centres," *The New York Times*, May 18, 1906.

²⁵One source noted that, while there had been a decrease in the amount of U.S. canned beef exported, this could very likely have to do with a decrease in Japanese wartime demand following the conclusion of its conflict with Russia. See "Meat Trade Facts," *The New York Times*, July 17, 1906.

used them promptly as ammunition with which to attack America and everything American, especially American manufactured products and trade."²⁶

J. Ogden Armour, head of the meatpacking firm Armour and Company, stated that he believed that Reynolds and Neill's report was "unfair," and that *The Jungle* was an attempt at sensationalism. He was not opposed to inspections, he stated, "within reasonable bounds.... There is a danger that the inspection would involve so much red tape ... as to be useless." Armour added, however, that the "agitation" of Sinclair and others had "done us much harm. European countries are wondering why our Government is thus crippling its meat industry, and foreign packers have not been slow in telling their people not to purchase American goods. The harm that can be done in a minute may take a long time to correct."²⁷ As the London *Daily Telegraph* stated in June 1906, "Americans will not expect our confidence in the wholesomeness of their food products will be restored for many a long year."²⁸

The quick spread of information—particularly through the global British Empire—may have added to their dread. For, as Rockefeller might have said, the "ammunition" of bad publicity spread around the globe, from Chicago to the British colony of South Africa.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the issue of the allegedly libelous postcards described at the beginning of this article was forwarded by the American embassy in London to the British Foreign Office. The British informed the U.S. government that under the Empire's postal laws the cards were not libelous "from the mere fact that the word 'Chicago' appears on them."²⁹ Whether Armour and Company or any other Chicago firm ever sought further legal action is unclear based on the records examined for this article.

Armour's reaction, however, reflects a concern for its public image not just at home but on the global stage. A consumer of canned meat in Cape Town would likely never step foot in a Chicago stockyard. Yet, the international food trade would bring

²⁶"Rockefeller Urges National Upbuilding," *The New York Times*, Oct. 5, 1906.

²⁷"J.O. Armour, Home Again, Defends the Packers," *The New York Times*, June 27, 1906.

²⁸"London View of Message: Englishmen Urged to Avoid American Meats, Pending Sweeping Reform," *The New York Times*, June 5, 1906.

²⁹File 9106, *Numerical and Minor File, 1906-1910*; General Records of the Department of State, RG 59; NACP.

a can of Chicago meat to him or her. Global information networks also ensured that consumers would have information in a variety of media regarding that same can of potted meat. Companies such as Armour stood to gain financially from the increased geographical reach of both the meat trade and information. As the comedic Chicago "tinned meat" postcards indicate, however, these developments also enabled unfavorable news to spread widely and rapidly.

Teaching Suggestions

- 1) Provide pairs of students with copies of the postcards and Cartoon Analysis Worksheets. Ask them to study the cards and complete the worksheet. Then lead a class discussion based on their responses. Generate a list of questions on the board that the postcards prompt.

[For access to the postcards, visit <http://archives.gov/research/arc/>. In the search box type the identifying ARC number 2657925. This document is from the *Numerical and Minor File, 1906-10* of General Records of the Department of State, National Archives Record Group 59.]

[The cartoon analysis worksheet is available on the National Archives website at http://archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/cartoon_analysis_worksheet.pdf.]

- 2) Ask your students to read pages three and four of Upton Sinclair's letter to President Theodore Roosevelt. Then direct them to write a "letter to the editor" by Sinclair in which he offers his opinion of the postcards. Suggest that they consider whether he would have thought that the postcards supported his findings and whether he believed that there was adequate government food inspection.

[For access to the letter from Upton Sinclair to President Theodore Roosevelt, visit <http://archives.gov/research/arc/>. In the search box, type the identifying ARC number 301981.]

- 3) Share with your students information from the background essay about how these postcards came to the attention of the federal government. Then ask them to read the excerpt from the Reynolds-Neill report. In light of this document, discuss to what extent they think that the concerns of Armour and Company's R.L. Graycroft were valid.

[For access to the Reynolds-Neill report excerpt, visit <http://archives.gov/research/arc/>. In the search box, type the identifying ARC number 595296.]

- 4) Divide your class into groups of three to four students. Direct them to play the role of advisors to President Theodore Roosevelt in 1906. Inform them that he has asked for a recommendation on whether or not the federal government should take action to regulate the meat packing industry.

Within their groups they should consider the evidence presented to them through Sinclair's letter, the excerpt from the Reynolds and Neill report, the postcards, and any additional information you think necessary.

Upon completion of their discussions, assign them to write a one-page recommendation memorandum to the President. It should be justified by evidence from the primary sources. Invite students to share their recommendation with the class.

- 5) Assign students to conduct general research on a current food safety issue and the governmental (local, state, or federal) response to it.

The www.foodsafety.gov website might be useful in their research. It provides a gateway to food safety information from several organizations, including the Food and Drug Administration, the Centers for Disease Control, and others.

Then direct them to create postcards that reflect a current food safety issue. They should carefully consider the message that they want to convey and the tone they want to set. Ask them to consider whether a comic or a more serious approach would be best.

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