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THE JUNGLE OF THE MEATPACKING INDUSTRY: HOW CONGRESSIONAL DEBATE PROMPTED INCREASED FEDERAL REGULATION

Abstract. In response to widespread customer demand for reform, the congressional battle over America's food and drug industries, specifically the meatpacking industry, was resolved with the passing of the Federal Meat Inspection Act of 1906 and the broader Pure Food and Drug Act (1906). The debate, spurred on by public outrage and the diplomatic exchanges that collectively ensued, became the determining factor in pacifying Congress and the businesses within the food industry. With roots in preliminary investigations and muckraking journalism intending to expose corruption, conflicting proposals made the enactment of this act a legislative hallmark of compromise. Debate was the foundation for seeing the act to fruition, leaving behind a legacy of success in improved public health as well as shortcomings that would be addressed in future amendments.

Keywords: Upton Sinclair, meatpacking industry, muckrakers, federal inspection, FDA.

“He has no wit to trace back the social crime to its far sources – he could not say that it is the thing men have called “the system” that is crushing him to the earth; that it is the packers, his masters, who have dealt their brutal will to him from the seat of justice” [1].

Thomas Jefferson's early vision of the United States endorsed the growth of society toward agriculture and away from a dependence on markets and customers. Subsistence farming built around small farmer-landowners was, inherently, the very image of “productivity and conduciveness to virtue and independence” [2]. During these pre-industrial times, that which was not directly grown by familial units was traded, but overall, the exchange of goods was local, traceable, and solely tied between the producer and the consumer.

Over time, these small-scale trading interactions evolved to meet the needs of industrialization. With the conformity to newly-established standards of the Industrial Revolution (1870–1914) came the disappearance of the traditional Jeffersonian ideal [3]. Larger corporations began to sell food items for

profit over self-sustainability, with normal groupings of products like bushels being replaced by cans and packages, imported by distant growers over local farms. For individual consumers, this disconnect between goods and the original suppliers dramatically changed the content of their purchases.

Such a pattern can also be seen within the meatpacking industry, where its growth made it “the first or second most valuable U.S. industry from 1880 to 1910” [4]. However, behind this facade of economic success, the nationwide delocalization into a corporate food economy carried a weighty price tag on its growth. Understandably, this rapid transition aroused concerns over the quality of products and the safety of meatpacking workers.

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The Origin of the Meatpacking Industry

Meatpacking: the slaughter, processing, and distribution of livestock for sale. The industry was at first a seasonal trade occurring during the cooler months – beef was difficult to preserve and would otherwise spoil quickly [5]. In addition, farmers worked according with market fluctuations, reducing hog production when corn was in short supply and at a higher cost, then increasing hog production when corn was more abundant and affordable [6]. Thus, this activity created a hog-corn cycle, where it experienced intervals of inconsistency [6]. Other challenges presented in early meatpacking included transportation, which was conducted over waterways and influenced heavily by weather [6]. With all of these limitations, small wholesale packers faced constant difficulty and uncertainty.

One of the most monumental practices that dramatically restructured the packing industry was refrigeration, solving many of the earlier mentioned obstacles to a reliable and stable market. Weight reductions of “10 to 15 percent” became possible as cattle could now be slaughtered before being shipped, and transportation costs dropped to “one-third” when compared with the original numbers associated with live cattle [4]. Additionally, the increased presence of immigrants in the workforce was another consequential shift: Chicago alone relied on two-thirds of its manufacturing and mechanical workers being foreign-born in 1890 [7]. Due to the large demand for low-skill, repetitive labor, factory owners employed immigrant workers at low wages.

These factors created the “Beef Trust,” involving the large firms of Armour, Swift, Morris, and the National Packing Company. Dubbed the “Big Four,” they commanded a large monopoly over the dressed beef trade [8]. Statistically, their control was evident in the revelation that the Big Four conducted an estimated 45 percent of all cattle slaughters [8].

Local cattle firms blamed centralized packing firms for the loss of 24 percent in livestock prices between 1885 and 1890, which was “the longest and most severe fall in cattle prices since the end of the Civil War” [4]. These cases evoked suspicion around the beef trust that was known to dominate the meat industry, and for many butchers and cattle farmers, this price depression only steepened their losses. Demands for nationwide regulations were issued.

The Spanish-American War

Whisperings of the stigma surrounding the US meatpacking industry were fully roused during the Spanish-American War, with 280 soldiers killed in battle and a disproportionate 2,630 lives lost due to unknown causes; at the time, this was attributed to their rations – specifically the meat portions [9]. In September 1898, the Dodge Commission was formed to investigate the unusual deaths, and subsequently, the Commanding General of the United States Army Nelson A. Miles appeared at a trial after taking testimonies in seventeen towns and cities. Miles’ findings were also based on the observations of a volunteer surgeon, W. H. Daly; Dr. Daly wrote to Miles regarding the inspections he made in “Tampa, Jacksonville, Chickamauga, and Porto Rico,” during which he found that the beef was “apparently preserved with secret chemicals,” which he also believed was “detrimental to the health of the troops” [10].

Conflict ensued; should this claim be found true, it would suggest that the War Department was willing to sacrifice lives in favor of monetary gain. Fortunately, Miles’ arguments were disproven with sound evidence. The Powell process used on the beef in Tampa was unrelated to the beef contractors who supplied the Army, Chickamauga and Jacksonville offered

refrigerated beef that produced no complaints from the soldiers, and in Puerto Rico, the beef was similarly accepted in quality and freshness. [10] Rather, the unexplained deaths were linked to disease: insufficient knowledge about sanitation led to 20,738 cases of typhoid fever and 1,590 fatalities [11].

The scandals of the Spanish-American War drew from false accusations, but they encouraged a spread of awareness and revealed prevailing attitudes of distrust. These specific circumstances surrounding the controversy were necessary for it to gain its vital publicity, because without the fear of the government potentially capitalizing on the lives of its soldiers, who were already in a position of mortal peril, such ubiquitous interest and public sentiment could not have been fomented. State-level change with new pure food laws occurred, but this alone was not yet enough to trigger federal laws [12].

The Jungle

While it may be true that preservatives and consequent detriments to health had not been discovered to affect soldiers at the time, the same was not to be said of the general meatpacking industry. Upton Sinclair's novel, *The Jungle*, was a pioneering muckraking novel that exposed the low wages, high-risk working environment, and unjust treatment of meatpacking laborers. Sinclair was inspired to put pen to paper after being contacted to write a serial publication for the Socialist newspaper *Appeal To Reason*. He spent two years investigating the Chicago stockyards, posing as a workman, and his work was subsequently published as *The Jungle* [13]. One quote especially illustrates the notorious conditions of packing plants:

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... There was no place for the men to wash their hands before they ate their dinner, and so they made a practice of washing them in the water that was to be ladled into the sausage [1].

Excerpts from the novel were also published in newspapers, further publicizing Sinclair's message.

[14] Readers were appalled by the author's hyperbole usage, as well as the highly-specific imagery poured into the lack of sanitation at the Chicago plants [15].

Sinclair's novel prompted worldwide hyper-awareness toward diet and nutrition, which were largely dependent on the very meats that the muckraker exposed to be contaminated. As a result, American meat exports plummeted with the increase in newspaper coverage [16]. In particular, the New York Times noted in 1906 that "no amount of contradiction on the packers' behalf" could convince "English-men" that Chicago's canned goods were "fit to put into human stomachs" [17]. Though Sinclair originally wrote the novel with the intention of shedding light on the treatment of immigrant workers and the socialist movement, it instead took on a prominent role in advancing federal meat regulations that responded to the silent threat of falling sales.

The Debate

Ultimately, the cumulative anger from the Spanish-American War and the publication of *The Jungle* was channeled into congressional debate. Prior to this sequence of events, the only existing federal legislation involved the 1890 meat inspection laws on exports, created to meet stringent foreign restrictions and enable U.S. producers and packers to compete in the international market. Though at first these covered only salted pork and bacon, an 1891 amendment expanded their certification to all beef intended for export [18]. This substantial lack of regulation was to be changed. After the war in 1898 and the publication of *The Jungle* eight years later, President Theodore Roosevelt and Senator Albert Beveridge were moved to take action, both as readers of the novel and condemners of the "embalmed beef" scandal [19]. Roosevelt, incidentally, also served during the Spanish-American War [20]. This personal connection motivated his active involvement in the debate, as he could relate with others affected by the lack of apparent food safety.

To vindicate Sinclair's claims, Roosevelt commissioned the Department of Agriculture (USDA)

to oversee an investigation [21]. Though some faults were inevitably discovered, the USDA dismissed the more radical descriptions and claims in Sinclair's articles and novel, labeling them as an "atrocious exaggeration" and "willful and deliberate misrepresentations of fact" [22]. However, before its report was issued, Sinclair argued through letters and telegrams that the USDA could not be trusted and that its investigators were themselves involved with meatpacking industry practices. Thus, this led Roosevelt to conduct a private examination, working in coordination with Sinclair, who provided his own agent with leads [21].

The collaboration between these two figures led to the creation of the Neill-Reynolds report, a disclosure based on a weeks-long search for buried truths. The report chronicled the conditions at facilities along with the treatment of the food and workers, but it also established a definitive example of what a model slaughterhouse would look like, giving numerous suggestions for possible legislation and inspection procedures. Spaces were described as "dark and dingy," but what was most alarming with regard to health and hygiene was the "frequent absence of any lavatory provisions" [23].

This official corroboration of meatpacking practices spurred quiet change. In time, the possible publication of the discoveries would become the biggest leverage over the packers – one that Roosevelt would extensively use to persuade Congress.

Concurrently, Beveridge was chiefly concerned with drafting stricter inspection laws, now backed with the weight of Roosevelt's support [21]. Beveridge's bill was introduced as an amendment to the original agricultural appropriation bill, and at its very core, demanded for date stamps on meat products and regular inspections that would be paid by the packing industry [24]. The bill was passed with tight acceptance by the Senate, but only out of fear of bad publicity; Roosevelt had threatened to publish the Neill-Reynolds report otherwise. Moreover, the lack of resistance was marked by the knowledge that it

would be easier to defeat or change Beveridge's proposal within the House of Representatives [21].

A plethora of perspectives emerged. To consumers, this was a promise of security. To small businesses, regulations meant greater certainty and efficiency, as well as protection against dishonest competitors [12]. However, to the large meatpacking firms, the bill would "take the management and control away from the men who have devoted their lives to the upbuilding and perfecting of this great American industry." Their complaints were voiced by members of the House of Representatives; James Wadsworth, the chairman of the Committee on Agriculture, along with William Lorimer, began revising the bill according to meatpucker demands [21].

Sinclair, frustrated by the lack of progress, was convinced that complete public transparency took precedence over a new bill. By relaying what he knew of the Neill-Reynolds report to the *New York Times*, Sinclair forced Roosevelt to finally publish a complete disclosure to prevent possible misinformation [21]. With this publication, the *Times* suddenly elevated Wadsworth as the "champion of the packers," and he along with his associates, the "friends of the packers," were seen as the head of a "defensive campaign" [25].

Debate erupted over the report, and the packers continuously challenged the credibility of its content. Their defenders in the House harshly attacked Neill, who had come to testify. Wadsworth, in particular, steered the discussion time and time again to confront accounts of a hog that had allegedly fallen into a bathroom but was still hung with clean carcasses [21]. Other congressmen protested against Neill's treatment, and he himself remarked, "I feel like a witness under cross-examination whose testimony is trying to be broken down" [26].

Regardless, the Senate held onto its bill, even as the House passed the Wadsworth-Lorimer compromise bill. This was because, according to the *Chicago Tribune*, the adjusted version had undergone so many edits that even "Beveridge would not recognize his own child" [27]. Thus, the deadlock continued.

Pressured by time alone, as the congressional session was ending soon, Roosevelt provided closure by asking Beveridge to relax parts of his bill. During the entire session, Roosevelt walked the line between alienating his like-minded allies in the Senate by appeasing the packers too much, and on the other end of the spectrum, demanding too much from the House and risking all progress. As such, his diplomatic exchanges were vital in preserving the peace and ensuring collaboration. Nevertheless, in order for federal change to be enacted at all, the Senate ultimately yielded [21]. The agreement that was reached was far from clean and unanimous, and noteworthy exclusions included labeling requirements and inspection fees; the latter was regarded as especially necessary because meatpackers were viewed as responsible for financing the correction of the unsanitary conditions they had caused.

On June 30, 1906, the same day that the Pure Food and Drug Act was signed, the agricultural appropriation bill that included the Federal Meat Inspection Act also received a presidential signature of approval. Despite notable omissions, the law none-

Appendix A [6]

theless enabled the protection of consumers with its regular inspections, and it further became reassurance that Congress could reform longstanding business practices. It even benefitted the larger packing firms: American meat exports would finally recover from weak sales.

The debate between reformers in the Senate and the power brokers that controlled the House represented the larger conflict between American consumers, local businesses, and large packing firms. Though their ideologies were sharply polarized, intensified by the recurring scandals and muckraking journalism, balancing each part of the two proposals warranted decisive diplomatic action. Crossing these borders allowed the resulting bill to be accepted by all.

Today, we take much of what is at face value for granted. However, the guarantees of food safety that we now enjoy were once won from decades of turmoil, and are still subject to revision in the present. As such, the campaign for reform in the meat industry shows that even with the disappearance of the Jeffersonian ideal, we as consumers are able to make informed

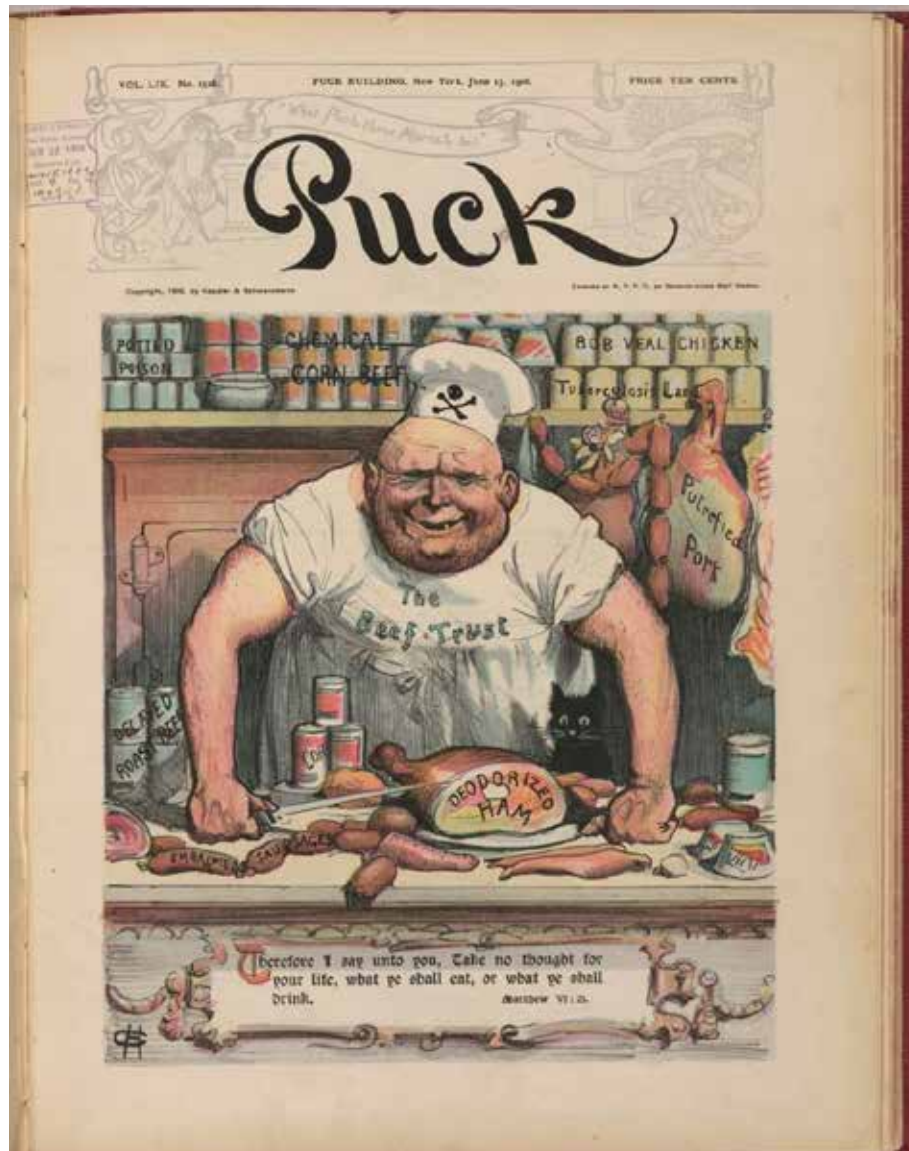
Table 11. Exports of Pork and Bacon from Cincinnati, 1847–1873 (in Pounds¹)

Year (Sept. 1–Aug. 31)	Via Canals and Railways ²	South by Water
1847/48	3,713,411	60,693,890
1848/49	3,120,855	60,084,696
1849/50	4,253,718	52,177,460
1850/51	3,103,653	46,949,270
1851/52	7,722,290	52,091,795
1852/53	16,000,158	45,730,213
1853/54	20,846,302	30,520,803
1854/55	18,296,681	30,597,358
1855/56	30,470,305	21,046,450
1856/57	36,605,369	20,832,550
1857/58	36,301,109	24,291,150
1858/59	31,941,045	30,056,500
1859/60	38,872,984	38,649,300
1860/61	30,135,498	40,205,831
1861/62	74,149,768	7,263,750

1862/63	100,002,521	10,423,400
1863/64	47,413,245	14,827,675
1864/65	29,070,721	18,642,370
1865/66	28,189,376	34,671,309
1866/67	28,391,427	46,536,230
1867/68	32,369,475	34,592,650
1868/69	37,968,992	32,009,873
1869/70	49,241,486	32,604,050
1870/71	50,136,710	36,907,852
1871/72	79,701,336	33,659,317
1872/73	76,517,888	38,815,170
1873/74	87,799,143	30,863,134

This excerpt depicts the increase in exports as a direct result of increased rail transportation. In contrast, water transportation gradually declined in usage over time.

Appendix B [15]



The cover cartoon for *Puck* magazine, the first successful humor magazine that dwelled on political satire, in the June 1906 issue. As opposed to earlier issues intended to amuse and advocate for political parties, Hassman's image instead raised awareness

towards a cause: the food adulteration issues, as well as the food and drug laws. The illustration of a stereotypical, unsanitary butchery encouraged readers to avoid the tainted meat products of the time.

Appendix C [16]



This photo portrays the working conditions at Swift & Co's. packing plant. With few federal laws in

place, food was often handled in unsanitary conditions. The lighting and ventilation were also very poor.

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