

In Roosevelt's Name We Bust Trusts: The Meat Inspection Act of 1906



by Suzanne White Junod, Ph.D.

“Possibly, the horrors of Packingtown are exaggerated; but only by exaggeration and uproar can we get abuses abated in this land of the unrestrained.”¹

“Since the Chicago slaughter houses are so clean and everyone is invited to come and inspect them, why these strenuous objections to permanent inspection?”²

“Meantime, the pure food bill is assuming somewhat the appearance of a band wagon.”³

On June 23, 2005, the Friends of the Library USA (FOLUSA) dedicated the Union Stock Yard Gate in Chicago, Illinois a Literary Landmark. The landmark commemorates the 100th anniversary of the publishing of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*. At its peak, the Union Stock Yards occupied 450 acres on Chicago’s Southside, employed 25,000, and processed 82% of all of the meat consumed in the United States. It once was quipped that the meatpackers were so efficient that they processed “every part of the pig except the squeal.” The Union Stock Yards were closed in 1971 and only the gate remains—standing as a National Historic Landmark. Sally Reed, Executive Director of FOLUSA, presented the plaque to Margaret O’K. Glavin, the Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA’s) Associate Commissioner for Regulatory Affairs. The plaque will be displayed in FDA’s History Office in Parklawn during the Centennial and then will be affixed permanently to the gate. The plaque reads:

In 1906, Upton Sinclair’s novel, *The Jungle*, exposed the horrific working conditions beyond this gate. The recounted struggle for human dignity of Lithuanian immigrant Jurgis Rudkus galvanized this nation, spurred the labor movement, and led to the passage of the Pure Food & Drug Act. This site is dedicated a Literary Landmark by the Friends of the Library, USA. June 23, 2005.



Although most everyone has read *The Jungle* in the course of their education, many may have missed Edmund Morris’ Pulitzer Prize winning biography, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (1979) and its sequel *Theodore Rex* (2001), both of which simply make for delightful reading. Morris makes it clear that Theodore Roosevelt was a man who, far from being merely a man “of the times,” virtually created his own times, energizing the nation with bold decisions at critical times on an astonishing number of political, social, governmental, business, and international fronts.

During his first term, Roosevelt demonstrated his personal faith in politics as “the art of the possible.” The issue of “trusts” was one of the most explosive issues of his presidency, yet he struck a conciliatory tone, reassuring business interests that he would protect the “delicate” mechanisms of modern business, while nonetheless taking action to “supervise” aspects of the great business enterprises that were prone to hurt the general welfare of the country. Humorist

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Finley Peter Dunn put a succinct summary of Roosevelt's first message on the subject of trusts in the mouth of the inestimable "Mr. Dooley."

[T]he trusts, says he, are heejooous monsther built up be the enlightened intherprise iv th' men that have done so much to advance progress in our beloved country, he says. On wan hand I wud stamp thim undher fut; on th' other hand not so fast.

Roosevelt's coalition of progressive and conservative-minded voters easily ensured his re-election to a second term in 1904. Although he drew back from his most fervent anti-trust work during his second administration, he secured his most important anti-trust victory in 1905 when the Supreme Court held that the "beef trust" had illegally combined to avoid competitive bidding on livestock. In *Swift and Company v. United States*,⁴ the Court put forth its "stream of commerce" doctrine and overturned a previous ruling holding that manufacturing was strictly an intrastate activity. Because both cattle

and finished meat products move in interstate commerce, reasoned the Court, the companies themselves became subject to federal oversight and regulation. This broadened interpretation of the interstate commerce clause became, and remains, a critical component of FDA's ability to act against violative goods under the provisions of the 1906 Pure Food and Drugs Act, as well as its successor, the 1938 Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act. The agency still is required to establish as fact, however, that suspected violative products have moved in interstate commerce.

The pages of *Puck* and *Judge*, as well as all other major periodicals of the "Progressive" era, contained almost endless references to "trusts." *Puck* was particularly fond of decrying the evils of both the Beef Trust and the Tobacco Trust, and even before Sinclair's portrayal of the dismal working conditions in *Packintown*, showed little sympathy for the Packintown factory owners. Noting that a number of packing house officials had migrated to Europe or Canada when the investigation of their business practices began, *Puck* quipped, "If the exodus continues, the Beef Trust may



THE FIGHT GOES ON AND BEEF GOES UP!

The Fight Goes On and Beef Goes Up—Once again, the public receives a lesson in fundamental economics. The public clearly was surprised when, following enactment of the very popular Meat Inspection Act, those supplying meat to the public balked at paying the costs for the program. Instead, they passed those costs along in the form of higher meat prices.



INSPECTING THE BEEF TRUST.
THE ONLY WAY TO GET THE RIGHT RESULTS.

Inspecting the Beef Trust—In typical *Puck* style, this cynical portrayal of the “Lilliputian” inspectors lined up minutely inspecting each other shows how many expected the law, which stationed inspectors in each meat processing plant, actually would operate. While the Beef Trust (holding bribes behind his back) and Secretary of Agriculture Wilson looked on, nothing much was expected to happen.

be deftly “cured” by process of elimination.”⁵ Following their indictment, *Puck* noted that “one of the Beef Packer’s main objections to their present arraignment in Chicago was the fact that they were indicted by a Federal Grand Jury ‘secretly and consequently illegally drawn.’ What conscientious scruples the Beef Trust has against that which is secret and illegal!”⁶

Puck’s editors had been critical of the patent medicine industry, but they also turned a skeptical eye to those ignorant and gullible patrons in communities across the country that fed the industry’s excesses. Following both publication of *The Jungle* and Roosevelt’s own confirmation of the conditions in Packingtown as reported by his own “undercover” investigators, Neill and Reynolds, *Puck* threw its hat in the ring with the reformers, supporting passage of both the Meat Inspection Act and the Pure Food and Drugs Act. Theodore Roosevelt signed both of these Acts on the same day—June 30, 1906.⁷

What To Eat

*What shall I eat? I will no longer feed
On meat and cater to the packer’s greed.*

*Let’s see. There’s fish—as fresh as e’er was seen—
Made fresh by rubbing it with Vaseline.
The market man “restores” and “touches up”
The somewhat faded fish on which I sup.
There’s “full cream cheese” that’s innocent of cream,
For things, you know, are seldom what they seem.
There’s butter—more skimmed milk solidified
After a dosing with formaldehyde.*

*What shall I eat? Perhaps some tea and cake.
The cake is made with “bottled eggs,” “egg flake,”
Or other doctored product of the hen,
Laid long ago—I know not where or when:
The tea, touched up with graphite, comes—
Who knows?—*

*From China or—more likely—from Cohoes.
There’s raspberry jam, made up of equal parts
Of apple cores and glucose—nice on tarts.*

*But why continue the enumeration
Of substitution and adulteration
Until the thought of eating makes one ill?
And yet I scan the cafe’s dismal bill [of fare].*

*For I must eat. What shall I eat?
Ho, waiter!
Fetch me two boiled eggs and a baked ‘ptater.*

Jokes about the most prominent of the meatpackers of Packingtown were rife in the pages of *Puck* throughout 1906.

“Our firm has been in business forty years. If we have been able to fool the people all of that time we have disproved Lincoln’s assertion. —J. Ogden Armour

Puck’s rejoinder: Not at all. Lincoln declared that “you can’t fool all the people all the time.” Forty years, isn’t “all the time.” But forty years seems to be the limit of the Armour capacity.”

J. Ogden Armour remarks that American meat products “speak for themselves.” Some of them, however, use foul language.

Statistics compiled by the Secretary of the Interior show a remarkable increase in the number of vegetarians in this country. Some of our best know citizens are abjuring flesh and going in for grass. Here are a few expressions of opinion culled at random:

J. Ogden Armour: “No, I never touch meat of any kind. I am committed to a vegetable diet. There’s a reason.”

Nelson Morris: “I do not regard a flesh diet as healthful. Dressed Oats and Nutgrapes for mine.”

President Tillden of the National Packing Co.: “The nearest I come to eating meat is a cereal hamburg steak. A flesh diet coarsens the intellect, don’t you think?”

Mr. Swift of Packingtown: “I am a vegetarian of long standing—by inclination, conviction, and I might add, by revelation.” Δ

Many thanks to Cindy Lachin, FDA, for her help in locating and obtaining the reproductions of the *Puck* and *Judge* prints used in this Centennial series of articles.

¹ 59 PUCK no. 1528 (June 13, 1906).

² 59 PUCK no. 1530 (June 27, 1906).

³ 59 PUCK no. 1531 (July 4, 1906).

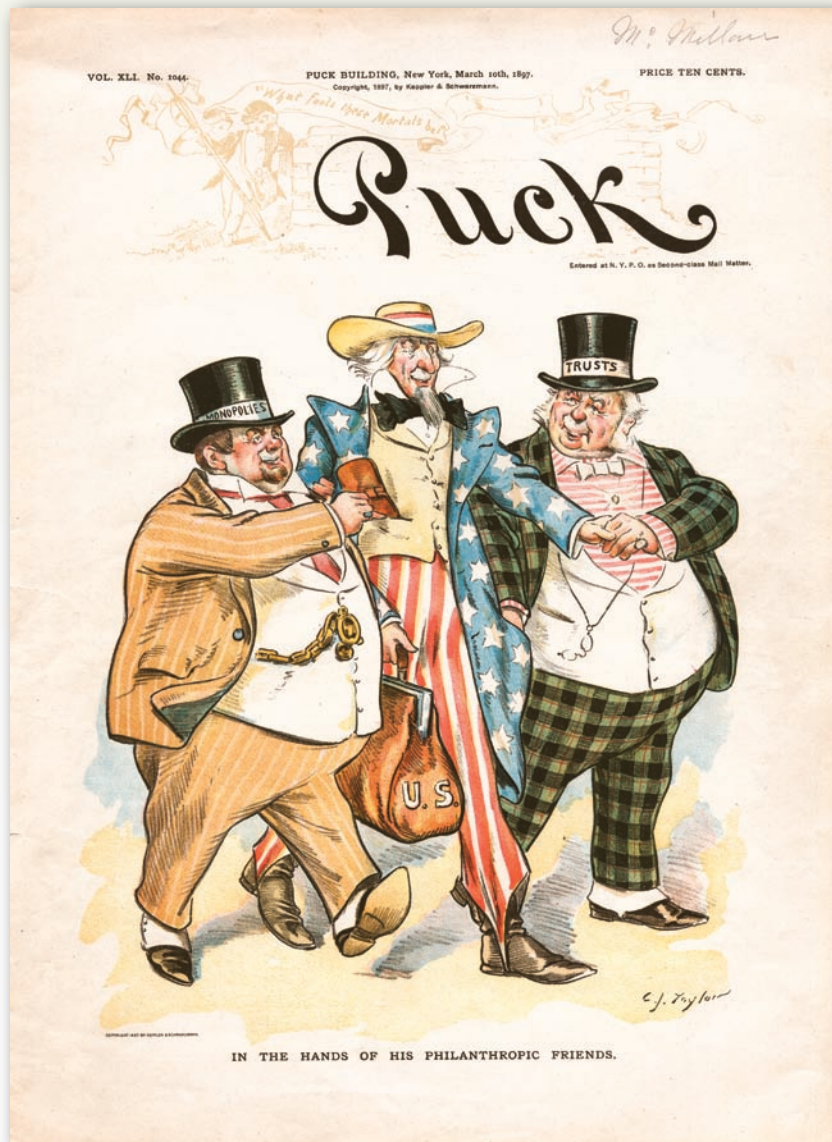
⁴ 196 U.S. 375 (1905).

⁵ 57 PUCK no. 1473 (May 24, 1905).

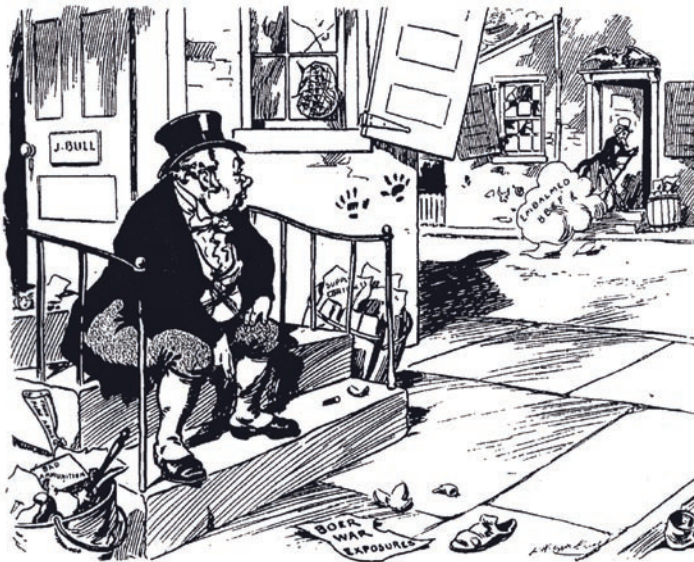
⁶ 58 PUCK no. 1491 (Sept. 27, 1905).

⁷ See James Harvey Young, *The Pig That Fell into the Privy: Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle and the Meat Inspection Amendments of 1906*, 59 BULLETIN OF THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE 467-80 (1985).

⁸ 59 PUCK no. 1529 (June 20, 1906).



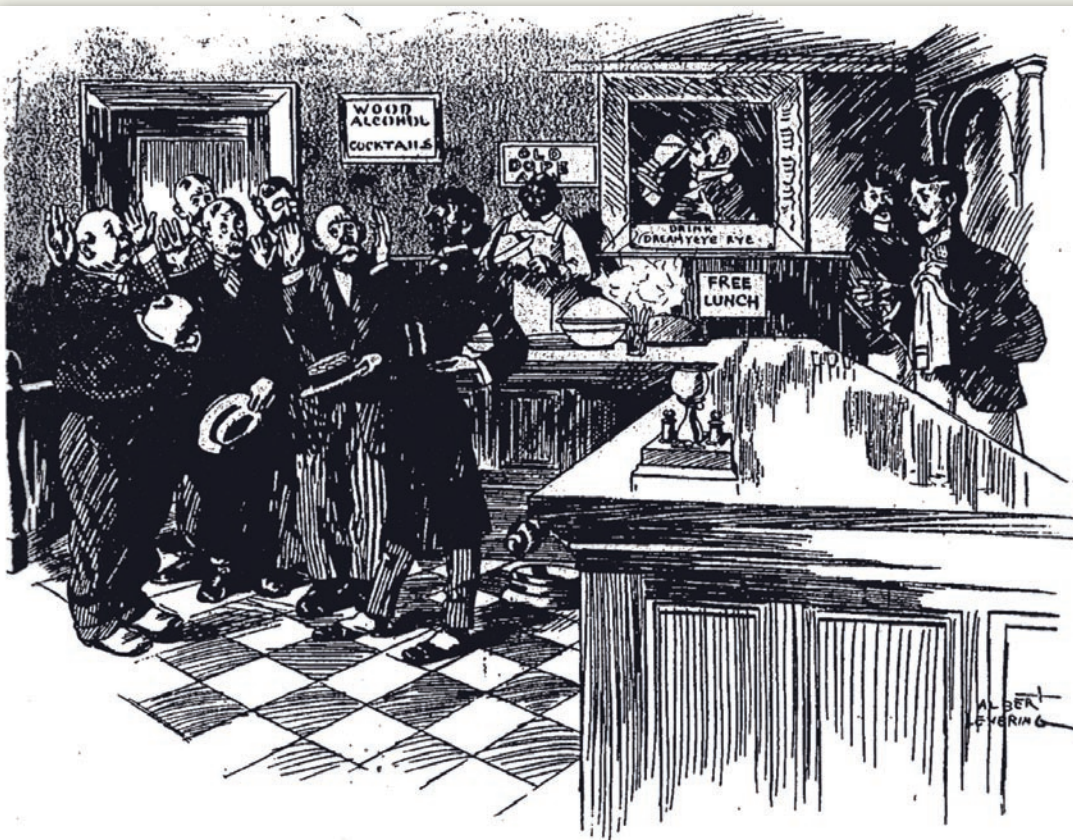
Uncle Sam Trusts—The public in the early 20th Century, largely ignorant of the fundamentals of economic knowledge that we consider part of literacy today, remained skeptical of the federal government’s (Uncle Sam Ostrich) ability to act independent of “big” interests. One of the reasons that Theodore Roosevelt’s “Progressive” administration was so admired was his ability to show that the government could, and would, act independently on issues when necessary to further truly national interests, including enacting the Meat Inspection Act and the Pure Food and Drugs Act of 1906.



The strangest thing about the Beef Trust expose is that neither Hensel nor Pulitzer "did it."

JOHN BULL—That 'ouse hopposite is a beavtly filthy 'ouse.

"Orrible"—John Bull (Uncle Sam's English counterpart) overlooking his own country's meat scandals while condemning the "filthy house" across the way where Uncle Sam is purging his house of the remnants of the Embalmed Beef scandal of the Spanish American War by passing the Meat Inspection Act.



TAKING THE OATH.

CHORUS OF FREE LUNCH FIENDS.—We do hereby solemnly swear or affirm in future to abstain from all products of the Chicago packing houses, howsoever free or alluringly served in any café, Kathskeller, roof garden, bouze palace, gin mill, groggery or other thirst emporium. So help us Theodore!

Taking the Oath—It was as hard for many to imagine a saloon without meat as it was to imagine a saloon without alcohol, so this humorous "oath" portrayed the dilemma of many upper middle class male consumers.