

Week of 10/15

1870 to 1900, the “Gilded Age,” as Mark Twain called it, was a revolutionary time for entrepreneurs all over the US, but especially in big cities such as New York and Chicago. A man named, Gustavus Swift was one of these entrepreneurs—a man who had ambition, and possibly even more importantly, the “opportunity” to make something of himself.

According to the film, Gustavus Swift started butchering as a teenager, and eventually became a cattle dealer. In order to expand his original business into a “big business,” Swift revolutionized the beef industry—he decided that he would start slaughtering the cows in Chicago and then ship the dressed meat into New York through way of his own refrigerated train cars. However, most people in that time were not used to this new way of purchasing meat. They were used to getting fresh meat from the butcher which had been butchered less than 24 hours before the purchase, and they were wary about purchasing meat that had been butchered a week or two prior to the purchase.

The traditional railroad routes from Chicago to New York were wary about this refrigerated meat as well, so in order to ship his meat, Swift took a less traditional route and sent his meat up into Canada, in Montreal, and finally to reach New York and Boston. With people on the East Coast still wary of Swift's way, Swift decided to move his company to the East, and called it “Swifts Chicago Dressed Beef.”

Swift, like many other factory owners of the time, eventually invested in hiring immigrants and children, and firing the skilled Irish and German butchers so that he could double the work, and not have to give the workers any extra pay. Swift created his big business not only with this, however. Swift also found a way of creating the “by-products” of the cattle. Really, *this* is what benefited Swift the most. These by-products included Jell-O, leather for shoes, cushion stuffing, tennis racket strings, and many other usable materials. (Film.)

According to the film, some of the ways that Chicago's "new immigrants" were able to survive and succeed were through creating their own ethnic communities, or neighborhoods. The immigrants banded together in order to be able to be with people that were like them—being able to speak the same language, sharing each others religious beliefs, etc. These ethnic communities were often anchored by Churches (mostly the Catholic Church). The immigrant children would attend Church schools in order to move up in society, the children would learn the language and the ways of society so that they could reap the benefits of their parent's sacrifices.

Many of the ethnic communities had saloons, where families would gather with other families to share their culture. The saloons were also sort of a "home base" for people, especially those with no permanent address. The immigrants could store their trunks, could stay in the saloons, use the saloons as financial institutions, and also use the saloon address as a way to communicate with their families in other parts of the United States.

The purpose of Jacob Riis's expose, "How the Other Half Lives," was not only a cry to the show middle and upper class societies the poverty that they had been avoiding, but a call to help the poor immigrants conditions—conditions which Riis says were not inevitable. According to the film, Riis's publication awakened people to the conditions of the poor, and made people want to get involved in improving life in the city. It "spurred" people into action.

Jacob Riis knew firsthand the terrors of living on the Lower East Side of New York. Riis had lived there himself, and after fortunately getting out of the system, Riis went back to the "slums" to report and take pictures of the poor immigrants. One way that so many of the immigrants lived was in housing called, "tenements." These tenements did not have any housing regulations whatsoever—the goal was to cram as many people into these tenements as possible. The conditions in the tenements were revolting. More often than not, the housing did not have indoor plumbing, there was no ventilation, they were dark, crowded, and disease ran rampant killing many—especially children.

Week of 10/22

In the late 1800s, early 1900s, an enormous amount of young women (most being immigrants) were becoming seamstresses in garment factories. Although this was an opportunity for women to work, the working conditions were less than favorable. The young women had to work most hours of the day and 6-7 days a week with very little pay. However, the long hours and little pay were definitely not the worst of their situation. Within the factories, there were no laws or regulations on the limit of work hours, the women were locked in to their working environment, and among many other things, were not even allowed to talk to each other while working.

On November 22 1910, there was a mass meeting of women. The women had decided that “enough was enough” and they were all going to go on a strike. The following day, 15,000 shirtwaist workers left their machines and walked out onto the cold streets. Not only were working women a part of the strike, but even some of the upper class young women joined the strike. This Garment Workers' General Strike became the largest woman's strike to go down in American history.

Sadly enough, this general strike did not accomplish much in the way of making regulations in the factories. However, the strike did show what these women were capable of—it showed how women could band together and how their hearts could beat as one, and a union was formed. Unfortunately, not a strike, but a tragedy—a fire, along with 146 deaths (The Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire) was what it took to make people realize that regulations needed to be made.

People started looking to the government for solutions to their problems. There was a Factory Investigation Commission which found how terrible the conditions were. Fire sprinklers, and enclosed stairways were put into the factories. There were regulations made on woman's work hours, on machinery, and they were also given better “washrooms.”

The type of work in industrialization was quite different than what people were used to. Rather than working as farmers and such by the “movement of the sun,” (pg 525. Para 2. Line 8.) workers were dictated by a clock; and often times that clock would go late into the night, or sometimes all night,

depending on the shift. Most of the workers worked 6 days per week at 10 hours a day, and with all of the machines, less skills were required; more workers were confronted with menial, mundane chores.

“...Workers bore the brunt of depressions, faced periodic unemployment, and toiled under dangerous conditions...” (pg 525. Para. 2. Line 13.) Many of the machines in the factories were dangerous, especially if the workers were tired (which after working a menial chore for hours on end, one can only imagine that most were). “Each year from 1880 to 1900, industrial mishaps killed an average of 35,000 wage earners and injured over 500,000.” (Page 526. Para 2. Line 11.) Despite the many deaths and injuries, workers or their families were not compensated for any work-related incidents.

Not only were men hired for working in the factories, but now also women and children. However, women and children laborers did not make nearly as much as their male counterparts. According to the text, by 1870, one in four non-agricultural workers was a woman, yet the women only earned half of what the men did. Even more saddening was the wages for the children. “On average children worked 60 hours a week and carried home paychecks a third the size of those of adult males.” (Page 527. Para. 1. Line 4.)

The gap between the wealthy and poor gradually widened with industrialization. “In 1890, an unskilled laborer could expect about \$1.50 for a 10-hour day; a skilled one, perhaps twice that amount. It took about \$600 (a year) to make ends meet, but most manufacturing workers made under \$500 a year.” (Page 529. Para. 3. Line 17.)