

The Bloodiest Blocks in Chicago

Slaughterhouse

By Dominic A. Pacyga
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BY ROBERT K. LANDERS

WHEN ACTRESS Sarah Bernhardt visited what Chicagoans called “the yards”—the Union Stock Yard and Packingtown—she was dismayed by the “abominable smell” and the “almost human cries” of the pigs being slaughtered (as she recalled in her 1907 memoir). Despite the stench and the bloody spectacle, many Chicagoans took great pride in the South Side maze of livestock pens and giant packing houses, ringed by railroad lines. “The stockyards were Chicago,” historian Dominic A. Pacyga observes in “Slaughterhouse: Chicago’s Union Stock Yard and the World It Made.”

Mr. Pacyga’s grandparents, immigrants from Poland who arrived in the aptly named Back of the Yards neighborhood just before World War I, worked in the meatpacking industry, as did many of their children. The author himself worked there when he was a college student during the summers of 1969 and 1970. “Slaughterhouse” is not a memoir, however, but an illuminating history of this Chicago industry long vital to the city and the nation.

The centralized Union Stock Yard, which soon supplanted the city’s small, scattered yards, opened on Christmas Day, 1865. On the ranges out West, cattle, hogs and sheep had been replacing the vanishing bison. The rise of the railroad and the defeat of the Confederacy allowed Texas cattle to reach lucrative Northern markets. At first they came to Chicago “on the hoof,” but soon the cattle (as well as hogs and sheep) arrived by rail. Once purchased by packers, shippers and others, most

animals were moved by rail to Eastern markets, since Chicago meatpacking operations were then mostly local.

That changed after Chicago packer Gustavus Swift in 1878 had an engineer design a refrigerated railcar. Soon all the major packers were shipping chilled meat by rail, letting Chicago packers “set prices lower to capture eastern markets.” The packers also began making use of what had previously been wasted parts of the animal. Cattle byproducts included glue, candles, buttons, combs and pipes. Hogs yielded sausage casings and lard. As for sheep, their parts were made into soap and even tennis and violin strings.

“By 1880,” Mr. Pacyga writes, “the Union Stock Yard had established itself as the prime livestock market in the West. Its location proved advantageous to meat companies as they moved their operations near the stockyard in what became Packingtown.” The industry experienced decades of rapid growth after 1890, and Packingtown became the nation’s leading center of slaughterhouses and packing.

Chicago meatpacking exemplified the industrial economy that came into being after the Civil War, the author notes. The emerging factory system of production brought specialization and greater efficiency. Indeed, the packers’ vast “disassembly” line—on which live animals were turned into hunks of pork, mutton and beef in minutes—antedated Henry Ford’s automobile assembly line, begun in 1913.

As the Swift and the Armour companies and other packers “split the disassembly process into simpler and more discrete tasks,” Mr. Pacyga observes, they hired more unskilled workers. By 1904, in one Chicago packinghouse, 230 unskilled workers killed 105 cattle in an hour—and 144 of the workers received less than 20 cents an hour,

the equivalent of about \$5.32 today.

The work was hazardous. “Packinghouse workers worked at fast speeds in dark rooms. . . . Workers on kill floors stood in blood and grease, and in the summer they moved between hot conditions and chilly coolers. In the winter, men stood in pools of steaming blood and freezing water

book helped Theodore Roosevelt obtain the landmark Pure Food and Drug Act that year, but, as Mr. Pacyga notes, TR’s inspectors found that in reality, while there was “some need for improvement,” the problems “had little to do with the quality of meat products and they called Sinclair’s charges false.”



HERE'S THE BEEF Chicago stockyards ca. 1900.

performing their tasks in unheated spaces.” Skin infections and respiratory diseases were common.

By exposing the “wage slavery” in Chicago’s meatpacking industry in his muckraking novel “The Jungle” (1906), Upton Sinclair hoped to incite a socialist revolution. But the public was more outraged by his shocking passages purporting to tell how meat products were made. “Rats were nuisances,” went one passage, “and the packers would put poisoned bread out for them; they would die, and then rats, bread, and meat would go into the hoppers together.” The

By World War I, Chicago’s packers “controlled much of the American meat industry from the Atlantic to the Pacific,” Mr. Pacyga says. The Union Stock Yard and Packingtown reached their height during the war: “Some fifty thousand people found employment in the stockyards and adjacent Packingtown. Tens of thousands of cattle, calves, hogs, and sheep changed hands every day in the market. Afterward, about one-third reboarded trains and headed to slaughterhouses further east. The rest met their fate in Packingtown.”

The decline of Chicago’s stockyards

and packing houses—which accelerated after World War II and the development of the interstate highway system—began in the early 1920s, Mr. Pacyga says, as farmers started using trucks to deliver livestock to markets closer to them. “Once reliable refrigerated trucks appeared on the nation’s highway system, the railroads that crisscrossed the country and ran through Chicago lost their predominance in the meatpacking industry.” By 1960, Chicago’s major packing plants had closed down. In 1971, six years after celebrating its centennial, the Union

Chicago packers made use of what had been waste: Sheep parts were made into violin strings.

Stock Yard, too, ceased operations.

But “the yards” live on, if in a very different form. Today, Mr. Pacyga reports, “the Stockyards Industrial Park is one of the most successful industrial sites in the city.” In what had been Packingtown, there is only one slaughterhouse (Park Packing). The roughly 70 firms in the park include some meat purveyors, but other sorts of business predominate. One firm, Testa Produce, stands out for its environmentally advanced plant, which makes extensive use of rainwater and solar and wind power. As the yards once did, Testa Produce offers tours and attracts visitors—who are spared the old “abominable smell” and the cries of beasts being slaughtered.

Mr. Landers is the author of “An Honest Writer,” a biography of novelist and Chicago native James T. Farrell.