



City on the Make: Impact of the Stockyards and Meatpacking Industries

Gallery Video Transcript

Approx. Lexile Range – 1010 -1400L (Lexile range 1095-1295L recommended for grades 7-12)

We recommend this script be used in conjunction with viewing the video *City on the Make: Impact of the Stockyards and Meatpacking Industries* at <https://www.chicagohistory.org/education/field-trips/virtual-field-trips/>

Hello! My name is Megan and I work in the education department of the Chicago History Museum. I'm standing in our exhibition all about Chicago's history called Chicago: Crossroads of America. This exhibition explores Chicago's changing economy, challenging crises, diverse neighborhoods and groundbreaking innovations. Each video in our series will explore a different story told in the exhibition. Let's go see some more!

Time: 00:30 - What is industry? What do you think of when you hear that word?

Many people think of manufacturing and making products for people to sell and buy. As Chicago grew into the modern city we know today, industries, large scale businesses, like transportation, manufacturing, steel production and others fueled the expansion. One of the most powerful industries in the late 1800s and early 1900s was the meatpacking industry and the nearby Union Stockyards. Meatpacking is the process of killing and processing animals for food, while the stockyards were pens the animals were held before being sold to the meat packing plants. Part of the reason meatpacking came to be an industrial powerhouse was Chicago's connection to transportation.

In 1848, the city of Chicago saw the completion of the Illinois and Michigan Canal which ultimately linked Chicago to the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico. Chicago was already linked to the Atlantic Ocean and the East Coast by the Great Lakes chain and Erie Canal in New York. 1848 also saw the arrival of the Pioneer Locomotive, seen here. Chicago's railroad industry quickly grew connecting the city with farmers in rural Illinois and Wisconsin. In time, railroads connected Chicago to major cities including Detroit, Cleveland, Cincinnati, New Orleans, St. Louis, Kansas City, Omaha, and St. Paul. Chicago became a central hub connecting all these places together.

Time: 02:00 - Why is transportation important to industry especially meat packing and the stockyards?

The Union Stockyards opened December 25, 1865 and were operated by the Union Stockyard and Transit Company a group of nine prominent railroads of the time. When the stockyards were at their largest, it stretched east to west from Halsted Ave to Ashland and north to south from 37th Street to

49th Street. This area is about the size of 1.5 Grant Parks. The stockyards held the live animals before they were taken to be butchered in the nearby meat packing plants. Pigs, cows, goats, and lambs were brought by train from all over the Midwest to be butchered and processed by meatpacking plants that were set up nearby. In 1870, 3 million animals moved through the stockyards, just 20 years later in 1890, that number was 12 million. Transportation also played a critical role sending the food back out. Developed in 1882, ice-cooled refrigerated rail cars took meat to cities such as New York City.

The three largest plants were owned by Gustavus Swift, Philip Armour, and Nelson Morris. The owners of the meat packing plants figured out ways to use just about every part of the animal. One of the characters in Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle*, says, "They use everything about the pig but the squeal." Skins became leather goods like gloves, coats, and footballs. Bones were used for handles on knives and cutlery, animal fat was processed into lard and margarine, any other leftovers became glue, fertilizer, glycerin, and gelatin! In one unique case, the horns even became a chair for your parlor!

Time: 03:36 - What jobs did people have in the meat packing plants?

When the meat packing plants were first established, many skilled German and Irish butchers worked in there. As the number of animals grew, so did the need for more workers, and the greed of the owners. Gustavus Swift, owner of one of the largest companies, took an assembly, er...or more appropriately a disassembly, line approach. Each worker had one role in the butchering the animal and he was able to hire unskilled workers. Where it once took a skilled butcher and their assistant between 8 and 10 hours to slaughter and prepare the meat, it now took 34 minutes on the disassembly line! Unskilled workers could be paid far less than the skilled butchers, adding more money to the owner's profits. Unskilled jobs were available by the thousands. Many immigrants from areas in Eastern Europe came to Chicago for jobs in the Stockyards. By 1900, 25,000 of the nation's 68,000 packinghouse employees worked in Chicago.

Speeding up the butchering process and using unskilled workers led to a dangerous work environment. Broken bones and sprains were common among the men who worked directly with the animals and knife wounds were widespread amongst the people doing butchering tasks. Illness and disease were frequent due to the poor living and working conditions. Workers at this time worked 12 to 16-hour days, and had no protections such as unemployment benefits, sick leave, or disability payments. If you couldn't work, you were fired.

Upton Sinclair's 1906 book *The Jungle* unintentionally made Americans aware of the unsafe working conditions and the unsanitary food handling practices. This book was written to show the dangers of a capitalist society and why socialism was better. Americans were horrified to read about the unsafe practices within the meatpacking plants. Congress quickly passed the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 which outlawed altering foods and using misleading and improper labelling of ingredients on food containers. This act also led to the creation of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) which continues to track and inspect the foods, medicines, and vaccines we use to this day.

Time: 05:50 - What do you think are the benefits to joining a union? What are the risks?

Workers began to form unions to help communicate the safety issues and their needs to the owners. Strikes and work stoppages often occurred, which could lead to the participating workers losing their jobs. Joining a union was risky. Some workers were fired for being part of the union and their name would be added to a list of people to not re-hire. Unions and other activists had a small win during World War I when the owners agreed to a small wage increase and an 8-hour day. Finally, in the 1930s the unions were able to make the packing companies sign a contract guaranteeing safe working conditions, setting hours, and wages.

In the 1910s, Black Americans and Mexican immigrants were beginning to settle in Chicago. Black Americans were moving away from the racial violence that was taking place across the South, and Mexican immigrants were traveling to Chicago to escape economic and political issues in Mexico. Black and Mexican workers were often hired to take the place of the striking European Americans.

Time: 06:57 - Where did stockyards employees live?

The area to the south and west of the stockyards known as Back of the Yards was home to many of the packinghouse workers and their families. It started out predominately German and Irish, then transitioned to being home to many different Eastern European groups, then again to being predominately Mexican and LatinX families working in the stockyards. Some people still associate Back of the Yards with the negative portrayal by Upton Sinclair in *The Jungle* when in fact it was, and continues to be, a vibrant working-class community.

Time: 07:33 - How have industries changed over time?

Over the 1900s, more aspects of the butchering process were run by machines, transportation routes were altered, and even how farmers worked with processing plants changed. The stockyards saw an uptick in the work during World War II supplying products for the war effort at home and abroad. But further changes in machinery and transportation led to a decline in the use of the Union Stockyards. Following the 1 billionth animal being processed through the stockyards, they closed in 1971, just over 105 years after they first opened.

The meat processing industry, the stockyards, railroads, and steel mills and other industries were important to the economic development of Chicago during the late 1800s and early 1900s. That growth could not have been possible without the thousands of laborers, immigrants, and persons of color that did the work to make these economic achievements possible.

As we think about industry today, many of the large-scale manufacturing industries that once called Chicago home like the stockyards and meat packing plants have been decentralized or the jobs have been moved to other countries around the world. Although no longer the large-scale manufacturing center it once was, the area that housed the stockyards still employs many Chicagoans. The area is now known as the Stockyards Industrial Park. Many smaller businesses and manufacturers have taken over old meatpacking buildings and constructing new ones, creating more jobs in the process. Many of these workers still live nearby in Back of the Yards and surrounding

neighborhoods. Consider where people work today, transportation, financial services and banks, hospitals and the medical field, smaller scale manufacturing, and tourism are amongst the largest industries for Chicago today. What might those industries look like in 20, 50, or 100 years from now?

This script was researched and written by Megan Clark, Chicago History Museum school programs coordinator. Thank you to the following Museum staff members for their thoughtful review: Peter T. Alter, chief historian & director of the Studs Terkel Center for Oral History; Nancy Villafranca-Guzmán, vice president for Education and Engagement; and the Chicago History Museum's Teacher Advisory Board.

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