

## History at Home for Teens

### Weekly Project 5: Exploring Chicago's Neighborhoods—Back of the Yards

The Back of the Yards neighborhood is perhaps best known as the former home of the meatpacking industry in Chicago. In the nineteenth century, [meatpacking](#) emerged as a major industry and signaled the beginning of industrialization in Chicago. On Christmas Day 1865, the [Union Stock Yard](#) opened and grew quickly into the largest livestock market in the world, processing over one billion animals! The packinghouses that developed alongside the livestock pens and railroads, came to be known as Packingtown. This new industrial food system allowed livestock to be slaughtered and prepared for the cooler within a matter of minutes. Henry Ford was inspired to develop his assembly line for the automobile after seeing the disassembly of animals in the packinghouses.

The Union Stock Yard and its surrounding area became a major destination for immigrants and migrants. Working conditions varied at packinghouses, and the benefits of modern industry came with an increased pressure on workers to produce. Upton Sinclair's book, [The Jungle](#), was written after he visited and talked with meatpacking workers. These horrible working conditions highlighted the need for [labor unions](#). By 1900, the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen appeared in Chicago to advocate for workers. The United Packinghouse Workers of America (CIO) organized the Chicago packinghouses in the 1930s and 1940s. African American and Latin American immigrant workers struggled to be included in these early organizing efforts, but were successfully included after World War II. All of the efforts of these labor organizations would eventually lead to the formation of the [United Food and Commercial Workers International Union](#).



Large crowd gathered at Ashland Ave. & 47th St during the 1904 Stockyards Strike - Chicago History Museum

Labor inspired William Walker's mural [History of the Packinghouse Worker \(1974\)](#). It is painted on the former site of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen local union office at 48th Street and Wabash Avenue. Walker uses art as a way to depict the workers as large, monumental figures while union representatives confront bosses for better working conditions and pay. Another famous labor mural can be found at the Detroit Institute of Arts. Painted by Mexican artist Diego Rivera, his [Detroit Industry Murals \(1932-33\)](#) depict automobile workers in a similar fashion.

What are some of the jobs that you or another person in your household have held? What kind of work is it? How could you translate that labor into murals like Walker's and Rivera's?

#### Instructions:

- ◆ Ask some of the people in your household about their jobs. What kinds of things do they do? Are they still working or are they working from home?
- ◆ Call other friends/family members and get a wide range of responses.
- ◆ Use these responses as inspiration for a labor mural that honors all the workers in your life! Draw up a mural or create a collage using images!
- ◆ Share your creations on social media or on our [Google Classroom](#) page.

To share with us, upload your creations using your phone, computer, or other device using the Google Classroom app. You can also share your story on social media (Twitter and Instagram @chicagomuseum, Facebook @chicagohistory) tagging us and using #historyathometeens!

**[All activities can be done from your phone! Just follow the blue hyperlinks to the materials/pages!](#)**

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### Additional Activities

#### Meatpacking During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Labor unions are still advocating for workers' rights in a variety of occupations. Most recently, the [Chicago Teachers Union](#) went on strike for better working conditions for teachers and better classroom environments for their students. The United Food and Commercial Workers International Union is still active and represents about 1.3 million food and retail workers nationally. Though unions are often [vilified](#) by the media and politicians, unions have advocated for workers' rights and had a major influence in the way we all work, regardless of whether you are part of a union!

The current pandemic has also shown that many workers are still being exploited and not being compensated enough, whether through pay or benefits. Meatpacking plants are becoming hotspots for COVID-19 infections, and unions are pushing for safer working conditions.

Read more about the current state of the meatpacking industry, how workers are being affected, how the nation's meat supply could be affected, and what unions are doing. Then compare these findings with some of the things you learned in the weekly project and the history of Back of the Yards and unions in Chicago's packinghouses.



Worker at Bluebird Packing, Chicago. 1974.  
Roosevelt University Archives

#### Instructions:

- ◆ Read this article about the [meatpacking industry during Covid-19](#).
- ◆ Write down your thoughts on what you see as some similarities and/or differences between the current state of meatpacking and some of the history you learned about.
- ◆ Use your journal to record your thoughts about this!
- ◆ Share your thoughts with us!

#### Journaling

Journaling is a great way to record events as they are occurring and are often used by historians when they are conducting research. Keeping a journal is also a great way to share your own thoughts, reactions, feelings, and observations of your surroundings and the things you are learning about!

Consider keeping a journal of your experience during this pandemic, to not only record your experiences with the pandemic, but also of all the exciting, fun, and new things you may be doing and learning! You can use a notebook, your notes app on your phone, and/or a document on your computer.

Feel free to share any of your entries that you are comfortable sharing! Or share with us your thoughts on keeping a journal during these times and how you are journaling, so as to inspire others!

#### Share With Us!

To share with us, upload your responses from your computer or from your phone through the Google Classroom App, through the submit assignment button. You can also share your creations on social media (Twitter and Instagram @chicagomuseum, Facebook @chicagohistory) tagging us and using the hashtag #historyathometeens!