

DEFINING MOMENTS  
THE MUCKRAKERS  
AND THE  
PROGRESSIVE ERA



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*Omnigraphics*

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# Chapter Four

## BATTLING THE TITANS OF INDUSTRY



Murder it was that went on there upon the killing-floor, systematic, deliberate and hideous murder. They were slaughtering men there, just as certainly as they were slaughtering cattle; they were grinding the bodies and souls of them, and turning them into dollars and cents.

—Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*

One of the main goals of the Progressive Movement was to reduce the power and influence of large corporations over workers, political leaders, and other aspects of American society. The muckrakers helped by exposing some of the unfair business practices used by the large corporations or “trusts” that dominated most industries at that time. Journalists chronicled the ways in which these industrial giants exploited workers by demanding long hours and exhausting labor in hazardous conditions in exchange for low wages and dehumanizing treatment. They also detailed many cases in which big business took advantage of American consumers by selling products that were spoiled, dangerous, or did not deliver on their promised benefits. Muckraking articles and books about abuses of public trust by large corporations generated outrage among both middle-class and working-class Americans. They responded by pressuring state and federal governments to step in to limit the power of big business and protect the interests of small businesses, workers, and consumers.

### Investigating the Trusts

The turn of the twentieth century saw a tremendous consolidation of American business in the hands of a few wealthy men. Most industries were

dominated by a few large corporations. The U.S. Steel Corporation, for instance, controlled 80 percent of all steel production nationwide, while the Standard Oil Company controlled 90 percent of U.S. oil production. These companies grew into huge monopolies by acquiring smaller competitors or forcing them out of business. In the late 1890s and early 1900s, for example, more than 4,000 independent companies were consolidated into about 250 large corporations or trusts. The corporations then used their tremendous power and influence to negotiate favorable contracts with other businesses, command high prices for their products, demand concessions from their workers, derail proposed government regulations, and build huge fortunes for their owners.

*“Muckraking was what people wanted to hear,” wrote columnist Walter Lippmann. “There is no other way of explaining the quick approval which the muckrakers won.... There must have been real causes for dissatisfaction, or the land notorious for its worship of success would not have turned so savagely upon those who had achieved it.”*

Several prominent muckraking journalists went behind the scenes to investigate the business practices of the trusts. They pored through financial records and legal documents, spoke with employees and competitors, and prowled the factories and railroad yards they owned. Their investigations uncovered countless examples of underhanded deals and secret alliances among the large corporations. The exposés angered middle-class Americans and transformed wealthy industrial magnates like J.P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, Cornelius Vanderbilt, and Andrew Carnegie into enormously controversial figures. In some parts of America, in fact, these captains of industry became known as “robber barons” for their ruthless business tactics and willingness to exploit workers and consumers for personal

gain. “Muckraking was what people wanted to hear,” wrote influential columnist Walter Lippmann in 1914. “There is no other way of explaining the quick approval which the muckrakers won. They weren’t voices crying in a wilderness, or lonely prophets who were stoned. They demanded a hearing; it was granted. They asked for belief; they were believed. They cried that something should be done and there was every appearance of action. There must have been real causes for dissatisfaction, or the land notorious for its worship of success would not have turned so savagely upon those who had achieved it.”<sup>1</sup>

One of the earliest and most famous muckraking attacks on the trusts was journalist Ida M. Tarbell’s groundbreaking investigation of the Standard

Oil Company (see Tarbell biography, p. 152). This company was so big and powerful—and its reach extended into so many different areas of business—that it was known as “The Octopus.” Tarbell started working on a history of the massive company owned by John D. Rockefeller (see Rockefeller biography, p. 132) in 1901, around the time that Theodore Roosevelt took office as president of the United States. She spent a year gathering information, tracking down leads, and reviewing documents. The first story in the series, “The Birth of an Industry,” appeared in *McClure’s* magazine in November 1902, and eight more installments followed.

Tarbell told readers how Rockefeller had gotten started in the oil business in Pennsylvania in 1863, shortly after oil was first discovered there. From there, she chronicled how Rockefeller formed Standard Oil in 1870 and then used every possible means to expand its power and influence. The company secretly negotiated favorable prices from the railroads, for instance, which allowed it to reduce its shipping costs far below its competitors. This advantage made it impossible for smaller businesses to compete, which allowed Rockefeller to pressure them to sell their operations to him at less than their true value. Tarbell also charged that Standard Oil officials had resorted to bribery, threats, and even sabotage to cover up these shady dealings.

Tarbell made her case against Standard Oil patiently and systematically. She was careful to criticize the business practices employed by Standard Oil, rather than the size and power of the company. “I was willing that they should combine and grow as big and rich as they could, but only by legitimate means,”<sup>2</sup> she explained.

Tarbell’s series for *McClure’s* proved so fascinating to readers that circulation of the magazine increased by 100,000 copies during its run. She continued the story in a second series of articles that appeared in *McClure’s* between December 1903 and October 1904. Tarbell eventually published her work in



Muckraking journalist Ida M. Tarbell, pictured in 1905, is best known for exposing the ruthless business practices of John D. Rockefeller’s Standard Oil Company.



This political cartoon depicts the Standard Oil Company as an octopus, with its tentacles wrapped around various industries and branches of the U.S. government.

book form as *The History of the Standard Oil Company* (see “Ida Tarbell Investigates the Standard Oil Trust,” p. 173). Throughout the publication of these reports, Rockefeller and other Standard Oil Company officials never challenged the accuracy of Tarbell’s work. Rockefeller generally followed a policy of not responding to critics. But historians also note that Tarbell had convincing evidence to back up most of her claims.

At any rate, Tarbell’s revelations helped shift public opinion squarely against Rockefeller. He turned into a symbol of ruthlessness and greed in the minds of many Americans. Rockefeller and his defenders thought that the attacks were unfair. Supporters claimed that he was simply an extraordinary businessman, and they pointed out that he gave millions of dollars to charity. Still, it took decades for his image to recover from the damage inflicted by the muckrakers.

### Uncovering the Exploitation of Workers

Most of the large corporations that dominated American industries took advantage of their economic power and political influence to treat their workers



poorly. The wealthy owners of mining operations, steel mills, textile factories, slaughterhouses, and other industrial facilities believed that they had the right to run their businesses as they pleased. Their main goal was to earn profits, and their relentless pursuit of this goal often led them to exploit workers.

Even as the owners of large corporations amassed great personal wealth, they barely paid subsistence wages to the workers in their mills and factories. The average annual salary for workers in manufacturing industries was only \$435 in 1900, and some workers earned considerably less. The average salary for coal miners was only \$340 per year, for instance, while farmhands received an average of \$180 per year plus room and board.

To make matters worse, many industrial jobs were exhausting, requiring workers to perform repetitive tasks for hours on end without breaks. Many jobs were outright dangerous. Mine workers faced a constant threat of explosions or cave-ins, for example, while thousands of factory workers were killed or injured by machines each year. In addition, many workers in the nation's paper and steel mills, slaughterhouses, and mining operations were exposed to hazardous levels of toxic chemicals, fumes, or dust. This exposure contributed to numerous health problems, including asthma and tuberculosis (see sidebar "Alice Hamilton, Occupational Health Pioneer," p. 56). Most employers did little to protect workers from such hazards or to compensate them if they became unable to work.

Working-class Americans had very little power to resist or change this situation. Anyone who complained about long hours or dangerous working conditions—or tried to organize fellow workers in protest—ran a high risk of being fired. Since most working-class people depended on their meager income to support their families, they could not afford to jeopardize their jobs. In addition, workers in many industries were forced to live in "company towns" where all the homes, shops, schools, and other facilities were owned by their employer. Workers in these situations risked losing their homes as well as their jobs if they voiced any objections. As a result, many turn-of-the-century workers simply accepted long hours, low wages, and difficult working conditions as a fact of life.

Other workers, however, rebelled against these conditions. Workers in some industries organized labor unions to bargain with employers for higher wages, shorter hours, safer work environments, and other benefits. A few unions made progress in improving working conditions for their members. For the most part, though, American workers remained at the mercy of the

## **Alice Hamilton, Occupational Health Pioneer**

Industrial workers in turn-of-the-century America spent long hours toiling in hot, dirty, noisy factories for low wages. Yet these hardships were often not the worst that they endured. Millions of workers in the nation's mines, mills, and factories were exposed to dangerous levels of toxic chemicals, fumes, or dust on the job. Many of them suffered from chronic illnesses or deadly diseases as a result. Most employers made no effort to educate workers about the health hazards they faced or to compensate them if they became disabled. Occupational health and safety thus became a big issue for progressive reformers.

One of the pioneers of this field of study was Alice Hamilton. Born in 1869, Hamilton received a medical degree from the University of Michigan in 1893. Following postgraduate study in Germany and at Johns Hopkins University, she became a professor of pathology at the Women's Medical School of Northwestern University in 1897. During her time in Chicago, she became acquainted with Hull House, a settlement house dedicated to improving the lives of the urban poor. Hamilton eventually opened a well-baby clinic for poor families in the neighborhood. Her work brought her into contact with countless immigrants and other working-class parents who were suffering from pains, tremors, and illnesses triggered by workplace conditions. She also learned of the sudden or unexplained deaths of dozens of industrial workers.

Hamilton realized that little was known or understood about these problems, and she grew determined to apply her medical knowledge to the new field of occupational health. In 1908 she was appointed as the managing director of the Illinois Commission on Occupational Diseases, a state organization charged with investigating industrial poisoning from

big corporations. In the absence of laws protecting organized labor, mine and factory owners could simply fire any employees who attempted to form a union. If workers arranged a work stoppage or strike, a company could hire replacement workers. In some cases, businesses resorted to intimidation and violence to suppress union activities.

lead and other materials. In this role, Hamilton conducted an extensive survey on industrial illnesses and their social consequences. She inspected factories, spoke with workers and their families, examined hospital records, and performed laboratory research. She issued a series of groundbreaking reports showing that the majority of industrial workers in the state faced life-threatening hazards on the job.

Hamilton's work connected a number of common diseases with specific occupations. She found that steelworkers often suffered from carbon monoxide poisoning, for instance, while workers in hat-making facilities faced high rates of mercury poisoning. She also identified many kinds of repetitive stress injuries among industrial workers, such as "dead fingers" syndrome among workers who used jackhammers. Illinois legislators found Hamilton's report so persuasive that they passed sweeping reforms that set occupational safety standards and improved the health of workers.

Hamilton continued her work on a national scale as a special investigator for the U.S. Bureau of Labor from 1911 to 1919. She then accepted a position as Assistant Professor of Industrial Medicine at the Harvard Medical School, becoming the first woman to join the faculty of that prestigious institution. In 1925 she published the first American textbook on the subject of industrial toxicology, *Industrial Poisons in the United States*. Following her retirement from Harvard in 1935, Hamilton became a consultant to the U.S. Division of Labor Standards and served as the president of the National Consumers League. She published her autobiography, *Exploring the Dangerous Trades*, in 1943.

Hamilton died in 1970 at the age of 101. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) named a laboratory after her in Cincinnati, Ohio. Research in the field she pioneered continues in the twenty-first century through the CDC's National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

Although the labor unions shared many goals with the larger progressive movement, many Americans considered them to be too radical. They worried that union leaders wanted to overthrow America's system of capitalism and replace it with socialism. The main idea behind socialism—collective ownership of businesses and other property—appealed to some sup-

porters of the working class, but most middle-class Americans still believed in the capitalist system of private property and free enterprise. Therefore, most progressive reformers wanted to use the power of the U.S. government to end the exploitation of workers by large corporations. They favored establishing new regulations at the city, state, and federal levels to limit the power of the trusts and improve conditions for workers. The muckrakers helped increase public demand for such regulations and put pressure on political leaders to take action.

### Creating Sympathy for the Working Class

A number of muckrakers chronicled the poor working conditions and unfair labor practices endured by industrial workers. One famous article, “Old Age at Forty” by John A. Fitch, appeared in the March 1911 issue of *American Magazine*. Fitch investigated working conditions at steel mills and discovered that most workers were required to put in twelve-hour shifts each day. At the end of each week, when the day and night shifts switched places, one group of workers was forced to remain on the job for twenty-four hours straight. Fitch found that working such long hours in physically demanding jobs took a huge toll on the steelworkers, their families, and the community.

Although many other industries had instituted an eight-hour workday by this time, Fitch argued that the big steel operations “have inaugurated labor policies that are undemocratic and destructive. They have taken more and more of the day from their workmen; they have demanded more and more of their strength; they have taken from them individual freedom; they have robbed the home of a father’s time and care, and from the citizenship of the mill towns they have sapped the virility and aggressiveness necessary to democracy.”<sup>3</sup>

While Fitch and other writers raised awareness of poor industrial working conditions, several incidents occurred that brought national attention to the issue. In May 1911 a deadly fire broke out in a New York City textile mill owned by the Triangle Company. The facility produced a type of tailored women’s blouse called a shirtwaist. Hundreds of young women, most of them immigrants, toiled there in sweatshop conditions. Factory managers routinely locked the doors to prevent the workers from leaving during their shift or stealing material. When the factory caught on fire, many employees were trapped inside. In all, the tragedy took the lives of 146 young women.

Reporter William G. Shepherd of United Press was on the scene and watched dozens of workers jump to their death from the factory windows rather than die in the inferno. He described the horrific scene to his editors over the telephone: “The floods of water from the firemen’s hose that ran into the gutter were actually stained red with blood. I looked upon the heap of dead bodies and I remembered that these girls were the shirtwaist makers. I remembered their great strike of last year in which these same girls had demanded more sanitary conditions and more safety precautions in the shops. These dead bodies were the answer.”<sup>4</sup> In the wake of the tragedy, the State of New York passed several new laws that reduced work hours for women and improved workplace safety conditions.

Another shocking incident occurred in April 1914 in Ludlow, Colorado. Ludlow was the home of miners who worked for the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company, owned by John D. Rockefeller. The miners went on strike to protest the long hours, low wages, and poor working conditions they received from the company. Following a series of minor confrontations, Colorado National Guard troops under the direction of company management attacked a tent city full of striking miners and their families. Twenty people were killed in the mining camp, including two women and eleven children. This violent incident, which became known as the Ludlow Massacre, drew renewed public attention to labor-management issues and generated political support for such reforms as a national eight-hour workday and a ban on child labor.



This cover of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Weekly* depicts a violent confrontation between striking workers and corporate security guards outside a steel mill owned by Andrew Carnegie.

### Raising Concerns about Food Safety

Freelance writer Upton Sinclair (see Sinclair biography, p. 142) set out to expose the hardships endured by workers in the meatpacking industry. As it turned out, though, middle-class Americans were even more appalled by his descriptions of the disgusting, unsanitary conditions in which meat was processed. His work created a tremendous public outcry that led directly to the passage of federal laws aimed at improving food safety.

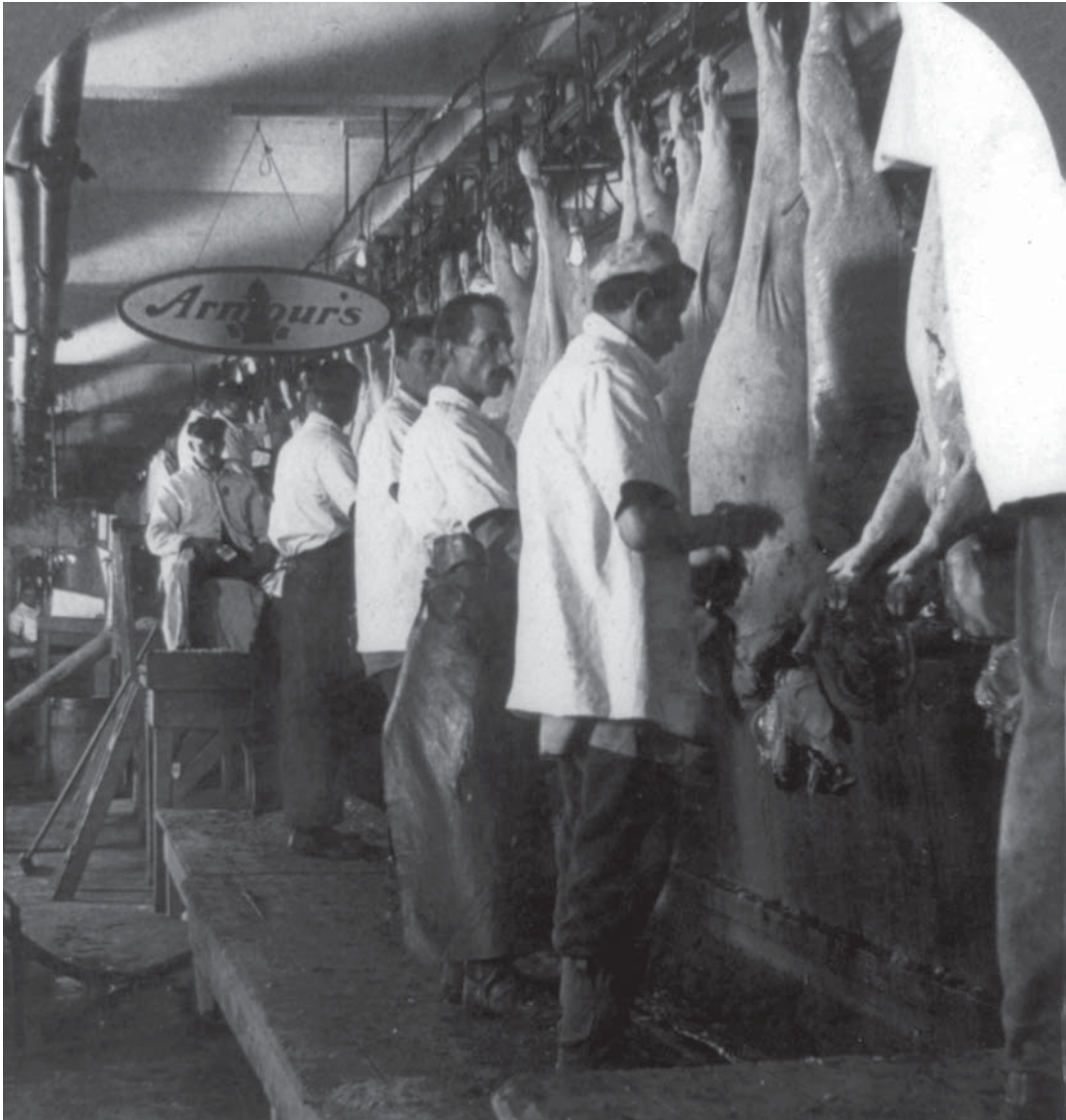
In 1904 Sinclair received an assignment to investigate slaughterhouse operations in Chicago and write a series of muckraking articles for a magazine called *Appeal to Reason*. Chicago was the center of the nation's meat production at that time. Trainloads of cattle, pigs, and sheep from farms and ranches across the Midwest arrived in the city's rail yards each day. A continuous stream of livestock was herded into slaughterhouses and meatpacking facilities owned by three powerful corporations: Armour, Swift, and Morris.

Once inside, the animals were killed and processed by an assembly line of workers. Each worker performed a single, repetitive task in the process of turning live animals into saleable cuts of meat. The workers were known by descriptive titles—such as knockers, stickers, skinners, boners, trimmers, and luggers—based on the jobs they did over and over, day after day.

Sinclair conducted an undercover investigation over the course of seven weeks. Dressed in shabby work clothes and carrying a lunchbox, he slipped into Chicago meatpacking plants unnoticed. By pretending to be a worker, he was able to observe the meatpacking operations firsthand. Sinclair even lived at a settlement house in the nearby tenement district known as Packingtown. He spoke with other workers and their families and developed a clear understanding of the challenges and hardships they faced.

In order to make the problems in the meatpacking industry seem more immediate to readers, Sinclair decided to weave his observations into a story about a fictional worker named Jurgis Rudkos. Rudkos was a Lithuanian immigrant who worked in Packingtown and endured everything Sinclair had witnessed in the plants and the surrounding neighborhood. At the end of the

*“There was never the least attention paid to what was cut up for sausage,” Upton Sinclair wrote in The Jungle. “There would be meat stored in great piles in rooms; and the water from leaky roofs would drip over it, and thousands of rats would race about on it.”*



Muckraker Upton Sinclair investigated conditions in Chicago meatpacking plants for his best-selling book *The Jungle*.

story, Rudkos joins the Socialist Party, which promises to bring fairness to workers by spreading ownership of the nation's factories among all citizens. Sinclair hoped that readers would share his view that socialism could help

solve the problems of modern industry and raise the standard of living for working-class Americans.

Sinclair's series of articles drew a great deal of attention and helped increase the circulation of *Appeal to Reason*. In 1906 he revised and shortened the series and published it as a book called *The Jungle* (see "Upton Sinclair Exposes Problems in the Meatpacking Industry," p. 178). It became a best-seller, was translated into seventeen languages, and turned Sinclair into a worldwide celebrity. Still, the author was disappointed that many readers focused on his revelations about food safety, rather than his message about socialism. "I aimed at the public's heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach,"<sup>5</sup> he admitted.

Readers of *The Jungle* were shocked and disgusted by Sinclair's descriptions of unsanitary slaughterhouse and meatpacking operations. They were particularly appalled to learn that diseased animals, spoiled meat, and even rats routinely made their way into the nation's food supply. "There was never the least attention paid to what was cut up for sausage," he revealed. "There would be meat stored in great piles in rooms; and the water from leaky roofs would drip over it, and thousands of rats would race about on it.... These rats were nuisances, 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. This is no fairy story and no joke; the meat would be shoveled into carts, and the man who did the shoveling would not trouble to lift out a rat even when he saw one—there were things that went into the sausage in comparison with which a poisoned rat was a tidbit."<sup>6</sup>

The large corporations that controlled the meatpacking industry insisted that their operations were clean and sanitary, and that they had inspections and other precautions to ensure that no tainted meat ever reached American consumers. *The Jungle* created such public outrage, however, that Roosevelt sent federal investigators to Chicago to review the situation. The inspectors not only confirmed Sinclair's findings, but in some cases found conditions even worse than those detailed in *The Jungle*. Roosevelt threw his weight behind efforts to craft strong new regulations for the meatpacking industry, and Congress responded by passing the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906.

### **Protecting Consumers from Patent Medicines**

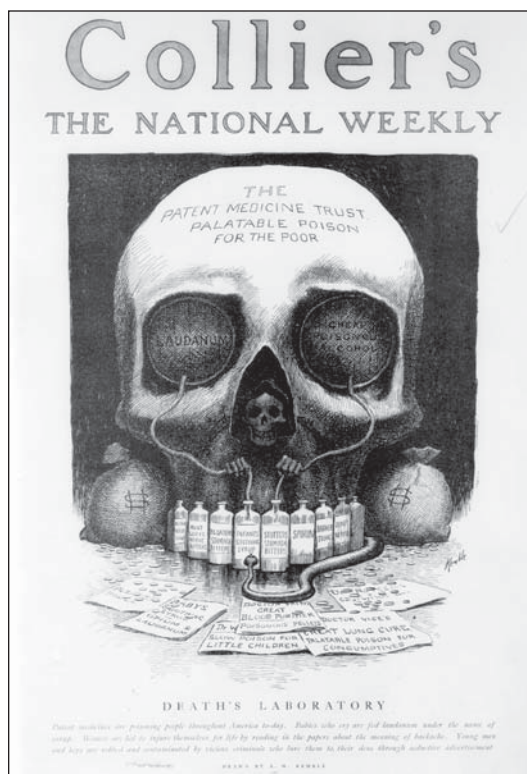
The Pure Food and Drug Act also addressed another industry of concern to American consumers: patent medicines. Patent medicines were mysterious



pills and potions that promised to cure a wide variety of illnesses and ailments. The companies that manufactured these remedies advertised heavily in newspapers and magazines. Their slick ads often included glowing testimonials from people who were miraculously restored to good health by using the product. In fact, patent medicine makers spent more money on advertising than they did on manufacturing. They spent so much money for ad space that they were often able to dictate terms to newspaper and magazine publishers. In many cases, the patent medicine companies inserted clauses in these contracts that prohibited publications from running any articles that were critical of their business.

Nevertheless, a few muckraking magazines conducted investigations of the patent medicine industry. They found that most of the popular remedies were not healthy at all. In fact, many of the products contained dangerous ingredients, including alcohol, narcotics, stimulants, and depressants. A few included addictive drugs like morphine and cocaine, which created dependence in consumers and ensured that they would keep buying the product.

Several magazines published articles and editorials condemning the patent medicine industry as a dangerous fraud perpetrated on American consumers. Muckraker Samuel Hopkins Adams wrote a year-long series called “The Great American Fraud” for *Collier's* magazine in 1905. He charged that the American people paid \$75 million per year to patent medicine manufacturers for products that did nothing to improve their health. Edward Bok, the editor of *Ladies' Home Journal*, told his magazine's readers that “It is not by any means putting the matter too strongly to say that the patent medicine habit is one of the gravest curses, with the most dangerous results, that is



In 1905 *Collier's* magazine published a year-long series of muckraking articles about the health risks associated with patent medicines.

### Frank Norris Condemns Greedy Railroad Barons in *The Octopus*

**A**nother classic work of muckraking literature that condemned corporate greed and its impact on the lives of working-class Americans was *The Octopus* by Frank Norris. Published in 1901, this novel centered around a deadly real-life confrontation between railroad barons and a group of settlers over land rights in California's San Joaquin Valley.

When the Transcontinental Railroad was completed in 1869, it suddenly became possible to travel from one side of the continent to the other in a matter of days. Over the next few years, several major railroad companies entered into a fierce competition to develop additional rail lines across California. In most cases, these companies received grants of land from the federal government along the routes where they planned to lay tracks. Each rail line that was constructed opened up new areas for settlement, ranching, and agriculture by ensuring that farm products could be shipped back east to market.

Many people settled along the rail lines, with the understanding that the railroad companies would eventually turn over ownership of the federal land grants to homesteaders at a fair market value. The settlers generally improved the land by building houses, barns, corrals, and irrigation systems. Many families established homes and lived there for years, thinking that they were gradually gaining property rights, when in actuality the railroad companies retained title to the land.

inflicting our American national life."<sup>7</sup> Other magazines revealed that the patent medicine companies used their financial power to limit negative media attention and government regulatory efforts.

American consumers were outraged by the deceptive and dangerous practices of the patent medicine industry. They demanded that political leaders take action to protect them from unhealthy products and false advertising. In the resulting uproar, many magazines and newspapers announced that they would no longer accept advertisements for patent medicines. In addi-

This situation had dire consequences for settlers of land granted to the Southern Pacific Railroad Company in the San Joaquin Valley. In 1880, when the railroad company decided to sell its parcels, it set the price per acre ten times higher than the settlers had been led to expect. Railroad executives justified the price increase by saying that it reflected the value of the improvements the settlers had made. When the settlers were unable to pay, the railroad company forced them to vacate the property. In many cases, railroad employees and backers then stepped in to purchase the improved land.

Some settlers got together to challenge the Southern Pacific's actions in court, but the railroad company used its financial strength and political connections to ensure that all of the lawsuits were decided in its favor. Devastated at the loss of everything they had worked to build, one group of angry settlers got into an armed confrontation with railroad employees and law enforcement officers who had been sent to evict them from the disputed land. Six settlers were killed in the resulting gunfight, which became known as the Battle at Mussel Slough.

This tragic incident forms the centerpiece of Norris's novel. *The Octopus* raised public awareness of the abuses of the railroad companies and generated calls for progressive reforms. Still, some historians claim that Norris presented a more sympathetic picture of wealthy industrialists and large corporations than many other muckrakers.

tion, several state medical societies disavowed the products and state legislatures banned their sale. Reinforcing the concerns about food safety raised by *The Jungle*, the pressure to reform the patent medicine industry contributed to the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906.

### **Busting the Trusts**

Muckraking exposés about the large corporations that dominated American industry at the turn of the century had a dramatic impact on public

opinion (see sidebar “Frank Norris Condemns Greedy Railroad Barons in *The Octopus*,” p. 64). Millions of middle-class citizens called for the federal government to take steps to limit the power and influence of large corporations and promote the welfare of workers. The influence of the muckrakers was “evident in the growth of the federal government’s regulatory power over railroads, packing houses, and the food and drug industries,” according to one historian. “The public demand that produced this result was unquestionably inspired and maintained primarily by the magazine muckrakers.”<sup>8</sup>

By raising public awareness of the abuses of industry, the muckrakers helped increase support for President Roosevelt’s progressive reforms. Roosevelt believed that the role of government needed to expand in order to address the many problems brought on by rapid industrialization. He wanted to take action to improve conditions for the poor and working class and restore the American people’s faith in democracy.

*The influence of the muckrakers was “evident in the growth of the federal government’s regulatory power over railroads, packing houses, and the food and drug industries,” according to one historian.*

One of Roosevelt’s main concerns was labor-management relations, which was a frequent muckraking topic. He intervened on behalf of labor unions in several high-profile disputes with management during his presidency, and he launched an aggressive trust-busting campaign. In 1902, for example, Roosevelt stepped in to help resolve a bitter strike by United Mine Workers members against the large corporations that controlled Pennsylvania coal mines. The president threatened to put the mining operations under federal government control if management did not agree to settle the dispute through arbitration. Once the two sides appeared before an impartial party, the miners received a wage increase and other concessions that they had demanded. Roosevelt’s handling of the strike put other large corporations on notice that his administration would not automatically side with industry in labor disputes. “The federal government, for the first time in its history, had intervened in a strike not to break it, but to bring about a peaceful settlement,” noted one historian. “The great anthracite strike of 1902 cast a long shadow.”<sup>9</sup>

Roosevelt also took action to stop or reverse the monopolistic business practices of the trusts. In 1902, for instance, he used the Sherman Antitrust Act to prevent financier J.P. Morgan from executing a plan to control all railroad transport between Chicago and the West Coast. Following the election

of 1904, which he won in a landslide with 57 percent of popular vote, Roosevelt stepped up his trust-busting activities even further. In 1906 he pushed the Hepburn Act through Congress, which empowered the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) to increase its regulation of the railroads. The agency set reasonable shipping rates, ensured that the railroads did not make unethical deals that favored big companies, and forced the railroads to sell off their interests in unrelated industries.

Roosevelt prosecuted more than forty antitrust cases against corporate giants during his second term in office. The most prominent trust-busting effort involved Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company. Following a lengthy investigation and legal battle that did not conclude until two years after Roosevelt left office, the Department of Commerce and Labor used the Sherman Antitrust Act to break up the trust. Rockefeller was forced to sell off thirty-eight different pieces of his holdings. Some of these companies went on to become successful oil industry players on their own, including Amoco, Chevron, Exxon, and Mobil. The proceeds from these sales made Rockefeller the richest man in the world. Still, the breakup of Standard Oil was cited by a national panel of historians and journalists as one of the top 100 historic events that changed America during the twentieth century.

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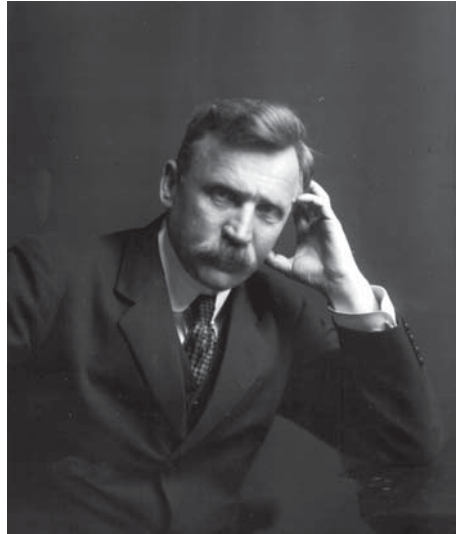
### Notes

- 1 Lippmann, Walter. *Drift and Mastery: An Attempt to Diagnose the Current Unrest*. H. Holt and Company, 1914, p. 4.
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**S.S. McClure (1857-1949)**

*Progressive Owner and Editor of McClure's Magazine*

Samuel Sidney McClure was born on February 17, 1857, in Frocess, County Antrim, Ireland. His father, Thomas McClure, was a carpenter and farmer. His mother, Elizabeth (Gaston) McClure, divided her time between farm work and caring for Samuel and his three younger brothers. In 1865 Thomas McClure died in an accident while working in a shipyard. His sudden death threatened the future of the rest of the family, which had depended on his earnings for basic food, clothing, and shelter. The circumstances of McClure's family steadily worsened, and in 1866 Elizabeth McClure fled to America—where four of her siblings had already immigrated—with her four sons.



**Entering the World of Magazine Publishing**

The McClure family settled on a small farm outside of Valparaiso, Indiana. Their first months in America were a terrible struggle, but in 1867 Elizabeth McClure married a fellow Irish immigrant named Thomas Simpson. They had four more children together before his death from typhoid fever in 1873.

Young Samuel attended school in Valparaiso, and by the time he graduated from high school he was known to classmates by his initials, "S.S." In 1874 McClure enrolled at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, where he distinguished himself as the editor of the school newspaper (the *Knox Student*) and the founder of the Western College Associated Press. During his time at Knox, McClure developed an intense romantic attachment to Harriet Hurd, the daughter of one of his professors. The relationship appeared to end after McClure's graduation in 1882. McClure fled to Boston after Hurd rejected him in response to intense pressure from her disapproving family.

Within a year, though, McClure had established himself in the world of magazine publishing by co-founding the highly successful magazine *Wheelman* with famed bicycle maker Albert Pope. McClure's success with *Wheelman* enabled him to make another bid for Harriet Hurd's hand in marriage,

and this time her family grudgingly consented to the union. They were married on September 4, 1883, and eventually had five children.

### Setting a New Course

In 1884 McClure and his wife left Boston for New York City, where he worked briefly at a printing company and at *Century* magazine. Late in the year, however, he launched his own business, which he called the McClure Syndicate. This syndicate—one of the first of its kind established in the United States—sold articles and short stories by popular writers to magazines and newspapers across the country. By the late 1880s McClure was working with some of the world's leading writers, including Rudyard Kipling, Robert Louis Stevenson, Henry James, Walt Whitman, Stephen Crane, and Jack London.

In 1893 McClure used his syndicate earnings to launch his own national periodical, called *McClure's Magazine*. The first issues were released at the height of a serious economic downturn in the United States, and the magazine barely survived its first year. But the high quality of its content and its low price—10 cents an issue at a time when most other magazines cost 25 or 35 cents—brought steady increases in readership. McClure compensated for the low price of the magazine by relying on advertising revenue. Other magazines followed suit, and the percentage of space devoted to advertising in many U.S. periodicals swiftly rose.

By 1900 *McClure's Magazine* enjoyed a circulation of more than 350,000 and a national reputation for publishing top-notch fiction and journalism. Several famous writers and reporters on the staff, including Ida Tarbell, Willa Cather, and Lincoln Steffens, first came to the attention of American readers in the pages of *McClure's*. In addition, McClure continued to place work from talented new fiction writers alongside contributions from some of the country's leading literary figures. His blend of news coverage, investigative reports, and high-quality fiction became the envy of nearly every other magazine in America.

### Flagship of the Muckraking Movement

*McClure's Magazine* rose to prominence at a turbulent time in U.S. history. Industrialization, free-market capitalism, and settlement of the West had ushered in an exciting era of economic expansion across much of the country. But the gap between America's rich business class and its millions of working

poor seemed to be growing wider with each passing year. A so-called Progressive Movement rose up to protest against this state of affairs, as well as other perceived problems in American society such as political corruption, urban squalor, and mistreatment of laborers.

As the first decade of the twentieth century unfolded, American newspapers and magazines contributed to these calls for governmental and economic reform by publishing hard-hitting investigative reports detailing outrageous examples of consumer fraud, government corruption, and immoral behavior by powerful corporations and individuals. These “muckraking” reports, as they came to be known, became a specialty of several national magazines, including *Collier's*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Munsey's*, and *The Independent*. But S.S. McClure's magazine became the most famous of the muckraking magazines of the Progressive Era.

*McClure's* emergence as the flagship magazine of the muckraking movement is usually traced to its January 1903 issue, which featured three explosive investigative reports by Tarbell, Steffens, and muckraking journalist Ray Stannard Baker. Tarbell's piece on the ruthless practices of Standard Oil—the third installment in an entire series of Tarbell articles on Standard that was published by *McClure's*—was one of the most famous reports of the entire muckraking era. But the articles by Steffens and Baker—on political corruption and vicious lawlessness in the Pennsylvania coal fields, respectively—had a similarly momentous impact on public opinion. Together, the three investigative pieces amounted to a scathing attack on the state of American politics, business, and society. Today, the publication of the January 1903 issue of *McClure's* is often cited as one of the most important events in the history of American journalism.

As the muckraking movement gained momentum, McClure and his talented stable of writers and editors maintained a leading role. They were progressives themselves, and they saw the magazine as a tool that could help bring about much-needed reforms to American factories, tenements, boardrooms, and legislative chambers. As one historian observed, “McClure and his staff were very conscious of participating in a political and economic movement intent upon reshaping many of the country's institutions.”<sup>1</sup>

This dedication to the reform cause led McClure and his editors to fill issue after issue with reports and analyses of various problems in American society. Meanwhile, the magazine's lively and daring tone and its beautiful



covers and illustrations attracted a broad cross-section of readers. By 1905 it was almost universally regarded as the finest general-interest magazine in the country. “*McClure’s* was a supernova in the journalistic firmament,” confirmed one scholar. “Besides a talent for picking writers, McClure could talk almost anyone into working for him, and when he did, he gave them a free hand. He plowed his profits back into the magazine and thought nothing of spending thousands of dollars on one story.”<sup>2</sup>

### The Decline of *McClure’s*

The fortunes of *McClure’s Magazine* and its colorful owner changed dramatically in 1906. Over the course of that year, President Theodore Roosevelt publicly condemned the muckrakers for being excessively negative about American life and society. Even more importantly, McClure lost the services of Tarbell, Baker, and Steffens. Each of these writers had become frustrated by the publisher’s careless financial stewardship of *McClure’s*. In addition, they were angered by the fact that he was framing the magazine as a guardian of public and business morality at the same time that he was carrying out multiple extramarital affairs.

The simultaneous resignation of the magazine’s three top journalists was a terrible blow to McClure—he once described it as the greatest tragedy of his life—but it was made even worse by the fact that they decided to establish their own magazine. When the trio left *McClure’s* to form their own publication, called *American Magazine*, they took many readers with them. McClure and chief editor Willa Cather tried several strategies to reverse his magazine’s sliding sales, but none of them worked.

In 1912 McClure lost financial control of the magazine. In 1914 he published his autobiography, but the book was actually written by Cather (who later went on to become a Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist). McClure spent the next several years supporting himself as a writer, and in 1922 he returned to *McClure’s* for a three-year stint as the magazine’s managing editor. He then left the public spotlight almost entirely, and in 1929 his namesake magazine went out of business. McClure spent his final years living quietly in New York City, where friends and relatives reportedly gave him financial assistance. He died of a heart attack on March 21, 1949.

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## Lincoln Steffens Reveals the Shame of the Cities

*During the Progressive Era, corrupt city governments came under investigation by muckraking journalists like Lincoln Steffens. After joining the staff of McClure's magazine in 1902, Steffens compiled a series of articles about the ways in which bribery, backroom deals, and political favors drove the governments of virtually every major American city. The first installment in his "Shame of the Cities" series, entitled "Tweed Days in St. Louis," is excerpted below. Steffens describes the lonely battle waged by a newly elected district attorney, Joseph Folk, to clean up corruption in St. Louis, Missouri.*

St. LOUIS, the fourth city in size in the United States, is making two announcements to the world: one that it is the worst-governed city in the land; the other that it wishes all men to come there and see it. It isn't our worst-governed city; Philadelphia is that. But St. Louis is worth examining while we have it inside out.

There is a man at work there, one man, working all alone, but he is the Circuit (district or state) Attorney, and he is "doing his duty." That is what thousands of district attorneys and other public officials have promised to do and boasted of doing. This man has a literal sort of mind. He is a thin-lipped, firm-mouthed, dark little man, who never raises his voice, but goes ahead doing, with a smiling eye and a set jaw, the simple thing he said he would do. The politicians and reputable citizens who asked him to run urged him when he declined. When he said that if elected he would have to do his duty, they said, "Of course." So he ran, they supported him, and he was elected. Now some of these politicians are sentenced to the penitentiary, some are in Mexico. The Circuit Attorney, finding that his "duty" was to catch and convict criminals, and that the biggest criminals were some of these same politicians and leading citizens, went after them. It is magnificent, but the politicians declare it isn't politics.

The corruption of St. Louis came from the top. The best citizens—the merchants and big financiers—used to rule the town, and they ruled it well. They set out to outstrip Chicago. The commercial and industrial war between these two cities was at one time a picturesque and dramatic spectacle such as is witnessed only in our country. Businessmen were not mere merchants and the politicians were not mere grafters; the two kinds of citizens got together and wielded the power of banks, railroads, factories, the prestige of the city and the spirit of its citizens to gain business and population. And it was a

close race. Chicago, having the start, always led, but St. Louis had pluck, intelligence, and tremendous energy. It pressed Chicago hard. It excelled in a sense of civic beauty and good government; and there are those who think yet it might have won. But a change occurred. Public spirit became private spirit, public enterprise became private greed.

Along about 1890, public franchises and privileges were sought, not only for legitimate profit and common convenience, but for loot. Taking but slight and always selfish interest in the public councils, the big men misused politics. The riffraff, catching the smell of corruption, rushed into the Municipal Assembly, drove out the remaining respectable men, and sold the city—its streets, its wharves, its markets, and all that it had—to the now greedy businessmen and bribers. In other words, when the leading men began to devour their own city, the herd rushed into the trough and fed also.

So gradually has this occurred that these same citizens hardly realize it. Go to St. Louis and you will find the habit of civic pride in them; they still boast. The visitor is told of the wealth of the residents, of the financial strength of the banks, and of the growing importance of the industries, yet he sees poorly paved, refuse-burdened streets, and dusty or mud-covered alleys; he passes a ramshackle firetrap crowded with the sick, and learns that it is the City Hospital; he enters the “Four Courts,” and his nostrils are greeted by the odor of formaldehyde used as a disinfectant, and insect powder spread to destroy vermin; he calls at the new City Hall, and finds half the entrance boarded with pine planks to cover up the unfinished interior. Finally, he turns a tap in the hotel, to see liquid mud flow into wash basin or bathtub.

The St. Louis charter vests legislative power of great scope in a Municipal Assembly, which is composed of a Council and a House of Delegates. Here is a description of the latter by one of Mr. Folk’s grand juries:

“We have had before us many of those who have been, and most of those who are now, members of the House of Delegates. We found a number of these utterly illiterate and lacking in ordinary intelligence, unable to give a better reason for favoring or opposing a measure than a desire to act with the majority. In some, no trace of mentality or morality could be found; in others, a low order of training appeared, united with base cunning, groveling instincts, and sordid desires. Unqualified to respond to the ordinary requirements of life, they are utterly incapable of comprehending the significance of an ordinance, and are incapacitated, both by nature and training, to be the

makers of laws. The choosing of such men to be legislators makes a travesty of justice, sets a premium on incompetency, and deliberately poisons the very source of the law.”

These creatures were well organized. They had a “combine”—a legislative institution—which the grand jury described as follows:

“Our investigation, covering more or less fully a period of ten years, shows that, with few exceptions, no ordinance has been passed wherein valuable privileges or franchises are granted until those interested have paid the legislators the money demanded for action in the particular case. Combines in both branches of the Municipal Assembly are formed by members sufficient in number to control legislation. To one member of this combine is delegated the authority to act for the combine, and to receive and to distribute to each member the money agreed upon as the price of his vote in support of, or opposition to, a pending measure. So long has this practice existed that such members have come to regard the receipt of money for action on pending measures as a legitimate perquisite of a legislator.”

One legislator consulted a lawyer with the intention of suing a firm to recover an unpaid balance on a fee for the grant of a switchway. Such difficulties rarely occurred, however. In order to insure a regular and indisputable revenue, the combine of each house drew up a schedule of bribery prices for all possible sorts of grants, just such a list as a commercial traveler takes out on the road with him. There was a price for a grain elevator, a price for a short switch; side tracks were charged for by the linear foot, but at rates which varied according to the nature of the ground taken; a street improvement cost so much; wharf space was classified and precisely rated. As there was a scale for favorable legislation, so there was one for defeating bills. It made a difference in the price if there was opposition, and it made a difference whether the privilege asked was legitimate or not. But nothing was passed free of charge. Many of the legislators were saloonkeepers—it was in St. Louis that a practical joker nearly emptied the House of Delegates by tipping a boy to rush into a session and call out, “Mister, your saloon is on fire”—but even the saloonkeepers of a neighborhood had to pay to keep in their inconvenient locality a market which public interest would have moved.

From the Assembly, bribery spread into other departments. Men empowered to issue peddlers’ licenses and permits to citizens who wished to erect an awning or use a portion of the sidewalk for storage purposes charged an

amount in excess of the prices stipulated by law, and pocketed the difference. The city's money was loaned at interest, and the interest was converted into private bank accounts. City carriages were used by the wives and children of city officials. Supplies for public institutions found their way to private tables; one itemized account of food furnished the poorhouse included California jellies, imported cheeses, and French wines! A member of the Assembly caused the incorporation of a grocery company, with his sons and daughters the ostensible stockholders, and succeeded in having his bid for city supplies accepted although the figures were in excess of his competitors'. In return for the favor thus shown, he indorsed a measure to award the contract for city printing to another member, and these two voted aye on a bill granting to a third the exclusive right to furnish city dispensaries with drugs.

Men ran into debt to the extent of thousands of dollars for the sake of election to either branch of the Assembly. One night, on a street car going to the City Hall, a new member remarked that the nickel he handed the conductor was his last. The next day he deposited \$5,000 in a savings bank. A member of the House of Delegates admitted to the grand jury that his dividends from the combine netted \$25,000 in one year; a councilman stated that he was paid \$50,000 for his vote on a single measure....

The blackest years were 1898, 1899, and 1900. Foreign corporations came into the city to share in its despoliation, and home industries were driven out by blackmail. Franchises worth millions were granted without one cent of cash to the city, and with provision for only the smallest future payment; several companies which refused to pay blackmail had to leave; citizens were robbed more and more boldly; payrolls were padded with the names of nonexistent persons; work on public improvements was neglected, while money for them went to the boodlers.

Some of the newspapers protested, disinterested citizens were alarmed, and the shrewder men gave warnings, but none dared make an effective stand. Behind the corruptionists were men of wealth and social standing, who, because of special privileges granted them, felt bound to support and defend the looters. Independent victims of the far-reaching conspiracy submitted in silence, through fear of injury to their business. Men whose integrity was never questioned, who held high positions of trust, who were church members and teachers of Bible classes, contributed to the support of the dynasty—became blackmailers, in fact—and their excuse was that others did

the same, and that if they proved the exception it would work their ruin. The system became loose through license and plenty till it was as wild as that of Tweed in New York.

Then the unexpected happened—an accident. There was no uprising of the people, but they were restive; and the Democratic party leaders, thinking to gain some independent votes, decided to raise the cry “reform” and put up a ticket of candidates different enough from the usual offerings of political parties to give color to their platform. These leaders were not in earnest. There was little difference between the two parties in the city; but the rascals that were in had been getting the greater share of the spoils, and the “outs” wanted more than was given to them. “Boodle” was not the issue, no exposures were made or threatened, and the bosses expected to control their men if elected. Simply as part of the game, the Democrats raised the slogan, “reform” and “no more Ziegenheimism.”

Mayor Ziegenheim, called “Uncle Henry,” was a “good fellow,” “one of the boys,” and though it was during his administration that the city grew ripe and went to rot, his opponents talked only of incompetence and neglect, and repeated such stories as that of his famous reply to some citizens who complained because certain street lights were put out: “You have the moon yet—ain’t it?”

When somebody mentioned Joseph W. Folk for Circuit Attorney the leaders were ready to accept him. They didn’t know much about him. He was a young man from Tennessee; had been president of the Jefferson Club, and arbitrated the railroad strike of 1898. But Folk did not want the place. He was a civil lawyer, had had no practice at the criminal bar, cared little about it, and a lucrative business as counsel for corporations was interesting him. He rejected the invitation. The committee called again and again, urging his duty to his party, and the city, etc.

“Very well,” he said, at last, “I will accept the nomination, but if elected I will do my duty. There must be no attempt to influence my actions when I am called upon to punish lawbreakers.”

The committeemen took such statements as the conventional platitudes of candidates. They nominated him, the Democratic ticket was elected, and Folk became Circuit Attorney for the Eighth Missouri District.

Three weeks after taking the oath of office his campaign pledges were put to the test. A number of arrests had been made in connection with the

recent election, and charges of illegal registration were preferred against men of both parties. Mr. Folk took them up like routine cases of ordinary crime. Political bosses rushed to the rescue. Mr. Folk was reminded of his duty to his party, and told that he was expected to construe the law in such a manner that repeaters and other election criminals who had hoisted democracy's flag and helped elect him might be either discharged or receive the minimum punishment. The nature of the young lawyer's reply can best be inferred from the words of that veteran political leader, Colonel Ed Butler, who, after a visit to Mr. Folk, wrathfully exclaimed, "D—n Joe! He thinks he's the whole thing as Circuit Attorney."

The election cases were passed through the courts with astonishing rapidity; no more mercy was shown Democrats than Republicans, and before winter came a number of ward heelers and old-time party workers were behind the bars in Jefferson City. He next turned his attention to grafters and straw bondsmen with whom the courts were infested, and several of these leeches are in the penitentiary today. The business was broken up because of his activity. But Mr. Folk had made little more than the beginning....

Mr. Folk has shown St. Louis that its bankers, brokers, corporation officers—its businessmen—are the sources of evil, so that from the start it will know the municipal problem in its true light. With a tradition for public spirit, it may drop Butler and its runaway bankers, brokers and brewers, and pushing aside the scruples of the hundreds of men down in blue book, and red book, and church register, who are lying hidden behind the statutes of limitations, the city may restore good government. Otherwise the exposures by Mr. Folk will result only in the perfection of the corrupt system. For the corrupt can learn a lesson when the good citizens cannot....

This is St. Louis' one great chance. But, for the rest of us, it does not matter about St. Louis any more than it matters about Colonel Butler et al. The point is, that what went on in St. Louis is going on in most of our cities, towns and villages. The problem of municipal government in America has not been solved. The people may be tired of it, but they cannot give it up—not yet.

Source: Steffens, Lincoln. "Tweed Days in St. Louis." *McClure's*, October 1902. Reprinted in Weinberg, Lila Shaffer. *The Muckrakers*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001, pp. 122-27.



# IMPORTANT PEOPLE, PLACES, AND TERMS

## **Baker, Ray Stannard (1870-1946)**

Muckraking journalist who is best known for exploring race relations in his book *Following the Color Line*.

## **Bernstein, Carl (1944- )**

Investigative journalist whose reporting of the Watergate scandal contributed to the resignation of President Richard M. Nixon.

## **Boss**

A corrupt official who controls a city government and awards municipal jobs and contracts on the basis of bribery, connections, and political favors.

## **Capitalism**

An economic system that emphasizes free enterprise, competition, and private ownership of property as keys to prosperity.

## **Carnegie, Andrew (1835-1919)**

Businessman who made a fortune in the steel industry and later gave away much of his money to support philanthropic causes.

## **Carson, Rachel (1907-1964)**

Biologist and writer who exposed the environmental damage resulting from the unregulated use of pesticides in her 1962 book *Silent Spring*.

## **Civil War**

A military conflict (1861-65) between the northern and southern parts of the United States over slavery and other issues.

## **Conservative**

A political philosophy that favors lowering taxes and government spending, reducing government regulation of business, and limiting the role of government in society.

# CHRONOLOGY

1690

The first newspaper in the American colonies, *Publick Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick*, is published in Boston. *See p. 22.*

1704

The *Boston News-Letter* becomes the first ongoing newspaper in the American colonies. *See p. 22.*

1721

Brothers James and Benjamin Franklin launch a newspaper called the *New England Courant*. *See p. 22.*

1740s

The first magazines appear in the American colonies. *See p. 27.*

1765

British authorities pass the Stamp Act, which requires all legal documents, books, and newspapers printed in the American colonies to appear on specially stamped paper; American newspapers refuse to pay the high tax on stamped paper, and the act is repealed. *See p. 22.*

1769

The steam engine, one of the great inventions of the Industrial Revolution, is unveiled in England. *See p. 8.*

1776

American newspapers help shape public opinion in favor of independence from English rule. *See p. 24.*

1787

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution guarantees freedom of the press. *See p. 24.*

1830s

The invention of the cylinder press makes newspaper publishing faster and cheaper. *See p. 24.*

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