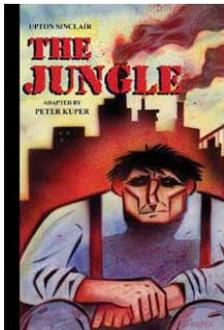


WORK INJURIES IN UPTON SINCLAIR'S *THE JUNGLE*

by Dave Torrey, *Workers' Compensation Judge*



Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, published in 1906, is the classic novel depicting the difficult lives of workers in the meat-packing industry in Chicago during the first decade of this century. As every high school student is taught, this is the quintessential muckraking novel, whose depictions of the ghastly, unhygienic conditions of the industry prompted the enactment of the Pure Food and Drug Act.

While it is for this that the novel is best remembered, the book was principally intended to present a picture of an all-too-commonly *derailed* "American Dream," showing how poor immigrants to the U.S. during the period were preyed upon by swindlers, con artists, and the "pitiless, cold-hearted system whose only purpose [was] to enrich those at its summit." Within the first few chapters, indeed, our heroes are subject to a calamitous housing rip-off; lured by insipid advertisements to waste their hard-earned pennies on commodities they don't really need; and sold shoddy, defective, and fraudulent products. Ultimately they become victim to corrupt judicial and municipal systems.

Sinclair narrates, specifically, an account of how a large, naïve peasant family from Lithuania comes to Chicago, and seeks to make a living working in the sprawling slaughterhouses and packing plants (called "Packingtown").

By the end of the book, the family is in ruins. Jurgis Rudkus, the family patriarch and chief protagonist, has been reduced from a robust, twenty-five year old heavy laborer – with dreams of children, opportunity, and prosperity – to a crippled bellhop dreaming pathetically of a socialist revolution.

The lessons being communicated in *The Jungle* are not subtle, and there is virtually nothing left for the reader to infer. Left undeclared, however, is the fact that it is work injuries, in this pre-workers' compensation era, that are usually the proximate cause of the family's many disasters. Bad working conditions provided or allowed by the greedy proprietors are often identified as the source of much danger and misery, but the devastation wrought by unsafe working conditions is left to speak for itself.

An anxiety *pervasively* illustrated in the book is that of the workers over deadly or crippling disease, in this pre-antibiotic era, caused by lacerations or by virtually *any* accident. Ultimately one of the book's minor heroes, a worker who also plays the fiddle on his off-hours, cuts his finger, develops an infection, and has to have it amputated. The music, of course, stops.

The risk of such accidents is especially great for the workers actually doing the butcher work, as their workplaces are typically unheated, and they lose dexterity: "The cruelest thing of all was that nearly all of them – all of those who used knives – were unable to wear gloves, and

their arms would be white with frost and their hands would grow numb, and then of course there would be accidents.”

The chief protagonist’s aged father, meanwhile, is relegated because of his age to the worst of jobs, that of a “squeedgie man” in the “pickle room.” Here it is damp and dark, and when winter comes he develops a pneumonia which will quickly kill him. In addition, he develops sores on his feet:

Then, too, a still more dreadful thing happened to him; he worked in a place where his feet were soaked in chemicals, and it was not long before they had eaten through his new boots. Then sores began to break onto his feet, and grow worse and worse. Whether it was that his blood was bad, or there had been a cut, he could not say, but he asked the men about it, and learned that it was a regular thing – it was the saltpeter. Everyone felt it, sooner or later, and then it was all up with him, at least for that sort of work. The sores would never heal – in the end his toes would drop off, if he did not quit. Yet old Antanas would not quit

Jurgis is ultimately done in by a bad tendon injury to his ankle, suffered in a fall he takes when a steer gets loose half-way through the slaughtering process, causing a melee as the workers run to escape the danger. He pathetically continues to try to work (concerned that his “place will be taken”), and winds up with an aggravation and a two-month disability. This ruins him physically, spiritually, and financially. The ultimate result of his uncompensated, unprotected time off of work is, indeed, his lay-off and the permanent loss of his job.

For this injury, the novelist ventures, there was no liability at common law: “The injury was not one that Durham and Company could be held responsible for, and so that was all there was to it, as far as the doctor was concerned.”

As to those injuries where there might be room for a negligence action, “To this [*viz.*, the inevitable lay-off of an injured worker] there was no exception, save when the accident was one for which the firm was liable; in that case they would send a slippery lawyer to see him, first to get him to sign away his claims, but if he was too smart for that, to promise him that he and his should always be provided with work. This promise they would keep, strictly and to the letter – for two years. Two years was the ‘statute of limitations,’ and after that the victim could not sue.”

A full laundry-list of the “various afflictions of the workers” is provided near the beginning of the novel:

[W]hen Jurgis had first inspected the packing plants ..., he had marveled ... of all the things that were made out of the carcasses of animals, and of all the lesser industries that were maintained there; now he found that each one of these lesser industries was a separate little inferno, in its way as horrible as the killing beds ...

[T]he workers in each of these had their own peculiar diseases. And the wandering visitor might be skeptical about all the swindles, but he could not be

skeptical about these, for the worker bore the evidence of them about his own person – generally he had only to hold out his hand.

There were the men in the pickle rooms, for instance ...; scarce a one of these that had not some spot of horror on his person. Let a man so much as scrape his finger pushing a truck in the pickle rooms, and he might have a sore that would put him out of the world; all the joints in his fingers might be eaten by the acid, one by one.

[O]f the butchers and floormen, the beef boners and trimmers, and all those who used knives, you could scarcely find a person who had the use of his thumb; time and time again the base of it had been slashed, till it was a mere lump of flesh against which the man pressed the knife to hold it. The hands of these men would be criss-crossed with cuts, until you could no longer pretend to count them or to trace them. They would have no nails – they had worn them off pulling hides; their knuckles were swollen so that their fingers spread out like a fan.

[T]here were men who worked in the cooking rooms, in the midst of steam and sickening odors, by artificial light; in these rooms the germs of tuberculosis might live for two years, but the supply was renewed every hour.

[T]here were the beef luggers, who carried two-hundred-pound quarters into the refrigerator cars, a fearful kind of work, that began at four o'clock in the morning, and that wore out the most powerful men in a few years.

[T]here were those who worked in the chilling rooms, and whose special disease was rheumatism; the time limit that a man could work in the chilling rooms was said to be five years.

[T]here were the wool pluckers, whose hands went to pieces even sooner than the hands of the pickle men; for the pelts of the sheep had to be painted with acid to loosen the wool, and then the pluckers had to pull out this wool with their bare hands, till the acid had eaten their fingers off.

[T]here were those who made the tins for the canned meat, and their hands, too, were a maze of cuts, and each cut represented a chance for blood poisoning.

[S]ome worked at the stamping machines, and it was very seldom that one could work long there at the pace that was set, and not give out and forget himself, and have a part of his hand chopped off

[T]here were the “hoisters,” as they were called, whose task it was to press the lever which lifted the dead cattle off the floor. They ran along upon a rafter, peering down through the damp and the steam, and as old Durham’s architects had not built the killing room for the convenience of the hoisters, at every few feet they would have to stoop under a beam, say four feet above the one they ran on,

which got them in the habit of stooping, so that in a few years they would be walking like chimpanzees.

The historical accuracy which the novel reportedly possesses, and its great drama, make *The Jungle* one of the great social justice novels that came out of the Industrial Revolution. For a depiction of work injuries and their consequences in the days prior to workers' compensation, safety laws and the regulatory state, a better literary source is hard to find.