

## Editor and Publisher Journal

### 100 Years Ago: Upton Sinclair's Notable Leak to 'The NY Times'

*Leaks to The New York Times that cause a national uproar are nothing new. Exactly one century ago, it was a 'Jungle' out there in the Chicago stockyards, and famed muckraker Upton Sinclair knew where to go with damaging documents.*

By Greg Mitchell

(May 31, 2006) -- In case you are wondering, leaks to The New York Times go way back. One of the most notable in a long history took place almost exactly a century ago, on May 27, 1906. The leaker was no faceless bureaucrat or wrongdoer looking to atone for some personal or governmental sin, but rather, famed novelist/muckraker Upton Sinclair.

The result? Nothing less than the first Food and Drug Act and the coming of federal meat inspections. Today's leakers should only do so well.

Sinclair, only 28 at the time, had journeyed to Chicago two years earlier to research horrific conditions for workers in the stockyards. In the process he discovered that devil-may-care management also led to dangerous, or just plain disgusting, food on the plates of millions of American consumers. Employees told him how dirt and grime, sawdust, splinters, rat droppings, and even rats routinely ended up in ground meat and sausage. Food handlers with tuberculosis and other diseases were common. There were even tales of workers tumbling into open vats, with only their bones retrieved later. In that case, "you are what you eat" rang frightfully true.

Deciding to fictionalize the problem, he wrote *The Jungle*, which appeared first in serial form in a magazine and later as a book published by Doubleday, Page & Co. in early 1906. It caused a sensation and brought Sinclair worldwide fame, earning him an audience with President Theodore Roosevelt, who promised reform.

But then, as now, a president's interest tends to wane, faced with opposition from economic interests — and Teddy suggested that Sinclair let him "run the country for a while." Roosevelt had dispatched two investigators to Chicago, Charles P. Neill and James B. Reynolds, but a source told Sinclair that someone in the president's office had sent a telegram to the Chicago Tribune's publisher, revealing the secret probe. The Tribune allegedly tipped off the meat packers, who then rushed to clean up their factories.

On April 14, 2006, Roosevelt delivered a speech coining the dismissive term "muckraker," at least partly directed at Sinclair. But public sentiment, due to Sinclair's publicity crusades, continued to grow for reform. What happened next is described at length in *Radical Innocent*, a new biography of Sinclair by Anthony Arthur, to be published in June by Random House.

Arthur reveals that Sinclair learned from Neill and Reynolds that they had verbally delivered a report to Roosevelt confirming much of what Sinclair had been charging about conditions in the meat industry — but the president did not press them for a written version and said nothing publicly. The U.S. Senate had passed a reform bill, but it appeared doomed to languish in the House. So Sinclair took action, sensing that the two investigators "desired publicity."

On May 27, 1906, he rushed to New York from his Princeton, N.J., home to meet with Carr Van Anda, managing editor of The New York Times, bringing with him letters, sworn affidavits and official reports. Sinclair claimed that the Associated Press had turned him away earlier. "Two stenographers took down his story in shifts for three hours, and by 1 a.m. it was ready to go to press," Arthur relates.

The story appeared up front in the Times the next day, under the multi-tiered headline, "Sinclair Gives Proof of Meat Trust Fraud & Offers Affidavits and Letters of Packing House Workers ... Telegraph to Roosevelt Asks for Neill-Reynolds Report."

The next day, the Times quoted Sinclair again on page 2: "I do not believe that President Roosevelt has made any bargain to keep the Neill and Reynolds report from the public. But the packers and their representatives are trying to make him think he has made such a bargain."

Almost immediately, Roosevelt ordered Neill and Reynolds to have their report on his desk within 48 hours, and it was released to the public on June 4. It revealed "universal" uncleanliness in the plants and, among other things, the "exportation of tuberculosis" by workers. One detail: a freshly killed hog once slipped into the men's privy, where it was retrieved and hung up with all the other carcasses with no attempt to clean it.

"Victory came quickly — at long last," Arthur writes. The first Pure Food and Drug Act was passed on June 23, 1906, and signed by the president on June 30. It included the equally significant Meat Inspection Amendment. Much of the century's improvements in food safety and purity stem from that -- and from the Sinclair leak.

After a very long and very active career as an author and political activist -- and as one of the nation's first notable press critics -- Sinclair settled into retirement in the 1960s. In 1967, The New York Times and other newspapers "featured a picture of Upton Sinclair once again at the White House," Arthur observes. "The occasion was the signing of an updated meat inspection act, when President Lyndon B. Johnson acknowledged the old crusader's contribution to the nation's health."

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