



## BIOGRAPHY ACTIVITY 17C

### Jacob Riis

Jacob Riis used photography to change living conditions for immigrants. The Progressive Era was at its height in the late 1880s and 1890s. Riis shocked middle-class Americans with photographs that showed the desperate lives of the poor. His exposés persuaded reformers to work for change.

Riis was born in 1849 in Denmark and emigrated to the United States in 1870. He learned what it was like to spend a night in the dirty, overcrowded lodging houses of the New York City Police Department. After doing agricultural work for a few years, he returned to New York City. He was a newspaper reporter from 1877 to 1899. He used the job to expose the slums of the Lower East Side.

#### Words Alone Were Not Enough

Riis found that words alone could not communicate the squalor he saw. He used the technical improvement of night photography to show the dark alleys and windowless rooms where the poor lived. He wandered the streets from midnight to dawn recording the sordid conditions.

A tenement apartment might house a family of nine or ten in two small rooms. There was little sanitation. In basements, mattresses were tightly stacked on platforms built one on top of another. Men could rent a bed for the night. Orphaned children slept on the streets. Illnesses that might be cured often meant death for slum dwellers who could not afford health care.



Jacob Riis

#### Emergence of “Muckraking” Journalism

Riis’s crusading work as a “muckraker” took over his life. He resigned as a reporter and toured as a lecturer. The audience often gasped when he showed his photographs. Riis also published books. The most famous was *How the Other Half Lives*, published in 1890. Riis used photos of children to wring people’s hearts in *Children of the Poor* (1892) and *Children of the Tenement* (1903).

New York City Police Commissioner Theodore Roosevelt, later the 26th President of the United States, sometimes accompanied Riis to the tenements. Roosevelt shut down the police lodging houses. Laws were passed to improve tenement housing with airshafts and toilets. Parks, playgrounds, and more schools were built. Riis died in 1914. He had pioneered the use of photojournalism to expose corruption.

**BIOGRAPHY ACTIVITY 17C (continued)**

**Jacob Riis**

**Directions:** Answer the questions below.

1. How did Jacob Riis use photography during the Progressive Era?

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2. What technical improvement in photography allowed Riis to take graphic photographs?

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3. List three ways that Riis communicated his message to the public.

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4. How did Theodore Roosevelt support Riis's work?

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5. **Drawing Conclusions** What reforms were sparked by Riis's exposure of the corrupt living conditions for the poor?

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Answer Key  
Biography Activity 17C:  
Jacob Riis

1. With pictures of how the poor lived, he shocked middle-class Americans so that they would work for reform.
2. The technical improvement of night photography allowed him to take photos in dark alleys and windowless tenement rooms.
3. He was a newspaper reporter. He gave lectures. He published muckraking books.
4. As Police Commissioner of New York City, Roosevelt closed the police lodging houses.
5. Laws were passed that required builders to put airshafts and toilets in apartment houses. Parks, playgrounds, and more schools were built for the children.