CHAPTER 9

The Mirror with a Memory

At the same time that freedpeople all across the South were struggling to become an integral part of a free and equal society, millions of other Americans in the urbanized North and Midwest were searching for a place in the new industrial society of the late nineteenth century. In the forty years following the Civil War more than 24 million people flooded into American cities. While the population of the agricultural hinterlands doubled during these years, urban population increased by more than 700 percent. Sixteen cities could boast populations over 50,000 in 1860; by 1910 more than a hundred could make that claim. New York City alone grew by 2 million.

Urban areas changed not only in size but also in ethnic composition. While many of the new city-dwellers had migrated from rural America, large numbers came from abroad. Most antebellum cities had been relatively homogeneous, with perhaps an enclave of Irish or German immigrants; the metropolises at the turn of the century were home to large groups of southern as well as northern European immigrants. Again, New York City provides a striking example. By 1900 it included the largest Jewish population of any city in the world, as many Irish as Dublin, and more Italians and Poles than any city outside Rome or Warsaw. Enclaves of Bohemians, Slavs, Lithuanians, Chinese, Scandinavians, and other nationalities added to the ethnic mix.

The quality of living in cities changed too. As manufacturing and commerce crowded into city centers, the wealthy and middle classes fled along newly constructed trolley and rail lines to the quiet of developing suburbs. Enterprising realtors either subdivided or replaced the mansions of the rich with tenements in which a maximum number of people could be packed into a minimum of space. Crude sanitation transformed streets into breeding grounds for typhus, scarlet fever, cholera, and other epidemic diseases. Few tenement rooms had outside windows; less than ten percent of all buildings had either indoor plumbing or running water.

The story of the urban poor and their struggle against the slum's cruel waste of human beings is well known today—as it was even at the turn of the

century—because of a generation of social workers and muckrakers who studied the slums firsthand and wrote indignantly about what they found. Not only did they collect statistics to document their general observations, they compiled numerous case studies that described the collective experience in compelling stories about individuals. The pioneer in this endeavor was Jacob Riis. Few books have had as much impact on social policy as his landmark study of New York's Lower East Side, *How the Other Half Lives.* It was at once a shocking revelation of the conditions of slum life and a call for reform. As urban historian Sam Bass Warner concluded, "Before Riis there was no broad understanding of urban poverty that could lead to political action."

Riis had come to know firsthand the degrading conditions of urban life. In 1870 at the age of twenty-one he joined the growing tide of emigrants who fled the poverty of the Scandinavian countryside for the opportunities offered in America. Riis was no starving peasant; in fact his father was a respected schoolmaster and his family comfortably middle class. But Jacob had rejected professional training in order to work with his hands as a carpenter. Unable to find a job in his hometown and rejected by his local sweetheart, he set out for the United States.

Once there, Riis retraced the pattern that millions of immigrants before him had followed. For three years he wandered in search of the promise of the new land. He built workers' shacks near Pittsburgh, trapped muskrats in upstate New York, sold furniture, did odd jobs, and occasionally returned to carpentry. In none of those lines of work did he find either satisfaction or success. At one point poverty reduced him to begging for crumbs outside New York City restaurants and spending nights in a police lodging house. His health failed. He lingered near death until the Danish consul in Philadelphia took him in. At times his situation grew so desperate and his frustration so intense that he contemplated suicide.

Riis, however, had a talent for talking and the hard sell. Eventually he landed a job with a news association in New York and turned his talent to reporting. The direction of his career was determined in 1877, when he became the police reporter for the *New York Tribune.* He was well suited for the job; his earlier wanderings having made him all too familiar with the seamy side of urban life. The police beat took him to headquarters near "The Bend," what Riis referred to as the "foul core of New York's slums." Every day he observed the symptoms of urban poverty. Over the course of a year police dragnets collected some forty thousand indigents who were carted off to the workhouses and asylums. And at night Riis shadowed the police to catch a view of the neighborhood "off its guard." He began to visit immigrants in their homes, where he observed their continual struggle to preserve a measure of decency in an environment of chronic unemployment, disease, crime, and cultural dislocation.

As a *Tribune* reporter, Riis published exposé after exposé on wretched slum conditions. In so doing he followed the journalistic style of the day. Most reporters had adopted the strategies found in Charles Dickens's novels, personifying social issues through the use of graphic detail and telling

vignettes. Such concrete examples involved readers most directly with the squalor of city slums. The issue of female exploitation in sweatshops became the story of an old woman Riis discovered paralyzed by a stroke on her own doorstep. The plight of working children, who had neither education nor more than passing familiarity with the English language, was dramatized by the story of Pietro, the young Italian boy who struggled to keep awake at night school. Touching stories brought home the struggles of the poor better than general statistics. They also sold newspapers.

But Riis found the newspaper life frustrating. His stories may have been vivid, but apparently not vivid enough to shock anyone to action. New York authorities had made token efforts at slum clearance, but by 1890 the conditions about which Riis protested had grown steadily worse. The Lower East Side had a greater population density than any neighborhood in the world—335,000 people to one square mile of the tenth ward and as many as one person per square foot in the worst places.[1]

In frustration, Riis left the *Tribune* to write *How the Other Half Lives.* He wanted to make a case for reform that even the most callous officials could not dismiss, and a full-length book was more likely to accomplish what a series of daily articles could not. The new format enabled Riis to weave his individual stories into a broader indictment of urban blight. It allowed him to buttress concrete stories with collections of statistics. And perhaps most important, it inspired him to provide documentary proof of a new sort—proof so vivid and dramatic that even the most compelling literary vignettes seemed weak by comparison. Riis sought to document urban conditions with the swiftly developing techniques of photography.

From the experience of other urban reformers, Riis had learned that photographs could be powerful weapons to arouse popular indignation. In a book on London slums, *Street Life in London* (1877), authors John Thompson and Adolph Smith had decided to include photographs because, as they explained, "The unquestionable accuracy of this testimony will enable us to present true types of the London poor and shield us from accusations of either underrating or exaggerating individual peculiarities of appearance." For Riis their argument was a compelling one. If photographs accompanied *How the Other Half Lives*, no corrupt politician could dismiss its arguments as opinionated word-paintings spawned by the imagination of an overheated reformer. Photography indisputably showed life as it really was.

"REALITY" AND PHOTOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE

From the moment in 1839 when the French pioneer of photography Louis-Jacques Daguerre announced his discovery of a process to fix images perma-

1. Those readers conjuring up a picture of slum-dwellers standing like sardines row on row, each with his or her own square foot, must remember that tenement space reached upward through several stories. The statistic refers to square footage of ground area, not square footage of actual floor space.

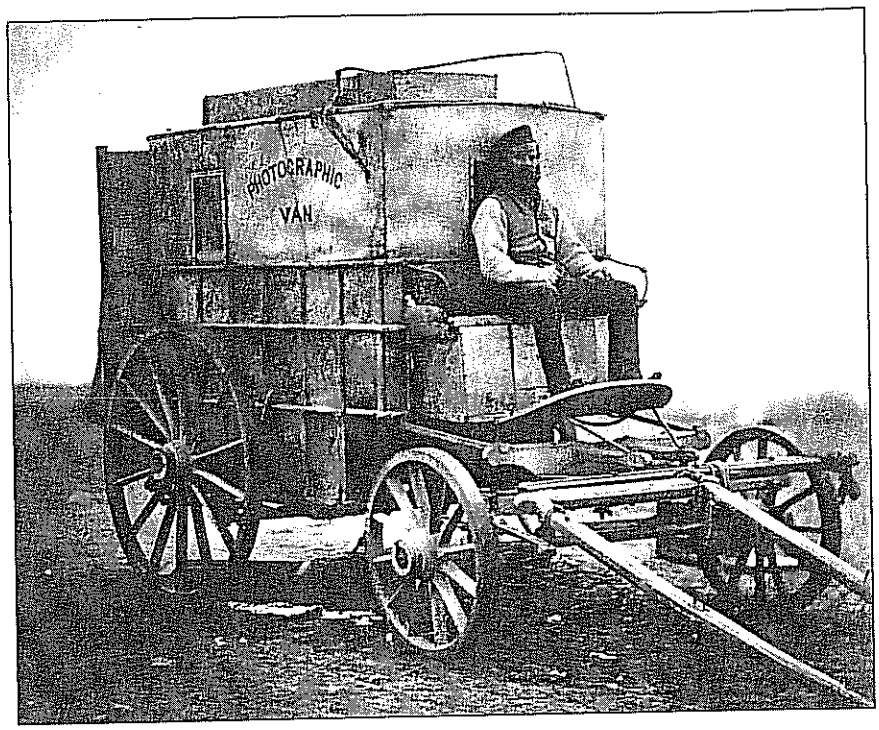
nently on a copper plate, observers repeatedly remarked on the camera's capacity to record reality. More than anything else, the seeming objectivity of the new medium caught the popular imagination. The camera captured only those objects that appeared before the lens—nothing more, nothing less. So faithful was the camera that people often commented that the photographic image recorded the original with an exactness "equal to nature itself." Indeed, one of the attractions of the new medium was that it could accurately reveal the look of other parts of the United States and the world. Nineteenth-century Americans were hungry for visual images of unseen places. Few had ever seen the trans-Mississippi West, much less Europe or the South Pacific. Almost no one had access to pictures that satisfied curiosity about exotic lands or people. As a result, crowds flocked to the galleries of a painter such as Albert Bierstadt when he displayed his grand landscapes of the Rocky Mountains. Even Bierstadt's paintings, though, were colored by his romantic vision of the West, just as all artists' work reflects their own personal styles and quirks.

The new photography seemed to have no style—that was its promise. It recorded only what was before the camera. Reproductions were so faithful to the original that close observation with a magnifying glass often revealed details that had been invisible to the naked eye. The American writer and physician Oliver Wendell Holmes summed up the popular conception when he noted that the camera was even more than "the mirror of reality"; it was "the mirror with a memory."

Certainly, there was no denying the camera's unprecedented ability to record detail in a way that paintings could not. Yet from today's vantage point, it is easier to see the limits of the camera's seeming objectivity. Any modern amateur photographer who is familiar with the features of a single-lens reflex camera will appreciate immediately how deceptive the camera's claim to mirroring reality can be. Merely to sight through the viewfinder reminds us that every photograph creates its own frame, including some objects and excluding others. The problem of selection of evidence, which is at the heart of the historian's task, remains of paramount importance in photography.

The situation becomes even more complex when we begin to make simple photographic adjustments once the frame has been selected. Far from recording every detail within the lens's reach, we immediately begin excluding details by turning the focusing ring: in choosing a closeup, background details blur; if aiming for a distant subject, it is the foreground that becomes hazy. The technical constraints of the camera thus limit what can be recorded on the negative's frame. If we close down the aperture of the camera's lens (the circular hole that allows light to pass through the lens), the camera's depth of field is increased, bringing into focus a larger area within the path of the lens. On the other hand, photographers who wish to concentrate the viewer's attention on a central subject will eliminate cluttering detail by decreasing their depth of field.

Of course, it may be argued with a good deal of justice that many, if not all, of these distorting capabilities of the camera are irrelevant when



The cumbersome technology of early photography restricted the use of photography largely to professionals. Field photographers had to take along darkrooms in which they prepared the photographic plates that went into a heavy box camera. The van pictured here was used by a photographer during the Crimean War. Matthew Brady and his assistants employed similar large wagons during the Civil War. They soon discovered, much to their chagrin, that such rolling darkrooms made uncomfortably obvious targets for enemy artillery and sharpshooters.

discussing the work of Jacob Riis. Riis worked with neither a sophisticated single-lens reflex camera nor a particularly extensive knowledge of photographic principles. His primary goals were not to record scenes aesthetically and artistically but to capture the subject matter before his camera. The niceties of art would have to wait.

Indeed, when Riis began his photographic efforts he quickly discovered that the primitive nature of photography precluded too much attention to aesthetic details, especially in his line of work. In the 1880s taking pictures was no simple matter. Each step in the photographic process presented formidable obstacles. First, would-be photographers had to learn to prepare a light-sensitive chemical mixture and spread it evenly on the glass plates that served as photographic negatives. For work in the field, they had to take along a portable darkroom, usually a clumsy tent perched on a tripod. Here the negatives were taken from the cumbersome box camera and developed

in chemical baths. Additional solutions were necessary to transfer the image from the plate to the final paper print. Such a process taxed the ingenuity and dedication of even the most avid practitioners.

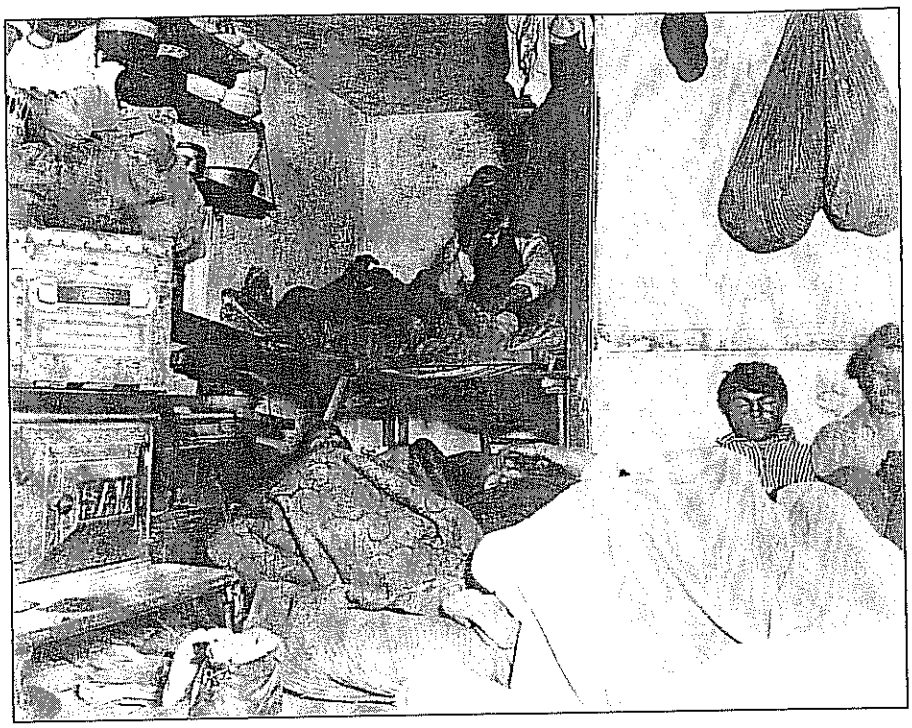
Fortunately, advances in chemistry, optics, and photographic technology had given birth to a new generation of equipment, the "detective camera." Wily photographers took to disguising cameras as doctors' satchels, briefcases, books, revolvers, and vest buttons—hence the nickname detective camera. To ease the burden of field photographers and make possible the candid shot, a number of companies had introduced small cameras about the size of a cigar box. Some carried as many as twelve photographic plates that could be used before the camera required reloading.

George Eastman simplified the process even further with his Kodak camera. Introduced to the public in 1888, the Kodak was more than an improved detective camera; it was the first model that replaced glass negatives with a photographic emulsion coated on paper rolls. For twenty-five dollars, an aspiring photographer could acquire the camera loaded with a hundred shots. Once the film had been exposed, the owner simply returned the camera to the dealer, who removed the spool in a darkroom and shipped it to Eastman's factory for processing. For an additional ten dollars, the dealer would reload the camera with new film. So successfully had Eastman reduced the burden on amateur photographers that his ads could boast, "You press the button, we do the rest."

But even the advances in photographic technology did not eliminate Riis's difficulties. When he began his photographic work, he knew nothing of photography. To help him, he enlisted the assistance of several friends in the Health Department who also happened to be amateur photographers. Together they set out to catch their subjects unawares. That meant skulking around the Bend in the dead of night, with the normal photographic paraphernalia increased by bulky and primitive flash equipment. For a flash to work, a highly combustible powder was spread along a pan. The pan was then held up, and Riis exploded a blank cartridge from a revolver to ignite the powder. This photographic entourage sneaking about town after hours made a remarkable sight, as the *New York Sun* reported:

> Somnolent policemen on the street, denizens of the dives in their dens, tramps and bummers in their so-called lodgings, and all the people of the wild and wonderful variety of New York night life have in turn marvelled at and been frightened by the phenomenon. What they saw was three or four figures in the gloom, a ghostly tripod, some weird and uncanny movements, the blinding flash, and then they heard the patter of retreating footsteps and their mysterious visitors were gone before they could collect their scattered thoughts.

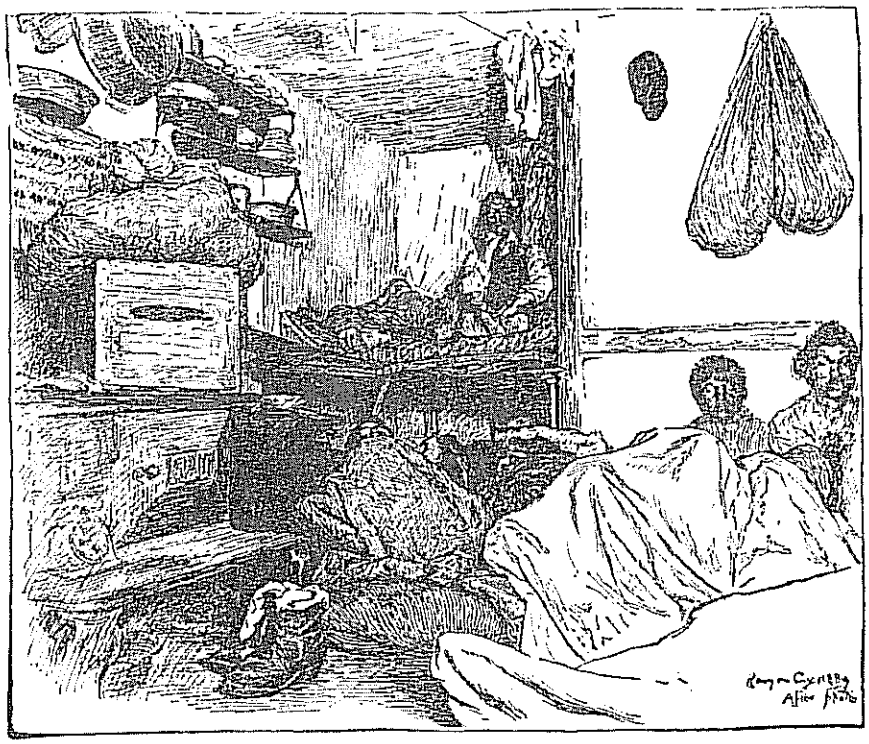
The results from using such finicky equipment were not always predictable. Sometimes the noise would awaken unsuspecting subjects and create a disturbance. On one particularly unfortunate occasion Riis had gone to "Blind Man's Alley" to photograph five sightless men and women living in a cramped attic room. Soon after his eyes cleared from the blinding flash, he



Lodgers in a crowded Bayard Street tenement—"Five Cents a Spot"

saw flames climbing up the rags covering the walls. Fear gripped him as he envisioned the blaze sweeping through twelve rickety flights of stairs between the attic and safety. Fighting the impulse to flee, he beat out the flames with his coat and then rushed to the street seeking help. The first policeman who heard his story burst out laughing. "Why, don't you know that's the Dirty Spoon?" he responded. "It caught fire six times last winter, but it wouldn't burn. The dirt was so thick on the walls it smothered the fire."

Under such precarious circumstances, it might be argued that Riis's photography more closely mirrored reality precisely because it was artless, and that what it lacked in aesthetics it gained in documentary detail. Above, for example, we see a picture taken on one of Riis's night expeditions, of lodgers at one of the crowded "five cents a spot" tenements. The room itself, Riis informs us in *How the Other Half Lives*, is "not thirteen feet either way," in which "slept twelve men and women, two or three in bunks in a sort of alcove, the rest on the floor." The sleepy faces and supine bodies reflect the candid nature of the picture; indeed, Riis had followed a policeman who was raiding the room in order to drive the lodgers into the street. The glare of the flash, casting distinct shadows, reveals all of the crowding, dirt, and disorder. This photograph is no aesthetic triumph, perhaps, but it does reveal a wealth of details that prove most useful to the curious historian.



In the original edition of *How the Other Half Lives*, seventeen of the photographs appeared as blurry halftones and nineteen as artists' engravings, such as this rendering of the "Five Cents a Spot" photograph. A comparison of the two illustrations quickly demonstrates how much more graphically the photograph presented Riis's concerns. Riis continued to take photographs for other books he published, although it was not until well into the twentieth century that mass reproduction techniques could begin to do justice to them.

We notice, for instance, that the stove in the foreground is a traditional wood-burning model, with its fuel supply stacked underneath. Space in the apartment is so crowded that footlockers and bundles have been piled directly on top of the stove. (Have they been moved from their daytime resting places on the bunks? Or do these people carry their possessions onto the street during the day?) The dishes and kitchen utensils are piled high on shelves next to the stove. The bedding is well used, dirty, and makeshift. Such details are nowhere near as faithfully recorded in the line drawing originally published in *How the Other Half Lives.*

Yet no matter how "artless" the photographs of Jacob Riis may be in terms of their aesthetic control of the medium, to assume they are bias-free seriously underestimates their interpretive content. However primitive a photographer Riis may have been, he still influenced the messages he presented through an appropriate selection of details. Even the most artless photographers make such interpretive choices in every snapshot they take.

Let us look, for example, at the most artless photographic observations of all: the ordinary family scrapbook found in most American homes. When George Eastman marketed his convenient pocket camera, he clearly recognized the wide appeal of his product. At long last the ordinary class of people, not just the rich and wellborn, could create for themselves a permanent documentary record of their doings. "A collection of these pictures may be made to furnish a pictorial history of life as it is lived by the owner," proclaimed one Kodak advertisement.

But while family albums provide a wide-ranging "pictorial history," they are still shaped by conventions every bit as stylized as the romantic conventions of Bierstadt or other artists with equally distinct styles. The albums are very much ceremonial history—birthdays, anniversaries, vacations. Life within their covers is a succession of proud achievements, celebrations, and uncommon moments. A father's retirement party may be covered, but probably not his routine day at the office. We see the sights at Disney World, not the long waits at the airport. Arguments, rivalries, and the tedium of the commonplace are missing.

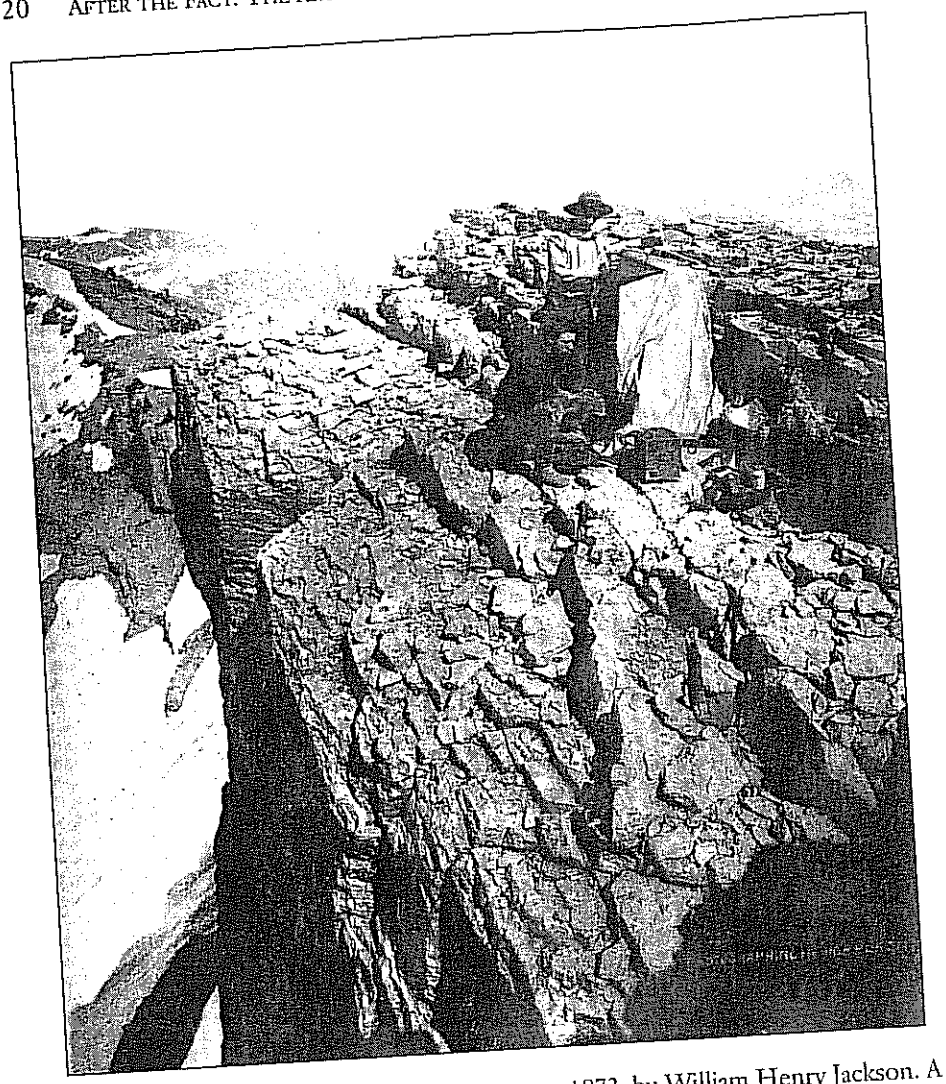
If the artless photographers of family life unconsciously shape the records they leave behind, then we must expect those who self-consciously use photography to be even more interpretive with their materials. This manipulation is not a matter of knowing the tricks of the trade about depth of field or shutter speed, but simply intelligent people wishing to convey a coherent message with their photographs. Civil War photographer Matthew Brady wanted to capture the horrific carnage of the war. To achieve it, he did not hesitate to drag dead bodies to a scene in order to further the composition or the effect he desired.

But to point out such literal examples of the photographer's influence almost destroys the point by caricaturing it. The photographer need not rearrange compositions in order to be photographing for interpretive, even propagandistic purposes. The western land surveys of the 1860s and 1870s, for instance, discovered that their photographs had social uses that extended beyond the narrowly geologic. Although the surveys' missions were ostensibly scientific, they required the financial patronage of Congress. As rival surveys vied for an adequate share of the limited funds, they discovered that photographs of scenic wonders produced the desired results back East. The survey headed by F. V. Hayden in 1871 verified the tall tales that had long circulated about natural wonders in northwest Wyoming. The photographs of spectacular vistas, towering waterfalls, Mammoth Hot Springs, Old Faithful, and the geyser basins justified survey appropriations as well as helped persuade Congress to establish Yellowstone as the first national park safe from commercial development.

A later generation of government photographers, those who worked during the Great Depression of the 1930s, also viewed photographs as vehicles to convey their social messages. Few photographers were more dedicated to the ideal of documentary realism than Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn, and others who photographed tenant farmers and sharecroppers for

"A collection of these pictures may be made to furnish a pictorial history of life as it is lived by the owner." Following the dictum in the Kodak advertisement, these two men pose happily, one holding one of the new Kodak cameras while a friend uses another to record the scene. Like so many family album "candids," this shot follows the tradition of ceremonial history—proud achievements, celebrations, and uncommon moments. These men, dressed in their best, are tourists from Pennsylvania enjoying spring on the White House lawn in April 1889.

the Farm Security Administration. Yet these photographers also brought to their work preconceived notions about how poverty should look. As critic Susan Sontag has noted, they "would take dozens of frontal pictures of one of their sharecropper subjects until satisfied that they had gotten just the right look on film—the precise expression on the subject's face that supported their own notions about povery, light, dignity, texture, exploitation,



"Photographing in High Places," Teton range 1872, by William Henry Jackson. A member of John Wesley Powell's earlier expedition down the Colorado River recalled the effort involved in handling the unwieldy photographic equipment: "The camera in its strong box was a heavy load to carry up the rocks, but it was nothing to the chemical and plate-holder box, which in turn was feather weight compared to the imitation hand organ which served as a darkroom." Mishaps along the way were not uncommon. "The silver bath had gotten out of order," reported one of Powell's party, "and the horse bearing the camera fell off a cliff and landed on top of the camera . . . with a result that need not be described."

and geometry. In deciding how a picture should look . . . photographers are always imposing standards on their subjects."

Thus any series of photographs—including those Jacob Riis took for his books—must be analyzed in the same way a written narrative is. We can

appreciate the full import of the photographs only by establishing their historical context. What messages are they meant to convey? What are the premises—stated or unstated—that underlie the presentation of photographs? Ironically, in order to evaluate the messages in the Riis photographs, we must supplement our knowledge of his perspectives on the city by turning to his writings.

Images of the Other Half

Jacob Riis was an immigrant to America, like so many of those he wrote about. He had tasted poverty and hardship. Yet in a curious way, Riis the social reformer might best be understood as a tourist of the slums, wandering from tenement to tenement, camera in hand. To classify him as such is to suggest that despite his immigrant background, he maintained a distance between himself and his urban subjects.

In part, that distance can be explained by Riis's own background as an immigrant. Despite his tribulations, he came from a middle-class family, which made it easy to choose journalism as a career. As a boy, in fact, Riis had helped his family prepare copy for a weekly newspaper. Once established in a job commensurate with his training, Riis found it easy to accomplish the goal of so many immigrants—to rise to middle-class dignity and prosperity and to become, in the most respectable sense, not a newcomer but an American.

Furthermore, because Riis emigrated from Denmark, his northern European background made it more difficult for him to empathize with the immigrant cultures of southern and eastern Europe, increasingly the source of new immigrants in the 1880s and 1890s. Like many native-born Americans, Riis found most of these immigrants' customs distasteful and doubted whether they could successfully learn the traditional American virtues. As Sam Warner remarked, Riis ascribed a "degree of opprobrium to each group directly proportional to the distance from Denmark."

Yet for all that, Riis retained a measure of sympathy and understanding for the poor. He did not work his way out of poverty only to find a quiet house far from the turmoil of the urban scene. He was unable to ignore the squalor that so evidently needed the attention of concerned Americans. Thus an ambivalence permeated Riis's writings. On the one hand he sympathized with the plight of the poor and recognized how much they were the victims of their slum environment. "In the tenements all the elements make for evil," he wrote. He struggled to maintain a distinction between the "vicious" classes of beggars, tramps, and thieves and the working poor who made the slum their home because they had no other choice. On the other hand, Riis could not avoid using language that continuously dismissed whole classes of immigrants as inherently unable to adapt themselves to what he considered acceptable American behavior.

When he visited "Jewtown," for example, Riis scarcely commented on the strong bonds of faith and loyalty that held families and groups together in the face of all the debilitating aspects of slum life. Instead, he dwelt on the

the exploitation of Bohemians in New York, most of whom worked at cigar making in apartments owned by their employers, generally Polish Jewish immigrants.

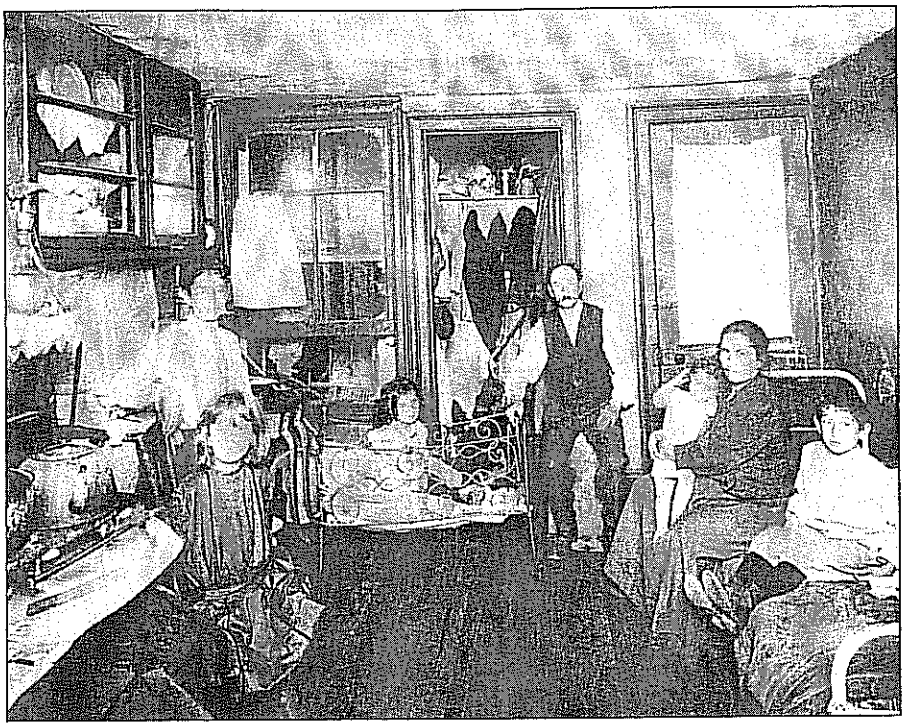
The cigar trade dominated all aspects of life: "The rank smell that awaited us on the corner of the block follows us into the hallways, penetrates every nook and cranny of the house." This particular family, he noted, turned out 4,000 cigars a week, for which it was paid $15. Out of that amount the landlord-employer deducted $11.75 in rent for three small rooms, two of which had no windows for light or air. The father was so tied to his workbench that in six years he had learned no English and, therefore, made no attempt to assimilate into American life.

It is interesting to contrast the portrait of the Bohemian family with a different family portrait, this one taken by another reforming photographer, but still often published in reprints of *How the Other Half Lives.*[2] Unlike the photograph of the cigar makers' lodgings, the photograph on page 225 is a more formal family portrait. Very much aware of the camera's presence, everyone is looking directly at the lens. Perhaps the photographer could gain consent to intrude on their privacy only by agreeing to do a formal photograph. The children have been scrubbed and dressed in what appear to be their good clothes—the oldest son in his shirt and tie, his sister in a taffeta dress, and a younger girl in a frock. Unlike the "five cents a spot" lodging, where dishes were stacked one upon the other, here the family china is proudly displayed in the cabinet. Perhaps it was a valued possession carefully guarded on the journey from Europe.

Other details in the picture suggest that this family enjoyed a more pleasant environment than was seen in the previous photos. We notice on the left a gas stove, a relatively modern improvement in an age when coal and wood were still widely used for heating and cooking. Perhaps these people had found a room in a once-elegant home divided by the realtor into a multiple dwelling. Certain details suggest that may be the case. Few tenements would have had gas, much less built-in cupboards or the finished moldings around doors and windows. The window between the kitchen-bedroom and closet-bedroom indicates that the room may have once looked out on open space.

By contrast, the picture communicates a sense of crowding. This image hardly seems an accident. Had the photographer wished to take only a family portrait, she could have clustered her subjects in the center of her lens. Instead, she placed them around the room, so that the camera would catch all the details of their domestic circumstance. We see not just a family, but the conditions of their lives in an area far too small for their needs. Each space and almost all the furnishings are used for more than one purpose. The washtub just before the window and washboard behind it indicate that the kitchen doubles as a laundry room—and the tub was probably used for

2. The photographer is Jessie Tarbox Beals, and the picture was taken in 1910. Although not included in the original edition of *How the Other Half Lives*, it is among the photographs in the Riis collection held by the Museum of the City of New York.



Room in a tenement flat, 1910

baths as well. The bed serves during the day as a sofa. To gain a measure of privacy the parents have crowded their bed into a closet stuffed with family possessions. Seven people seem to share a room perhaps no more than 250 square feet in total. The children appear to range in age from one to twelve. If the mother is again pregnant, as the picture hints, that means every two years another person enters that cramped space.

This portrait, then, does not conform to the stereotype we would expect to find of urban immigrant slum dwellers. In the first place, many immigrants came to America without families. Of those, a majority were young men who hoped to stay just long enough to accumulate a small savings with which to improve their family fortunes upon returning to Europe. On the other hand, immigrant families tended to be much larger than those of middle-class native-born Americans. Rather than evoking a sympathetic response among an American audience, the picture might, instead, reinforce the widespread fear that prolific breeding among foreign elements threatened white Protestant domination of American society.

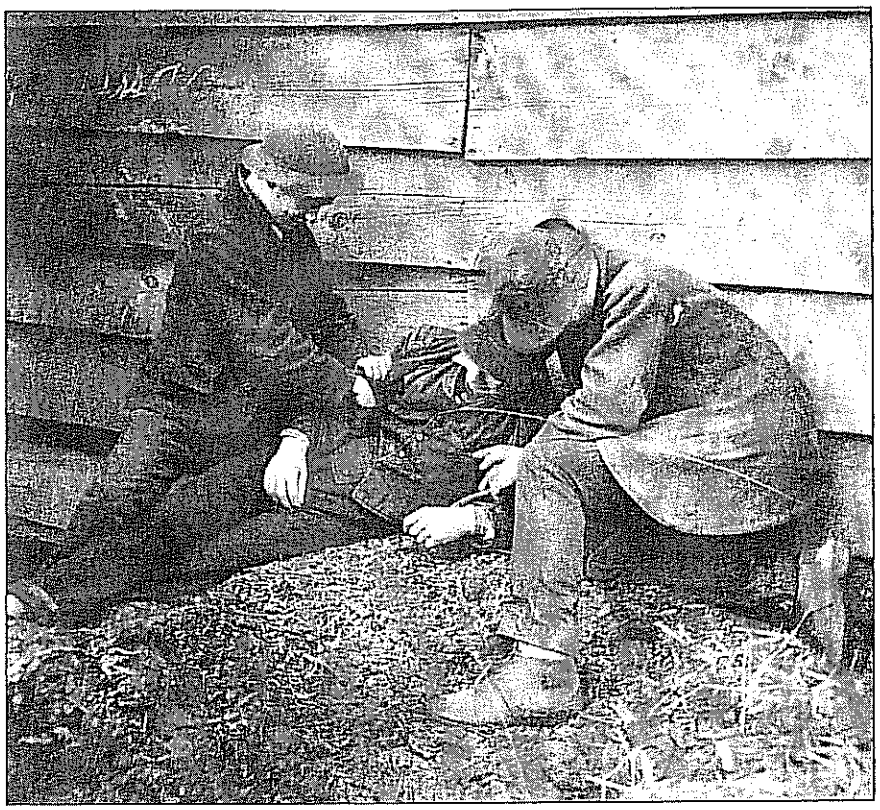
What then does the modern viewer derive from this family portrait? Over all, it seems to say that immigrants, like other Americans, prized family life. The father perches at the center almost literally holding his family together,

"Street arabs" in sleeping quarters

though with a rather tenuous grip. The son with his tie appears to embody the family's hopes for a better future. His mother securely holds the baby in her arms. Each element, in fact, emphasizes the virtues of the domestic family as it was traditionally conceived in America. The picture, while sending a mixed message, conveys less a sense of terrible slum conditions than a sense of the middle-class aspirations among those forced to live in inadequate housing.

Does the fact that the picture is posed make it less useful as historical evidence? Not at all. Even when people perform for the camera, they communicate information about themselves. There is no hiding the difficulty of making a decent life for seven people in a small space. Nor can the viewer ignore the sense of pride of person and place, no matter how limited the resources. What remains uncertain, however, is what message the photographer meant to convey. The scene could serve equally well to arouse nativist prejudice or to extol the strength of family ties in the immigrant community. Both were concerns that Riis addressed in his writing and photographs.

Concern over the breakdown of family life drew Riis to children. They are among his most frequently photographed subjects. He shared the Victorian notion of childhood innocence and, therefore, understood that nothing could be more disturbing to his middle-class audience than scenes of homeless children, youth gangs, and "street arabs" sleeping in alleys, gutters, and empty stairways. At first glance, the three "street arabs" pictured above ap-

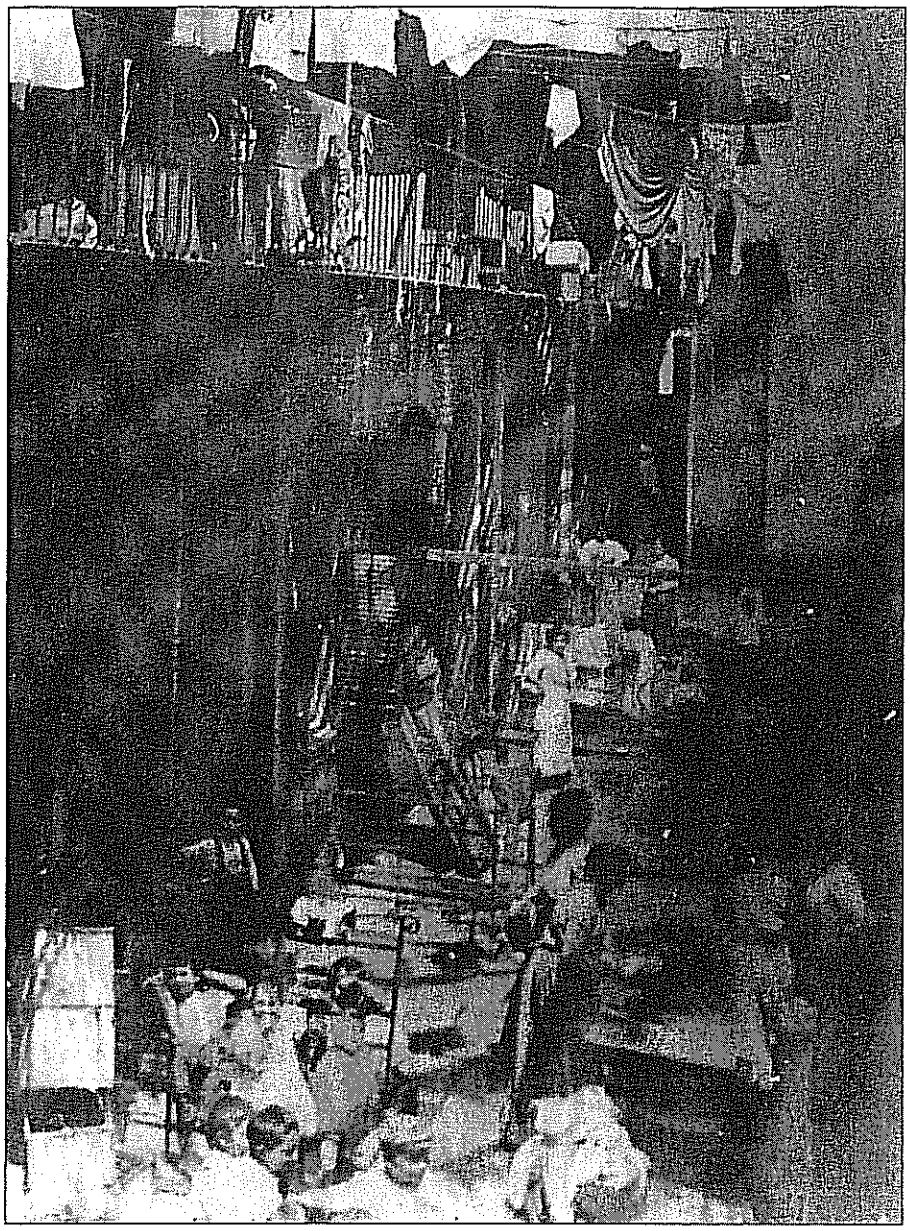


Hell's Kitchen boys—"Showing Their Tricks"

pear as if they might even be dead. A closer look suggests helpless innocence—children alone and unprotected as they sleep. Their ragged clothes and bare feet advertise poverty and the absence of parents to care for them. In each other, though, they seem to have extracted a small measure of warmth, belonging, and comfort. It would be almost impossible for any caring person to view the picture without empathy for its subjects and anger at a society that cares so little for its innocent creatures.

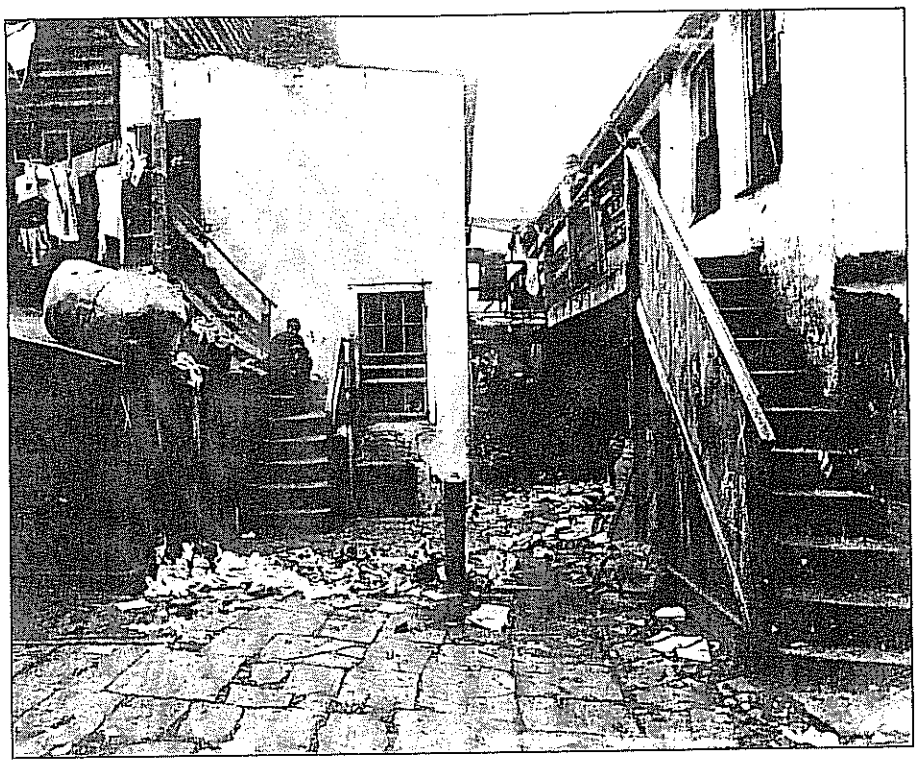
Riis hints at his sympathies through the location of the camera. He did not stand over the boys to shoot the picture from above. That angle would suggest visually the superiority of the photographer to his subjects. From ground level, however, observer and subject are on the same plane. We look at the boys, not down on them. And should we dismiss as accidental his inclusion of the prisonlike bars over the small window? From another angle Riis could have eliminated that poignant symbol from his frame.

Certainly, we know that Riis feared that all too soon those "innocents" would become the members of slum gangs, operating outside the law with brazen disregard for society or its values. In a second picture of lost innocence



Tenement-house yard

on page 227, Riis persuaded some gang members to demonstrate how they "did the trick"—that is, robbed the pockets of a drunk lying in an alley. The mere fact that Riis had obviously arranged the content of the picture, indicating that some relationship existed between the photographer and his subjects,



"Bottle Alley"

would have made the image even more shocking. These young men were clearly proud of their acts and so confident that they were beyond the reach of the law that they could show off for the camera. We see smiles and smug satisfaction on their faces. Other members (not shown) gather around to enjoy the novelty of the situation. Riis's audience would have understood quite clearly that the slums as breeding grounds for crime drove the innocence out of childhood.

Space was scarce not only in the homes of the poor. Crowding extended into public places as well. Without parks or wide streets, children were forced to play in filthy alleys and garbage heaps. Adults had no decent communal space in which to make contact with the community. The picture of a tenement yard on page 228 immediately reveals a scene of chaos and crowding. As in slum apartments, every open area had to serve more than one purpose. Women doing the wash and children playing appear to fall all over one another. The fire escape doubles as a balcony. Any of Riis's readers with a small yard, separate laundry room or laundress, and nearby park surely thanked their good fortune not to be part of this confusion.

Once again, however, closer scrutiny may lead us to reconsider our initial impressions. This place seems alive with energy. We see that the women and

children are all part of a community. They have given their common space, restricted as it may be, to shared activities. Everyone seems to have a place in the scheme of things. All that laundry symbolizes a community concern with cleanliness and decency. On the balcony some people have flower boxes to add a touch of color and freshness to the drab landscape. Our initial shock gives way to a more complex set of feelings. We come to respect the durability of spirit that allowed people to struggle for a small measure of comfort amid such harsh surroundings. The message that at first seemed obvious is not so clear after all.

In the photograph titled "Bottle Alley," on page 229, Riis has editorialized on the same theme with more telling effect. In this dingy slum, along the infamous Bend, we are still among tenements. Laundry again hangs from the balcony. A few isolated men look upon the camera as it takes in the scene. Their presence during the day suggests they are among the army of unemployed who sit aimlessly waiting for time to pass. They seem oblivious to the filth that surrounds them. We cannot help but feel that they are as degraded as the conditions in which they live. The dilapidated buildings and rickety stairs create an overall sense of decay; nothing in the picture relieves the image of poverty and disorder Riis wanted to capture. The message is all too clear.

As Jacob Riis and his camera demonstrate, photography is hardly a simple "mirror of reality." The meanings behind each image must be uncovered through careful exploration and analysis. On the surface, certainly, photographs often provide the historian with a wealth of concrete detail. In that sense they do convey the reality of a situation with some objectivity. Yet Riis's relative inexperience with a camera did not long prevent him from learning how to frame the content to create a powerful image. The photographic details communicate a stirring case for social reform, full of subjective as well as objective intent. Riis did not simply want us to see the poor or the slums; he wanted us to see them as he saw them. His view was that of a partisan, not an unbiased observer.

In that sense the photographic "mirror" is silvered on both sides, catching the reflections of its user as well as its subjects. The prints that emerge from the twilight of the darkroom must be read by historians as they do all evidence—appreciating messages that may be simple and obvious or complex and elusive. Once these evidentiary limits are appreciated and accepted, the historian can recognize the rueful justice in Oliver Wendell Holmes's definition of a photograph: an illusion with the "appearance of reality that cheats the senses with its seeming truth."

Additional Reading

Readers wishing to examine more visual evidence from Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* should consult the Dover Publications edition (New York, 1971) of his book. It has a good introduction by Charles Madison, but most important, it includes 100 photographs and several reproductions of line illustrations from the original version. Another edition of *How the Other Half Lives* (Cambridge, MA, 1970) has an excellent introduction by urban historian Sam Bass Warner but suffers because of a limited number of photos. A more comprehensive collection is Robert J. Doherty, ed., *The Complete Photographic Work of Jacob Riis* (New York, 1987). The Riis photographs are also available on microfiche from the International Archives of Photography (New York, 1981). Peter B. Hales, *Silver Cities: Photography of Urban America, 1839–1915* (Philadelphia, 1984) has offered a persuasive interpretation of Riis's place in the tradition of urban photography and social reform. Hales makes clear the extent to which Riis redirected both urban photography away from the celebration of an idealized urban order and social reform away from its ignorance of slum conditions and its sentimentalized view of the poor.

Riis's account of his life is found in Roy Lubove, ed., *The Making of an American* (New York, 1966). An interesting but dated biography exists in Louise Ware, *Jacob A. Riis, Police Reporter* (New York, 1938); see also the more recent study by Edith P. Mayer, *"Not Charity But Justice": The Story of Jacob A. Riis* (New York, 1974). One of America's finest photographers and critics, Ansel Adams, has also done the preface to an important book on Riis: Alexander Alland, *Jacob Riis: Photographer and Citizen* (Millerton, NY; reissued 1993).

Even for those readers whose photographic expertise is limited to a mastery of George Eastman's injunction ("You press the button . . . "), a number of books provide clear discussions of the photographic medium, its potentialities, and its limitations. Susan Sontag, in her *On Photography* (New York, 1977), provides many stimulating ideas, particularly in her first essay, "In Plato's Cave," and, most recently, in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York, 2003). All followers of photographic art owe a debt to Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present Day* (New York, 1964). Besides his work as photo-historian and critic, Newhall helped establish the photographic wing of the Museum of Modern Art. Also useful for background on the technical and aesthetic developments in photography is Robert Taft, *Photography and the American Scene* (New York, 1938; reissued 1964). For views that contrast with Riis's scenes of New York, see the Museum of the City of New York's *Once Upon a City: New York from 1890 to 1910* (New York, 1958).

Discussions of immigration, urbanization, and industrialization abound; here we mention only a representative and useful sampling. Among the histories and novels of the immigration experience, few have the impact of Anzia Yezierska, *Breadgivers* (New York, 1925), reissued in 1975 with a fine

introduction by Alice Kessler Harris. Umberto Nelli, *Italians of Chicago* (New York, 1972) is worth reading as a corrective to Riis's stereotypes of Italians. For more general discussions about immigration we recommend Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life* (New York, 1990), and Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston, 1993). On the story of Jews, Ronald Sanders, *Shores of Refuge: A Hundred Years of Jewish Emigration* (New York, 1988) is a readable account. To appreciate Riis's impact on other urban reformers, we suggest Robert Hunter, *Poverty* (New York, 1904; reissued 1965), supplemented by Keith Gandal, *The Virtues of the Vicious: Jacob Riis, Stephen Crane, and the Spectacle of the Slum* (New York, 1997).

Two brief yet informed analyses of late-nineteenth-century economic development are Stuart Bruchey, *The Growth of the American Economy* (New York, 1975), and Robert Heilbroner, *The Economic Transformation of America* (New York, 1977). For the concurrent transformation of cities, see Zane Miller, *The Urbanization of Modern America* (New York, 1973), and even more stimulating, Sam Bass Warner, *The Urban Wilderness* (New York, 1972). Nor should readers miss Ray Ginger's lively discussion of urban Chicago in *Altgeld's Illinois* (Chicago, 1958). The problems and challenges of technology are treated in Ruth Cowan Schwartz, *A Social History of American Technology* (New York, 1996), and Nathan Rosenberg, *Technology and American Growth* (White Plains, NY, 1972).

One significant pleasure in a field as untapped as photographic evidence comes from doing original research yourself. Many photographs of historic value are on file and readily available to the public in the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division and the National Archives Still Picture Branch. At quite reasonable prices, interested researchers may obtain their own 8 × 10 inch glossy reproductions printed from copy negatives made of the original photographs, or they may download them from the Library's *American Memory* Web site (http://memory.loc.gov). The Library of Congress is easier for novices to use than is the National Archives, although the staffs at both institutions are extremely helpful. Two books provide a sampling of each institution's collections: from the Library of Congress, *Viewpoints* (Washington, DC, 1975); from the National Archives, *The American Image* (New York, 1979). The latter volume contains an excellent introduction by Alan Trachtenberg, whose discussions of photographic images planted the seed for this essay. Both books provide ordering numbers for the photographs that were reproduced so that interested readers may order their own prints. Michael Lesy, *Wisconsin Death Trip* (New York, 1973) opened up the possibilities of doing photographic research, though not without disturbing other historians. Almost all readers will have access to family albums, yearbooks, newspaper files, Web sites, and other sources from which to do their own investigating.

Interactive Learning

The *Primary Source Investigator* includes materials that explore early photographic images of immigrants in tenements during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. These photographs provide a telling story of what city life was like for immigrants at this time. Also included are images of early photography equipment and personal accounts of "how the other half lives."