

PHOTOGRAPHY CHANGES OUR AWARENESS OF POVERTY

Story By Bonnie Yochelson

Bonnie Yochelson, art historian and curator, describes how Jacob Riis' photographs of the poor in New York City at the turn of the 20th century made public what most audiences preferred not to see.

In 1889, police reporter Jacob A. Riis took this photograph, "Five Cents A Spot," which depicts an illegal rooming house on Bayard Street in the infamous New York City slum called Mulberry Bend. The recent influx of European immigrants to the city forced thousands to sleep in nightmarish places like this one, for which they paid "five cents a spot," two cents below the legal limit of seven-cents for a bed. The seven people discernible in the photograph represent only half of the men and women, one with a week-old baby, whom Riis saw in this and an adjoining room.

Setting up a box camera on a tripod and igniting magnesium flash-powder to illumine the darkness, Riis took the photograph on a midnight expedition with the city's sanitary police. No one, including Riis, could clearly see the scene, but the resulting image reveals a devastating tableau. The harsh light of the flash exaggerates shadows and obscures the room's depth so that the startled expressions of the rudely awakened boarders emerge from chaos as in a dream. In his autobiography, *The Making of an American* (1901), Riis explained, "When the report was submitted to the Health Board the next day, it did not make much of an impression – these things rarely do, put in mere words – until my negatives, still dripping from the dark-room, came to reinforce them. From them there was no appeal."

Himself an immigrant, Riis arrived in New York in 1870, a twenty-year-old seeking opportunities not available in small-town Denmark. He struggled as an itinerant laborer for five years before he was hired as a journalist by a small Brooklyn newspaper. In 1877, the *New York Tribune* offered him the position of police reporter, which he explained in his autobiography, "is the one who gathers and handles all the news that means trouble to someone: the murders, fires, suicides, robberies, and all that sort, before it gets into court."

As he shifted his attention from reporting grim events to understanding their causes, Riis focused on housing reform. His principal mentor was Felix Adler, head of the 1884 Tenement House Commission, who in a *New York Tribune* article published that same year said he believed that "it is not the squalid people that make the squalid houses, but the squalid houses that make the squalid people."

In October 1887, on learning of the invention of flash-powder, Riis enlisted two amateurs to photograph the scenes that he wished to describe in images as well as words. In January 1888, the two amateurs arranged for him to present a lantern slide lecture at the Society of Amateur Photographs of New York. In "How the Other Half Lives and Dies in New York," 100 images were projected on a screen in a darkened hall, a dramatic

performance that garnered considerable press. Riis' slide lecture marked a turning point in his life. For the next two years, he delivered it in churches and theaters throughout the New York area, building a reputation as an expert in slum life. In 1889, he reached a national audience with an illustrated article in Scribner's Magazine, and the following year, his book *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements* became a national bestseller. Although the slide lecture formed the basis of Riis' argument, the published images, seen as wood engravings or smudgy halftones, attracted almost no press attention.

Between 1888 and 1892, Riis was most active as a photographer, and he changed his photographic method as his skills improved. The photographs for *How the Other Half Lives* reflect the invasive approach of what Riis called his "raiding party," a group of outsiders photographing a subject, often by surprise, without establishing rapport or offering explanation. In Riis' second book *Children of the Poor*, which he published in 1892, photographs played a more integral role in his research: he took them as he collected anecdotes and gathered impressions. As a result, many are sympathetic portraits.

In "I Scrubs," Riis depicts nine-year-old Katie, whom he met outside the 52nd Street Industrial School. When he asked her what kind of work she did, she replied, "I scrubs." Katie told Riis that her mother had died and her father remarried, and that she lived with her three older siblings; she kept house while they worked in a hammock factory. At the end of their conversation, Riis asked Katie if she would pose for a picture, and she "got right up . . . without a question and without a smile."

After *Children of the Poor*, Riis published ten more books and dozens of magazine articles, and traveled throughout the United States giving lantern slide lectures, but took only a handful of new photographs. He used his own photographs to reveal the problems of poverty, and he collected photographs of playgrounds, settlement houses, and other social service organizations to demonstrate solutions. The Jacob A. Riis Collection at the Museum of the City of New York contains approximately 400 images, half of which were made by Riis and his collaborators, and half by professional photographers, mostly unknown.

Riis was writer and lecturer by profession with a negligible commitment to the practice of photography whose disturbing images were best known in ephemeral slide lectures. He was nonetheless a revolutionary figure. A dozen years before the Progressive era, Riis showed middle-class audiences what they preferred not to see.

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