

Jacob Riis wrote of his times for a big city newspaper, the New York Evening Sun. One of the early residents of Richmond Hill, NY, he came to this country as a young immigrant from his native Denmark at the age of 21, in 1870.

He loved this country and never ceased to look at it with an eye to making it better. With unfailing accuracy, he questioned some of the things he saw here and didn't like. He used his pen and was a pioneer in photo journalism, using his own photography to fully illustrate his documentaries to indict the slums and tenements of a New York in the dawn of a new century. He visited stench-ridden tenements on hot summer nights when they were at their worst. Ahead of his time, he was one of the best investigative reporters this city ever produced.

Sometimes he brought his friend **Theodore Roosevelt** with him on these trips into tenement streets. Riis came to Roosevelt's attention through his documentary book on *How the Other Half Lives*. It was a call to action and Roosevelt responded.

Both men shared a conviction that slums and freedom lacked compatibility. "Life, liberty, pursuit of happiness? Wind! says the slum, and the slum is right if we let it be. We cannot get rid of the tenements that shelter two million souls in New York today," said Riis in the *Making of An American*, "but we can set about making them at least as nearly fit to harbor human souls as might be."

Often these men—one the reporter in the modern, investigative tradition, the other one someday to be our 26th President of the United States but then the head of the New York Police Board of Commissioners—would go off into the gas-lighted night without hint of what they would find. Together, both men fought the injustices they witnessed on those turn of the century nights while the city slept. "It is long since," Riis would later relate, "I have enjoyed anything so much as I did those patrol trips of ours in the "lost Hour" between midnight and sunrise, which earned him the name *Haroun al Roosevelt*. I had at last found one who was willing to get up when other people slept—including too often the police—and see what the town looked like then. He was more than willing."

When Roosevelt became President of the United States, Jacob Riis never aspired for an appointment to office. "...to represent is not my business. To write is; I can do it much better and back up the other; so we are two for one. Not that I would be understood as being insensible of the real honor intended to be conferred by such tokens. I do not hold them lightly. I value the good opinion of my fellow-men for with it comes increased power to do things. But I would reserve the honors for those on whom they sit easy. They don't on me. I am not ornamental by nature". (From the *Making of An American*).

"It could not have been long after I wrote 'How the Other Half Lives' that he came to the Evening Sun office one day looking for me. I was out and he left his card merely writing on the back of it that he had read my book and had "come to help". That was all, and it tells the whole story of the man. I loved him from the day I first saw him; nor ever in all the years that have passed has he failed of the promise made then. No one ever helped as he did. For two years, we were brothers on Mulberry Street."

-Jacob Riis, Making of An American



Photo of TR taken by Jacob Riis

'It is difficult for me to write of Jacob Riis only from the public standpoint. He was one of my truest and closest friends. I have ever prized the fact that once, in speaking of me, he said, "since I met him he has been my brother." I have not only admired and respected him beyond measure, but I have loved him dearly...and I mourn him as if he were one of my own family.'

-Theodore Roosevelt

