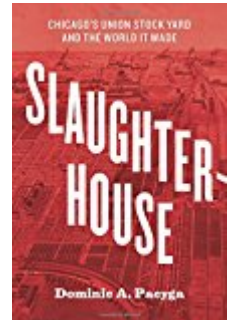


Dominic A. Pacyga. *Slaughterhouse: Chicago's Union Stock Yard and the World It Made.* Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2015. 256 pp. \$26.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-12309-7.



Reviewed by Greg Hall

Published on H-Midwest (September, 2017)

Commissioned by Patrick A. Pospisek (Grand Valley State University)

The city of Chicago has an endlessly fascinating history that scholars have explored for several generations. Dominic A. Pacyga, who has written distinguished histories of the city, is one of those scholars. His latest work to examine the history of Chicago is *Slaughterhouse: Chicago's Union Stock Yard and the World It Made*. Here, he focuses on a specific place, perhaps one of the most remarkable, within the city, the Union Stock Yard. Others have studied the Yard, particularly in terms of the meatpacking industry and its workers. Few scholars, however, have focused on the Yard as a distinct place with a history all its own and how that history relates to Chicago, the Midwest, and the world. Pacyga writes that history, primarily as the rise and fall of the Union Stock Yard, though that significant "Square Mile," Pacyga makes clear, has a life after the Yard.

The author notes early on that his interest in writing *Slaughterhouse* emerged out of his own personal history and that of his family, for he and members of his family had worked in the Yard. Moreover, that experience influenced his early

study of history and became entwined in his career as a historian. Pacyga acknowledges the fine work of other historians who have written about the Yard, and in some respects *Slaughterhouse* is a work of synthesis that incorporates a variety of historical perspectives, bringing a multidimensional quality to his study. At the beginning of his history, the author argues that the Yard was emblematic of an emerging modern industrial and commercial era in American history. The meatpacking industry of Chicago was a clear demonstration of "the modern," as Americans experienced a fundamental change in their way of life both in terms of their labor and their consumption.

Pacyga argues that for several decades before the Civil War, Chicago had been an important live-stock marketplace and meatpacking center for the Midwest. After the war, capitalists sought to centralize their business interests in Union Stock Yard. By that time, Chicago had already emerged as a hub of railroad transportation, and in the sec-

ond half of the nineteenth century it became the gateway to the Far West. Cattle moved east through Chicago and capital moved west through the city as well. In many respects, the Yard was only possible in Chicago. The author notes that at first livestock distribution was the primary goal of the Yard; however, rather quickly the meatpacking industry in Chicago, particularly in Packingtown, grew in significance, making the city the largest meat processing center in the country. With innovations in the meatpacking process, refrigeration, transportation, and marketing, the Yard and industries associated with it prospered immensely and fundamentally changed the relationship Americans had with the meat products they purchased and consumed.

The business history of the Yard and the meatpacking industry is central to Pacyga's study. He provides the reader with a detailed analysis of the men whose business acumen led to the innovations that transformed the processing and sale of meat products in the country. He also explains that these business leaders well understood the transformations and therefore made the Yard and their meatpacking plants open to the public as an early form of positive public relations. Moreover, the author uses the public's interest in touring the Yard and packing plants as an example of the "spectacle" that he connects to the "modern" in his study.

Slaughterhouse, though, is far more than a straightforward business history. Pacyga explores the serious environmental and sanitation problems associated with the Yard and meatpacking in general. He takes the reader through the experience that the animals faced in the Yard and in the plants themselves, as they went from living being to meat product. He examines the problems associated with free market capitalism, which faced few regulations as to how the slaughtering and meatpacking process was conducted. In addition, Pacyga examines the environmental impact the

industry had on Chicago and the greater region, especially in regard to waterways and the land. Although William Cronon, in *Nature's Metropolis* (1991) goes much further than Pacyga in providing an environmental history of the Chicago meatpacking industry, Pacyga, unlike Cronon, does not ignore the men and women who labored in the industry.

The labor history associated with the Yard and meatpacking is a central element to *Slaughterhouse*. Here, the author brings a combination of primary and secondary research to the fore in his analysis of workers in the industry. Like the business leaders and consumers of products of the industry, workers also experienced the "modern," but in a more brutal form. Pacyga examines the history of the workers as they transformed from a largely native-born population into an overwhelmingly immigrant population. As the industry desired less skilled workers, these workers had less power in the workplace because they could be easily replaced. Therefore, union organization became their only recourse to improve their wages and working conditions. The author takes the reader on the long journey these workers experienced as they sought to exhibit some control in their workplaces and to share in the profits of the industry. Pacyga does not ignore race in the labor component of his study, for he gives thoughtful treatment to African Americans, who became an ever-increasing percentage of the workforce.

In the post-World War II era, the logic of capital that had led to centralization of livestock and meatpacking in Chicago gave way to a new metric that encouraged decentralization. Trucks replaced rail as a means to move animals and meat products, and new innovations in meatpacking made relocating packing plants to other cities in the Midwest and Far West profitable. The Yard and meatpacking in Chicago began a slow decline that ended with the Yard closing in the early 1970s.

Nevertheless, Pacyga does not end his study there, for he examines efforts by Chicago business leaders and entrepreneurs to make effective use the Square Mile that used to be home to the Yard and adjacent meatpacking plants. The area is now home to a variety of pioneering industries that are helping to propel Chicago into a twenty-first-century economy, making the city one of the most economically innovative in the Midwest.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-midwest>

Citation: Greg Hall. Review of Pacyga, Dominic A. *Slaughterhouse: Chicago's Union Stock Yard and the World It Made*. H-Midwest, H-Net Reviews. September, 2017.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=46444>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.