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**Email Interview, January 7, 2015**

### Interview Transcript

**1.) How is New York today different from New York in Riis' time in terms of sanitation, tenement life and immigrants and how is New York still in need of Jacob Riis' work and change?**

...A couple thoughts: New York is still a city of recently arrived immigrants, although they no longer live in Manhattan as they did in Riis's day. Sanitation and housing are much more heavily regulated than in Riis's day, but there are still huge inequalities in enforcement and the delivery of services based on income. The need to advocate for immigrants and lower income people is as great as it was in Riis's day. As for Manhattan, Many of the tenements that Riis photographed and described still exist but have been renovated into "luxury" apartments and chic retail stores.

**2.) Specifically, which individuals did Riis directly and strongly impact?**

Riis wrote regularly for New York daily newspapers from 1875 to 1899. He was a crime reporter -- that was his beat -- but he expanded his subject matter to include reform. So part of his audience was local. Beginning in 1890 and until the end of his life, Riis wrote regularly for nationally circulating magazines, an industry expanding during his lifetime. He wrote for general interest magazines, such as Scribner's, Century, The Review of Reviews, Outlook. He also wrote for a variety of magazines aimed at Christians concerned with social issues. Three of his books were national bestsellers -- How the Other Half Lives (his debut), The Making of an American (his autobiography), and The Battle with the Slum (a summary of his 10 years in the trenches of reform work). He also lectured several months of the year all over the country. There was a lecture circuit and booking agents who booked his talks. He charged anywhere from \$50 to \$150 per lecture, and much of the money went to support the Jacob A. Riis Settlement House (Kings Daughters Settlement, named for Riis in 1901). These talks were for entertainment and educational purposes -- like going to a movie now. His special gift was to take an unpleasant subject present it in a way that was entertaining but not voyeuristic or disreputable. He told jokes, he even preached, but he was not arrogant or moralistic. In his later years, he went out of his way to speak at prep schools, often inspiring students to identify -- as children -- with the children of the streets, and to make donations for a particular program for the urban poor -- a vacation school or a boys club.

### **3.) How did the photographs of Riis reveal that he was an amateur photographer (Why did Riis not regard himself as a "good" photographer and what type of people did his photographs particularly appeal to?)**

This issue has been central to my work on Riis, since I am an art historian and Riis is considered a great pioneer of the medium of photography. Here's my view:

Riis was a genius as a publicist, and he knew he could grab people's attention if he could show them what he saw every day in the slums. That was his motive, and that is what inspired his first lecture, "How the Other Half Lives and Dies in New York," delivered in Jan 1888 at the Society of Amateur Photographers of New York (the talk was sponsored by the amateurs who took photographs at his direction for that lecture). This talk became the template for his first article in a national magazine (Scribner's) which then became his book, and his career as a reformer was thus launched. So photographs were a key to his story and its presentation -- no pictures, no talk, no article, no book.

Because he worked so hard to preserve his legacy through the written word and did not even bother to save his photographs, we learn that he literally did not see the photographs as having value separate from his arguments. I am currently writing a complete catalogue of his photographs which reproduces the photographs along with the relevant descriptions by Riis. This way, we can begin to understand the photographs in Riis's terms....

Anyway, back to 1890. At the same time that Riis was developing his approach to photography, there were amateur photographers who were beginning to show photographs as works of art. Indeed, the leading amateur Alfred Stieglitz was based at the New York Society of Amateurs, the same place that Riis gave his lecture. But Riis had nothing to do with that, and social reform was the farthest thing from Stieglitz's mind.

In the 1940s, when Riis's photographs were rediscovered by Alexander Alland, the idea of photography as fine art and photography to affect social change had merged into what we now call "documentary photography." Documentary photographers were professionals and often worked for magazines as photojournalists. Alland and others since saw Riis as a predecessor to this type of 20th century work, and his motives and theirs became confused. It has been my job to place Riis back into the media culture of his own time, very different from that of the mid-20th century.

Regarding his amateur status, he wasn't a real amateur photographer. In his day, amateur photographers were interested in the technology and craft of photography -- he was interested in neither. He used the camera but not a darkroom. Commercial studios developed his negatives

and make his prints and lantern slides. Riis used photographs to illuminate his verbal descriptions. The audience for his photographs was one and the same as the audience for his writings and lectures.

**4.) How did the work of Riis influence various laws/legislation (Small Parks Act, Tenement Act of 1901) and landmarks such as Ellis Island, the Jacob Riis Beach, Columbus Park, etc?**

Riis's relationship with government and politics evolved over time. During most of his career, New York City politics was dominated by Tammany Hall -- that is, the clubhouse of corrupt Democratic politicians who won elections by "buying" immigrant votes. Because he didn't trust government, he aimed to appeal to the moral conscience of individuals to affect change. When William Strong became Mayor in 1895 and Teddy Roosevelt was his Commission of Police, Riis was involved in politics mostly behind the scenes because Roosevelt trusted him. Riis is very clear about what he accomplished this way -- clearing land for small city parks and playgrounds, building new public schools with roof playgrounds, tearing down the worst of the old tenements and closing the police lodging houses. The Strong Administration lasted only one term -- Tammany returned -- but much good was done, and Riis traced this progress in *The Battle with the Slum*. After the Tenement House Committee Exhibition of 1900, a younger generation of reformers took a different tack from Riis, enacting legislation of all kinds. Riis supported these efforts and was something of a figurehead...

**5.) What legacy did Jacob Riis leave on the immigration movement and the American Dream?**

Riis believed deeply that Americans should not fear immigrants but help them become Americans through education and support. His own story, *The Making of an American*, was of course his biggest case in point. As a Dane, he had certain advantages -- he was white, Protestant, from Northern Europe, and decently educated when he arrived at the age of 20. But he was homeless and struggled for several years and knew what it was like to be a rootless outsider. He brought this experience to his understanding other groups, who were more "foreign" than he -- in particular the huge numbers of Italians and Jews who arrived in the US in the 1880s-1910s.