

**Daniel Czitrom**

History Professor at Mount Holyoke College, Author of Rediscovering Jacob Riis

**Phone Interview, January 6, 2015**

### **Interview Transcript**

**Speaker:** What impact did the New Tenement Act of 1901 make on the slums? How did post-1901 tenements differ from pre-1901 tenements?

**Czitrom:** Well basically, they tightened up regulations: the amount of square feet per person minimum, they banned rear tenements where there was no light coming in, there were certain laws about how you had to have running water on at least every floor in the tenement. In other words, before 1901,...when people wanted to use the bathroom, they had to go outdoors. It was...an outhouse. In many tenements, the water really didn't get up the first floor so after 1901, there were all these improvements in sanitation, light, water and space.

**Speaker:** I read somewhere that immigrants preferred the tenement option so they could save up money to move out to better areas later on. If this is true, did Riis' leadership actually produce the desired effect and reaction among immigrants?

**Czitrom:** Interesting question. Actually many immigrants never moved out...Many people spent their entire lives living in the tenements and things really opened up until after about 1905 when the subways opened up and it became easier for people to live outside lower Manhattan. You see, most people have to walk to work, so you had to live by where you worked. So that's why lower Manhattan was so crowded. But once the subways opened up, people could go out to the other bureaus and other parts of Manhattan and it was a lot easier. But in other words, immigrants didn't want the tenements; they didn't like them, necessarily. Some of them owned them of course...Riis was more of a publicist - he was a journalist who helped to push through some reforms - the abolition of police lodging houses, police stations,...he had the police stations be homeless shelters, and he helped push through some of those acts that you mentioned, like the 1901 Tenement Act. The other big legacy of Riis is of course, the use of photography to really show people - to demonstrate to people - how bad conditions could be. So he was effective as a publicist; rousing the public's conscience and calling attention to some really bad conditions, both as a writer and journalist and also as a photographer. And as a reformer. He became pretty famous by the turn of the century.