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Interview Transcript

1.) How was Riis a social reformist leader?

Well, he brought public attention to the plight and suffering of those who lived in New York's tenements. Mostly immigrants and first-generation Americans, who were living in very, very crowded conditions without indoor plumbing, without heat often times - certainly without electricity, in most cases. So really rough conditions. So, he brought the city's attention, and really the country's attention, to the suffering of those people and it resulted in a change of laws and somewhat better conditions for the people living there.

2.) How did Jacob Riis' photographs and writings impact the public and upper class at the time?

The rich then and now sometimes do not like to be made aware of the conditions of the poor. They may travel in the circle just of other wealthy people and be able to keep out of their mind, the circumstances of people less fortunate. Jacob Riis forced them, through his writings and his pictures, to become aware of how other Americans and other New Yorkers, were living. And those images were very compelling. They forced many people to think twice - to think again - about the, what might be called, the social contract - the responsibility that each of us have to our neighbors and to those who live within our communities. So he shook up the wealthy as well as the middle class to become aware of those conditions.

3.) What was the key reason as to why Jacob Riis became a muckraking journalist?

I think the main reason he became a muckraking journalist is because, he felt in his heart, the suffering of other people. He had experienced what these people had experienced. He was an immigrant himself. For a time, he couldn't find work. He was homeless for a time; he had to struggle. And so, because of his own suffering, he was sensitive and aware of the suffering of others. I think he wanted to change things to make life better for these new Americans and so he turned to muckraking journalism.

4.) Did the work and leadership of Jacob Riis influence later social documenters and muckrakers?

Very, very much. Jacob Riis is one of the heroes of modern journalism. He is someone who set an example for the rest of us to follow. I know; I worked at the Washington Post, a newspaper in Washington, where I was an investigative reporter, and I worked for a reporter named Bob Woodward, who wrote a story called "Watergate", which was very famous in the early 1970's. And all of us who were in the field of journalism would adapt to Jacob Riis because he was one of the pioneers of investigative reporting of muckraking journalism in this country.