Theodore Roosevelt derisively named them for "the Man with the Muck Rake," a figure who would "rake to himself the filth of the floor" in John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. The muckrakers were reporters, authors, and critics who sought to expose the evils and injustices of Gilded Age society, hoping to expose such social ills before they strangled democracy. Publishing their works in popular periodicals like McClure's, Hampton's, Cosmopolitan, and even the more conservative Ladies' Home Journal and Saturday Evening Post, these reporters spearheaded a movement in investigative journalism that remains an important part of American society today. Yet they did not always succeed in provoking substantive reforms, and sometimes their motives differed starkly from the actual effects of their work.

The muckrakers played a significant historical role, largely because late nineteenth-century America was a nation of readers. The television did not yet exist and radios did not enter widespread use until the 1920s and '30s. Technological improvements in the publishing industry—from the linotype machine to the telegraph, telephone, and use of a chemical wood pulp process for making more durable newspapers—spread across the country after the Civil War. They enabled a vast expansion in the number of papers printed, and circulation rose quickly. Some 24 million daily newspapers were sold in the United States in 1899, nearly ten times as many as had been sold just three decades earlier. Joseph Pulitzer's The World doubled in circulation to 40,000 just after Pulitzer took over the paper in 1883; by the next year, the paper was selling 100,000 copies a day, then 250,000 by 1886. By the early twentieth century, heavily illustrated magazines could be purchased for a dime.

Continuing a trend that began in the antebellum period and continues to the present, editors favored salacious stories about crime and scandal because those stories yielded greater sales. At the same time, Progressive-era editors gained more freedom to publish their journalists' more controversial pieces, since newspapers were becoming less and less dependent upon affiliations with political parties, which traditionally had subsidized their operations. Instead, the modern newspapers of the Progressive Era came to rely more on subscriptions, sales, and—especially—advertising revenue. Politicians could no longer wield the same sort of influence over editors in this new climate, though advertising sponsors gained a newfound power over newspapers and magazines. Nonetheless, advertisers had a vested interest in getting their ads seen by the largest possible number of readers, and muckraking exposés proved widely popular with the public. At the height of the muckraking era, McClure's readership more than doubled in a span of just three years to reach 750,000 people; Hampton's experienced an even more dramatic boost, from 13,000 to 440,000 subscribers between 1903 and 1906.

Readers avidly bought these magazines to read of appalling malpractices in the food industry, the drug industry, the government, the police, the corporations, and the banks. These stories often abounded with salacious details—like George Kibbe Turner's 1907 revelation that there were "at least 350 good-sized houses of prostitution" in Chicago, home to more than 4,000 women who made about $50 a person—but they also directly affected readers' lives with their revelations about all aspects of American society, from the economy to the democratic process. Notably, muckrakers seldom offered concrete solutions to the problems they described in such explicit detail; the writers were usually optimists who believed that their society needed reform, but not sweeping institutional change, and that merely exposing wrongdoing to the public would lead to improvement. In perhaps the most memorable and dramatic example, an author who never actually defined himself as a muckraker created a public outcry with his grotesquely detailed novel on the meatpacking industry and the immigrant laborers who worked in it.

The Jungle
The 1906 novel The Jungle offers perhaps the best example of how activist authors could wind up sparking Progressive reforms that were far different from what they had intended. Upton Sinclair wrote his disturbing exposé of life in the urban slums, where working and living conditions were equally deplorable, to show readers that unskilled immigrants seemed to stand little chance of ever ascending the ranks of American society. Sinclair was a socialist who wrote his novel not as a typical muckraking endeavor, but in hopes of galvanizing the public to demand much more radical changes to the structure of America's government and economy. Sinclair wove his socialist message into the fictional story of Lithuanian immigrant Jurgis Rudkus and his family, as they struggled to survive in working-class Chicago. He dedicated the book to "the Workingmen of America."

Sinclair's writing was all the more vivid for the experience that underpinned it; he had lived among the meatpackers of Chicago during their bitter (and largely unsuccessful) 1904 strike for wage increases. He
described every aspect of their world, from the corrupt machine politicians who exploited them, to the nightmarish conditions they lived in, to the ruthless company bosses who ruled over them. Sinclair’s tale unfolded in the filthy factories in which the men worked and prepared the meat for delivery to butcher’s shops across the country. In one notorious passage, Sinclair recounted how “There would be meat stored in great piles in rooms; and the water from leaky roofs would drip over it, and thousands of rats would race about on it. It was too dark in these storage places to see well, but a man could run his hand over these piles of meat and sweep off handfuls of the dried dung of rats. These rats were nuisances, and the packers would put poisoned bread out for them, they would die, and then rats, bread, and meat would go into the hoppers together.”

Perhaps no other book in American history has inspired so many readers to consider the merits of vegetarianism.

Within a year of its publication, *The Jungle* had sold more than 100,000 copies. Yet Sinclair’s true intent—promoting socialism—was drowned out by the public’s disgust at the idea that their meat was full of rat dung and poisoned bread. Sinclair’s readers proved less interested in challenging capitalism than in passing regulations to ensure the sanctity of the country’s meat supply. As a direct result of Sinclair’s writing, Congress passed the Meat Inspection Act and Pure Food and Drug Act in 1906 to protect consumers from unsafe and adulterated foods. But Sinclair’s broader socialist vision gained little traction, and little was done to better conditions for the workers. In October 1906, Sinclair wrote in *Cosmopolitan Magazine* that “Perhaps you will be surprised to be told that I failed in my purpose, when you know of all the uproar that ‘The Jungle’ has been creating. But then all that uproar is accidental and was due to an entirely different cause. I wished to frighten the country by a picture of what its industrial masters were doing to their victims; entirely by chance I had stumbled on another discovery—what they were doing to the meat supply of the civilized world. In other words, I aimed at the public’s heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach.”

**Poverty, Visualized**

Underlying the public outcry over “bad meat” was the problem of urban poverty. Pioneering photojournalist Jacob Riis strove to show Americans *How the Other Half Lives* in his 1890 book of that title, which explored the filthy and overcrowded tenements of New York and quickly became a bestseller. Influenced by the growing temperance movement, Riis described how saloons vastly outnumbered churches in the slums below Manhattan’s Fourteenth Street. For the poor, Riis argued, the saloon offered “refuge, relief,” since it was “the one bright and cheery and humanly decent spot to be found” in “many a tenement-house block.” Riis was fairly conservative and believed solutions to poverty were more likely to be found in private Christian charity and benevolent businessmen than in government reforms, but he did advocate legislation for stricter building codes. In 1904, settlement house worker Robert Hunter expounded upon poverty in *Poverty*, a work based on his experiences among the slums of Chicago and New York. Hunter sought to describe not only the conditions and problems that bedeviled the working class, but to explain how such problems would feed on themselves and continue to grow unless the public could adequately address the issue. He made the striking claim that for all the growth and prosperity of the Gilded Age, some 10 million Americans were still “underfed, under clothed, and poorly housed”—some 13% of the U.S. population. There was no way to actually prove or disprove this estimate, since—as Hunter himself pointed out—the United States spent more money than any other nation on statistical investigations, “and yet we know less about the poverty of our people than almost any other great nation of the Western world.”

But perhaps the most striking medium of all for exposing the true conditions of American poverty was not the written word, but the captured image. Lewis Wickes Hine was one of the first and most successful documentary photographers to showcase the potential of his medium for capturing social ills and inequalities. His images revealed child laborers in deplorable conditions, all across the country. Boys around the age of ten were captured through Hine’s lens, covered in the soot of the Pennsylvania coal mines. Illiterate children who labored in Georgia’s textile mills told Hine that they wanted to learn how to read, but their jobs kept them too busy. Some boys and girls working at these textile mills were so small that they had to climb up on the spinning frame to fix broken threads and replace empty bobbins. One of the girls Hine interviewed and photographed in a North Carolina mill stood just 4’3” tall, and made 48¢ a day. In St. Louis, Washington, D.C., and Hartford, Connecticut, Hine documented the lives of newsboys—or “newsies”—who were as young as five years old, many of them forced to work late into the night to help support their families. Hine’s work provided moving and irrefutable evidence of the poverty and rampant child labor that plagued turn-of-the-century America. His range of locations documented the extent to which these issues affected people all across the nation.

And Hine knew exactly what he was doing; he had been a teacher before embarking upon a career in photography in order to further the cause of child labor reform. Hine worked in conjunction with the National Child Labor Committee, which reformers organized in 1904 and Congress chartered in 1907. Hine’s haunting
pictures proved effective for the NCLC's cause, and his work was emblematic of the Progressive faith in the ability of education and science to solve the major social problems of the age. Hine's images resonated with Progressives, who were horrified to confront such vivid portrayals of wasted youth and rigid class structure, where these haggard and filthy children seemed to have no hope of ascending beyond their miserable circumstances. The specter of these poor working children was antithetical to everything Progressives knew or believed about America; the photographs seemed more appropriate for a class-bound European country, not the fabled land of opportunity.

**Trust-Busting**

Ida Minerva Tarbell grew up in the oil country of northwestern Pennsylvania, in a home that—by her own account—was no more than 30 miles from John D. Rockefeller's first oil well. As Rockefeller's business grew into the behemoth trust known as Standard Oil, Tarbell and her family came to feel the sting of monopolization; when Ida was fourteen, her father Frank Tarbell was bankrupted by the cutthroat business practices of Rockefeller's company. Frank was one of many independent oil producers who were ruined by the South Improvement Scheme, a secret agreement between the Pennsylvania Railroad and a few large oil refiners (like Standard Oil) that raised rates for all customers but gave secret rebates to the trusts. After that experience, Tarbell's mother described monopolies as "fearful evils," and Ida carried this perspective with her when she went to work as an editor and writer for *McClure's Magazine* in 1894. In November 1902, Tarbell's *History of the Standard Oil Company* began publication in *McClure's* in a series of installments that continued until October 1904; Tarbell then published the entire *History* as a book. The other members of the *McClure's* staff did not expect Tarbell's *History* to be a broad indictment of trusts, but her careful presentation of evidence persuaded many within the magazine that monopolies had become a pernicious presence in American society whose evils must be exposed to public view.

Tarbell's articles, and others written from a similar perspective that soon followed in the muckraking press, did not seek radical change; they identified monopolies as aberrations in the capitalist marketplace that posed a danger to the stability of the free market itself, and to the security of the middle class. If they weren't combated soon, some reformers suggested, the gross economic inequalities that the trusts had created might then spark massive social revolution from the working class, and it would then be too late to save capitalism. Ray Stannard Baker, a muckraker and one of the most renowned contributors to *McClure's* magazine, argued that "We muckraked, not because we hated our world, but because we loved it. We were not hopeless, we were not cynical, we were not bitter." Such reporters conveyed the message that the buccaneering capitalism of the trusts needed to be restrained to save capitalism itself. Tarbell's investigative work succeeded in prompting public pressure for government action, and in 1911 the Republican William Howard Taft's Progressive administration successfully prosecuted Standard Oil under the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. As a result, Rockefeller's giant corporation was broken up into 38 separate, smaller companies. Still, while the Progressives may have dismembered Standard Oil, all trusts did not disappear, and the handful of high-profile prosecutions that did occur largely ameliorated public outrage while masking a broader trend toward wealth concentration that continued throughout the era.

**Educated Women**

Partially successful trust-busting was not the only outcome of the *History of the Standard Oil Company*. That women like Ida Tarbell could hold down professional careers in journalism, let alone become respected voices of reform, was a remarkable achievement in itself. While old-fashioned ideas about the inferior female intellect—and the negative influence of higher education on a woman's child-rearing "duties"—remained prevalent even among many doctors and scholars throughout the Progressive Era, the period also witnessed significant moves toward gender equality, particularly in the field of education. Oberlin College in Ohio became the first American university to admit women in 1837, and in the second half of the nineteenth century, opportunities for women in higher education expanded rapidly. In 1862, Congress passed the Morrill Act, which gave federal land grants to educational institutions. Within a decade, states from New York to California had established state colleges, and many of them were coeducational. By the turn of the twentieth century, the University of California at Berkeley had a higher proportion of female students—46% of the total undergraduate population—than any other American coeducational institution. In the East, many of the oldest and most prestigious colleges, however, refused to admit women for most of the twentieth century, and instead founded separate women's colleges. Yale and Princeton did not begin admitting women until 1969; Radcliffe, Harvard's all-female "sister school," did not become a full-fledged part of Harvard until 1970. In 1869, there were 8,000 female undergraduates enrolled in American colleges; by 1894, that number had more than doubled to 20,000, and it continued to grow rapidly throughout the twentieth century.

At the grade-school level, Progressive reforms also dramatically expanded public access to education. Legal restrictions on child labor freed more kids to attend school at a time when both immigrant parents and
Progressive reformers identified education as the key to realizing aspirations for poor children. Between 1880 and 1890, the number of students enrolled in American high schools doubled (although even after that increase just 7% of all 14 to 17 year-olds in America attended school). High school attendance rates continued to increase rapidly, doubling with each passing decade until 1930.64

Yet the unexpected consequences that plagued so many other Progressive reforms also affected the caliber of education in the United States. In high schools, an antiquated nineteenth-century curriculum designed for privileged elite men—geared towards classical studies like Latin and Greek—persisted in many places, contributing to high dropout rates and alienating many students who required new skills in a changing world—not fluency in ancient Greek. For college-educated women, increased academic achievement did not yield better job opportunities or salaries commensurate with their training. Worst of all, African-American children were increasingly relegated to separate and unequal schooling throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Despite the 1896 Supreme Court verdict in Plessy v. Ferguson, which suggested that segregated public facilities could be "separate but equal," by 1910 southern schools spent about twice as much on white students as they did on black ones. White teachers also made twice as much as black schoolteachers. For many whites who identified themselves as Progressives, black schooling was something of a needless indulgence, since African-Americans were expected to remain confined to menial work in the same agricultural and domestic industries that employed their parents, and were not thought capable of ascending beyond that station in life. In the South, where the vast majority of black families struggled to survive by sharecropping on rented land, the school year was cut short for black students who were expected to spend several months helping their parents harvest the crops. Progressive education substantially increased scholastic opportunities for white American pupils, even from the poorest families. But in education as in most other spheres of life, African-Americans found themselves largely excluded from the progress wrought by Progressivism.