

Back of the Yards

by Amanda D. Clark

Definition:

Back of the Yards is the name of a neighborhood in southwest Chicago, historically situated near the livestock yards and meatpacking plants of the early to mid-20th century. The community is the basis for Upton Sinclair's 1906 book, *The Jungle*. Populated mostly by working-class immigrants from many different countries, the area is also known as New City.

Background:

From the late 19th century, Back of the Yards was home to many different groups of immigrant workers. Waves of Irish, German, Slavic, Mexican, and African-American people created small neighborhoods within the area. While providing work, the concentration of meatpacking plants and stockyards around the railroad lines also contributed to environmental degradation. This situation, coupled with low wages, work hazards and injuries, and poverty, presented challenges to the overall health and wellbeing of the community.

Significance to Civic/Political Engagement:

While Back of the Yards included many different groups, people organized together for more protections against pollution, for higher wages, and for better living conditions. The Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council sought to create a broader community identity while solving community problems while the parent organization of the United Packinghouse Workers of America, the Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee, fought for better working conditions. These organizations and their work were used by Saul Alinsky as a model for community organizing (Barrett 2005).

Key People:

Saul Alinsky- co-founder, Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council

Important Organizations:

Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council (BYNC)- <https://bync.org/>

Increase the Peace, <https://www.facebook.com/increasethepeacechicago/>

Resurrection Project, <https://resurrectionproject.org/>



Further Scholarly Resources:

Books:

Back of the Yards: The Making of a Local Democracy by Robert A. Slayton (University of Chicago Press, 1988).

Work and Community in the Jungle: Chicago's Packinghouse Workers, 1894-1922 by James R. Barrett (University of Illinois Press, 1990).

Pride in the Jungle: Community and Everyday Life in Back of the Yards Chicago by Thomas J. Jablonsky (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

Websites:

Electronic Encyclopedia of Chicago (2005), <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/>

The Gate News, Chicago Community News for Back of the Yards and Surrounding Communities, <http://thegatenewspaper.com/>

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