

**The New York Public Library
Humanities and Social Sciences Library
Manuscripts and Archives Division**

**Jacob Riis Papers
1871-1916**

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November 1985**

Biographical Note

Jacob August Riis (1849-1914), journalist, author, social reformer, and photographer was born in Ribe, Denmark and came to the United States in 1870. As a recent immigrant, Riis worked at a variety of jobs which took him through many states and acquainted him with the life that many immigrants faced as itinerant laborers. In 1876 Riis married Elisabeth Nielsen, also of Ribe.

It was not until 1877 that Riis, hired by the *New York Tribune* as a reporter assigned to Police Headquarters, found the work that was to become his career. Stationed at Mulberry Street in the center of the New York City's tenement district, Riis was appalled by the abject living conditions which he saw and was inspired to begin his life-long work as a reformer and crusader for the organized improvement of urban life.

In his articles, book, photographs, and lectures Riis depicted the suffering of the poor in the city's ghettos. His efforts to ameliorate conditions in the slums included campaigns for effective child-labor laws and building codes. Two of Riis's major projects were the building of Mulberry Bend Park and the Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement House (1888). Riis was also responsible for introducing the use of Christmas stamps to raise money for tuberculosis victims. Throughout his life he remained convinced of the effectiveness of organized charity and legislation in curing the social ills of the day.

Riis worked at the *Tribune* until 1888 and continued his journalistic career at the *Evening Sun* (1888-1899) as a police reporter. After his retirement Riis continued to write and to pursue an active schedule of lectures and speaking engagements. His lectures generally reflected the causes that were so important to him and in 1912 he came to the aid of his long-time friend Theodore Roosevelt. Four hectic weeks that year were spent speaking in support of Roosevelt's bid for the Republican presidential nomination. In 1911 Riis and his second wife Mary Phillips, whom he married in 1907, bought a farm near Barre, Massachusetts, where Riis died in 1914.

In addition to numerous newspaper and magazine articles, Riis wrote *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), *The Children of the Poor* (1892), *Our of Mulberry Street* (1898), *The Making of an American* (1901), *The Battle With the Slum* (1902), *Children of the Tenements* (1903), *Theodore Roosevelt the Citizen* (1904), *Is There a Santa Claus?* (1904), and *The Old Town* (1909).

After Jacob Riis's death, Mary Riis continued work on the farm and later worked on Wall Street and taught a course on inventing at Columbia University. She served as president and honorary chairman of Riis House and was involved in activities there until her death in 1967.

Scope and Content Note

The papers of Jacob Riis consist of correspondence, diaries, lecture notes, holograph manuscripts, clippings, miscellaneous printed materials, and photographs. They span the years 1871-1916 and include Riis's own papers as well as correspondence of the Phillips family, much of it addressed to Mary Phillips, Riis's second wife. The correspondence includes family letters, business letters regarding Riis's work, publications and lecture tours and, during 1912-1913, letters relating to farm matters.

Most of the early letters to Riis beginning in 1900, and in Danish and many are written from his native Ribe. The many letters Riis received in 1905 relate for the most part to the illness and subsequent death of his first wife, Elisabeth Nielson, in May of that year. Elisabeth had become well known to the American public after the publication of *The Making of an American* (1901) in which she played an important role. The letters and notes of sympathy include many from people who did not know Riis personally as well as those from prominent persons, including several cablegrams from Theodore Roosevelt.

Phillips family letters include correspondence between Mary and her parents (Mr. and Mrs. R.F. Phillips), and sister Carol, from her school days through the period of her marriage to Jacob Riis. These letters, which date from 1892-1916, are interesting from the details of everyday life which they provide; children, fashion, family relationships, schooling, and social activities are among the topics discussed.

Riis's pocket diaries (2 volumes) for the years 1871-1875 were written almost exclusively in Danish and document his early years in the United States and his search for employment. One English entry in August of 1875 records Riis's purchase of the *South Brooklyn News* for six hundred dollars. Six memorandum books kept by Riis in 1882-1902 include research notes, lecture schedules, business and personal expenses, and travel notes from a trip to England in 1893.

Lecture notes for the years 1896-1911 (7 folders) are included for speeches on housing and organized charity, and for the opening of Seward Park in 1903, among other topics.

The five holograph manuscripts in the collection represent some of Riis's major works: *How the Other Half Lives*, *The Children of the Poor*, *The Making of an American*, and *Theodore Roosevelt the Citizen*, and *The Old Town*.

The unsorted papers include newspaper clippings, published articles by Riis, pamphlets, brochures and several Danish manuscripts, letters and notebooks. Subjects covered by these materials include day care, schools, reformatories, asylums, good government clubs, and Christmas seals. A typescript version of the epilogue for a 1970 edition of *The Making of an American* is also included. Written by J. Riis Owre (Jacob Riis's grandson), it is an interesting and warmly written biographical sketch which quotes extensively from Riis's letters in the Library of Congress.

Photographs include scenes of Denmark, family pictures, individual portraits, and one portrait of Jacob Riis. The photographs are, for the most part, unidentified and only one (of his son Roger William Riis) is attributed to Riis.

Container List

Box

Correspondence

- 1 1892-1916
2 undated

Writings

- 3 *The Children of the Poor* (1892) - original holograph MS.
How the Other Half Lives (1890) - original holograph MS.
Theodore Roosevelt, The Citizen (1904) - original holograph MS.
- 4 *The Making of an American* (1902) - original holograph MS.
The Old Town (1909) - original holograph MS.

Pocket Diaries (in Danish)

- 5 1871-72
1872-74

Memorandum Books - 1888-1902 (pocket size) - 6 vols.
Undated (pocket size), kept by Roger Riss - 1 vol.

Notebook of miscellaneous farm accounts, c. 1914 (23x15 cm.)

Notebook containing inventory of books in 'drawing room' (23x15 cm.)

Receipt Book for assessments and dues, Royal Arcanum, 1898-1904 (15x8 cm.)

Check stubs (Bank of Long Island Manhattan Co.), 1903 Oct-1914 Feb.
25 vols. (18x21 cm.)

Miscellaneous papers -

- 6 Good Government Clubs, letters. and papers, 1896 (1 folder)
Lecture notes, 1896, 1906, 1909, 1911, n.d. (6 folders)
Miscellaneous notes and memoranda (1 folder)
Miscellaneous notebooks and MSS. In Danish (1 folder)

Printed Matter -

- 7 Photographs
Clippings, pamphlets, flyers and other ephemera