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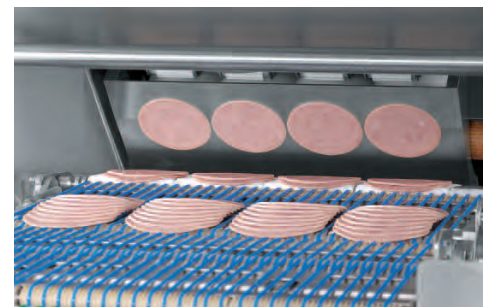
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100 YEARS



USDA Under Secretary Dr. Richard Raymond

By John Gregerson, editor

"I've come to Chicago to write the 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' of the labor movement," he said upon arriving at the city's stockyards. His credentials weren't stellar — a succession of failed novels with names like "Prince Hagen" and "A Captain of Industry" — but sufficient to catch the eye of Socialist Fred Warren, who commissioned the 26-year-old to write a novel about the immigrant experience in Chicago's meatpacking district.

So Upton Sinclair followed the money — and his conscience — into history. One hundred years later, on a sweltering afternoon in late June, a stream of politicians, journalists, consumer advocates and regulators poured into one of those imposing edifices along Washington's Mall to commemorate Sinclair's imprint on human health and industry.

Only it wasn't the Labor Department building, as young Sinclair may have envisioned. It was the Agriculture

Building. As his biographer Anthony Arthur explained on that June afternoon, the celebrated novel "The Jungle" didn't capture the hearts and minds of the American public quite as its author intended. Labor would have to fight its own battles, but Sinclair, to his bemusement, had won the war on adulterated meat.

By all accounts, the relationship between the gonzo author and the nation's most powerful man was a prickly one. "The Jungle" first earned the ire of Theodore Roosevelt, then, grudgingly, his admiration. Sinclair told the president his book had been compared to Tolstoy. Roosevelt responded with a three-page critique of it.

However uneasy, the alliance served its purpose. All that the industry knows about meat safety, and much of how it functions, flows from that single and singular act of Congress known as the Federal Meat Inspection Act.

In June, after taking the podium of the Agriculture Building's Patio Room, Food Safety and Inspection Service Under Secretary Dr. Richard Raymond gave Sinclair and Roosevelt their due, but also gave a nod to the future.

The link between the past 100 years and the next, he suggested, is what is happening today. That day in June, he said, was a good one. Pathogen counts were continuing to fall, food-borne disease outbreaks were on the decline. "In 100 years, perhaps someone will commemorate us," he said.

On other occasions, he has said, "I didn't come to Washington to just serve as the caretaker of a good system."

Nor did Sinclair come to Chicago with the idea of leaving a bad one.

"I aimed at the public's heart," he lamented, "and hit it in the stomach." As Sinclair learned, we don't choose our legacy, history does, and USDA's is one that remains very much in the making.



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