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CHEMAWA AMERICAN

OREGON
COLLECTION

Printed at Chemawa, Oregon, and Devoted to the Interests of Indian Education

Vol. XXX

Wednesday, April 3, 1929

No. 23

JACOB RIIS

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Today we hear so much about health, food, germs, sunshine, vegetables, milk, water, cleanliness, etc. How many children in the United States know who it was that began the first public fight against sickness, dirt, ignorance and vice? It was Jacob Riis, who wrote "The Making of an American," "The Battle With the Slums," "How the Other Half Lives" and "Children of the Tenement."

All the children of all the great cities, including those who come from the tenement houses and from the slums, should be grateful to this man, who was the first to become interested in the public school play-grounds.

"The Making of an American," his autobiography, is a charming book in which he gives an account of the scenes and events of his own early life in a struggle with poverty, and his warfare upon ignorance, dirt and vice. He had a deep, manly feeling of indignation and disgust against all social injustice. His love for children and for unfortunate men and women was the one thing that told him to take this work against the things that kept the poor people down in health and poverty.

Jacob A. Riis was born in 1849, in the decaying little town of Rihe, on the northern coast of Denmark. At twenty-one he came to America to seek his fortune, landing from the emigrant ship with a "pair of strong hands and stubbornness enough to do for two!" For the next few years there was hardly any kind of decent work from truck farming, coal-mining and brick making, to selling patent flatirons for laundry use, which Riis did not undertake in his search for steady employment that would enable him to make a home and to return to Denmark to claim his sweetheart as his wife.

He went back to Rihe and married the girl of his choice. Soon after he had brought her to a home in Brooklyn he began the great work of his life at police headquarters in Mulberry street, New York.

He was a natural fighter, enjoying life best when he had a lively scrap on his hands. But his fights were uniformly against the powers of evil. The "graft" and dishonesty of the politicians, the gripping selfishness of tenement house landlords, the dirt and crime which were inseparable from dark hall ways and unventilated and unlighted sleeping rooms in over-crowded and deadly tenement houses.

"It was Riis who went up through the Croton watershed with a camera and took pictures of towns sewerage into streams, public dumps on their banks, and people and animals washing in the water."

But Riis, finding that the water of New York flowed down from the Croton reservoir within four days, learned from experts that the cholera germ might live in running water seven days, and forced New York to buy up that watershed; and now New York has pure water. "It was Riis who forced the destruction of rear tenements, and thus relieved the hideous darkness and density of life among the poor."

"It was Riis who fought to secure a truant school where boys who play hooky are cared for; they used to be imprisoned with juvenile criminals."

Riis did the work that won small parks for bad spots in the city; he labored years to secure schools enough for the New York children. He drove bake-shops with their fatal fires out of the tenement basements. He demanded light for dark tenement hallways, and thus cleansed one hiding place of vice, crime and filth. He worked for the abolition of child labor, and when a law was enacted, compelled its enforcement. Playgrounds for schools and the opening of schoolrooms to boys' and girls' clubs were of his work. And he raised the cry for the healthy in the New York tenement houses as well as for the sick and poor. Of course he did not do all these things single-handed, and he did not pay for them out of his own pocket. Riis was poor in pocket, but he was rich in sentiment, strength and courage. He gave facts, and made the city pay. The man has cost New York millions of dollars, and because he has made the city foot the bill he is the greatest philanthropist of them all. He taught a great city how to help itself.

No one who loves children can fail to love Jacob Riis. While struggling to help mankind he had many discouragements before he became successful.

In the days of his early poverty in New York Riis had been driven to the verge of suicide by the impossibility of finding work and by the pride that would never beg; and as he sat on the wharf, tempted to drown himself, he was called back to a sense of sympathy and hope by the nestling against his side of a little lost dog which he straightway adopted. With the dog, hungry and forlorn, he spent the night on

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