Union Stockyards Stations Activity Questions

Station 1:

1. When were the Union Stockyards created?

2. Where are the Union Stockyards located? How large is the complex?

3. How many years did the Stockyards remain open?

4. Please describe what you see in the first image. What can you infer about the stockyards from your observations (make sure to discuss the railroads)?

5. According to the article, what activities did packinghouse workers have to take their mind off work?

6. In looking at the third image from top, what are your reactions to this image?

Station 2:

1. What are your initial reactions to the image #1, the entrance to the Union Stockyards?

2. Image #1 was part of a rudimentary 3D image device made by Chicago’s Montgomery Ward & Co. What does it tell you about Chicago’s impressions of the “Great Union Stockyards”?
3. Image #2 depicts the actual stockyards. How do you think the square mile of livestock impacted the environment of Chicago and those living in the vicinity of the stockyards?

4. What is Image #3? What does it tell us about the Union Stockyards if visitors/locals would want to advertise that they visited the stockyards?

Station 3:

1. Describe what you see in "Station 1" and "Station 2" of the Visitor's Reference Book.

2. What does "Station 1" explanation mean by "the hogs are not dressed the same day they are brought in from the yards, but are allowed to rest until the day after arrival"?

3. What is "Station 2" describing? How do they make this process sound?

4. Who are Swift & Company and why would they create a "Visitors Reference Book"? (You may refer to your book to identify Swift & Company).

5. What is the advertisement from 1950 promoting?

Station 4: (Upton Sinclair's The Jungle was based on Chicago's Union Stockyards)

1. What would happen to a man if he should scrape his finger in one of the pickle rooms of the stockyard?
2. How does Sinclair describe the condition of the stockyard butchers, floorsmen, beef-boners, and trimmers?

3. What disease was present and unrelenting in the cooking rooms? What disease did the men in the chilling room suffer from?

4. What two areas does Sinclair say that absolutely no tourists are allowed to visit? Why can’t they visit each of the locations?

5. Please compare this images that Sinclair portrays of the stockyards, as well as the image of the “blood soaked floor inside the building of the Union Stockyards” to the images from Station 3. How do these portrayals differ?

6. Why were the workers’ strikes unsuccessful in 1894 and 1904?

Station 5:

1. When did the Union Stock Yards close?

2. What remains of the Stockyards today?

3. How does Tracy Ullman feel about the legacy of the Union stockyard and Chicago as the meat capital of the nation?

4. What does Chicago currently have planned for the location of the historic Union Stockyards?
'Hog butcher for the world'

The Chicago Union Stock Yards help define the city to this day, more than 40 years after the slaughterhouses closed -- and the stench wafted into memory.

February 19, 2012 | By Ron Grossman

The shuttering of the Union Stock Yard and Transit Co. on July 30, 1971, didn't mark the end of Chicago's role as "hog butcher for the world." That came a year earlier, when "hog alley" closed, a victim of the stockyards' long descent from years of glory and gore.

But when bulldozers knocked down pens vacated by the last cattle, a hole was torn in Chicago's identity. Four decades ago, a stockyards official acknowledged how emotionally difficult its closing was. "We decided to let it go quietly," he told the Tribune, on the yard's final day. "We didn't want to conduct a wake." Outsiders still identify our city with the long-vanished landmark. A New York Times headline recently lamented: "Chicago Losing a Chef Who Refined its Stockyards Palate."

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The stockyards and allied industries employed 40,000 workers, but it was more than a jobs base for the South Side. Well over a billion head of livestock were sold and shipped out or became steaks and chops in nearby slaughterhouses, but this also was more than America's butcher shop.

It was the heart of a veritable small town — Packingtown, as it was known — in the midst of a metropolis.

It had a baseball league. According to the Trib's score card, on opening day 1918, the Wilsons beat the Soap Works, 14-8. It had its own police chief and "L" loop. A branch of the South Side elevated servicing the yards had stops named Swift and Armour, after major packers. It lent its name to an adjoining neighborhood with its own fight song:

Back o' the yards — back o' the yards

In old Chicago town,
Where each fellow and gal is a regular pal ...

Packington inspired civic pride. When in 1906 Upton Sinclair published "The Jungle," a novelistic expose of the dark side of working-class life, the Tribune's reviewer dismissed it as "an attempt to create a sensation by an attack on the stockyards." The yards also made appearances in novels by Willa Cather and Thomas Pynchon. Its literary fame extended to Europe. In "Saint Joan of the Stockyards," the German playwright Bertolt Brecht reset the French heroine's story on the South Side.

Long before becoming mayor, Richard J. Daley worked as a bookkeeper in Packington. But most workers toiled under miserable working conditions. An 1886 strike failed to win a reduction of the workday from 10 to 8 hours. A 1904 walkout provided an unaccustomed holiday from back-breaking labor, as a Tribune reporter observed. "Many of the strikers went to the new McKinley Park, where they bathed in the large swimming tank." A federal investigation sparked by "The Jungle" found that girls as young as 16 worked 10-hour days in refrigerated rooms in standing water.

The yards, which covered a huge area from Halsted Street to Ashland Avenue and Pershing Road to 47th Street, were a kaleidoscope of constant motion and deafening noise. In 1904, the Tribune painted a word picture of "a vast sea of pens, viaducts, buildings, railroad tracks, etc, the whole paved with brick and divided into blocks and streets like a city."

At the yards' peak in 1924, more than 18.6 million cattle, hogs and sheep passed through that labyrinth — leaving an odoriferous trail behind.

In "City of the Century," historian Donald Miller quotes a description by Mary McDowell, who ran a Packington settlement house, of what life was like in the shadow — and smell — of the yards. "In the night we would be awakened by a choking sensation. One night it would be the odor of burned flesh, another of feathers, another of sties, etc, etc."

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Cather observed that especially where life is harsh "beauty is necessary, and in Packington there is no place to get it except at the saloons, where one can buy for a few hours the illusion of comfort, hope — whatever one most longs for."

Packington had its natural disasters — like the 1910 fire that took the lives of 24 firefighters including the department's chief, and the 1934 fire that raged across much of the yards and the surrounding area. It had its own un-natural wonder, Bubbly Creek, a stub of the Chicago River where the slaughterhouses dumped offal. On its hardscrabble streets, community organizing was largely invented by Saul Alinsky, lately decried by Newt Gingrich as Barack Obama's spiritual godfather.

But Packington also had an upscale restaurant, the Stockyards Inn, where steaks were branded with patrons' initials. And its International Amphitheater hosted an annual livestock exhibition as well as national political conventions, including the notorious 1968 Democratic National Convention. (Both buildings had to be rebuilt after the '34 fire.)

The stockyards opened on Christmas Day 1865 as a consolidation of older stockyards scattered around the city, and during its 106 years curiously so endeared itself to Chicagoans that some couldn't afterward let go. It produced a terrible stench, but for some Chicagoans it was our stench.
"That smell is sweeter than a bunch of American beauty roses to me," Frank Keigher told the Trib's "Inquiring Reporter" in 1920. Even now, some swear that on warm summer evenings a whiff of the yards returns. Along the bar at nearby Schaller's Pump, bits of family lore are dated with phrases like: "That was when my granddad had a job in a packing house."

And on a blistering hot day in 2005, Cook County Commissioner John Daley, a son of one mayor and brother of another, came to Packingtown for a centennial commemoration of "The Jungle," which was serialized in a magazine a year before the book was published. Why was he out there in the burning heat, a Trib reporter asked?

Gesturing toward the Union Stock Yards Gate, a lonely sentinel of its place in history, Daley said: "My father walked through that gate to work in the stockyards."

Editor's note: Thanks to Jessie Young of Clinton, Iowa, and Lenore Glanz of Lakeview, for suggesting this Flashback.

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A panoramic view shows the extent of the stockyards in 1902. The yards, the Tribune said two years later, were "a vast sea of pens, viaducts, building..."

'Hog butcher for the world'

Chicago's Union Stock Yards help define the city to this day, 40 years after the slaughterhouses closed — and the stench wafted.

By Ron Grossman

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But when bulldozers knocked down pens vacated by the last cattle, a hole was torn in Chicago's identity. Four decades ago, a stockyards official acknowledged how emotionally difficult its closing was. "We decided to let it go quietly," he told the Tribune, on the yard's final day. "We didn't want to conduct a wake." Outsiders still identify our city with the long-vanished landmark. A New York Times headline recently lamented: "Chicago Losing a Chef Who Refined its Stockyards Palate."

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This small piece of text appears to be a mix of images and possibly text, making it challenging to extract meaningful information. Without clearer visibility and a readable format, it's difficult to provide a coherent transcription. The visible words indicate a discussion possibly involving a historical event or a legal context, given the reference to 'President's Message' and 'House No Action'.
Station 3

Swift and Company's Visitor Reference Book on the Union Stockyards (1903)

Station 1

Live Hog Pens

The hogs are not dressed the same day they are brought from the yards, but are allowed to rest until the day after their arrival. Swift & Company have yardage capacity for 5,000 live hogs.
Beginning Hog Dressing

After a rest and a shower, both the hogs are driven, a dozen or more at a time, into a pen at the base of the automatic hoisting wheel. Each one is then shackled to the moving wheel, which raises the hog steadily until the shackle hook is dropped to a sliding rail. On this rail the animals pass the skilled dispatcher who starts eight hundred an hour on the journey through the dressing and cleaning rooms to the vast coolers.
Station 4

Excerpts from Upton Sinclair’s, The Jungle (1906)
Chapter 9

There was another interesting set of statistics that a person might have gathered in Packingtown – those of the various afflictions of the workers. When Jurgis had first inspected the packing plants with Szedvillas, he had marveled while he listened to the tale of all the things that were made out of the carcasses of animals, and of all the lesser industries that were maintained there; now he found that each one of these lesser industries was a separate little inferno, in its way as horrible as the killing beds, the source and fountain of them all. The workers in each of them had their own peculiar diseases. And the wandering visitor might be skeptical about all the swindles, but he could not be skeptical about these, for the worker bore the evidence of them about on his own person – generally he had only to hold out his hand.

There were the men in the pickle rooms, for instance, where old Antanas had gotten his death; scarce a one of these that had not some spot of horror on his person. Let a man so much as scrape his finger pushing a truck in the pickle rooms, and he might have a sore that would put him out of the world; all the joints in his fingers might be eaten by the acid, one by one. Of the butchers and floorsmen, the beefboners and trimmers, and all those who used knives, you could scarcely find a person who had the use of his thumb; time and time again the base of it had been slashed, till it was a mere lump of flesh against which the man pressed the knife to hold it. The hands of these men would be cross- crossed with cuts, until you could no longer pretend to count them or to trace them. They would have no nails, – they had worn them off pulling hides; their knuckles were swollen so that their fingers spread out like a fan. There were men who worked in the cooking rooms, in the midst of steam and sickening odors, by artificial light; in these rooms the germs of tuberculosis might live for two years, but the supply was renewed every hour. There were the beef-luggers, who carried two-hundred-pound quarters into the refrigerator-cars; a fearful kind of work, that began at four o’clock in the morning, and that wore out the most powerful men in a few years. There were those who worked in the chilling rooms, and whose special disease was rheumatism; the time limit that a man could work in the chilling rooms was said to be five years. There were the wool-pluckers, whose hands went to pieces even sooner than the hands of the pickle men; for the pelts of the sheep had to be painted with acid to loosen the wool, and then the pluckers had to pull out this wool with their bare hands, till the acid had eaten their fingers off. There were those who made the tins for the canned meat; and their hands, too, were a maze of cuts, and each cut represented a chance for blood poisoning. Some worked at the stamping machines, and it was very seldom that one could work long there at the pace that was set, and not give out and forget himself and have a part of his hand chopped off. There were the “hoisters,” as they were called, whose task it was to press the lever which lifted the dead cattle off the floor. They ran along upon a rafter, peering down through the damp and the steam; and as old Durham’s architects had not built the killing room for the convenience of the hoisters, at every few feet they would have to stoop under a beam, say four feet above the one they ran on; which got them into the habit of stooping, so that in a few years they would be walking like chimpanzees. Worst of any, however, were the fertilizer men, and those who served in the cooking rooms. These people could not be shown to the visitor, – for the odor of a fertilizer man would scare any ordinary visitor at a hundred yards, and as for the other men, who worked in tank rooms full of steam, and in some of which there were open vats near the level of the floor, their peculiar trouble was that they fell into the vats; and when they were fished out, there was never enough of them left to be worth exhibiting, – sometimes they would be overlooked for days, till all but the bones of them had gone out to the world as Durham’s Pure Leaf Lard!
The blood-soaked floor inside a building in the Union Stockyards

Stockyard workers striking

In the years 1894 and 1904, workers held strikes to protest the unsanitary conditions at the stockyards. Both of these strikes were unsuccessful because recent immigrants to Chicago were prepared to take the strikers jobs.
The Union Stockyards

Today, the idea of millions of farm animals being transported hundreds of miles to a large city for slaughter and processing seems bizarre. But for more than a century, that is exactly what happened at the Union Stockyards in Chicago. For generations, the Stockyards virtually defined Chicago, dubbed "Hog Butcher to the World" by Carl Sandburg.

Established in 1865, "The Yards" processed two million animals yearly by 1870. By 1890 the number had risen to nine million. In 1921, the Stockyards employed 40,000 people, and occupied more than a square mile of Chicago's South Side from 39th to 47th and from Halsted to Ashland. Chicago had become the meat-processing center of the world.

The impact on Chicago - and on labor history - was monumental. The Stockyards story is teeming with strife: a bitter, ongoing struggle between labor and management, and ethnic conflict among strikers and strikebreakers. Labor negotiations at the Stockyards resulted in improvements in conditions that would benefit the industry nationwide. It even had an impact on the Chicago River: when the City reversed the flow of the Chicago River in 1900, it was largely to keep the Stockyards' enormous volume of waste products from flowing into Lake Michigan. By mid-20th century, the industry began to decentralize, and the Stockyards faded with little fanfare; the last pen and killing floor were closed in 1971.

Today the site is occupied by a flourishing industrial park.

The Stockyards

Memories of the Stockyards and Commentary by Dominic Pacyga
Dominic Pacyga is a Columbia College professor who grew up in the back of the yards in the 1950's and 1960's, and who worked at the stockyards at the age of 20.

Memories of the Stockyards and the Labor Movement by Les Oser
Les Oser, President of the Illinois Labor History Society, worked at the stockyards beginning in 1932.

Behind the Scenes: What It Was Like to Film Around the Stockyards By Tracy Ullman

It was unbelievable how much the original architecture of the Stockyards had been dismantled and how in its place stood the modern buildings of the Stockyards Industrial Park. To think that there were several "L" stops, an entire set of tracks devoted solely to transporting thousands of tourists and workers to the site daily -- it had all been dismantled without a trace. Many of the people we interviewed in the program were able to point out where buildings had been, such as the prominent Armour and Swift factories and the innumerable wooden pens for holding livestock, but it was hard to imagine.

When cameraman Roy Alan and I went to shoot in Chiappetti's, the last veal and lamb slaughterer in the city, it was the one remnant we could use to qualify the smells, the look and feel of the Union Stockyards. Very few people driving by on Halsted around 39th
Street would know that there were hundreds of head of lamb and calves being held there—
but once you’re inside, the smell is overpowering. Just north of Chiappetti’s main offices on
Halsted is where the animals are slaughtered. Everyday, as part of a kosher kill, a Rabbi
stands at the front of a conveyor belt and slits the throats of a seemingly endless supply of
livestock. As the carcasses go down the production line, they’re cleaned and skinned and
are prepared to be broken down into edible cuts. When we went in to shoot on the kill floor,
both Roy and I feared getting hit by the fast-paced stream of carcasses moving from one
station to the next.

It was much the same in Lincoln Provisions, which is just around the corner. They used to
slaughter cattle, but now just break down the carcasses for top quality cuts, such as filet
mignon, that are then shipped around the world. To be surrounded by so much dead flesh,
many people asked us if we wanted to go vegetarian. In fact, we never ate such good meat
in our lives and got a great feel why Chicago was and still is a meat capital in the nation.

TRACY ULLMAN, producer of “The Union Stockyards” for Chicago Stories began working on
documentaries at the BBC. Her previous docs have been on an eclectic variety of subjects,
including British politics, Greek Rush in the United States, and dating over the age of 50.

Links of Interest
“The Jungle” by Upton Sinclair
Complete online text of the novel by Upton Sinclair (who’d worked in the meat packing plants
on assignment for a journalistic expose), detailing illegal practices, unsafe food handling, and
the squalor of the yards neighborhoods.

Review of “The Yankee of the Yards”
Written by the Progressive Calvinism League, it details comparisons between Upton Sinclair’s
account of the Stockyards and this biography of Gustavus Franklin Swift, which gives the
history of the meat packing industry from the viewpoint of the son of the founder of the
largest meat packing company in the world.