

Linguist explores 'The Jungle'

By Suzanne Hanney

When Upton Sinclair came upon a Lithuanian wedding after police kept him from photographing a nearby garbage dump, he called it a "gift from the gods."

Sinclair had his facts for "The Jungle," his 1906 novel about dangerous working conditions and grossly unsanitary meat packing at the Chicago Stockyards. But the wedding provided his characters: the delicate teen bride; her big and strong, hard-working groom; their assorted in-laws. He drafted the book's opening scenes even as he joined in the singing.

Sinclair later confessed that he could not stop crying whenever he heard one of the songs, "In the Good Old Summertime," says Giedrius Subacius, an associate professor in the University of Illinois at Chicago department of Slavic and Baltic languages.

"He saw in the wedding young people looking to their bright future, which was a big contrast for him because he saw no future at all," said Subacius, whose new book, "Upton Sinclair: The Lithuanian Jungle," is being released on the centennial of Sinclair's work.

Lithuanian phrases sprinkled through the book first attracted Subacius. He shares linguistics as a hobby with the early 20th century author, who spoke English, French, and German, and read Latin and old Greek at the time.

"When he saw a new language, for him an exotic one, he wanted to incorporate it, show off a bit."

Newspaper installments of the book used a variety of dialects, faithfully recorded. The book, a year later, used what became the standard written form of the period. Readers sent their comments and a Lithuanian edited it, Subacius surmises.

Sinclair was also precise in his descriptions: a two-block distance was exactly that. And so, "it was also gift of the gods to walk the streets and imagine how it happened," the professor added.

Using the novel, the author's memoirs, census tracts, city directories and Sanborn maps that show dimensions of buildings and streets, he sleuthed through urban history. He found the garbage dump where children had been scavenging food - for themselves and chickens they raised to eat.

Located between 46th and 47th Streets, Damen Avenue and the railroad tracks, the site of the dump is now a mall and parking lot.

Subacius thinks that the wedding, which Sinclair spotted after nearly being clubbed by police at the dump, was six blocks away at 46th and Paulina. He located the granddaughter of the saloonkeeper and obtained a photo.

Stockyard workers lived in an area bounded by four big dumps, the yards themselves (between Pershing Road and 47th Streets, Ashland Avenue and Halsted Streets) and Bubbly Creek, an animal waste-polluted branch of the Chicago River.

"Polish and Lithuanians wanted to live there because it was close to work," the professor said. It could be deadly to walk to work in winter and they wanted to save streetcar fare.

Sinclair had been commissioned by a Socialist newspaper in Kansas to write about "wage slavery" in the wake of a 1904 Stockyards strike.

"He wanted to write the 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' of white people, a much more modern slavery as he understood it," Subacius said.

Similar to today's immigrant workforce, characters in "The Jungle" sustain work-related injuries, shortfalls on their checks, sexual harassment, predatory loans on their homes.

The Lithuanians were merely the latest cheap labor procured by packing-house agents sent to Europe so there would never be another strike. They came after the Germans, the Irish, the Bohemians and the Poles, but before the Slovaks.

"The Poles had been driven to the wall by the Lithuanians, and now the Lithuanians were giving way to the Slovaks. Who was poorer and more miserable than the Slovaks, Grandmother Majauszkiene had no idea, but the packers would find them," Sinclair wrote.

Giedrius Subacius will discuss "The Lithuanian Jungle," and the use of real people and places in Chicago at 11 a.m. Saturday, March 25 at the Newberry Library, 60 W. Walton St., Chicago. For more information, please visit www.newberry.org or call (312) 255-3700.



Giedrius Subacius