



# Literary sleuth hunts through 'The Jungle'

## THE CHICAGO WAY



TOM  
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The Jungle is tough to find on a sweet spring morning in 2006.

No pig in pens by the block. No stench. No stockyard workers slicing off their fingers.

The Jungle is gone, and what's left is so normal and boring it's hard to believe the Jungle ever was. A bunch of warehouses. Some trucks. Empty fields.

Been a long time since the bad old days.

Unless, I suppose, you are Giedrius Subacius.

"The wedding guests went in a door right here," he tells me, standing on 46th Street, west of Paulina. "The band was on the left, like in the book."

Subacius is describing a real wedding celebration that took place in a tavern on this spot 102

years ago. It was the model for the wedding party in the first chapter of *The Jungle*, Chicago's most famous novel. Remember? Jergis Rudkus married little Ona.

So, I wonder aloud, it all really happened — just the way Upton Sinclair wrote it?

Subacius nods. "The coaches came up Ashland — that fits — and the rear room was exactly how he described it," he says. "I spoke myself to the last owner of the tavern, a woman in her eighties. Sinclair was precise with details."

*The Jungle*, a book full of harrowing scenes, has always been

a little hard to swallow. Who can believe all those nauseating stockyard tales of rats being made into sausage and workers being turned into lard?

When the book first was published, exactly 100 years ago, critics said Sinclair was just making stuff up. And now, over time, that

whole monumentally savage chapter in Chicago history — the treacherous butchery of the Union Stockyard — has receded into the realm of urban myth and lore. Won't be long before there's a musical.

But Sinclair's cruel Packingtown, as Subacius reminds me, was no myth. Exaggerated, of course, but no bad dream.

*The Jungle* was a work of fiction packed with truth — right down to the decaying cadavers of cows in Bubbly Creek.

### 'I have to find out'

Subacius, a professor of linguistics at the University of Illinois at Chicago, has written a new book about the Lithuanian aspects of *The Jungle*. Most of the novel's major characters are Lithuanian immigrants, and many locations — such as the tavern where the wedding was held — are specifically Lithuanian. In his book, *Upton Sinclair: The Lithuanian Jungle*, (published by Rodopi; [www.rodopi.nl](http://www.rodopi.nl)) he traces many of these fictional characters and locations to real people and locations.

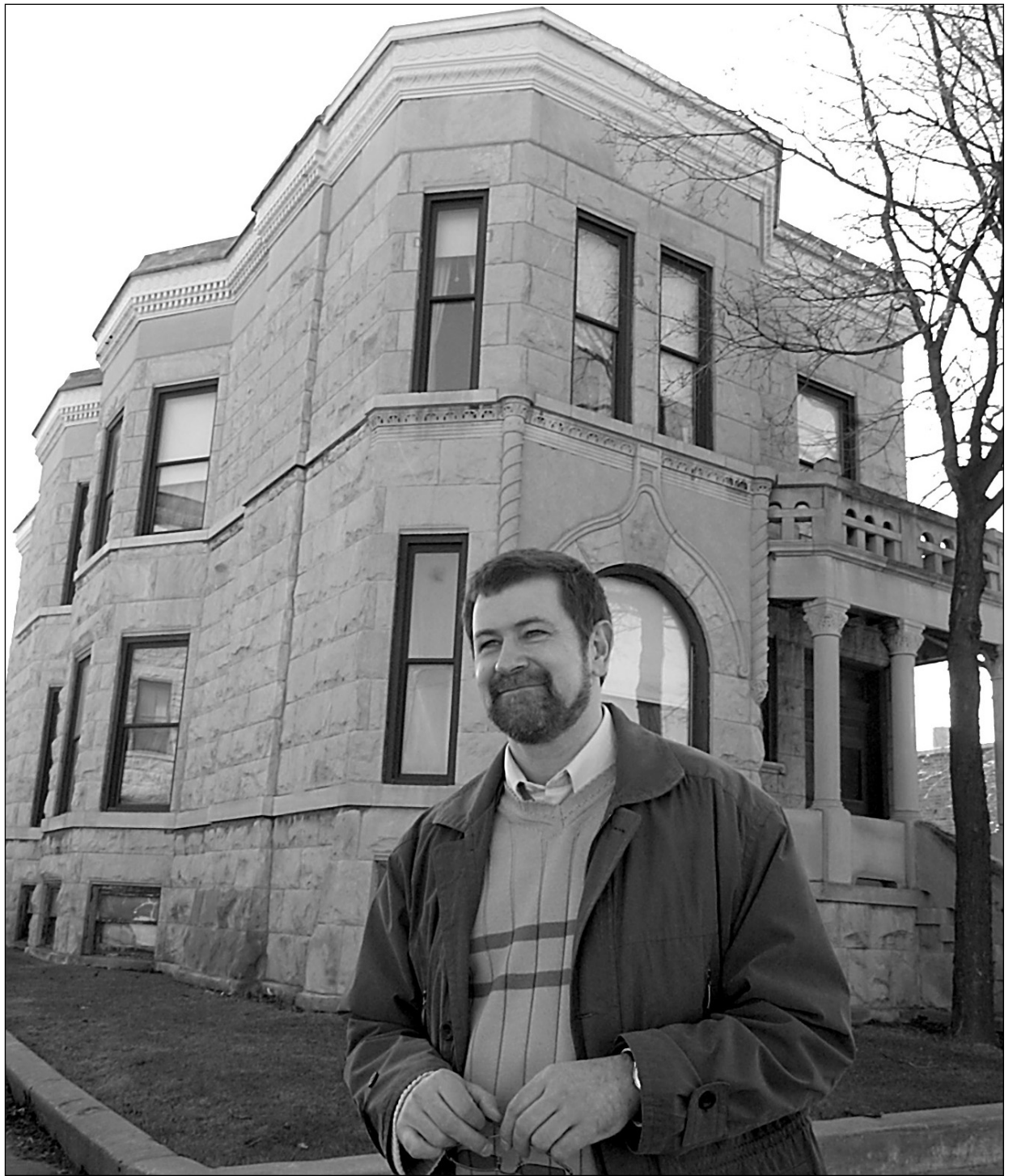
Subacius concludes, for example, that the real wedding celebration almost certainly was held in the back

room of Kuzlejk's Tavern, at 4558 S. Paulina, which burned down in 1948. There's now a small house on that corner. To figure this out, Subacius pored over Sinclair's private writings and autobiography, studied dusty building records and blueprints, and personally interviewed a few people who had knocked down beers there.

But, I say, all the Lithuanians moved out of the neighborhood decades ago, so where did he find the old-timers?

"The 101st anniversary reunion of the church," he says with a smile, pointing down the block to Holy Cross Catholic Church. "They came back."

This, of course, is brilliant and a



Giedrius Subacius, a University of Illinois at Chicago professor, stands in front of 4201 S. Western, where Ald. Tom Carey lived during the time "The Jungle" takes place. —JOHN H. WHITE/SUN-TIMES

little adventurous, and I say so.

Subacius, who moved to Chicago from Lithuania only 12 years ago, did exactly what Sinclair had done — venture with a notebook into a strange and tough neighborhood called Back of the Yards and talk to people.

"Maybe I share some characteristics with him, psychologically," he shrugs. "From the time I read *The Jungle*, I said I have to find out how he got all this."

### Lived at Halsted and Exchange

Subacius drives me around and points out the sights.

He waves at a vacant lot at Halsted and Exchange where the Transit House once stood. The hotel was Sinclair's home for seven weeks in November and December of 1904 when he was doing his research. Sinclair, who was from New Jersey, had a publishing contract to crank out a potboiler novel exposing how capitalism exploits workers. He had promised his backers "the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of wage slavery."

Driving down Wood Street, Subacius tells me that this likely would have been where Jergis Rudkus first lived in Packingtown. It's a couple of blocks from the tavern — which fits with the book — and once was full of Lithuanian-American boarding houses.

Subacius says he'd like to come back here sometime with his camera and photograph all the old nar-

row wooden houses.

"In a neighborhood, you have an aura," he says. "This is history. This is how people lived."

Again, I'm struck by a similarity between Sinclair and Subacius. Sinclair saw Chicago with the fresh eyes of an outsider, and so does Subacius. If Sinclair had lived his whole life in Chicago, he once wrote, he might have "taken for granted" the things that hit him like "a sudden violent blow."

If Subacius had lived his whole life here — as I have — he might take for granted these simple houses so drenched in hard living — as I usually do.

We drive around for about an hour, and I begin to suspect Subacius' car is a time machine. The more landmarks from *The Jungle* he points out, the more I can see and hear the real thing — the blood-slick floors of the killing rooms, the moan of the cattle.

At Damen and 47th, we pull into a strip shopping center's parking lot. The asphalt covers what was once a huge, stinking, garbage dump, a big source of disease for Back of the Yards children and a big source of income for the neighborhood's conniving political boss. In the book, that was Ald. Mike Scully (note the hidden word "skull.") In real life, it was Ald. Tom Carey.

After that, we drive by Scully's — I mean Carey's — fancy grey-

stone house on Western Avenue, on the edge of the stockyard district. It's empty and crumbling now, but I can almost see Carey out on the back porch, counting the garbage wagons rolling into one of his dumps, watching his money grow.

### 'A gift from the gods'

But why Lithuanians?

Why didn't Sinclair make his major characters Irish or Polish or Bohemian or, for that matter, nothing?

To begin with, Subacius says, there was that wedding feast. Sinclair happened upon it one Sunday afternoon, invited himself in, and found the human heart of his story. "There was the opening scene of my story," Sinclair later wrote, "a gift from the gods."

And by choosing Lithuanian characters, Subacius says, Sinclair conveniently could borrow heavily from a long profile of a Lithuanian stockyard worker that had run in a socialist newspaper.

And then there was this: Lithuanians were brand new to Chicago in 1904, and life truly was a struggle.

"Sinclair was looking for the worst place and he found it here," Subacius says, "and he found Lithuanians here."

Tom McNamee's "The Chicago Way" runs Mondays in the *Sun-Times*.