A Penny for Your Rags: Rag Pickers and the Paper Industry in the Later 19th Century

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David Nasaw, *Children of the City: At Work and at Play*:
- Early twentieth-century American cities played a crucial role in the socialization, growth, and development of children, including rag pickers.
- Cities gave immigrant and working class children autonomy and purchasing power in a consumer-driven society.
- Children were able to recognize that if they were not competitive and resourceful, someone else would be, and that meant defying the logic of the streets.

Carl Zimring, *Cash For Your Trash: Scrap Recycling in America*:
- Organized complex system of scrap metal junkers, who sometimes doubled as rag pickers, by categorizing roles and responsibilities.
  - Collectors, peddlers, dealers, and processors

- Examines “low-end” laborers, such as slaves, free blacks, European immigrants, and the native-born in the antebellum era and their struggle to earn a wage.
- Many underpaid laborers served as a crucial part of the economy and helped shape the future of cities by providing entrepreneurs and businesses access to a diverse, exploited labor pool.

- Analyzes the gradual technological changes that took place in more rural paper factories that enhanced mechanization including increased rag processing and paper finishing.
- Paper manufacturers mechanized their processes in order to increase profits and maximize performance to meet demand.
- It was found as late as 1885 that women in the rag room produced more uniform squares and that manufacturers preferred women to do the job instead of machines.

Rags and the Papermaking Process

The economy of the paper industry depended on the existence of a huge labor pool of poor and poorly paid workers to not only collect rags on the streets, but to also work within factories to prepare the rags.

Paper to Rags:

1. **Sorting** the rags based on material
2. **Cutting room** where rags were properly cut up into perfect sizes and shredded once seams had been opened and all buttons had been removed
3. **Washing room** where rags were boiled in limewater for about a day in order to remove all dirt, dust, and color from the rag
4. **Dried and then shredded up** by a machine with several knives until the rag turned into a pulp like substance
5. **Pulp substance** added into a machine that mixed in water, drained water, and then dried the leftover substance until it looked like paper
6. **Run through multiple hot, heavy rollers** that removed any remaining water and produced smooth and dry paper

Rag Work

Rag picking was an extremely strenuous, difficult, dirty, and tedious job.

- In 1857, a journal writer remarked, “Everybody...sees the men, women, and children of this wandering class, hook in hand, basket on the arm, and sack over their shoulder, moving through the gutters and searching in the ash-barrels and boxes, and overhauling garbage vessels to find rags...”
- Sketches of rag pickers include worn out faces of people hauling large sacks and pulling loaded carts with bent backs, weakened steps, sorrow faces, and indifferent to the rest of the world around them.
- Jacob Riis wrote, “I found boys who ought to have been at school, picking bones and sorting rags. They said that they slept there, and as the men did, why should they not? It was their home. They were children of the dump, literally.”

Rag Pickers

- Women, men and children, of all ages, did the backbreaking work.
- In 1881, the Society of the Prevention of Cruelty to Children created a bill that would charge any person responsible for a child working as a rag picker with a misdemeanor.
- Through illustrations we see drawings that emphasize certain characteristics that were associated with different ethnicities.

Rag picking has been studied by historians before, but never analyzed as a complex industry that provided stability for the paper industry through the exploitation of the work of rag pickers. Rag pickers were not just poor, immigrants trying to make a living, or sad children running the streets; rag pickers were the backbone of the paper industry. Rag pickers played multiple roles in the manufacturing of paper, from the street to the factory. They scavenged the streets with wagons to collect rags, bartered and traded their rags in “Rag Pickers’ Paradise,” and worked as a middleman for paper factories. Rag pickers, while only pocketing pennies for their work, were supplying a major commodity to the growing industrial economy. In order to understand the manufacturing process of paper and the paper industry of the late nineteenth century, it is essential to recognize the role of rag pickers as main suppliers of a material that was absolutely essential to this sector of the American economy.

Reformers

- Viewed rag pickers from a negative lens, did not consider rag picking as a vital part of the economy, but as dirty and for the poor.
- Wanted to eliminate the increasing social ills of poverty in cities—created the Poverty Reform Movement.
- As business owners and entrepreneurs, made more money from increased profits and manufacturing processes, the lower class became stuck in a cyclic process of poverty because they never earned enough to get ahead
- Took a hard stance that the poor were being punished for their sinfulness and that government aid would only strip them of a sense of pride and independence

Living Conditions

- Rag Pickers’ Paradise and the Five Points area of New York were popular tenement housing for rag pickers.
- Sanitation was extremely low and often times those that managed the cleanliness of these neighborhoods thought it better to just evict the occupants because it was considered unsalvageable.
- The ground encompassing the buildings was littered with garbage, dead animals and waste.
- Rag carts filled with rotting vegetables, damaged meat, stale bread, bones, cheese, and other sundried food that emitted, “...a stench almost unendurable by mortal man, who has never educated his nasal organs to relish such vile stinks for the sake of hoarding up a few hundred dollars.”

Factories

- Extremely dangerous: lack of regulations and employee rights.
- If there was a fire, workers died from burns, injuries from jumping, or became trapped.

Conclusion