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Jacob Riis: Muckraking in alleys at the turn of the century

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WASHINGTON - He was heralded with pioneering a particularly stark and revealing brand of photojournalism, but Jacob Riis never even considered himself a photographer.

Toiling in New York's Lower East Side before the turn of the last century, the crusading newspaperman used the newly developed breadbox-size camera to shine light on overcrowding, poverty and squalor in the tenements.

And using the flashgun methods of illuminating nighttime shots, Riis also set at least three fires, according to the current Library of Congress exhibition "Jacob Riis: Revealing 'How the Other Half Lives.'"

The exhibition combines the Riis papers in the library collection with a number of photos, once thought long discarded, that were found in an attic and donated to the Museum of the City of New York, which is co-presenting the show.

Riis (1849-1914) may have had an affinity for immigrants since he, too, had moved to the United States from his native Denmark in 1870, spending three years walking the East Coast until he found a job in New York newspapers. He couldn't ignore the squalor and overcrowding all around him, so he published his findings in the paper, in magazines of the day such as Scribner's and, eventually, in such influential books as "How the Other Half Lives" and "The Children of the Poor," which galvanized reformers to improve conditions.

Riis became a friend of President Theodore Roosevelt's and an in-demand speaker nationally who would bring his newfangled visual device: the "magic lantern" that cast his striking photographs onto screens in the days when motion pictures were just starting.

A re-creation of his magic lantern presentations is part of the exhibition, as is paper-print film footage of the Lower East Side at the turn of the 20th century.

"Jacob Riis: Revealing 'How the Other Half Lives,'" through Sept. 5 at the Library of Congress's Thomas Jefferson Building, 10 First St. SE. Free. 202-707-5000 or loc.gov.

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