

Development of the U.S. Meat Industry

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November 1994

The U.S. meat industry began during colonial times. Initially, colonists depended on wild animals for their meat supply. As the supply of domestic livestock increased, colonists became involved in trading meat with the West Indies in exchange for molasses. Meat was salted, smoked and packed into wooden barrels or boxes for storage and shipping. Hence, the term "meat packing." According to historical records, William Pynchon of Springfield, Massachusetts became the first American devoted to the 'packing' business. In 1655 he started by driving cattle to Boston, and was packing large numbers of hogs by 1662. The first retail meat shops were operated by colonial butchers. Having learned their trade in Europe, local butchers supplied meat to others in the community beyond their own immediate family.

With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, eastern cities grew and the demand for meat increased. To serve this market, large cattle ranches were established west of the Mississippi river. Between 1865 and 1875, railroads expanded into the Mississippi and Ohio Valley regions. Range cattle were driven on hoof over cattle trails from production areas in the west to railheads. One of the best known trails was the Chisholm Trail which led from Texas to Abilene, Kansas. Railroad cattle cars were then used to transport livestock to large eastern packing houses. Cincinnati, Buffalo, Milwaukee and Chicago became centers of the packing industry.

Meat packing was a seasonal industry, operating primarily during the cooler months. The beginning of the chilled meat trade coincided with the end of the Civil War. In 1875, G.H. Hammond designed the first practical refrigerated rail car for use in transporting fresh meat. Under the leadership of Gustavus F. Swift, founder of Swift and Company, and Philip D. Armour, who established the Armour firm, refrigeration revolutionized the meat industry. Chicago, located in the center of the cornbelt, dominated the meat industry by the late 1800s. By the early 1950s, however, the Chicago meat industry reached its peak. Many plants which had been built in the 1890s or earlier had become obsolete. With the development of the interstate highway system, refrigerated truck transport and cropland irrigation, the packing industry no longer had to be concentrated in the cornbelt. When new plants were constructed to replace obsolete ones, they were placed close to areas of livestock production. It became more economical to ship meat and dressed carcasses than live animals.

As we approach the year 2000, meat processing has become a highly sophisticated industry. By using modern computer-age business practices and applying scientific knowledge to meat manufacturing, the meat industry provides this country with the safest, highest quality meat products in the world.

This article was written with the assistance of Rodolfo Estrada, former Graduate Research Assistant in Meat Science, at KSU.