

**Horton's**

# **Michigan Notebook**

## ***Political & Social Commentary***

**September 23, 2018**

### **Some History About Immigration**

**By Steve Horton**

Last week I wrote a news story on a lady observing her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. During the interview, she mentioned that both her father and mother immigrated to the United States.

“Where from?” I asked.

“Poland,” she said, adding her mother had come here as a young lady—“all by herself.”

I offered that my grandmother (on my mother’s side) had done the same. In her case, she came from Prussia—part of eastern Germany.

Still another similarity was that my Grandma Amo and this lady’s mother had both arrived prior to World War I, or at least before America’s entry into that conflict which was in April of 1917. The European powers had launched their battle in July of 1914.

These women—our respective ancestors—were among the millions of people who immigrated to the United States during the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, with many of them coming from Central, Southern, and Eastern Europe. They had been preceded by earlier, large-scale migrations that occurred during the 1800s.

The flow of new arrivals accelerated after World War I ended in November of 1918 (the



year my interviewee was born), with “millions of distraught Europeans seeking refuge in America.”

So many were coming, joining those already here, that it soon caused a backlash.

A historical account noted that “With the new wave of immigration came the resurgence of nativism (an emphasis of traditional customs and opposition to outside influences).”

These nativists, it was further noted, “were not only concerned with the growing influx of immigrants, but the cultural upheaval that (they felt) newcomers would bring to traditional American values.”

This anti-immigrant movement included groups like the Ku Klux Klan who felt the new arrivals were “racially inferior” to the predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant population and would “dilute the purity of the American race.”

A recession in 1920, causing a tight job market, prompted accusations that the immigrants were taking away jobs by working for low wages. Adding still more fuel to the fire was the fear by many of radical political movements (like Communism) and concerns by business with the growing strength of labor unions. In both cases, the immigrants were seen as being 'hotbeds' for this political and labor activism.

Perhaps underlying this growing angst was the dramatic acceleration of industrialization that occurred in the nation during the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, making the nation more urban and less rural and "indeed" resulting in a social and cultural upheaval. Since most of the immigrants lived in the bigger cities and worked in the factories, one could speculate that many Americans viewed them as the cause of the changes rather than seeing them as a consequence of industrialization.

What finally happened were a pair of Congressional laws that limited the number of new immigrants by restricting what nations or areas of the world they could come from. The first law was passed in 1921, followed by one in 1924 that had stricter language.

The end result of this legislation (as intended) was to "almost completely stem the flow of Southern and Eastern Europeans and limiting all immigration from Asia." By 1928, the number of new arrivals had declined to around 300,000.

But for all those already here, and for their descendants, the American Dream beckoned. Many of them ended up in Michigan, including the young lady from Poland and my Grandma Amo. There were many reasons the immigrants came to this state, but the emergence of auto manufacturing in Detroit and surrounding cities, with the lure of decent wages and a decent standard-of-living, was a main motivation.

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**ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITES AND THE HOPE OF A BETTER LIFE** have, of course, been primary motivations for coming to this country since the first Englishmen stepped off the boat at Jamestown, Virginia in 1607.

The first white settlers to the Fowlerville area came mainly from western New York and were for the most part Protestants of Anglo-Saxon ancestry. Arriving in the mid-to-late 1830s, they cut the forests, built the log cabins, planted the crops, and began creating schools, churches, businesses, and a community life.

This homogeneity was altered a bit with the gradual arrival of more and more people of Irish Catholic background. These newcomers eventually became the nucleus of the St. Agnes Parish.

The area also soon attracted a number of families of German ancestry. Among their legacies was the establishment of St. Johns Lutheran Church.

The Irish Catholics had come to the United States in large numbers due to the hard times, including starvation, that occurred when the Potato Famine began in Ireland in 1845 and continued for the next few years.

Historical accounts tell us that these immigrants were not met by the existing population with open arms.

Information from the web site for Irish-Genealogy-Toolkit noted that "So-called 'Elegant Society' looked down on them, and so did nearly everyone else!

"They were forced to work long hours for minimal pay. Their cheap labor was needed by America's expanding cities for the construction of canals, roads, bridges, railroads and other infrastructure projects, and they also found employment in the mining and quarrying industries.

"When the economy was strong, Irish immigrants to America were welcomed. But

when boom times turned down, as they did in the mid-1850s, social unrest followed and it could be especially difficult for immigrants who were considered to be taking jobs from Americans. Being already low in the pecking order, the Irish suffered great discrimination. 'No Irish Need Apply' was a familiar comment in job advertisements."

The German immigrants and their offspring would also experience some ill feelings. A virulent, anti-German feeling sprung up in the United States when America entered World War I, with many German-Americans, despite their long residence, being suspected—and even accused—of disloyalty.

Fast forward to the 1970s and the ensuing years.

A number of factors, alone or in combination, resulted in more and more people re-locating to Livingston County, including the Fowlerville area. Call it 'Urban Sprawl' or 'White Flight' or whatever, but the offspring of families that had lived in Detroit or the older suburbs, now resided in what had once been a rural, farming community. Among them was a number of Americans of Polish ancestry, with many of them being Catholic.

With their arrival, St. Agnes grew into an even larger congregation.

One of the church's annual celebrations, reflecting this heritage, is their Polish Octoberfest. It's an event my wife and I have attended.

Polish food—including Kapusta & Kielbasa (Sauerkraut & Kielbasa) and Golabki (Stuffed Cabbage)—is featured, along with music and dancing.

In the "History and Culture of Polish Americans in Michigan", available at the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan, the introduction stated that "Poles are the second largest ethnic group in Michigan (living mainly in the Detroit and Grand Rapids areas) and have been a

significant part of the history of Detroit and the state of Michigan.

"The first Polish mass migration took place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries following years of aggression and occupation of Poland by its European neighbors. During that time about 2.5 million ethnic Poles came to the United States in search of freedom and economic stability.

"The Detroit area's large Polish community was for many years concentrated in Poletown and Hamtramck, the latter a suburb of Detroit. Hamtramck was originally settled by German farmers, but it became a dominantly Polish industrial town in 1914 when the Dodge Brothers automotive plant was opened, providing great employment opportunities. These Polish communities became vital centers of immigrant social life, with small businesses, press, and cultural, political, veterans, patriotic and professional organizations. The heart of Polonia, however, was its Polish Roman Catholic church and its parishes. Poles were able to keep their identity by cultivating their cultural traditions, language and faith.

"The second wave of new Polish immigrants (over 200,000) came to the U.S. following World War II, when Poland became part of the Soviet Union bloc. Of these, 38,000 came to Michigan."

The story of immigration, whether viewed at a national level or closer to home, is not necessarily a matter of history repeating itself, but there do seem to be familiar refrains.