

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/chi-0605210008may21,1,4328638.story>

Immigrants vital part of city's history, future

By Ron Grossman
a Tribune staff reporter

Advertisement

May 21, 2006

Every afternoon between 2 and 3, a bus pulls into Autobuses Latinos on South California Avenue with passengers who have bet \$108 on the American dream. That's the price of a one-way ticket from Laredo, Texas, a jumping-off point for the latest wave of immigrants to Chicago. They arrive with a piece or two of luggage-- and hopes of a better future.

A century ago, the languages and ticket prices were different, but the human drama and emotional conflicts were essentially the same. European immigrants from ships recently docked at Ellis Island debarked by the trainload at Chicago's railroad stations.

Chicago has always been a city of immigrants, dependent on recruiting much of its labor force from afar, but never quite sure what to make of that economic reality. Without a steady stream of newcomers, the city's factories and other businesses would come to a halt. Yet it hasn't known whether to rejoice or bemoan a sociological side-effect: Neighborhoods where English is a foreign language.

The Chicago Association of Commerce and Industry half bragged, half complained in 1909 that the city's "confusion of tongues is the worst since Babel."

Monday evening, President Bush expressed similar feelings in a nationally televised speech.

While noting the U.S. is a nation of immigrants, he proposed posting 6,000 National Guard troops on the southern border. It wouldn't be the first time a politician has thought to solve the problem of America's newcomers at the point of a gun.

Know-Nothing mayor

In 1855, Levi Boone was elected mayor of Chicago as the candidate of the Know-Nothing Party, the political wing of an anti-immigrant movement. In his inaugural address he argued that political office should be reserved for native-born Americans. He took a swipe at the Catholic Church, and its many Irish and German immigrants, as a "powerful political-religious organization" aiming to dominate the U.S.

Boone also ordered taverns closed on Sunday, enforcing the regulation strictly for beer gardens patronized by German immigrants but winking at the infractions of saloons where the native-born drank. When Germans marched in protest, they were met by armed constables, and in a bloody melee, many were wounded and at least one killed. Boone's supporters were Yankees who had come to Chicago from the eastern seaboard. Their ancestry went back to England, making them immigrant stock, too. But the miracle--and curse--of America has been that one after another newcomer

group quickly loses sight of that chapter in its history, thus failing to see a link to the experience of those who come after them.

Sometimes that amnesia occurs within an ethnic community, noted Hector Sanchez, who runs a hardware store on South Kedzie Avenue.

"We just don't remember how we used to have it," he said in his old-fashioned shop, crammed with bolts and plumbing parts. His neighborhood, which is predominantly populated by Mexicans, is called Little Village, which was formerly inhabited largely by Eastern Europeans.

Sanchez's father, Antonio, bought the business from two Czech brothers. Antonio Sanchez came from Mexico and worked in factories for 20 years. In that time he bought buildings and fixed them up; now he lives comfortably on the rents. "People warned my father: 'Don't buy property around here,'" Hector Sanchez said. "They said: There are too many immigrants moving in."

Some Chicagoan or another has been saying that since the city was born. America was sparsely populated in the 19th Century, when George Pullman invented the sleeping car and Cyrus McCormick the reaper that made their and their city's fortunes. But with virtually free farmland available on the western frontier, they and other entrepreneurs found it tough to get the native-born to work in their factories.

So agents were sent to Eastern and Southern Europe, advertising Chicago as a place where anyone willing to work need never be out of a job. The success of that campaign was described by a Hungarian visitor to Chicago in 1908.

"It would seem as if all the millions of human beings disembarking year by year upon the shores of the United States were unconsciously drawn to make this place their headquarters," observed Count Vay de Vaya and Luskod in a memoir of his trip.

Already by 1890, almost 80 percent of the city's inhabitants were immigrants or their children. Eventually, Chicago became the second-largest Polish-speaking community in the world. There were more Czech and Slovak speakers here than anywhere but Prague. It was the third-largest Irish, Swedish and Jewish city on Earth.

But that ethnic diversity was an irritant to older-stock residents of the hinterlands who thought the foreign-born a threat to the nation's identity. Responding to those fears, Congress enacted severe immigration restrictions after World War I.

In the middle of the 19th Century, the Chicago Tribune made a connection between immigration and the city's fortunes, urging the federal government to help foreigners get here. But a century later, its longtime publisher and editor Col. Robert McCormick remade the newspaper into a sounding board for xenophobia. He worried aloud about the loyalties of "the newly arrived immigrants" if war should come with their homelands. "In event of invasion, thousands and thousands of them will ... join the invaders," McCormick predicted in a magazine article.

Bound by English

There were faint echoes of such worries in President Bush's address. Americans are bound together by a common identity, he said, whose hallmarks include "an ability to speak and write the English language."

Yet despite the insults and restrictions on getting here, and proposals for still higher hurdles, the immigrants keep coming. Just as in Pullman's and McCormick's days, immigrants are the city's basic workforce. That determines the position taken by businessman Nour Salman in an increasingly heated debate.

Salman owns a Dollar Store on 26th Street, the shopping mecca of the Mexican community. He and his customers don't share a common language. A Palestinian immigrant, he doesn't speak Spanish, though his Peruvian wife does.

"I love these people. Why?" he said, while ringing up purchases of household gadgets and phone cards. "Because I

need them. We all do. Take a look at a restaurant or factory. Who's doing the work?"

Copyright © 2006, [Chicago Tribune](#)