

## Utah's Ethnic Legacy

*Helen Papanikolas*

**A**s I look at you graduates, I recognize in your faces, full-blown in some, slight in others, the ethnic people of your past. Among you sit men and women whose sorrowing ancestors were summarily sent to federal reservations when settlers arrived. Those settlers ploughed the land on which for centuries your people had picked berries, gathered nuts, and hunted small animals. Perhaps seated here is a descendant of the Paiute leader who told Major John Wesley Powell:

We live among the rocks, and they yield little food and many thorns. When the cold moons come, our children are hungry. . . . We love our country; we know not other lands. [When] the pines sing, we are glad. Our children play in the warm sand; we hear them sing and we are glad. We do not want [others'] good land; we want our rocks, and the great mountains where our fathers lived (Powell 1875, 128–29, 130).

A great number of you, though, are progeny of those celebrated American Mormons and the later-arriving English converts. The English thought themselves superior to the Scandinavians, particularly the Danish, who followed. Their feuds have left a folklore that is the delight of scholars; their cultural clashes were resolved through intermarriages encouraged by leaders of the fledgling Church. Many of you may be descendants of persevering converts from other parts of Europe who were drawn to this new Zion. Some of you may descend from those few blacks, freeborn servants or slaves brought west by unbelievers and by southern converts in the first migrations. Others may come from those blacks recruited years later by the railroads to work as porters and waiters.

Surely several of you can trace your roots to those early Jews who drove precariously loaded wagons to army posts and mining camps. From lowly beginnings, these peddlers became merchants, then industrialists. Their illustrious names have long been associated with Utah's economy.

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Perhaps among you are great-great-grandchildren of those Chinese railroad workers who rushed to reach Promontory, Utah, before the Irish laborers arrived from the East. In one day they laid ten miles of track. Maybe you come from the Chinese in the Carbon County coal fields who used no blasting powder but with picks carved mine entrances that were "as beautiful a piece of work as one would want to see" (Reynolds 1948, 37). A few Chinese remained as launderers and restaurant workers and owners. One became a trading post proprietor on the Ute reservation; another, an herbal doctor in Mercur.

Many more of your forefathers were young men from the Balkans, Mediterranean, Middle East, and Japan who began coming to Utah at the turn of the century. They came to supply brawn for rapidly opening mines, mills, and smelters and for railroads, because Mormon leaders counseled their members to stay on the land. During labor wars large numbers of these immigrants were brought in as strikebreakers. They traded the clear air and the sound of sheep and goat bells for the darkness of mines, for the searing heat of smelting furnaces, for the loneliness of isolated railroad gangs.

These newer immigrants, unlike Mormon converts who came to stay, expected to remain in Utah only long enough to help their destitute parents. For mutual aid and protection they settled in neighborhoods known as "towns": the Greeks in Greek Town, the Italians, Lebanese, South Slavs, and Japanese in their towns. Yet they stayed because in America they were assured of bread to eat. From their native countries they brought brides they had seen only in photographs. Crucifixes, icons, and Buddhist shrines enriched modest homes in which Mormons had once lived. The young wives became matriarchs, raising large families within their towns, fearful of the world beyond and its alien language.

Then the Mexicans came to follow this pattern of immigrant experience. Several of you come from those first Hispanics, who drove covered wagons from southern Colorado and northern New Mexico to teach the Monticello Mormons the nurture of sheep and in time homesteaded there themselves. A professor in the University of Utah Department of Languages, William Gonzales, is the son of those first pioneers; his father will be one hundred years old soon. More of your forebears came later, fleeing the Mexican Revolution to become strikebreakers in the Bingham Canyon Strike of 1912, riding freight cars to find any kind of work, anywhere.

All these ethnic groups — Indians, blacks, immigrants — were separated by their distinctive cultures and languages, but they shared the belief that religion, family, and work constituted the highest good in life. Communal celebrations for marriages, baptisms, or confirmations offered them welcome respite from long hours of toil. Even laborers in Utah could afford to provide the hospitality their ancient traditions demanded.

Still, each incoming immigrant group suffered discrimination. When the Irish fled the potato famine in the 1840s, NINA signs appeared throughout eastern cities: No Irish Need Apply. In Utah, Chinese were chased from the mines by subsequent English-speaking workers. Managers and straw bosses ruled the lives of immigrants and blacks, forcing them to trade at company

stores, arbitrarily hiring and firing in alliance with labor agents, and at first providing no housing. As elsewhere in the United States, Utahns demanded instant Americanization of these laborers, disdaining their ancient languages and cultures.

Perplexed and wary, immigrants pined for their homelands. Yet, when in old age a few returned to their fatherlands to live more easily on their Social Security, they congregated in places like the Astor Hotel Bar in Athens or in ancestral village squares in Italy and spoke with longing of their lost land, America.

These forebears are receding from memory; they are entering the realm of myth. We must not forget them completely, for because of them we are here.

My parents were immigrants from Greece; I lived among ethnic people during my growing-up days in Helper in Carbon County, where whistles of coal mines and the Denver and Rio Grande Western steam engines drowned out the pandemonium of school recess. The first question a new child was asked was not "What's your name?" but "What nationality are you?" On a hillside just beyond town, a large, whitewashed number 57 advertised the Heinz Pickle Company's varieties, but residents maintained it meant the races and nationalities in town. (The Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the Depression days counted only twenty-six.)

The nostalgia, though, is not all pleasant. Memory reminds me that as a child of immigrants I was uncertain, even though I was born in Utah, that I was an American. When schoolmates taunted us immigrant children to "go back where you came from," we answered with anger and impotence, so unsure were we of our birthrights. How distantly strange it seems to me now that children were teased about eating spaghetti or for going to Greek or Japanese school after regular school. Yet that generation of immigrant children, most of whom began school without speaking English, has succeeded far beyond anyone's expectations.

The success of these Balkan, Mediterranean, and Asian immigrants has been unfairly compared with the experience of native Americans, blacks, and Hispanics. Those who wonder why they have not pulled themselves up by those suspect bootstraps are unaware of the historical forces and the circumstances that make such judgments unjustified and incorrect. Balkan and Mediterranean people survived continuous invasions without complete destruction of their cultures because their conquerors were unlettered tribesmen; the Japanese were proud that their country had never known "the shame of foreign rule." In contrast, Indians, blacks, and the indigenous inhabitants of Mexico were crushed by technologically superior invaders, and their ascent from near annihilation continues, unfinished.

Unlike the immigrants with whom they are compared, Indians, blacks, and Hispanics had no doctors, attorneys, editors, or druggists to champion and lead them. Nor did they have long-established ethnic newspapers and institutions like coffee houses and fraternal organizations to disseminate government news, help them with citizenship papers and legal problems, and provide support while they took the rudimentary steps toward Americanization. Decades would

pass before Indians, blacks, and Hispanics would found organizations to aid their people.

Nor in the first twenty-five years of this country, during America's great era of industrialization, did Indians, blacks, or Hispanics have labor agents with the power to represent and ease them into steady work. The Greeks, Italians, Labanese, South Slavs, and Japanese all had such spokesmen.

In all, the indignities and prejudices inflicted on these racial minorities were far more intense than those suffered by the Balkan and Mediterranean people. Historians researching old newspapers regularly find items recounting that Indians, blacks, and Mexicans were replaced on labor gangs by southern European and Middle Eastern immigrants — solely because of race. The roots of discrimination were in color and physiognomy: the darker the skin or the more distinctive the features, the greater the prejudice.

Mexican immigration differed from that of other groups in significant ways. Most immigrants traveled thousands of miles to Utah, to terrain and weather often far different from that of their native countries. Once in Utah, they were not only physically but psychically cut off from their homelands; they had little choice but to adapt. Mexicans, though, made their way north through arid land of sparse vegetation, a geographical continuation of their own country. Until the treaty of 1848, it had been Mexican territory. The need to modify the old culture with the new was less urgent.

More important, Mexican immigration has never eased. Immigrants from southern Europe, the Middle East, and Japan came mainly during one major era: the first two decades of this century. These people and their progeny passed once and for all through the three-generation immigration experience: the first generation's accommodation to America for survival, the second generation's ambivalence toward its parents' and American cultures, and the third generation's complete assimilation. For Mexicans, however, the immigration experience has never finished. Although Hispanics continually enter the middle class to become educators, small businessmen, building subcontractors, and civil servants, the constant arrival of poor Mexicans with little education gives the erroneous notion that Hispanics are unprogressive and contribute little to the state. Facts contradict this impression; as Utah's largest minority, Hispanics did and do most of the industrial work begun by earlier immigrants. The newest immigrants will always perform the menial labor for the nation. In Utah the newly arrived Mexicans and the refugees of the Viet Nam War join native Americans and blacks in this work. Of the Southeast Asians, the Vietnamese have a decided advantage because of the influence their former rulers' Western culture had upon their own.

Yet the immense amount of industrial labor that gave millions of immigrants a foothold in America is gone. In Utah the railroads, mills, and smelters have already been built. In mines, mammoth cutting machines demolish within minutes veins of coal and ore that would have taken hundreds of men with picks and shovels days to dig out. In this age of the machine, education is the key to survival, and it is the right of every child. That children, many of



them immigrants, are lost in our educational system to wander, barely literate, their potential for a balanced life blighted, is a tragedy.

Those well-fed and comfortable in their identities find it difficult to understand the souls of Indian, black, Mexican, and Southeast Asian children. These children are forever immigrants, even those whose ancestors were born in this land. How easy to speak of bootstraps and of education available to all and to condemn dropouts and the young unemployed. Future educators will be teaching minority children; all of us will have contact with them. How will we approach them? Others standing here have spoken of Plato and Aristotle's view that education is more than a useful function; it is a liberating force. An educated person is liberated from his limitations and irrationality. Can we expect children to be liberated by education when we are not?

Paternalism — thinking we know what is best for others — is disguised prejudice, as is accepting preconceived ideas about people. The paternalism foisted on immigrants in mining and smelting camps is in the past; a mine manager today would not dare shut off electricity in company houses because the immigrants, in his opinion, did not need or deserve it. Paternalism today is more subtle. Some teachers think of minority children as intellectually or culturally inferior and treat them with condescension. Minority groups are often not invited to help make decisions that affect them. Paternalism did not work in industry; it does not work in education; it is unworthy.

We must keep searching for the best techniques to educate our children. Future educators must be given more than a smattering of instruction in how to teach children from many cultures. Computers and every other teaching aid must be brought into this crusade. Money spent for these programs will surely help stave future dependency on government.

This monumental task is extremely complex. Many parents' most anxious, daily concern is providing food and shelter for their children, not overseeing their school attendance. Other parents come from a cultural background that is highly permissive toward children. They must be taught the worth of education.

Education is difficult for children not knowing English. Native language is usually lost in the Americanization of immigrants by the third generation. But because Mexicans continually arrive, because Indians live mainly on reservations, and because Southeast Asians have been here such a short time, language will remain of paramount concern in the education of these minority students.

Bilingual education is experimental in Utah. The program began ten years ago, but a generation must pass before the results can be seen. Test scores among sixth graders in the Salt Lake City schools are encouraging, and Indian students in Roosevelt, Uintah County, appear to be responding to a bilingual program. The federal government has been lax in fulfilling treaties with Indian nations to provide education for their children. The Indians themselves are forcing the government to face this responsibility. Still, generations of Indian children are poorly educated, becoming aimless, unemployed young people, and little has been done to alleviate their despair. This must stop.



Although we all have an obligation to the children of our country, you ethnic graduates have a double duty. On your way to reaching your highest potential, may you not forget your people. They need you. Colleges founded with the sweat and blood of black educators are struggling to survive today because their graduates are not supporting them financially. Ethnic students who actively work for their rights during college days often lose interest in scholarship programs for those climbing up behind them. Often in their quest for material goods and what they perceive as social acceptance, they turn from their culture. They are wrong. Samuel Ramos, the Mexican philosopher, said culture is not like the brand of a hat. America has room for all cultures. Those cultures made America. Each immigrant and native people has given new vitality to this country. Culture is our soul.

Only recently have we Utahns acknowledged the importance and richness of culture. Until World War II people who thought of themselves as true Americans viewed those unlike themselves as strange and inferior. After the war, soldiers brought home foreign brides, often from enemy countries. The federal government sent vast amounts of economic aid and an army of workers to oversee its disbursement to devastated nations. The government lifted quotas to allow hundreds of thousands of destitute and displaced immigrants to enter the country. With the increase in defense industries and government services, employees moved far and often. Mormon missionaries proselyted in lands where Americans were strange and exotic. The word *isolationism* was almost eliminated from print. We began to appreciate people from many cultures, looking beyond the superficialities of appearance and habit.

Perceptions about ethnic people began to alter in small and significant ways. Racial slang that humiliated was heard less often. American sojourners in other lands returned with a penchant for foreign foods. Second-generation Italians who had been ashamed as children to admit they ate spaghetti opened pasta restaurants. Almost every ethnic food became readily available, and each group's modest communal celebrations, centered in churches, temples, or synagogues, evolved into highly successful festivals for the general population.

Now grandchildren of those first immigrants, whose names were either shortened arbitrarily by officials in Ellis Island, by judges awarding them citizenship, or by themselves in frustration at the reactions of "true" Americans, are at home in America and at the same time proud of their roots. Newer immigrants have left their patronymic names intact; grandchildren of the earlier arrivals often give their children names derived from the ancient histories, literature, and mythology, a startling departure from the custom of their parents.

Signs of goodwill are dramatically reflected in adoptions. Not long ago, adoptive parents would accept only white children of British or North European ancestry; today children of all races are sought. Important, also, is the awareness of the cultural enrichment of speaking languages besides English and perceiving education to be deficient without a second language. The language program for Mormon missionaries has greatly influenced this new attitude.

In education a slower yet steady trend toward hiring minority teachers is belatedly taking place. Utah's universities have opened their doors to ethnic

professors. When Louis Zucker, a Jew, arrived in 1928 to join the English department at the University of Utah, he was looked upon as an oddity. When the university established a four-year medical school, other Jews arrived. Several of them, Max Wintrobe, Leo Samuels, and Louis Goodman, were renowned in their fields. After World War II, the number of ethnic educators in higher education increased phenomenally. A few minority educators hold administrative positions in the public school system, and recently the first black principal was hired.

In judicial affairs, a memorable act in Utah history occurred recently when Governor Scott F. Matheson appointed Tyrone E. Medley, a graduate of the University of Utah law school, to the Fifth Circuit Court Bench, making Medley the state's first black judge.

Much has been accomplished since World War II, but we cannot linger in complacency. We have promises to keep for coming generations of children and for our own self-respect.

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