

Utah's Ethnic Legacy

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As 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