

Oregon's immigration debate More subtle, but no less heated

Oregonian, The (Portland, OR) - February 8, 2009

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- Section: Sunday Features (O!)
- Readability: 10-12 grade level (Lexile: 1190)
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On a Sunday in July, 50 men entered the houses of immigrant workers in Toledo, ordered them and their families to pack their belongings, and escorted them to cars and trucks waiting to drive them away.

They claimed the immigrants worked for substandard wages and took jobs from native Oregonians.

Sound familiar? The scene actually unfolded in 1925. The millworkers included 27 Japanese, four Filipinos and one Korean, most of whom were Oregon residents. Townspeople shouted as they left: "String them up!"

In a nation of immigrants, Oregonians' relationship with newcomers always has been ambivalent -- just like across America. Many immigrants have thrived, but at times, laws and prejudice limited rights or banned certain ethnicities altogether.

The history of Oregon -- one of the few states to completely bar African Americans -- shows an especially hard struggle with immigrants' race, which played out in widespread discrimination and fear as their numbers rose.

"Arm's length and open arms, those have been the two approaches to immigrants that reflected our state and national sentiments," says Bob Bussel, historian and director of the Labor and Education Research Center at the University of Oregon, who researched immigration history. "Oregon has really grappled with how to welcome some cultures."

The state extended the welcome mat to white immigrants, with policies and attitudes that favored northern and central Europeans. Oregon's treatment of blacks laid the foundations, says David Peterson del Mar, historian and author of "Oregon's Promise."

While Oregon was admitted to the Union as a non-slave state, Oregonians decided the way to avoid racial problems was to bar black residents altogether. Their argument was that by doing so they would abolish the inequalities between the rich and the working class. "I'm going to Oregon, where there'll be no slaves, and we'll all start even," said Capt. R.W. Morrison, a pioneer from Missouri, in 1844, according to historical accounts.

The same argument was later used to bar immigrants of other races: They would bring down wages and establish inequities.

"White Oregonians have associated people of color with hierarchy and disparities," Peterson del Mar says. "Owning slaves gave you an unfair advantage. Some thought wealthy people would use blacks and immigrants to get wealthier at the expense of regular white men."

Oregon was the only state admitted to the Union with a black exclusion law in its constitution (Illinois and Indiana had had similar laws, while other states made it difficult for blacks to live there). The state ratified the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which guaranteed citizenship for all U.S.-born people regardless of race, then rescinded its ratification. Oregon did not ratify the 15th Amendment, which gave African Americans the right to vote, until 1959.

Likewise, citizenship and voting were denied to arrivals from China, Japan and other Asian countries. The waves of Asian immigrants, unique to the West Coast, helped define its racial context, says William Toll, historian, author and adjunct professor at the University of Oregon. Far fewer Asians emigrated to the East and South.

"These people bring nothing with them to our shores, they add nothing to the permanent wealth of this country," claimed an editorial in Jacksonville's Oregon Sentinel, referring to Chinese arrivals.

Into the early 20th century, segregation ruled in practice and in law. Filipinos, Japanese, Chinese and African Americans sat in the balcony at Portland's Broadway Theater; only whites were allowed on the first floor. Mobs raided and burned Chinese homes in Northwest Portland. Oregon storefronts posted signs such as "Filipinos and dogs not allowed" or "No Japs wanted." Young Jewish and Italian men were accused of heightened criminal activity.

But all immigrants who were poor, unskilled and nonwhite felt the brunt, Toll says. As occurred elsewhere in the U.S., Eastern and Southern Europeans were viewed as a distinct and lower racial group -- too culturally different, inferior and taking away jobs.

Some Oregonians bucked the trend. Sherman Burgoyne, a Methodist minister, defended Japanese Americans in the Hood River Valley in the wake of World War II.

And Walter Gresham, a U.S. judge for the 7th Circuit, wrote to Gov. Sylvester Pennoyer in 1893 asking him to protect Chinese immigrants from violence after the Chinese Exclusion Act was extended. The city of Gresham was named after him.

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Clearly, there's progress -- but the immigration debate today hasn't changed much, except for a modern twist. What's new, says Bussel, the University of Oregon historian, is the preoccupation with legal status, in Oregon as elsewhere. "Illegal aliens" are blamed for taking Americans' jobs and using government resources -- with most Latinos, especially Mexicans, lumped into the category.

Race, class and cultural strain still bubble near the surface -- though today people seldom acknowledge racism. While Oregonians are more sensitive about race and not as critical of immigrants, he says, racial issues come to the forefront when tensions arise.

There seems to be a real sense of threat associated with immigrants from Mexico, Bussel adds, because of their large numbers, and history seems to repeat itself.

"When you look at the history of Japanese and Chinese in our state, there are undertones that are similar in the discussion today. The Chinese and Japanese were 'aliens' and it was said that they couldn't assimilate," he says.

The sense of Oregon's "special status" as a pioneer state, he says, is used to argue for restrictions on immigration population.

"So there's the argument that our infrastructure and environment cannot be sustained if there are so many new people coming here," Bussel says.

But Oregon's history of immigration holds lessons. For one thing, there's a double standard when it comes to self-righteousness about undocumented immigrants breaking the law, says Peterson del Mar.

"Bear in mind that the Oregon pioneers who we celebrate were people who came here, took land and were also operating outside the law," he says.

And if we harness the energy of our newest immigrants by easing their integration, Bussel says, their contributions can be as great as the generations of immigrants who came before.

"Where there have been clear public and private efforts to help immigrants come and integrate," says Bussel, "we've done better than when we were repressive and discriminating."

Most of us are immigrants, after all, even if several generations removed.

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Record: MERLIN_13205318

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