

Celebrate Immigrant Stories

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Sen. Smith reflects on the contributions of immigrants in honor of Immigrant Heritage Month.

MADISON - Many Americans are interested in genealogy and learning how their personal heritage has evolved over generations. New technology makes it even easier to trace one's genealogy, simply by sending in a sample of DNA. While we know that our genetic makeup is split in many different ways, we share a curiosity of learning where we're from and how our story started.

June is National Immigrant Heritage Month, so what better time to celebrate the contributions of immigrants throughout our country's history and reflect on where our own ancestors came from.

In my case, my wife has done a lot of digging into her own family for her parents. Her father, in particular, has always been interested in his roots. Once we started, our curiosity grew and spread to my side of the family as well. We found that one of my ancestors arrived here as early as the late 16th century. It really is surprising what we can learn.

America is incredibly diverse. From the First Nations, to modern day immigrants, we really are like a big salad bowl; different cultures and identities are all mixed together, but each has something unique to bring.

Immigrants have always faced immense challenges. Even before immigrants set foot in America, they faced hardship in their home countries, like starvation, war or political oppression. We must acknowledge that a significant population was enslaved and forced here by slave traders.

Immigrants faced a whole new set of challenges after arriving in an unfamiliar place. Although the United States is a nation of immigrants, prejudicial, nativist attitudes greeted many newcomers; this has always fascinated me because many of us are immigrants ourselves.



“The refugees seeking haven in America were poor and disease-ridden. They threatened to take jobs away from Americans and strain welfare budgets ... They were bringing with them crime ... And, worst of all, these undesirables were Irish.” This excerpt was taken from an article describing the Great Famine and migration to America in the 19th century. When the Irish arrived, they faced discrimination from many of those who were already living here.

While the Irish were landing on our eastern shores in the mid-19th century, Chinese immigrants were coming to California to escape the economic chaos in their homeland. They were treated as cheap labor in the mines and on the railroad lines connecting the west to the east. Immigrants have been discriminated against, harassed, exploited and used as a political scapegoat. Today, we still see how cultural intolerance targets and vilifies certain groups, which can lead to racialized violence.

Immigrants have found ways to persevere despite overwhelming adversity. Whether immigrants arrived in the 19th century or just this year, they've made our country stronger. A more recent example that many of us in Wisconsin are familiar with is the Hmong migration after the Vietnam War. Immigrants are our country's entrepreneurs, healthcare workers, farmers, small business owners, veterans, community leaders and so much more. We truly would not be the United States of America without them.



My mother's parents each came here in the early 20th century from Poland. My grandfather arrived in 1914 and returned to Europe as early as 1917 fighting for his new country in World War I. It was common for immigrants to defend the United States in wars.

What I recall from my own Polish relatives is that they lived in a neighborhood and associated with other Polish immigrants. There was even a Polish Club for dances and events. This is still typical for many large cities with culturally distinct neighborhoods.

The upcoming Independence Day holiday should be a reminder of the opportunity America promises to many. While we were taught to think romantically of immigrants arriving on ships with their first view of America being the Statue of Liberty, immigrants risk so much for a better future.

America is a nation of immigrants, all with their own story to share. During Immigrant Heritage Month, make a commitment to listen to these stories and learn from your neighbors. Let's reflect on where we come from and respect all immigrants as we would our own family.

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