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THE DIVERSITY NEXT DOOR

by Dr. Jim Leiker, associate professor of history, Diversity Fellow



This past April, while helping lead a tour of the Flint Hills for JCCC international students, hearing them contrast the tallgrass prairies with the manicured lawns of suburban Kansas City reminded me again of the surprising diversity within the sunflower state. I say “surprising” because for most hurried travelers on I-70 or I-35, Kansas can be a flat, boring place, occupied by flat, boring people, through which to cross on the way toward something more exciting. Yet a brief excursion off those highways, combined with some historical knowledge and a little imagination, will uncover real gems.

Take, for example, Southwest Kansas where over the past 30 years the meatpacking industry has created jobs for thousands of immigrants from Central America and Southeast Asia. Scores of Mexican, Vietnamese and Laotian restaurants fill the towns of Garden City, Liberal and Dodge City. Families of Mexican Mennonites, descendants of German-Russians who settled in Mexico more than a century ago and who today speak German and Spanish, fill the aisles at Wal-Mart. That corporate giant, with row upon row of ethnic foods catering to multiple groups, is one of many institutions learning to adjust to the demographic changes. Anthropologists and ESL instructors in the K-12 districts and

community colleges work in tandem with city administrators to ease the transition, both for newcomers and long-time locals who see their communities changing before their eyes.

Kansas has long prided itself on being “the free state,” a reputation gained during the struggle to prevent slavery’s westward expansion in the 1850s. Yet as Dr. Carmaletta Williams often says, “Free did not mean welcome.” The state government often tinkered with various ways to exclude African-Americans, even allowing school segregation in second-class cities, and racial violence was not unheard of. But African-Americans came anyway, founding dozens of rural settlements like Nicodemus, or forming communities parallel to whites in places like Wichita and Topeka. Descendants of those first black settlers in the state capitol launched the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, that helped spark the modern civil rights movement.

Outside of urban Wichita and Kansas City, the largest concentrations of blacks lay near the state’s federal military bases, Fort Leavenworth and Fort Riley. In 1975 writer Calvin Trillin, then a restaurant critic, described his great delight with Junction City’s Satellite Cafe, run by a retired black mess sergeant and serving black soldiers and their families. Unhappy with what he called the bland cuisine of most Kansas restaurants, Trillin was impressed with the cafe’s



“soul food specials” of pigs’ feet, black-eyed peas and cornbread. The full diversity of the place escaped him, however, until he entered the kitchen and discovered that these meals were not prepared by African-Americans at all but by a Japanese woman whom all the locals knew as “Judy-san.” After World War II, black and white servicemen returning from the Pacific theatre with Japanese wives were stationed at Fort Riley, earning the base a reputation as a safe spot for biracial families. Vietnamese and Thais joined this population in the 1970s, followed by Latinos from Central America a decade later. As of 2009, Junction City’s schools, churches, businesses and cultural celebrations often conduct their affairs in multiple languages.

At first glance, the story of Native Americans in Kansas seems the saddest of all, given their eviction and virtual extermination in the late 1800s. Yet census figures reveal some interesting trends. In 1940 the Census Bureau listed the number of Indians in Kansas as less than 1,200. That number doubled by 1950; doubled again by 1960; and in 1990 stood at more than 20,000. Next year’s estimate promises to be even higher. Less a sign of biological fertility, the numbers indicate a dramatic change in consciousness, as people who were once eager to hide native ancestry now proudly proclaim it. In so doing, they challenge scholars, government agencies and all who work with diversity to reconsider their usual classifications. What exactly is a Native Ameri-

can? Who are Latinos? What does it mean to be African-American?

We should especially ask that question of the most dominant group of all. Yes, both historically and at present, “whites” comprise about 90 percent of the state population. But who precisely is “white?” Eastern Europeans in Strawberry Hill; Italian miners and socialists in Southeast Kansas; Mennonites, Amish, Lutherans, Catholics from the entire German diaspora – with such an array of languages, churches, and lifestyles, to lump them all under one category opposes the goal of appreciating true diversity.

I believe the pundits who say we now live in a global community. As diversity facilitators, we have a responsibility to provide students an international education where they can live and work outside their usual comfort zones. But sometimes in directing their attention globally, we miss what advocates of sustainability say about living and working locally. Yes, diversity is on the other side of the world, but it is also here, within a day’s drive, within an hour lunch break, most especially in our classrooms and maybe even at our dining table. As with most important things, diversity lives right next door.

