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Immigrant Nebraska – Because we forget, we must tell the story all over again: Blog Post

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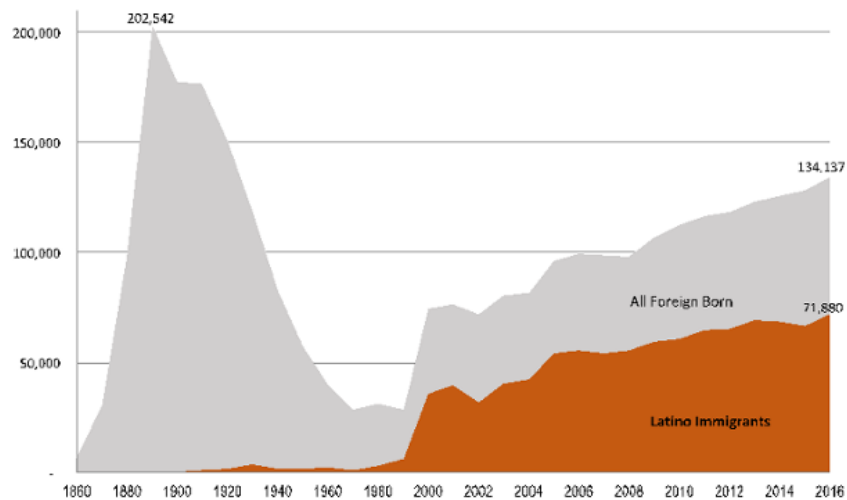
It may strike us as a cliché, but it bears repeating that Nebraska is a state of immigrants, and development for the past 155 years would have been impossible without their presence. Government and railroad agents recruited them in droves to settle a territory which, as we all know, but often choose to forget, had already been settled. Several thousand Native Americans first inhabited what became the Kansas-Nebraska territory in 1858. Most of these Indian lands were soon, and violently, turned into public and private lands available, for free or at little cost, to the newcomers. Despite the dire conditions of this pioneering era, easy access to land and railroad-driven jobs were a lifeline to these

overwhelmingly European immigrants hoping to make a go of it in Nebraska.

Early arrivals to the United States, and by extension to Nebraska, also enjoyed the benefits and opportunities of an era of open borders. Up to the mid-1920s, only about two percent of all immigrants arriving at Ellis Island were denied admission, mostly those considered too ill or too poor to be employable ([Bayor 2014](#)). Citizenship rights and naturalization were within reach of most arriving immigrants. The Homestead Act, for example, specified that homesteaders had to either be citizens of the United States or simply declare their intention to become citizens to qualify for free or subsidized land ([Bloemraad 2006](#)). Many of these intending citizens were also given voting rights ([Motomura 2007](#)). Until 1906 legal power was in the hands of state and local judges with ample discretion to adjudicate citizenship petitions. Proof of residence was minimal, waived or even forged by private or political patrons who provided false testimonies and paid required application fees ([Bloemraad 2006](#)).

Lest we forget, these decisions were laden with racial biases and White immigrants disproportionately benefited from them. With rare exceptions, for example, Mexicans and African Americans were effectively excluded or forbidden from accessing land and credit in Nebraska. Asians were barred altogether. And because we forget, it is necessary to once again debunk myths that suggested these earlier immigrants played strictly by the rules and worked harder than more recent arrivals. The truth is they were neither better nor worse. What made the difference was the rather fortuitous historical moment of their arrival and the opportunities they encountered for permanent settlement.

Immigrant Nebraska, 1860-2016



Source: OLLAS calculations based on IPUMS and American Community Survey 1860-2016.

As the graph above shows, by 1870, Nebraska's immigrant population was at its peak, and 25% of the state's residents were born in a foreign country. Danes, Swedes, Irish, Germans, and Czechs figured prominently among the earliest newcomers. Thirty years later, arrivals hailed primarily from southern and eastern Europe, along with smaller streams arriving from Mexico and Japan. According to the U.S. Senate's [Dillingham Commission](#) (1907), more than 80% of meatpacking workers were first- or second-generation immigrants. African-Americans leaving the segregationist South joined soon after.

Immigration in the U.S. and Nebraska grew at a steady pace until the 1920s when the welcoming mat was pulled out from under this second wave of immigrants. In 1924, the Johnson Reed Act established onerous quotas limiting the entry of those "provisionally White" Europeans coming from countries suspected of sending "their riffraff." Historian [Julie Greene](#) argues that the quota laws were inspired by eugenics and anti-Semitism, and were meant largely "to keep Jews and Italians out." Economic instability, rising unemployment, heightened racial tensions, and the nationalist hysteria erupting over immigrant-led strikes fueled xenophobia, illegal

deportations and restrictionist legislation, pursued by [Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer](#). The number of immigrants in Nebraska began a steep descent while anti-immigrant sentiments ascended in lockstep.

The state had already joined others in barring Asians from owning land in the late 1800s. By 1919, Nebraska had also joined the growing hysteria over foreigners threatening our security and our Americanness. One target was the use of foreign languages in newspapers, schools and open meetings. Some local organizations took it upon themselves to surveil and harass these multi-lingual spaces, and Nebraska became the first state to pass a constitutional amendment declaring English its official language in 1920. Thousands of newcomers and first-generation immigrants were affected. [Research shows that](#), except for the higher-educated, first-generation-immigrants learn English slowly, if at all, and rely heavily on their native languages in their assimilation processes.

By the 1930s, the depression generated a new panic and Mexicans recruited to replenish an immigrant labor force were subject to “repatriation campaigns.” As stated in an [OLLAS Report](#), by some estimates, Nebraska deported about half of all Mexican immigrants in the state. As in the 1920s, U.S.-born individuals were swept up in those raids, except this time they were Mexican rather than Italian, Russian or Polish. Relief agencies denied them services and pressured them to depart ([Fox 2012](#)). Some labor unions, rallying around the prescient banner of “Hire Americans” turned against them. Housing discrimination and segregation, as the quote below shows, was not that uncommon in towns where Mexican-origin families settled.

City Ordinance. Minatare, NE,
November 19, 1941

“It shall be unlawful for any person or persons of Mexican blood or race to purchase, lease or occupy real estate lying north of Niagara Street in said city and east of the public road on the east section line of Section 7, of Township 21, Range 53”

Source: [Lyons-Barrett, 2004](#)

Mexicans have been lured and sent back ever-since. In the early 1990s, Mexicans, along with Central Americans and Africans, were actively recruited to save Nebraska’s meatpacking industry, state budgets and rural towns devastated by the farm crisis ([Gouveia and Saenz 2000](#)). Hate crimes, anti-immigrant incidents, and the number and public expressions of hate groups rose in the following five years as the Sothern Poverty Law Center described in its [Intelligence Report](#). A 2006 Nebraska Rural Poll revealed that fifty percent of rural residents did not view immigration from Latin America as a good thing—re-confirming a historical pattern of ambivalence toward certain immigrants. That same year, the state experienced a surge of meatpacking raids and of legislative activity aimed at restricting immigrant rights ([Gouveia 2006](#)).

The twin-tale of Immigrant-Nebraska, one that simultaneously welcomes and resents immigrants, mirrors the complicated relationship this country has had with its foreign-born and minority populations from the time of its founding—or since the British colonizers and their descendants managed to elevate Whiteness, English and Protestant to the status of “true” markers of Americanness.

Today, most Nebraskans have come to realize that the sky has not fallen with renewed immigration; but it may fall if it fails to support immigrants’ productive incorporation. Towns like Fremont, which passed a costly anti-immigrant ordinance are the exception. Yet, the national immigration policy climate has turned eerily similar to that of 1920s and 1930s and is threatening our social fabric as several news outlet have mentioned (See [The Atlantic](#) and [Digital Journal](#) for examples). Today, that climate appears turbocharged by a post-9/11 culture of surveillance, retrofitting of civil immigration law into criminal law, specter of arbitrary enforcement actions, and nativist and White Nationalists’ rants spreading through Alt-Right websites, Fox News and the like ([the national media](#) also played a key role in fueling the eugenics-laden xenophobia of the 1920s). Every Muslim working father must be guilty of something and deported, even if he has no criminal record and his children only know this country as their own. Every Mexican single mother who brought her young child across the border without passing inspection must by definition be a bad mother and guilty of whatever is trolling that day in social media. Every Guatemalan DACA child is surely deserving of the cumulative trauma and loss of aspirations brought by the impending barriers of his or her precarious legal status. Every one of their countries of origin must be summarily stripped of their history and reduced to 148-character-epithets—ergo, every Salvadoran must be an MS-13 gang member, just as Russian or Italian immigrants in New York was at one time considered a violent anarchist.

Immigrants are no longer being viewed as “Americans in waiting,” as had been the case for nearly 150 years ([Motomura 2014](#)). Citizenship today is a rationed and increasingly scarce public good. Those intending to become citizens have no line to get behind. DACAS and others with precarious legal statuses are increasingly subjected to prolonged periods of fear and whimsical decisions by the executive power. Such “legal violence” ([Menjívar and Abrego 2012](#)) has consequences well beyond immigrant families. Entire economies are disrupted when working families lose wages and communities lose consumers, taxes and young talent. Multiple generations experience downward mobility, arresting development, and immigrant integration. By stopping most immigration, the 1924 quota laws virtually sealed Nebraska’s fate as a population-starved state. Before this latest wave of DACA students and their parents entered Nebraska, a mere 2% of the state’s population was foreign-born.

Immigration policy in this era of global inequality and massive refugee movements is particularly hard work. It requires enlightened, non-partisan, multi-lateral and constant calibration in order to avoid irreparable harm to migrants and non-migrants alike. Let’s hope the nation has the courage to revisit the good, the bad and the ugly chapters of its entire immigration history. For the nation,

it's a matter of preserving democracy and saving its very soul. For states like Nebraska, it is a matter of survival.

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