

Introduction

By Roland Clark

The five articles collected in this issue reflect the strong interest of students at Eastern Connecticut State University in the social history of modern New England, particularly as it relates to immigration and war. The university is home to a robust Center for Connecticut Studies, which boasts a significant collection of sources on local history, supplementing other regional collections held at the State Library and the Connecticut Historical Society. The students whose work is published here have uncovered fascinating microhistories in these and other collections that shed light on questions of broader historical interest to historians of the United States. How did experiences of immigration shape how specific ethnic groups fought, played, and did business over the last two centuries? How has the relationship between public policy, private initiative, and popular stereotypes created and divided imagined communities? Why did diverse groups of people come to identify themselves as Americans, embracing restrictive and often domineering discourses imposed by politicians and business leaders, instead of a myriad of other available identities? Furthermore, what were the limits of identification, and when did Americans resist attempts to dictate how they should think, feel, and behave? The authors answer these questions by telling the stories of a diverse range of historical actors, some of them prominent politicians but most of whom were relatively unknown figures that have been rescued from the “nameless masses” of history for the first time. In addition to noting the importance of economic motives, geographical factors, and personal histories, the authors point to the importance of discourses about national identity, loyalty, leisure, and success as predictors of individual behavior. They note how these discourses were constructed and popularized, how they changed over time, and why they eventually lost their appeal.

In doing so, the articles enrich our understanding of how the past has gradually become the present and why people behave the way they do.

In “The Harp, the Stars, and the Dollar,” an article she wrote under the supervision of Barbara Tucker while working on her Honors thesis in History, Bethany Niebanck asks why Irish immigrants enlisted the fight in the Union armies during the American Civil war. She situates their decisions to fight within a broader story of migration, arguing that the economic difficulties that had driven them out of Ireland also determined where in the United States they settled and, by extension, which side they fought on during the war. Niebanck juxtaposes group loyalties and feelings of duty or a desire to demonstrate the value of Catholics to American society with economic hardship and the very practical need to put food on the table. No one answer can explain Irish American motivation, and Niebanck suggests that it was a confluence of factors that persuaded them to enlist and fight in the war.

Irish immigrants arrived in North America mid-century en masse, fleeing disease and starvation in the wake of the Irish Potato Famine. Coming in large numbers and from a relatively homogeneous island, Niebanck assumes that it was unproblematic for these immigrants to identify as a group. Group identification was no so straight-forward for Italian Americans, as Joe Garzone explains in “Hartford Paesani.” The Italian peninsula remained divided by regional differences long after the establishment of the Italian nation-state during the 1860s. The cultural, linguistic, and economic variations that hindered the Risorgimento also meant that immigrants coming from northern Italy brought very different resources, life experiences, and expectations with them when they arrived in the United States in comparison with immigrants from southern Italy. Examining the life histories of Italian migrants who settled in Hartford, Connecticut, Garzone shows how the experience of settling in a small but fast-growing city brought them together and created a self-consciously Italian American identity. The individuals Garzone focuses on thrived not only as

immigrants, but also as Americans, rising to positions of leadership within the city's business and political life.

Assimilation into American culture did not always flow from economic and political success, and Margaret Kurnyk's article "Bases of Integration" explores the role baseball played in helping immigrants in Willimantic, Connecticut, create American identities. Willimantic was a burgeoning industrial town during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and attracted large numbers of immigrants in the early twentieth century, especially from Eastern Europe. Kurnyk shows that the American Thread Company – the largest business in town – established baseball teams for its workers in 1910 as a way to control their leisure time and to foster loyalty to the company and the town. These teams were highly successful, but immigrants were not content to allow the company to determine how they played the game, and they also organized their own teams along ethnic lines. "My father played baseball in Willimantic for most of his early life," Kurnyk writes, quoting her father as saying that "baseball and football were ways for me to be American. At home I was Ukrainian, but playing sports was a way for me to be like the other kids – to be American." Her father's memories constitute the main thesis of Kurnyk's article, and she supports his claim by drawing heavily on local newspapers and archives to demonstrate that this was far from an isolated phenomenon.

Garzone and Kurnyk both wrote their articles within a senior seminar taught by Ania Kirchmann in Fall 2014, while Jared Leitzel researched "Advertising the Great War" in Barbara Tucker's senior seminar on "New England and the Great War" during Spring 2015. Leitzel situates the work of the Creel Committee – tasked with encouraging Americans to support their country's contribution to the First World War – within a longer history of advertising in America. He shows that the government responded to changes taking place within the industry and convinced advertisers to incorporate patriotic messages into commercial advertising. Through a close analysis

of newspaper advertising in New England, Leitzel shows that advertisers responded enthusiastically, and that “patriotic motives” were often presented as the primary incentive to buy mundane goods such as milk protein powder or chewing gum. Leitzel demonstrates that how New Englanders responded to the war cannot be separated from other stories, such as that of how the advertising industry abandoned “yellow journalism” and introduced the “Truth in Advertising” campaign during the early twentieth century.

Finally, Christopher Morris’ analysis of Senator Joseph McCarthy’s speech at the Palmer House Hotel in Chicago on October 27, 1952 brings American politics into the Cold War era and reminds us of the power of the spoken word to influence how people think and feel. In “Got a Donkey in the Crosshairs,” Morris focuses on the rhetoric of one speech to demonstrate that McCarthy’s anti-Communist campaign was not only an attack on film stars and prominent left-wing personalities. Situating this speech within that year’s presidential campaign, Morris shows that McCarthy also used his anti-Communist rhetoric as a way to discredit figures associated with the Democratic Party and to secure the presidency for the Republicans. Morris wrote this article within Ania Kirchmann’s “Historical Research and Writing” course, which required students to build an argument around a single historical source. By contextualizing McCarthy’s speech so successfully, Morris has done much more than just show that anti-Communist politics of the era was vindictive and unjust. He has located it within a world of bitter partisan politics that used the Cold War to fight local battles rather than directing local energies for the national good. As with all the articles in this volume, Morris’ work speaks volumes about the ability of this generation of historians to shed new light on old problems and to find patterns in the ever-more complex web of modern American history.

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