Immigrant Communities A Look At 4 Ethnic Groups Essay, Research Paper

Immigrant Communities: A Look at Four Ethnic Groups

Immigrants arriving in the United States were often already

set up with a support system in the New World. Most people

either had relatives or friends already living there or they were

traveling with someone who did. According to the class lecture1,

people often lived close to other immigrants of their shared

backgrounds. In this way, immigrant neighborhoods were started

in many large cities such as Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago.

Each immigrant community was different from each other, since the

countries that people came from were so culturally diverse. Due

to these differences and a language barrier, immigrants tended to

stay with their own people and communities.

In order to better understand the similarities and

differences between these communities, it is necessary to take a

closer look at a few of them. One significant immigrant group

during the 1800 s is the Irish. The majority of immigrants

coming from Ireland were trying to escape the potato famine.

These people set up a large community in the Boston area, which

is still today known as having a large population of people from

Irish background. The people who immigrated to the United States

often came by themselves, since there was not enough money to

send a whole family. Most people were not among the most

extremely poor peasants, since they had a way to pay for their

passage. Women came as often as men, and their first goal was to

find work in order to support themselves and send money home to

Ireland.

The Irish had a great advantage over most other immigrant

groups because they spoke English and immigrated at a time when

there were a large number of jobs in the United States. Women

took jobs as household servants and maids, and they often lived

at the residence they worked at. In these jobs they had no

expenses and were able to send the majority of their earnings

home to their struggling families. Some Irish women also took

jobs as factory workers. Men tended to work as manual laborers,

in jobs such as construction work, railroad builders, and canal

workers. Some Irish men also found jobs as firemen, policemen,

dockworkers, and cobblers. Irish men often joined unions and

became involved in politics through these groups.

These immigrants set up their homes in tenement houses and

formed large communities in Boston and Chicago. Families were

not as common, since women were working to support families in

Ireland and often married later in life. Men who were married

were sometimes in very mobile occupations which required them to

leave their families for months at a time. Religion and the

church was a very important part of life for Irish immigrants.

Most Irish were Catholic, although some were of the Protestant

faith. However, the Irish also found time for fun, and taverns

were a common fixture in most communities.

Another large immigrant group was the Germans. People of

this ethnic background came to America in search of jobs and

land, both of which were hard to come by in their native land.

Germans usually brought their families with them to the new

country, and took jobs as farmers, service or factory workers and

skilled artisans. Single men were often boarders with German

families, who took people into their homes as a source of income.

Unlike the Irish, the German women worked at home and sent the

children out to work as household servants. They were also able

to save some of their income, since they did not have to send it

home to needy families. Germans also did not move around very

much, but settled in communities with other German families in

areas such as Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Louis. The German

immigrants formed neighborhoods and close ties so that they were

able to take care of each other. They began the first type of

life insurance with Mutual Aid Societies, which were paid into

every month so that if something happened to the head of the

household the family would be taken care of.

German communities were similar yet different from the Irish

in many ways. Aside from the idea of taking care of their

neighbors, Germans were also not as active in the church.

Although they often attended on Sundays, religion was not as

important to their daily lives. Like the Irish, Germans were

also involved in politics and unions, however they were not as

driven for political freedom as the Irish immigrants who were

accustomed to being under British rule. Known for their love of

beer, taverns were also very common in German neighborhoods, and

breweries were usually found in large communities.

Another immigrant group that formed large communities in the

United States were Italians. In this group, usually the men came

over first and found jobs, and then later sent for their wives or

families. A large number of Italians also immigrated back to

their home country. They came to America for a few years to find

work, and then went back to Italy to join their families.

Italian women rarely came to the U.S. alone, but for the most

part came to meet their husbands or the men that they were

arranged to marry. In these cases, women traveled in a group

with other Italian women from their town or area and were

escorted by a man.

Italians worked a variety of jobs upon coming to America.

Some men set up wine businesses in California, and others worked

as factory and textile workers in New England, miners in

Illinois, and cigar makers in various parts of the country.

Since most men were without their families, they were able to

migrate and move around in order to find work. Like the Germans,

Italian women stayed at home, and they earned an income by doing

piecework from factories or mending clothing. They took care of

the children, who were often sent out to work at a very early

age.

The large Italian communities developed in areas such as

Chicago and New York. In Chicago, a well known Italian

neighborhood was located around Hull House, which helped

immigrant women adapt to their new lives. Italians in New York

lived in more spread out communities, most in Manhattan,

Brooklyn, and the Bronx. An interesting thing to note about

Italian immigrants is that they usually set up their homes very

geographically similar to those they had in their home country.

For example, the people that a family lived by in Italy were also

most often their neighbors in America. Although this was not

always true, in most cases people formed communities with the

same people they had known before they immigrated.

Italians were also much more family oriented than German or

Irish immigrants. Families and neighborhoods were very

close-knit, and everyone tried to help out everyone else as much

as possible. The majority of Italian immigrants were Catholic,

and they took their religion and beliefs very seriously. The

church was often the backbone of the neighborhood, and it brought

everyone together and got them involved. Men were sometimes

involved in local unions and politics, but it was not as

important to them as Irish or German men. Taverns were usually

located in Italian neighborhoods, but for the most part Italian

communities were characterized by a strong sense of togetherness

and family.

The last group that will be examined are the Jewish

immigrants from various countries. Like the Irish who were

forced out of their country by the famine and the British

government, the Jews were also exiled from their homelands, but

their cause for fleeing was religious persecution. Jewish

immigrants came from many different backgrounds, but their

religion basically gave them a culture all their own. They spoke

their own language, Yiddish or Hebrew, and followed their own set

of traditions and values. In many cases of immigrants, they were

being oppressed by the government under which they lived, however

they were not allowed to leave. So many had to escape their

countries in order to come to America.

Similar to the Italians, Jewish men usually immigrated first

and then found a way to help their families escape to the freedom

of America. They became well known in the clothing industry, and

a great number of Jewish immigrants worked in tailoring and as

merchants and factory hands. Since in Jewish families, it is a

goal for the man to study their religion as a Rabbi and be

supported by his family, women were used to working outside the

home and adjusted well to factory and tailoring work. Jews were

also highly literate and educated, and most strived to better

themselves and better their family standing.

Jewish immigrants lived in urban settings, and a large

Jewish community was established in New York. These families

lived in the tenement houses and often took boarders into their

small apartments in order to bring in more income. These

boarders were usually single Jewish men who were newly immigrated

to the United States. The Jewish immigrants lived close to each

other for a few reasons. For one, although they may have been

from different countries, they had a shared past and common

origins. Also, it was a way of protecting themselves from

outside persecution.

The similarities between the four groups seem to be quite

obvious, yet immigrant groups can be different even in the things

they have in common. Although both Irish and Jewish immigrants

worked in factories, the Jewish were more involved in the

clothing and textile industry. Women from Italian and German

backgrounds stayed at home and took care of their families, but

Italian women were much more devoutly religious than the Germans.

Irish and German immigrants were more involved in politics and

unions than Italians or Jews, and were more likely to frequent

taverns and public houses. The main difference between all of

these immigrant groups is the location of their communities.

Some groups live in the same city, but their neighborhoods were

separate from each other. Immigrants came from different

countries and cultures and built their own communities in their

own ways.