

Thoughts on Immigration

President's Message

July 1 begins a new year for our chapter so this will be the last newsletter for this cycle. Our new cycle always starts July 1—we use the summer to plan the next year's meetings and to make changes or updates that seem necessary. April is a busy month for us. It begins with the annual conference of AAUW NC in Chapel Hill, followed by our April 16 chapter meeting (description in a separate article) with a potluck lunch at Carol Woods, and finally our Literary Tea on April 28. I have been reading one of our speaker's books, *Mexican Enough: My Life Between the Borderlines*. A third generation Mexican-American on her mother's side, Stephanie Elizondo Griest did not learn Spanish until she was thirty. Her mother was punished for speaking Spanish in school. Brought up in an English speaking household, Stephanie could not really converse in Spanish. This book chronicles her emersion into her mother's language and culture colorfully and humorously. Episodic in nature, it is easy to pick up and read as life permits.

Immigration has been a hot topic for a long time and this election year is no exception. Most of us do not have far to look before we too can identify an immigrant in our forebears. For me it was my mother, for my husband, one set of grandparents (who arrived from different countries but shared a language). Our nation is indeed a melting pot but those who have settled here and "melted in" seem to have short memories. We ignore that most people do not leave their native land for adventure. War, poverty, hunger, gang violence and parents' desire for their children to have a life without these scourges lead many people to leave the land and people they love. Immigrants also often leave their status and their professions behind. For example, a doctor arriving in the U.S. might find work in the medical field after training and a licensing process, but not as a medical doctor. If such a path is beyond their linguistic capability or financial means, lower paying jobs are the only hope for immigrants. Language barriers, cultural differences, illiteracy and lack of documentation compound the problem of finding work, assimilation and feeling safe.

Historically, our immigration laws have had a bias toward western Europeans. In 1790, Congress adopted rules that permitted only free white people the right to apply for citizenship after two years of residency. Eight years later, provisions were made to expulse "dangerous" aliens. Many states with huge immigrant influxes passed their own laws but after the Civil War, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that immigration was a responsibility of the Federal Government. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act suspended Chinese immigration for 10 years and barred Chinese in the U.S. from citizenship. In 1885, the Contract Labor Law made it unlawful to import unskilled aliens from overseas as laborers but the regulations did not pertain to aliens crossing land borders. Six years later, the Bureau of Immigration was established along with quotas for immigrants arriving from countries and health inspection of immigrants.

Women traveling alone had to be met by a man or they faced immediate deportation. In 1903, anarchists, epileptics, polygamists, and beggars were barred from entry in the U.S. The Ellis Island of the West, Angel Island, was established to control the flow of the Chinese into the country who were officially unwelcome. In 1907, the U.S. agreed to eliminate the segregation of Japanese students in the San Francisco schools in return for Japan's assurance to limit Japanese emigrants. The 1917 Immigration Act provided for literacy test for anyone over 16 and established an "Asiatic Barred Zone," which barred all immigrants from Asia. 1924 marked the beginning of quotas—82% of all immigrants allowed in the country came from western and northern Europe, 16% from southern and eastern Europe, 2% from the rest of the world. No distinctions were made between refugees and immigrants which limited Jewish emigres during the 1930's and 1940's. The War Brides Act (1945) allowed my mother, along with many other European spouses, to come to the U.S. But Filipinos and Asian Indian spouses had to wait until 1946 to enter the U.S. Japanese and Korean spouses were denied entry until 1947. In 1965, the Hart-Cellar Act abolished national origins quotas and established ceilings for the eastern and western hemispheres. Entry preference was based on family ties, critical skills, artistic excellence and refugee status. Since then, refugees have been removed as a preference category, and in 1990, unskilled workers were limited to 10,000 a year. The 2001 U.S.A. Patriot Act specifically denies entry to aliens tied to subversive or terrorist groups.

In 2013, alien groups entering the country were as follows: Asians (400,548), followed closely by people from the Americas (396,605), Africa (98,304), and Europe (85,556). These numbers do not include undocumented aliens. This very limited history shows clearly that our policies toward immigration have always been fraught with prejudice and fear. My personal hope is an immigration policy that springs from an appreciation of all people and cultures, and the knowledge that our country is enriched by their contributions no matter their wealth or station. As the Dalai Lama has said, "*Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries. Without them humanity cannot survive.*" (My sources include: *Flow of History*, Southeast Vermont Community Learning Cooperative, U.S. Dept. of Homeland Security (History Section), Office of Immigration Statistics). --Bea Keller