

Becoming American: Immigration and Assimilation in Late 19th Century America

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Part 3: How did immigrants create stable lives in the midst of this economic transformation?

In the early 20th century, the average American family still cobbled together a livelihood from some basic sources -- the woman's unpaid household labor, the father's wages, plus the children's and mother's income, loans in cash and kind, occasional charity, mutual benefits from parish and fraternal self-help, and, in a tiny minority of cases, union benefits. The day-to-day experience of immigrants turned not on steady wages but on insecurity of employment. Robert Hunter, an early 20th-century student of working-class life, conservatively estimated that 20 percent of the northern industrial population lived in dire want. Or take the findings of another revealing study of urban life, Margaret Byington's extraordinary book on Homestead, part of the famous Pittsburgh Survey: Slavic immigrant laborers, she showed, could live only seven months of the year on the husband's earnings; households required the labor of wives and children to survive the other five months. Compounding the uncertainty were the appalling frequency of industrial accidents that deprived families of income: A pioneer scholar of workplace safety, Crystal Eastman, discovered in 1910, for another instance, that 15 percent of the Slavic immigrants in Midwestern steel plants were seriously injured each year. Along with injury came seasonal and cyclical unemployment, which, in Massachusetts, the case we know best, struck one in five immigrant workers for at least 60 days each year, year in and year out.

Inadequate income and the absence of state support drove working people back upon the family economy. From French-Canadians in Manchester, New Hampshire, to Italians in Chicago, from Italians in Buffalo to Poles in Pittsburgh, everyone relied on different combinations of income at different stages of their life cycles. And it should come as no surprise that at the very bedrock of the family economy was not wage income at all but women's unpaid household labor, most of it still performed without the benefit of the new household technology. As household budget studies make clear, a high proportion of working-class income went for the basic necessities of food, shelter, fuel, and clothing, with only a fifth left over for everything else. Where were such families to find the money to buy gas stoves, or washing machines?

Nor was the family economy complete without the labor of children, whose wages added about a tenth to the working-class family's income. Children as young as the age of ten were expected to help out wherever possible, and were virtually required to work when the father was incapacitated by injury or illness. In tenement industries, food processing, textiles, and wherever a young helper could be attached to an adult, the tangible income from a young son or daughter outweighed the small returns to an elementary education. As Edith Abbott and Sophonisba Breckinridge concluded their ground-breaking 1915 study of Chicago's public education, "[i]t is because people are poor that they are tempted to take their children out of school and to put them to work while they are very young.... So long as vast numbers of people find it so difficult... to provide adequate food and clothing for children for whom the state is providing education, just so long will many children find it impossible to attend school regularly."

This pervasive insecurity left a deep imprint. One response was a powerful drive toward property ownership, a search for security that made the foreign-born more likely than natives to own their own homes. These holdings always remained tiny, but the fact that workers bought houses and formed an immense pride in their neighborhoods told just how high a premium they put on getting a foothold in the city. Indeed, a new ideal was in gestation: in place of the drive to

accumulate wealth, immigrants pursued security. Bit by bit, in the search for secure incomes, for steady jobs, for stable neighborhoods, and for good health, the immigrant working class built up a new ideal of stability that would be enshrined by the New Deal in the Social Security system, the cornerstone of the welfare state.

Samplings of contemporary testimony on this theme follows, from the works of investigators mentioned above: From Robert Hunter, a one-time settlement-house resident in Chicago and New York, a Socialist campaigner, and, in later life, a designer of the golf course at Pebble Beach, an introductory section to his relentless exposé of American poverty, published in 1904; from Margaret Byington, one of the pioneers of American philanthropy, a selection from her deeply informed account of Pittsburgh's immigrant households, which appeared in 1910; from Crystal Eastman, an undeservedly forgotten legal reformer and peace crusader, a segment of her searing, sobering study of industrial work accidents, which she published in 1910; from Edith Abbott and Sophonisba Breckinridge -- Abbott we have met before; Breckinridge was one of Jane Addams's closest collaborators at Hull House, the first female graduate of the University of Chicago Law School, and the first woman to earn promotion and tenure at the University of Chicago -- an unblinking account of children's labor and education in immigrant Chicago, which they offered in 1916; and again from Sophonisba Breckinridge, a snapshot of immigrants' relentless drive toward property ownership, from her study of immigrant homes published in 1921.

Document 7: Unemployment in the early twentieth century: Robert Hunter, *Poverty* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1904), pp. 28-30.

Document 8: Immigrant households in a steel city: Margaret F. Byington, *Homestead: The Households of a Mill Town* (New York: Charities Publication Committee, 1910), pp. 138-142.

Document 9: Immigrants in dangerous working conditions: Crystal Eastman, *Work-accidents and the Law* (New York, Survey Associates, 1910), pp. 135-140.

Document 10: Immigrant children at work and school: Edith Abbott and Sophonisba P. Breckinridge, *Truancy and Non-attendance in the Chicago Schools* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1917), pp. 269-279.

Document 11: The drive to acquire property: Sophonisba P. Breckinridge, *New Homes for Old* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1921), pp. 105-108.