



**Nearly Two Centuries of Community:  
Immigrants Have Always Contributed to Regional Progress**  
By Joy Brown

Notices posted throughout Findlay, Ohio, minced no words.

“TAKE WARNING, NO ITALIANS WANTED,” the signs stated. “Notice is hereby given to the Honorable Council of the Village of Findlay, and to all contractors and sub-contractors to take some action AT ONCE regarding Italian labor, as it must and shall be prohibited from working on the public works of this city. The American laborers and taxpayers in the city have become thoroughly aroused and advise you to be warned in time and save you further trouble.”

Signed “MANY CITIZENS,” the flyers, also displaying skulls and crossbones, appeared in June 1888.

Newspaper reports of this workforce-related tension dating back more than 120 years reveal that anti-immigrant sentiment, targeted toward people from certain countries and with certain complexions, is nothing new. As contemporary critics allege immigrants are taking jobs away from U.S.-born residents and committing more crimes, examining the past proves that, in this regard, history is repeating itself.

Today’s migrants to the region are like turn-of-the-century Italians in that they are also facing hostility and discrimination because of similar complaints. But, like their historical counterparts, they’re persisting, and many are thriving here. Making a living and keeping their families safer than they were in their home countries has been an alluring and attainable goal, in part because of international arrivals from long ago who paved the way.

Findlay in 1888 was at its oil and gas boom zenith, exponentially attracting more people than it had ever seen. Thriving industries provided jobs with incomes that launched families such as the Donnells of Ohio Oil Company (now Marathon Petroleum Corporation) fame; and the Vances who were successful farmers, merchants, and stock traders. Infrastructure was also needed to support the growing village, which is how Italians ended up being targeted on threatening flyers.

According to *Ethnic Roots: Immigrant and Racial Populations of Hancock County, Ohio 1830-1920*, written by Paulette J. Weiser and published in 1999, a *Findlay Daily Courier* story reported that 60 workers of Italian heritage “were working at the waterworks doing heavy labor in the hot sun for which they received \$1.25 a day. They lived in tents furnished by the contractor and provided their board, which cost 25 to 30 cents a day.” A total of 110 more Italians were camped west of town after one of the railroads promised them jobs and transported them to the city but didn’t follow through with providing work. Another 80 were camped at West Park, laboring for \$1.25 per day – 25 cents less than U.S.-born workers.

The newspaper reporter “was uncertain whether enough American laborers could be found to do their work. However, the report did not satisfy some elements in the community,” Weiser wrote.

The newspaper defended the Italians. It declared that the notice distributors “‘have laid themselves liable to prosecution and imprisonment’ and advised against mob action,” wrote Weiser. “The August 2<sup>nd</sup> issue of the *Findlay Daily Courier* carried out its journalistic duty by explaining the derogatory meaning” of a racist term for Italians. “It stated that none of the Italians in Findlay deserved the term and that it was incorrect and insulting.”

That same month, the *Daily Courier* reported that the firm of Sibly & Huss pledged to hire “only Americans” for \$1.50 a day. Details were lacking as to how the firm intended to determine potential employees’ nationalities, but during that era, even a last name like Huss didn’t guarantee protection against racist attacks.

## **A Prejudicial Past**

“New immigrants always face discrimination,” said Vibha Bhalla, Ph.D., an associate professor in Bowling Green State University’s Department of Ethnic Studies whose research focuses on immigration-related topics and policy. “In the 19th century, white immigrants were preferred. Groups we consider white today were not considered white in the 19th century. Immigrants fought to be considered white. Remember, according to the citizenship law established in the 1790s, only white men could become citizens. Immigrants to the U.S. fought to be considered white,” she pointed out.

“Immigration law since the 19th century evolved to bar Asian migrants from the U.S, and created a quota system in the 20th century, which revealed a marked preference for Western Europeans who were considered white,” Bhalla continued. “In the early decades of the 20th century, even southern Europeans were not considered white.” The laws never used the term ‘race’ or ‘white,’ she points out, but publications such as the book *America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States* by Erika Lee, Ph.D., an American history professor who is the granddaughter of Chinese immigrants; and research by David R. Roediger, Ph.D., an American studies and history professor, explain how even immigrants such as those from Germany have been targets for discrimination right along with Italians and other people of color.

“In Ohio, especially Northwest Ohio, during World War I, German immigrants were considered as loyal to Germany and the Kaiser and were required to report to police periodically,” Bhalla said.

### **Commercial and Cultural Contributors**

Regardless of anti-immigrant sentiment, international newcomers to Findlay and Hancock County have kept businesses in business; launched their own businesses; worked in key health and safety positions; infused their heritage into religious institutions, schools, and more; and helped each other survive and succeed. Although they’re not typically front and center in historical archives, records still abound if one researches thoroughly enough.

The first Germans to the region settled in Van Buren Township in Southwest Hancock County in the 1830s, where they built a grain mill, battled harsh winters, and were vulnerable to deadly diseases like cholera and typhus. Families such as the Gassmans, Schmidts, and Von Steins arrived.

Swiss citizens followed. Like the Germans, “They immigrated to seek a better life, coming to live initially with relatives already here,” *Ethnic Roots* states. “The families married, lost young children to disease, raised closely-knit families, worked hard, and lived out their lives in their adopted country, adding their toil, their culture, and their values to the ethnic and racial mix in Hancock County.”

A small number of Irish and Jewish migrants came here. Even fewer stayed. “While relatively large numbers of Italian natives were in Findlay in 1888 and 1911, they were by and large transient laborers on large public works and railroad construction projects. A small number of immigrant Italians stayed to live, work, and raise families in the county, becoming a part of the local fabric of life,” Weiser wrote.

The first-known individual of Asian descent to move to Findlay was Lee Hing from China, who opened a laundry on E. Main Cross St. in late October 1885.

In 1920, six women from Jamaica were serving as domestic servants in the South Main Street mansions of oil and gas barons while a 35-year-old male Montreal Robinson, also from Jamaica, worked in one of the most dangerous of occupations—as a refinery fireman.

Seasonal work was originally the impetus for Mexicans coming to the region but “in the late 1930s and the 1940s families began making the county their permanent home,” *Ethnic Roots* reported. “The reasons were economic. Permanent jobs were available at Cooper Tire Co., National Automotive Fibres, Hancock Brick and Tile Co., and National Lime and Stone which provided a steady income all year.”

As international newcomers do today, the region’s earlier immigrants also assisted each other by offering essentials such as food and housing. For instance, Julio de la Pena and wife Juanita, who

arrived in Findlay in the 1940s, provided boarding for fellow Mexican-born residents at their so-called 'La Casa Grande' at 1601 Morrival Boulevard.

## **The Statistical Landscape**

*Ethnic Roots* details how people from the Germanic states of Northern Europe comprised the largest immigrant group to Hancock County in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. "Their presence had a significant impact on religious, political, social, and cultural life in the county, particularly in Findlay," wrote Weiser. The book mentions that the German immigrant population reached a high of 69.9% of the total population in 1870. "Native Germans made up about two-thirds of the immigrant population in the county for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and nearly 60% in 1900 and 1910" Weiser pointed out. "The lower figure in 1920 reflects more diversity in immigration and a shift to more persons from eastern Europe and Scandinavia."

These local numbers reflected a midwestern trend. According to the Pew Research Center, "the first wave of immigrants to the U.S. began in the 1840s and lasted until 1889." More than 14 million arrived here during that time, "most of them coming from Northern or Western Europe; Germany, Ireland and the United Kingdom alone accounted for 70% of the new arrivals," the center notes.

The next immigrant wave happened between 1890 and 1919 when more than 18 million arrived. "By then, over 60% came from Eastern and Southern Europe, with large numbers arriving from Italy, Austria-Hungary, Russia and Poland," the center continues.

More than a century ago, work was still one of the main reasons that immigrants moved to other nations, said Bhalla. "Ohio in the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was primarily—and remains—an agriculture-based economy and immigrants aided in this economic growth," she explained.

As the earliest settlers, Germans converted much of the Black Swamp to farmland. Many from Ireland were construction workers who built valuable infrastructure such as canals and roads. Industrial jobs in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century drew immigrants from around the world.

Swiss immigrants were second to Hancock County Germans when it came to population numbers of the late 1800s. Irish immigrants ranged from 17.5% in 1850 to 4% in 1920 of the county's residents who were from other countries, Weiser wrote.

In 1920, Immigrants from Italy and Russia became the largest groups in a growing number of states. Latin American immigrants dominated the numbers from 1965 to 2007, a quarter of which were from Mexico.

In more recent years, migrant farm workers, many coming from Mexico, have also contributed significantly to the population.

“The Hispanic families of the county are relative newcomers when looking at the history of migration to the area back in the 1820s and 1830s. However, many families have been here 50 to 60 years, contributing both their hard work and their culture for several generations to the patchwork of life in Hancock County,” explained Weiser.

Although consequential, jobs aren’t usually the sole reason people migrate. Political, socioeconomic, and environmental factors often account for immigration increases, too. For instance, World Wars I and II, the Irish Potato Famine, the Great Recession, the Covid-19 pandemic, and upticks in cartel activity have all impacted migration.

What hasn’t changed much is the attraction to the U.S. for millions. Since 1965, when key amendments were made to the Immigration and Nationality Act to rid racism from immigration law, more than 70 million immigrants, both legal and unauthorized, have arrived in the U.S., according to Pew Research Center analyses of U.S. Census Bureau data, with about 18 million coming from Mexico, the largest wave of immigration from a single country.

### **Wienerwursts and West Park Parties**

Historically, however, while it’s clear that migrants significantly fueled the city’s growth and prosperity over the years through work, entrepreneurship, and cultural contributions, publications that have attempted to interpret and share the region’s history are predictably biased and exclusionary to varying degrees. Recorded history, after all, is not only a reflection of a chronicler’s personal beliefs and values, but often represents prevailing societal perspectives framed not by the marginalized, but by those in power.

“What a beautifully modulated voice the weinerworst man has,” wrote the *Findlay Daily Courier* in an 1887 edition, referencing a street food vendor.

Other local history books, dating back further than *Ethnic Roots*, also infuse racial preferencing into their rhetorical messaging.

“It is a common remark throughout the United States that no country of the world has contributed to the great republic a more desirable class of emigrants than Germany,” wrote R.C. Brown in *History of Hancock County, Ohio*, published in 1886. “Where one goes, he will assuredly hear it said: ‘These Germans make mighty fine citizens.’ They are always law-abiding, well-educated, genial in disposition, quick to ‘catch on’, and trained in those habits of economy and thrift which are so valuable in early life. They seem to succeed at everything they undertake... The Teutonic race is very generously represented in Hancock County. They are almost without exception good and honorable citizens...”

Early 20th-century assimilation efforts throughout the nation were widespread, with U.S.-born residents expecting and sometimes — particularly at businesses such as Ford Motor Company — requiring that international newcomers adapt to American cultural, societal, and functional standards. The America-first migrant-focused message from this era was clear: if you want to

become an American citizen, forget about where you came from and abandon every “foreign” custom you brought with you.

Weiser wrote that in the summer of 1920, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) held programs “near quarters in the Mexican village at the Continental Beet Sugar company’s plant... promoting the true idea of the Americanization movement. Programs included hymn singing, raising the American flag, an explanation of the flag and the workings of democracy, a sermon, encouragement to learn English, and distribution of miniature American flags, magazines, text cards, candy, flowers, and Sunday school materials. English lessons were provided during the day for the women and at night for the men.”

Not to be forgotten were Christian-based holiday traditions. “The WCTU also sponsored a Christmas celebration in the village in West Park,” *Ethnic Roots* shared. “The festivities included a tree, songs, prayers, the Christmas story of St. Luke in English and Spanish, Mexican songs, recitations and dances by the children. And Santa Claus distributing gifts, sweets and nuts.”

Multilingual and cultural celebrations are held to this day, particularly with the most recent migrant population increase. For instance, Findlay-based Black Heritage Library and Multicultural Center hosted the city’s first Haitian-Caribbean Festival in the summer of 2024, exemplifying the community’s diversity continuity and offering an embrace of differences that have always been present, influential, and meaningful.