

COMPARING PRIMARY SOURCES

On Cultural Ties

The quotes below reflect differing experiences immigrants had in adjusting to their new lives in the United States. Many debated how “Americanized” they should become.

As you read, think of how immigrant families living in the United States view the same issue.

Louise Nagy, a Polish immigrant in 1913

“Everybody lived in little cliques, the Polish, the Ukrainian, the Russian. So they would help each other out, whatever. Maybe one knew a few words more than the other. They used to live, I don’t know how many, maybe ten, twelve people in one room, because one was helping the other to get established here.

We wanted to be Americans so quickly that we were embarrassed if our parents couldn’t speak English. My father was reading a Polish paper. And somebody was supposed to come to the house. I remember sticking it under something. We were that ashamed of being foreign.”

Cosma Tangora Sullivan, an Italian immigrant in 1905

“We sort of got ashamed of being Italians, because we were harassed so much after we got here. We didn’t realize that things like that were going to happen. It was a shock to us. And that went on for years.”

Stoyan Christowe, “Half an American,” 1919

“While I am not a whole American, neither am I what I was when I first landed here; that is, a Bulgarian. . . . I have outwardly and inwardly deviated so much from a Bulgarian that when recently visiting in that country I felt like a foreigner. . . . In Bulgaria I am not wholly a Bulgarian; in the United States not wholly an American.”

Letter from Carl and Fred in Texas to their sister in Sweden, January 23, 1896

“Many Swedes are settled here and more come each year, so there will soon be a Little Sweden here, especially around the Swedish church. There is a post office and three stores as well as a Swedish doctor, Carlberg. The name of the place is Nya-Sverige, in English New Sweden.”

Gim Chang, a Chinese resident of San Francisco

“I myself rarely left Chinatown, only when I had to buy American things downtown. The area around Union Square was a dangerous place for us, you see, especially at nighttime before the quake [1906]. Chinese were often attacked by thugs there and all of us had to have a police whistle with us all the time. Once we were inside Chinatown, the thugs didn’t bother us.”

Abraham Ribbany, on his neighborhood in New York, 1893

“We ate the same dishes, spoke the same language, told the same stories, indulged in the same pleasures [as in Syria]. . . . To me the colony [neighborhood] was a habitat so much like the one I had left behind in Syria that its home atmosphere enabled me to maintain a firm hold on life in the face of the many difficulties which confronted me in those days.”