

## COMMON THREADS

# The Minnesota Immigrant Experience



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LOCKPORT, NEW YORK, APRIL 18, 1855: “I have made up my mind,” wrote Wenzel Petran to his family in Germany, “that when I have sold my land and other possessions, to go further into the interior, where I will look for a well situated town in the States of Illinois, Iowa, or Minnesota and start a business of my own. These states are now being settled very rapidly and land and well situated property is rising in value.”<sup>1</sup>

More than a century later, Sudhansu S. Misra, a recent immigrant from India, told an oral historian: “Various people of various backgrounds, particularly from Europe, came here and settled and had a hard life, of course. But culturally, they have adapted to this country, but they have not forgotten their own homeland. They still retain their heritage. Now, the time has come for other ethnic groups to be a part of this state. . . . It is important to record our history.”<sup>2</sup>

MINNESOTA HAS LONG BEEN the destination of immigrants from the far corners of the world. Some have traveled directly to Minnesota, while others, like Wenzel Petran, migrated to the state from another part of the country. Despite their differences in nationality, all shared common threads of experience that bound them together into the rich tapestry that has become the modern state of Minnesota.

Over the years, the Minnesota Historical Society has collected and preserved information documenting the state's newcomers. Manuscripts, letters, and oral histories shed light on the immigrant experience and how that experience relates one generation of immigrants to the next. Oral history projects conducted over the past 20 years with members of the Latino, Asian Indian, Hmong, Khmer, Tibetan, and Somali communities have yielded stories remarkably similar to those of earlier immigrants. With the help of an Institute of Museums and Library Services grant, the historical society is now bringing these stories to the worldwide web through audio clips and transcripts in a new project, *Becoming Minnesotan*.

Immigrants began coming to Minnesota in earnest after the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux (1851) opened the land for white settlement. The Homestead Act of 1862, which offered 160 acres to qualified settlers who agreed to live on and improve the property for a period of five years, enticed many to leave countries where conditions impeded the dream of owning land. After the Civil War, the growth of railroads in the state spurred further settlement as new towns were platted along expanding rail lines. In 1867 the legislature created the State Board of Immigration, not to control the influx but to promote settlement. Encouraged by advertisements that boosters placed in foreign newspapers proclaiming the healthful climate and opportunities in Minnesota, hordes of northern Europeans poured into the new state.<sup>3</sup>

Today, Minnesota welcomes immigrants and refugees from Asia, Africa, Mexico, and many other countries. Regardless of when they have arrived or where their journey began, these newcomers share with their predecessors common goals: they hope to find gainful employment,

FACING PAGE: *Young Somali women in Minnehaha Park, June 2004: (back, from left) Farhyia "Ubah" Mohamed, Hodan Abdi Budul, Amina Abdi, Marian "Muna" Farah, Amina Nur, Saida Hassan, Bibi Abdalla, Maryan Mohamed; (front, from left) Nasra Budul, Hibo Mohamed, Sagal Haji.*

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obtain a better education, own property, and escape war, oppression, or persecution in their homelands. All come seeking opportunities to build a better life for themselves and their children.

FOR EARLY IMMIGRANTS, getting to Minnesota was the first challenge. Even if they had the wherewithal to obtain passage, the often perilous journey across the ocean could last for weeks, with crowded conditions and sickness taking their toll. German immigrant Wenzel Petran sailed from Antwerp, Belgium, on May 25, 1849, and arrived in New York 35 days later. He remarked that there were some 135 passengers of all ages and from all parts of Germany onboard. In recounting the journey, he wrote, "We made the best of crossings, with no storms at any time, no long calms, but very strong and cold winds."<sup>4</sup>

Not all immigrants enjoyed such an easy crossing, as Petran soon discovered. "When we arrived in New York we learned that there were about 40,000 immigrants there who had come on other ships. On many ships there were 350 passengers, and the crossing had taken 42, 52 or even 90 days. On one ship with 350 passengers 42 had died, on another 14, and the average was five to seven deaths."

Surviving the sea voyage was just the beginning for immigrants who sought to reach the westernmost territories of the U.S. After six years in New York State, Petran recounted his journey from Lockport to St. Paul in 1855.

We left Lockport on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, on the railroad. Our journey took us after a day and a night to Detroit, the principal city of Michigan. . . . After one night's rest we continued our journey on the railroad through the states of Michigan and Indiana, to Chicago in the State of Illinois. . . . As it was our intention to go to the State of Iowa, we



To learn more about Minnesota's newer immigrant communities, visit *Becoming Minnesotan*: [www.mnhs.org/immigration](http://www.mnhs.org/immigration).

took one of the 11 trains that go out of Chicago. . . . After arriving at Rock Island, not an important city, we crossed over the river to Davenport, Iowa. I wanted to go from here into the interior of the State, but this could be done only by wagon transportation. . . . After three days delay, I decided to go up the river to Minnesota, where St. Paul, the principal city, is situated on the Mississippi. We therefore embarked in Davenport on a steamer bound for St. Paul (400 miles from Davenport) and arrived after a 6-day journey.<sup>5</sup>

Many modern immigrants arrive by plane. Even so, the trip can be filled with anxiety and hardship. Refugees from Southeast Asia, escaping a brutal regime in the 1970s and 1980s, risked their lives to reach crowded refugee camps where they spent months, if not years, before finally obtaining permission to leave for the United States. Like refugees streaming into the United States from Eastern Europe a century earlier or European Jews fleeing the Nazis during World War II, they were often separated from family and waited many years to be reunited.

See Lee, a Hmong woman who emigrated to the United States in 1980 at the age of 60 with her husband and two teenage children to join other members of her family, remembered her journey from a refugee camp in Thailand. “We stayed in the camp for six months. [We] heard from the Immigration office that we have been cleared through and we will be coming to America. We stayed . . . in Bangkok for two nights. On the eleventh day [after learning that the family had been cleared for

“I have taken a month leave from the school in order to only concentrate on the English language. I am studying English from early in the morning till late in the evening.”

travel], we boarded a jet destined for America. I don’t remember the city name when we got to America but we were delayed for two additional days. It was the sixteenth day before we finally reached [Minnesota].”<sup>6</sup>

For Bo Thao, whose family journeyed to America from Laos when she was a small girl, the trip was a puzzling adventure. “[We] got on the bus, and had no idea where we were going. I see my grandparents crying, and I questioned myself, ‘Why are they crying?’ . . . We were so happy, because we’ve never been on a bus before, but my parents and grandparents are crying.”<sup>7</sup>

**F**INDING EMPLOYMENT is an important first step to settling into life in America. While many nineteenth-century immigrants arrived with little education and few assets, they had transferrable skills, such as farming or carpentry, which made it easier to find suitable employment in a frontier state. Carl Martin Raugland, a teacher and church musician who emigrated from Norway to Minneapolis in 1885, was eager to share news of his prospects with his family at home. “Now I have to tell you what kind of possibilities I have. Yesterday I was together with the Norwegian Conference pastor, Gjertsen, who is known to be a serious Christian, and he told me I only had to write an announcement for our Norwegian papers, and I would surely get a position right away. He also promised to do what he could.”<sup>8</sup>

A few weeks later, Raugland wrote to his brothers:

I must say that I have been very fortunate over here. I am now employed as teacher and precentor in a little village a few miles from here called Edvatter [Atwater]. In this village there are two Swedish and one Norwegian church. 8 days after writing my first letter to you I had this post offered to me by the Norwegian minister up there. . . . As a teacher and precentor I will, according to

*Yang family, Ban Vinai refugee camp, Thailand, about 1978*



the minister, earn 400 dollars. Furthermore I shall be serving as organist in another church where the same man is preaching.<sup>9</sup>

After just two months in Minnesota, Wenzel Petran was able to report to family in Germany, "Upon arriving in St. Paul, I lodged my family in a boarding house and went to several places looking for openings, but could find none, as so many thousands of others had arrived this spring. I made my way on foot into the interior," he continued, "where I looked up an acquaintance from Lockport. . . . On my return trip, I passed through St. Anthony, where I again looked for an opening and succeeded in finding a shop, which I rented for one year for \$146. . . . I opened my business here on June 18<sup>th</sup>, after buying my stock in St. Paul. It consists of groceries, hardware and farmer's supplies."<sup>10</sup>

Today's immigrants come from landscapes and cultures vastly different from those they encounter in the United States, and many lack the education or skills needed by American employers. In spite of assistance they receive from improved social-service organizations, cultural obstacles hinder their chances for success in the workplace. In 1991 Hmong immigrant Yang Cha Ying described his daughter's attempt to find a job.

Most of my children have not accomplished anything yet. . . . They get married when they are still teenagers so they don't even have the diploma. . . . They have their own children so they just don't go to school. . . . [My] grandchildren . . . come every day to stay with me, so my daughter can go and find a job. She cannot find a job because she doesn't have a degree. She job hunt every day. I would rather we were still in our own country because then we would just do farming. . . . it's really hard. I am worried all day and night.<sup>11</sup>

Language barriers can make the quest for work even more difficult. In 1849 Wenzel Petran wrote, "I need to train myself in the English language. Within a few hours after my arrival here [Lockport], after having gone to a number of business houses, I found employment. . . . During the crossing I had learned a little English out of a borrowed book, and this helped me get a start, as English is spoken exclusively here." Within a year, Petran had learned enough English to secure a position with a higher salary.<sup>12</sup>



*Khmer immigrants Pitaro and Mary Khouth listening to English-language tapes, Centennial School, Richfield, 1980*

Unlike Petran, Carl Raugland made a serious study of the English language shortly after his arrival.

I have taken a month leave from the school in order to only concentrate on the English language. I am studying English from early in the morning till late in the evening. . . . It is not so easy as I first thought it would be, but shall one first learn to write and speak as it should be, then it is difficult and takes much time, particularly the pronunciation and grammar which are very difficult. But I am doing fine with the language and know already quite a lot, so when I return to you then we can if you want to speak in English!<sup>13</sup>

Recent immigrants face the same language barriers. In the early 1980s Thaly Chhour, a 22-year-old Khmer refugee, was sent first to the Philippines for cultural orientation before coming to the U.S. with her mother and sisters. She was taught some English there but felt unprepared for the task of providing for her family in a new country.

When I got here I was so worried and concerned, I don't know what to do. I did not speak any English, I learn very little from the camp but when we stay in Philippines, I learn a little bit, a few more months over there. So when I got here, I was concerned, I thought, "In my family I don't have any brother to depend any more, now

I have to stand up, be independent,” so I went to school . . . and my first teacher in Minnesota tried to encourage me to speak, just speak to anybody on the street, on the bus and all that. So I remember what she say and I try so hard to speak so I can get better and better.<sup>14</sup>

**I**MMIGRANTS INTERVIEWED for the *Becoming Minnesotan* project, particularly those who were refugees from Southeast Asia and Somalia, appreciate the freedom they have found in America—and the educational opportunities, employment, and human rights afforded by that freedom. Tashi Lhewa, a Tibetan born in India whose family came to America in the late 1990s, sees a bright future for the children of Tibetan immigrants. “[One] thing I noticed, that is parents strive strongly to make sure their children have all the opportunities that they didn’t. And so I believe that in the U.S. especially they have opportunities which their parents couldn’t dream of, whether it be academic or professional.” Lhewa, himself, earned both undergraduate and law degrees.<sup>15</sup>

Earlier arrivals appreciated similar benefits. In 1854 Karl Bachmann, who settled briefly in Easton, Pennsylvania, before migrating to Minnesota, wrote to his former employer in Saxony (present-day Germany):

Every man can conduct his business as he likes, he need not pay taxes and assessments, does not have to make out reports nor help to support idlers and princes. Here is freedom to choose your own work, no tariffs, freedom of the press. . . . Also there is plenty of work, hundreds are sought for by the railroads and earn 1 1/8 Doll. per day. Generally, whoever wants to work can find enough work.

Wenzel Petran agreed with this view of democracy: “In no country could it be better to work than in America, as there is no great difference between employer and employee, master and apprentice, and one is regarded merely as a co-worker.”<sup>16</sup>

European women who came to Minnesota in the mid-nineteenth century were pioneers in the traditional sense of the word. Accustomed to hard work, they adjusted to life on the prairies, often taking on male responsibilities in a harsh environment. In many ways, modern women immigrants are also pioneers, especially as they embrace what America has to offer and struggle to redefine their gender role in a very different culture.

Hmong immigrant Bao Vang pointed out the benefits women have in the U.S.

I think just to be able to go to school in the United States is wonderful. In Laos, very, very few people, Hmong girls, go to school and even if they did go to school, when they came back they don’t have any opportunities. They just become farmwives or something like that, so I think that to have an opportunity to go to school to be whatever you want . . . You can go to school and be a doctor. You can go to school to be a teacher, or go to school just to do community work. Anything is possible.<sup>17</sup>

New immigrants often settle in areas where earlier arrivals of similar background and religion have made their homes. Irja Laaksonen Beckman, who emigrated from Finland to Massachusetts, then to Virginia, Minnesota, and finally to the rural Fairbanks-Brimson-Toimi area, recalled that her family’s social life revolved around the Finnish halls and cultural events that “drew Finnish audiences from all over the Iron Range, even from Duluth.” The Irish clustered in St. Paul, many Swedes settled just north of the Twin Cities, and Germans initially colonized southwestern Minnesota.<sup>18</sup>

More recently, Mexicans, Southeast Asians, Tibetans, and Somalis have been drawn to Minnesota by existing communities. This “chain migration” makes resettlement easier, and newcomers enjoy the advantages offered by cultural centers and businesses specific to their needs. The India Association of Minnesota, established as the India Club of Minnesota in 1973, reaches out to new arrivals and seeks to share Indian culture with the wider community. The Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Minnesota provides career counseling and training, help in establishing new businesses, and assistance in purchasing property. The Tibetan American Foundation of Minnesota was formed in 1992 to assist in resettlement of new immigrants and to preserve Tibetan cultural and religious traditions.<sup>19</sup>

Jigme Ugen, a Tibetan who immigrated to Minnesota from India in 2000, observed that living in enclaves strengthened an ethnic community but could be limiting, too. “Tibetans are very, very well established in Minnesota, unlike anywhere in America. The Tibetan community is . . . getting stronger, but it’s getting stronger internally. There’s been nothing going outside of it. So

one of the problems that we have is we are too clustered and too much together as a community; we haven't given any room for anyone from the outside to come inside."<sup>20</sup>

**R**ELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS are integral to social as well as spiritual life in an immigrant enclave. The first settlers from any country are quick to recognize the need for their own religious centers, which then become a draw for later immigrants. Carl Raugland discovered "many Norwegians and Swedes" living in Minneapolis, while conceding that "there are also all kinds of nationalities here." He took comfort in the fact that there were no less than eight Scandinavian Lutheran churches in the city when he arrived in 1885.<sup>21</sup>

Minnesota's spiritual fabric today includes both Western and Eastern religious practices—and coexistence has required compromise and understanding on all sides. Many deeply religious people feel that their principles are compromised in a nation that separates "church" and state. Hared Mah summed up the challenges Muslim Somalis have faced in a secular yet predominantly Christian country. "[We] are a Muslim community, a Muslim society, and the culture is different. We live according to religion. . . . You have to pray and you have to follow your religion. The environment is different, so it's very hard to pray, especially if you're going to school or maybe working someplace. . . . For Muslims, there are also certain foods you have to avoid. You have to explain all that stuff. That's a challenge."<sup>22</sup>

Unlike contemporary immigrant populations, people arriving during Minnesota's early years had few social services to help them assimilate into American culture. The established immigrant communities looked after

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their own, and even the slightest acquaintance from home became a valued contact in the New World. Carl Raugland wrote to relatives in Norway: "I regard the Andersens as family and they regard me as one of them."<sup>23</sup>

By the early-twentieth century, settlement houses began to offer help with finding accommodations, employment, and learning the English language. The influx of Slavic immigrants into Northeast Minneapolis, for example, prompted the opening of the North East Neighborhood House in 1915. Today, such institutions as the St. Paul Neighborhood House and the Brian Coyle Community Center in Minneapolis carry on the tradition of helping newcomers feel at home by offering social services and educational courses. The International Institute of Minnesota, founded in 1919 to aid northern European immigrants, continues to provide services to new residents. Even so, some recent immigrants and their American-born children have difficulty finding their place, as Ramona Advani, the daughter of Asian Indian immigrants, discovered: "I think the hardest thing . . . about being first-generation Indian . . . is that there's no one to model myself after. I've struggled with that a lot. Sometimes I've looked to other women of color for clues as to how to function and fit in, but it's not quite the same. . . . I feel like I'm making it up as I go along, what it means to be a U.S.-born Indian person."<sup>24</sup>

**M**ONEY IS OFTEN a major cause of concern for immigrants. Becoming established in America—purchasing a home, settling in, and contributing to society—is a common goal but one that requires capital. Many have arrived with few material possessions and found it hard to make ends meet, let alone achieve their American dream. Cycles of economic recession have compounded the difficulty, making those dreams even more elusive.

In 1855 Wenzel Petran wrote to his family in Germany

*Vietnamese restaurant and deli on St. Paul's University Avenue, home to markets, eateries, and other businesses serving the area's many immigrants from Southeast Asia*



about Minnesota: “There is still much good government land here, of which every man may take 160 acres if he builds a cabin on it, lives there and cultivates the land. However, after several years, until it is measured, he must pay \$1.25 per acre. This would be a good place for speculation in real property as the land is rapidly being populated.” By 1858 he not only had his business property in St. Anthony but also purchased an additional building lot there and two more in the new town of Minneapolis, as an investment.<sup>25</sup>

Using good business sense, Petran survived the Panic of 1857 by avoiding the temptation to overextend his assets. Writing to his aunt and uncle in early 1858, he described the economic situation in America.

Trade was practically stopped for a time and trades people who depended on credit (without capital) were in distress, being broken in pieces like thin wood, because they could not sell their merchandise quick enough . . .

It is not to be expected that business enterprises can stand another revolution like it, which caused many of the factories to let their employees go; which left thousands of people breadless, especially in the great cities. . . . The amount of money squandered for luxuries and so forth for which the Americans are famous is the cause of the down fall.

Arvid Person arrived in Stillwater in the summer of 1868. Writing to his family in Ellestorp, Sweden, just



*Businessman Wenzel Petran and his young family, 1850s*

15 months later, he laid the blame for the bad economy on immigrants: “I can tell you that the times are very poor. The reason is the great influx of people, so it looks to me that the Emigration should be completely turned around—at least for those who do not have enough to settle down with. Because poverty is the same here as in Sweden nowadays. The times have fallen by one third since I came here.” Person’s ironic bias against immigrants was a reflection of prevailing attitudes that would later lead to restrictive immigration policy.<sup>26</sup>

In August 1875 he reported, “The times have not been this bad since before the war. The only activity is in farm work. Everything else is at a standstill. So I and others in my trade [carpentry] have nothing to do.” Person went on, “If there is no change soon one must take hold of the plow. Which is also hard to do for one who is poor because he lacks everything and everything costs money. When one must buy everything from first to last it takes more than a little capital. If that were not the case I would have been a farmer long ago. When one has nothing to start with it is not easy to come up in this world.”<sup>27</sup>

Carl Raugland had left church work and opened a music store in Minneapolis when he found himself in the midst of the Panic of 1893. He blamed the government for trying to pass a law that would reduce import duties on all manufactured goods, an action that had alarmed American businessmen into withdrawing financial support from domestic industries. “[We] are presently experiencing a period of bad recession due to a new Government. Thousands of factories have ground to a halt and hundreds of banks have closed down. . . . It has been an endless waiting for better times to come round, with no improvement so far in sight.” He tried to reassure himself that the setback was temporary: “Still—when the People elects a new Government with a more widespread popular support, I am certain that America is going to experience better times than she has ever seen before, the only problem is that there is not going to be another Presidential election for the next three years. America is in many ways a strange Country.”<sup>28</sup>

Like their predecessors, modern immigrants, particularly those used to an agrarian lifestyle, find it hard to make a start without means and with little education. Hmong writer and poet Mai Neng Moua was born in Laos and arrived in Minnesota in 1981 as a child. By 1999, she clearly saw the obstacles:

There aren't any work skills that are transferable to this country. But farming is very hard because we Hmong don't have machines; we only have hoes. . . . You can only grow enough for your little family. If you want to be a farmer, to start a business, you have to have money, you have to have the technologies and those are things that we Hmong do not have . . . we can't compete against the Americans. That is a source of sadness. Our background is so different.<sup>29</sup>

**D**ISCRIMINATION ALWAYS compounds the difficulties that newcomers face. Established Americans, whose ancestors were immigrants, sometimes focus on differences in race, culture, and religion in attempting to discourage people from entering the country or obtaining citizenship. In April 1855, just before moving west to Minnesota, Wenzel Petran reported to his family in Germany: "I received my citizenship papers in the month of February and now I am accordingly a citizen and voter of the United States. A new political party [the Know-Nothings] is contesting the rights of foreigners to citizenship. In case it should get the upper hand in State and law making, each foreigner that arrives would have to live in the States 21 years instead of 5 (as now) before he can become a citizen."<sup>30</sup>

American fears that "less desirable" newcomers would bring disease and poverty into the country and take jobs away from citizens prompted legislation that authorized officials to deny entry to those with certain physical or mental illnesses. Fueled by suspicions of foreign cultures perceived as threats to American wellbeing, laws such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Oriental Exclusion Act of 1924 were enacted. The United States Bureau of Immigration was created in 1891 to enforce these laws.<sup>31</sup>

Just as it has in the new millennium, national security posed a serious concern for immigration officials in the early-twentieth century. The assassination of President William McKinley by an anarchist in 1901 prompted the passage of the Anarchist Exclusion Act in 1903 to prevent the admission of political extremists. One hundred years later, following the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, the Patriot Act was passed with similar intention.

The Dillingham Commission, established by Congress in 1907 to investigate the impact of immigration on the United States, produced a 42-volume report that favored northern Europeans and cast suspicion on those

## The Know-Nothings

The "new political party" Petran referred to was a secretive organization established in 1854 with the goal of discouraging Irish Catholics, fleeing the potato famine, from immigrating. Party members feared that a large Catholic population would put the predominantly Protestant United States under the control of the pope in Rome. The organization got its curious name from its furtive nature; when asked about the party, members replied, "I know nothing." The Know-Nothings had many supporters in both the northern and southern states but dissolved over the issue of slavery just before the Civil War.

Minnesota Territory, eager to attract settlers, did not seem to have much sympathy for the Know-Nothings. In 1854 the *St. Paul Pioneer* poked fun at the mysterious organization by reprinting the following piece from the Petersburg, Virginia, *Express*, comparing the Know-Nothings to a less-than-admirable Dickens character.

Do not these gentlemen date simply from the appearance of "Bleak House," and is not "Joe" of that history their great founder and prophet? It will be remembered that Joe was always "a movin' on"; now the Know Nothings undoubtedly have been doing this for some time past,—Then Joe was a mysterious and obscure individual, of unknown origin, and undiscovered dwelling place; the second point of resemblance is plain. Lastly, the only reply which could ever be extracted from the mysterious Joe was a dolorous repetition of the phrase, "I don't know nothing"; there is the conclusive point.

A few months later, a *St. Paul Pioneer* editorial, "Patriotism of Foreigners," pointed out that eight of the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence were of foreign birth. It decried the movement to deny worthy immigrants their citizenship: "Yet in the face of this page of our annals, so honorable to the foreigners who have sought our land as a home of their choice, there is a crusade engendered, in secret, to proscribe them for the exclusive behoof of those whom accidental birth has given the title of natives. Shame, where is thy blush?"

Sources: *St. Paul Pioneer*, July 25, 1854, p. 2, Oct. 2, 1854, p. 2.



coming from southern and eastern Europe. This study resulted in the Quota Acts of the 1920s. Beginning with the Emergency Quota Act of 1921, legislation set limits on the number of people of all nationalities that would be allowed into the country, based on a percentage of those populations already in the United States. The U.S. Border Patrol was created by an act of Congress in 1924 to secure the borders against smuggling of illegal substances and illegal aliens, a situation that remains controversial to this day, particularly in light of increasing Mexican immigration.<sup>32</sup>

Mexicans recruited as seasonal agricultural laborers started entering the United States in large numbers in the early-twentieth century, as the sugar-beet industry began to grow. While not the first people of Latin origins to find a home in Minnesota, Mexican migrants were in the state as early as 1907, working for such firms as the Minnesota Sugar Company in Chaska. While most returned south at the end of the growing season, some decided to stay. The number of migrant workers declined during the Great Depression but soared during World War II, when a national labor shortage sent employers south of the border to find help. The Bracero Program, established in 1942 to address this demand, continued until 1964; recruiting peaked in 1956 at more than 445,000 temporary workers. Policies of the 1960s and 1970s sought to control the influx from Mexico and Latin America by capping immigration at 20,000 from each country of origin, a mandate that proved difficult

*Mexican migrant workers topping beets in the East Grand Forks region, about 1930*

“ Our children who are born here or who are growing up here, are they going to be able to keep this language and continue speaking it? Or are they going to lose it and assimilate into the mainstream? ”

to enforce. By the 1980s the number of undocumented aliens was estimated at 6 million, the majority of them Mexicans, and the public began to pressure the federal government to tighten the border. The result was the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, which allowed those in the country illegally to gain legal status while cracking down on future illegal border traffic.<sup>33</sup>

Lourdez Ortega Schwab, born in El Paso to Mexican parents, recounted their discouraging experiences seeking a new life in the U.S. as young newlyweds.

My mother and father met while he worked for my grandfather. My father was 16 years older than my mother but he stole her when she was 25 years old and they eloped to the United States. My mother had her visa at the time because she would cross the border daily into El Paso and nanny and house keep for people. My father did not have documentation, so he would cross illegally. When my mother's visa expired, they stayed in Texas in a small town called Silvertown in the panhandle. . . . They would always move around so that they wouldn't get caught by immigration. They always seemed to find odd farm jobs to survive until the next move. . . . My parents worked



hard and were deported many times before finally going through the amnesty in the Reagan era of 1986 or so, and they were proud to become U.S. citizens. That is the year that our entire family was finally able to breathe and live, rather than survive.<sup>34</sup>

**A**FTER NAVIGATING THE MAZE of American immigration law and breaking through the barriers of language and discrimination, immigrants who become Minnesotans face one more significant challenge: preserving their own culture and traditions while embracing those of their new country. Throughout history, immigrant parents have bemoaned the fact that their children had become “too assimilated,” that they were losing the family’s native language in favor of English and preferred American cuisine and customs.

As early as 1858, Wenzel Petran recognized this loss of culture. Writing from St. Anthony, he told his German relatives, “Our boy, now over five years old, comes in very helpful in many things and is quite willing to do so. Although we always speak German to our children, they don’t learn the language because they mix with the neighbor children with whom they always talk English, which I regret very much because both languages are very essential.”<sup>35</sup>

Carl Raugland, who had been so eager to learn English upon his arrival, acknowledged a similar disappointment in a letter to his brother in 1900: “Our little Martha is already 7-½ year [*sic*] old and has been in school for more than a year. Our children’s language is almost exclusively English, even if they understand almost every word spoken to them here at home. It is hard to teach the children Norwegian in this country, because English is easier for them.”<sup>36</sup>

Somali community leader Abdisalam Adam has seen this trend, too, among Minnesota’s most recent immigrants. “Our children who are born here or who are growing up here, are they going to be able to keep this language and continue speaking it? Or are they going to lose it and assimilate into the mainstream and forget about Somali? Right now, I’m worried that when it comes to the Somali language, we seem to be losing it, and we have not done much about preserving it.”<sup>37</sup>

**T**HROUGHOUT STATE HISTORY, many immigrants have come to Minnesota planning to return home after achieving their goals of education and wealth or, in



*Tibetan Cultural School students singing, St. Paul, 2008*

the case of refugees, when it became safe to repatriate. In most cases, events transpire to keep them in their new home. Wenzel Petran’s aunt and uncle wanted him to return to Germany to take over the family business, but when he began to speculate in land, found a nice German girl to marry, and started a family, he knew his roots were in Minnesota.<sup>38</sup>

Arvid Person, who had settled in Stillwater in 1868 and started a family there, realized that he was becoming too Americanized to return to his homeland.

[If] I thought that you really wanted to see me I could take a trip home and visit you—but I really could not stay in Sweden, as it would be difficult for me to get used to the Swedish customs that are so different from those in America. But that alone would not be so bad, it would be the Swedish laws that I could not endure. That one person should have greater privileges than another. That is to say the rich with their privileges. But here we all ride alike, said the scoundrel when he rode alongside the king.

A few years later he admitted, “Were it not for parents and brothers and sisters I would forget Sweden completely.”<sup>39</sup>

**I**MMIGRANTS WILL CONTINUE to stream into Minnesota in the years to come. Like those who came before, they, too, will face the challenges of leaving home, family, and all things familiar, of overcoming discrimination bred of misunderstanding, of striving to retain their homeland culture while finding their place in a new one. And like their predecessors, they will also experience both trial and success as they put down roots and endeavor to make their own contributions to Minnesota’s diverse culture. □

## Notes

1. Wenzel Petran to Johann and Theresia Pompe, Apr. 18, 1855, typescript translation, Wenzel Petran and Family Papers, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), St. Paul. All subsequent Petran quotes are from these translations.
2. Sudhansu S. Misra, interview by Polly Sonifer, May 5, 1994, transcript, India Association of Minnesota Oral History Project (Phase 1), Oral History Collection, MHS.
3. For an overview of immigration to the state, see "Introduction," *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State's Ethnic Groups*, ed. June D. Holmquist (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1981), 1–14.
4. Here and below, Wenzel Petran to Johann and Theresia Pompe, Aug. 26, 1849.
5. Wenzel Petran to Johann and Theresia Pompe, July 18, 1855.
6. See Lee, interview by MayKao Hang, Jan. 23, 2000, transcript, Hmong Women's Action Team Oral History Project, Oral History Collection, MHS. The prospect of the flight frightened Mrs. Lee. According to her granddaughter, MayKao Hang, "Grandma felt that she would disappear into the clouds and not come back. She felt that her spirit would leave her body and that she would get sick when she [flew] up into the air. When she arrived, my dad was at the airport, and she was so happy she cried. In fact, she was never sure she would actually make it here to the United States."
7. Bo Thao, interview by MayKao Hang, Jan. 17, 2000, transcript, Hmong Women's Action Team Oral History Project, MHS.
8. Carl Martin Raugland to "My dear Brother and Sister!" Aug. 24, 1885, typescript translation, Carl M. and Sara K. Raugland Papers, MHS. All subsequent Raugland quotes are from these translations.
9. Carl Martin Raugland to "Dear Brothers," Sept. 16, 1885.
10. Petran to Johann and Theresia Pompe, July 18, 1855.
11. Yang Cha Ying, interview by Linda Rossi (translator, May Herr), Nov. 20, 1991, transcript, Hmong Oral Histories Project, 1991–93, Oral History Collection, MHS.
12. Petran to Johann and Theresia Pompe, Aug. 26, 1849.
13. Carl Raugland to "My Dear Brother!" Feb. 14, 1886.
14. Thaly Chhour, interview by Cheryl A. Thomas, Aug. 14, 1992, transcript, Khmer Oral History Project, Oral History Collection, MHS.
15. Tashi Lhewa, interview by Dorjee Norbu and Charles Lenz, Aug. 28, 2005, transcript, Minnesota Tibetan Oral History Project, Oral History Collection, MHS.
16. Karl Bachmann to G. Peip, Oct. 15, 1854, typescript translation, Charles W. Bachmann and Family Papers, MHS;
17. Bao Vang, interview by Kim Yang, Dec. 17, 1999, transcript, Hmong Women's Action Committee Oral History Project, MHS.
18. Irja Beckman, "Echoes from the Past, 1958," 19, typescript draft, manuscripts collection, MHS; Ann Regan, "The Irish," 134, Hildegard Binder Johnson, "The Germans," 155–57, and John G. Rice, "The Swedes," 256–57, 259—all in Holmquist, ed., *They Chose Minnesota*.
19. To learn more, see: India Association of Minnesota, [www.iamn.org](http://www.iamn.org); Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Minnesota, [www.hispanicmn.org](http://www.hispanicmn.org); Hmong Cultural Center, [www.hmongcc.org](http://www.hmongcc.org); United Cambodian Association of Minnesota, [www.ucamin.org](http://www.ucamin.org); Tibetan American Foundation of Minnesota, [www.tafm.org](http://www.tafm.org) (all accessed June 3, 2010).
20. Jigme Ugen, interview by Tsewang Sangmo Lama and Charles Lenz, Aug. 31, 2005, transcript, Minnesota Tibetan Oral History Project, MHS.
21. Raugland to "My dear Brother and Sister!" Aug. 24, 1885.
22. Hared Mah, interview by Andy Wilhide, June 3, 2004, transcript, Somali Skyline Tower Oral History Project, Oral History Collection, MHS. Minnesota's Muslim population is not the first to encounter difficulties in following religion-mandated diets in their new community. Kosher Jews, vegetarian Hindus, and others have faced similar challenges.
23. Raugland to "My dear Brother and Sister!" Aug. 24, 1885.
24. For more information, see North East Neighborhood House Records, 1889–1961, 2002–2003, MHS; International Institute of Minnesota, [www.iimn.org](http://www.iimn.org) (accessed June 3, 2010); Ramona Advani, interview by Polly Sonifer, Feb. 19, 1998, transcript, India Association of Minnesota Oral History Project (Phase 2), MHS.
25. Here and three paragraphs below, Petran to Johann and Theresia Pompe, July 18, 1855, Jan. 30, 1858.
26. Arvid Person, [no salutation], Nov. 25, 1869, copy of typescript translation, Arvid Person Letters, MHS.
27. Arvid Person to "Dearly beloved parents, brothers and sisters," Aug. 5, 1875, Person letters.
28. Carl Raugland to "Dear Brother Martinius," Nov. 18, 1893. Democrat Grover Cleveland won a second (nonconsecutive) term in 1892, defeating incumbent Benjamin Harrison.
29. Mai Neng Moua, interview by Kim Yang, Dec. 1, 1999, transcript, Hmong Women's Action Committee Oral History Project, MHS.
30. Petran to Johann and Theresia Pompe, Apr. 18, 1855. For more on the Know-Nothing Party, see Thomas Cieslik, David Felsen, and Akis Kalaitzidis, eds., *Immigration: A Documentary and Reference Guide* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009), 19–21.
31. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, [www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis](http://www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis) (accessed June 3, 2010).
32. Cieslik, Felsen, and Kalaitzidis, eds., *Immigration*, 39–40. See also U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, [www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis](http://www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis) and National Border Patrol Museum, [www.borderpatrolmuseum.com](http://www.borderpatrolmuseum.com) (accessed June 3, 2010).
33. Susan M. Diebold, "The Mexicans," in Holmquist, ed., *They Chose Minnesota*, 92–107; Cieslik, Felsen, and Kalaitzidis, ed., *Immigration*, 179–99.
34. Lourdez Ortega Schwab, interview by Ruth Trevino, May 10, 2009, transcript, Latino Oral History Project, Oral History Collections, MHS. The Ortegas were in Minnesota when the parents and one sibling born in Mexico obtained U.S. citizenship.
35. Petran to Johann and Theresia Pompe, Jan. 30, 1858.
36. Carl Raugland to Martinius, Jan. 2, 1900.
37. Abdisalam Adam, interview by Sumaya Yusuf and Andy Wilhide, June 24, 2004, transcript, Somali Skyline Tower Oral History Project, MHS.
38. Petran to Johann and Theresia Pompe, Feb. 9, 1852.
39. Arvid Person to "My dearly beloved parents, brothers and sisters," Apr. 16, 1874, and to "Dear Papa, Mama, brothers and sisters," Sept. 1, 1879, Person letters.

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*The photo on p. 96 (and contents page) is courtesy David McGrath; p. 101, Bill Jolitz; and p. 105, Wangyal Ritzekura. All other images are in MHS collections, including p. 102 from the Wenzel Petran and Family Papers, and p. 104, American Crystal Sugar Co. Records.*



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