



New faces, an old story

Immigrants came a century ago

Sunday, April 15, 2007

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Each morning at the corner of Speedwell Avenue and Flagler Street, Morristown's Italian immigrants gathered, a dozen or so, looking to land construction or landscaping work. Irish immigrants met contractors with job offers in their own neighborhood called "Dublin."

The newcomers looked different from the town's established residents, who complained the immigrants lived in overcrowded homes, gathered on street corners, drank and committed crimes.

That scenario took place more than a century ago. Today, the situation is the same, the only difference is where the immigrants are coming from. The newcomers are now from Central and South America.

The established residents -- including descendants of those same Italian and Irish foreigners -- have the same complaints about overcrowding, bad behavior and crime.

"That's a recurring theme in immigration history," Muzaffar Chishti, a professor and director of New York University's Migration Policy Institute, said. "People tend to forget the plight and experiences of their forefathers and say the same things about immigrants now as was said about the immigrants back then."

The main argument about the immigrants in town today is easily summed up: The Irish and Italian immigrants came here legally. Many today did not, they say.

Seton Hall history professor Dermott Quinn said there are big differences between then and now.

"Back then, citizenship was assumed and rarely questioned. Today, that's not the case. There are layers and layers of government bureaucracy, especially with immigration," Quinn said. "This sounds a lot like generational nativism. That 'well, we played by the rules.' But back then there were much fewer rules to follow."

Making it in Morristown was not easy then, and it certainly isn't in 2007. This year -- if Mayor Donald Cresitello has his way -- the town will take part in a federal program that deputizes local law enforcement officers as federal immigration agents.

Those officers would investigate and begin the deportation process against illegal immigrants arrested for serious crimes. Immigration checks might even be made if they are caught jaywalking or living in overcrowded conditions. Police also would be able to use the program's powers to check whether contractors are hiring illegal immigrants, who are among the many dozens of day laborers gathering along Morris Street and Lafayette and Speedwell avenues each morning looking for jobs.

There is a lot of opposition to that plan by immigrant advocacy groups and some residents who say the plan would lead to discrimination and civil rights violations.

Tom Sheridan, an 84-year-old retired electrician who has lived his whole life in the town's Dublin section, and 83-year-old tailor Joe Margiotta, grew up in the town's Italian enclave, agree with Cresitello.

"I give the mayor a lot of credit. I think what the mayor is doing is right," Sheridan said.

Sheridan's family had been in Morristown since the mid-1800s -- when the Dublin area bounded by Madison and James streets and parts of Maple and Macculloch avenues started to take shape.

The Irish had been in Morris County for much longer, fighting in the Revolutionary War (and throwing one

of the first St. Patrick's Day celebrations in the nation when Washington was staying in town), building the Morris Canal in the 1820s, working on the railroads in the 1830s and laboring in the estates as servants.

As a teen, Sheridan worked in an apple orchard, earning 50 cents a day. He husked corn and later was a caddie, an inspector at the former Monroe Calculating Co. on Market Street and an electrician, retiring in 1988.

Sheridan said he never encountered the discrimination many other people of Irish descent suffered.

Across town, "The life of the Italian immigrant in Morristown at the turn of the century was not substantially different from the plight of other minority ethnic groups newly arrived in this country: long, hard work for low pay, segregation in an ethnic colony, discrimination and verbal slurs directed toward their racial and national origin," according to the late James Costanzo, author of "New Neighbors, Old Friends: Morristown's Italian Community 1880-1980."

"We were always humiliated, like there was something wrong with us," Rocco Nodoro recalled of his school days in the early 1900s, in Costanzo's book.

Called the "Hollow" and home to hundreds of residents, the Italian immigrant section was in a quarter-mile area with a long, hilly dirt road called Flagler Street serving as the heart of the community, Margiotta said.

The thriving businesses included Verrilli Bakery, which is still in business, Giordano's grocery store, and Lucia Tartaglia's Tailor Shop.

The area was bound by Race, River, Spring and Water streets. Little remains of that neighborhood, where Headquarters Plaza and the town's public housing projects now stand.

The Italians were mostly hired for manual labor and didn't have to wait on a corner for job offers. Only some did. Many Italian immigrants worked as masons and stonecutters, building local churches, the library and the Jewish community center among other projects.

Looking at the past and present, it's easy to see the irony, said Cheryl Turkington, author of the recently released "Greeting the Past: A Walking Tour of the Dublin Neighborhood in Morristown, New Jersey."

"We always seem to embrace our immigrant past. We have this nostalgia about it," she said. "But a lot of people always seem to have a problem with immigrants trying to make their way today."

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