

# Flag Day celebrates the gift of immigrants

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Another View

By Joseph Garrera

June 13, 2008

On June 14, 1944, readers of The Morning Call found a simple story of major importance. The headline read, "178 Seek to be Citizens." The story opened, "Allentown's observance of Flag Day will begin when Judge James H. Henninger and Harold W. Helfrich will sit 'en banc' at a session of Naturalization court to pass upon 178 applicants for citizenship in the United States."

Immigration was not an issue in 1944. Because of the war, there was little migration here. Chances were that those folks had been in America for many years. But this story is important for many reasons; those reasons include immigration and the Lehigh Valley's distinguished history with Flag Day. (The Allentown Flag Day Association is considered the nation's oldest.)

In our high-tech society, which spends little time on sober, reflective consideration of cultural issues, the debate on immigration and what it means to be an American has been surrendered to the television pundits. Since that story was written more than 60 years ago, immigration into the United States, both legal and non-legal, has become a topic of serious debate.

Some fear that foreign-born residents of the United States constitute too large a percentage of the nation's entire population. Looking back in history, one learns that during the era of Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, the percentage of foreign-born residents here had reached nearly 15 percent, compared to the estimated 12 percent that exists today.

Many fear America is being over-run with non English-speaking people. But history tells us that this concern is not new nor unique. As far back as the 1750s, there was concern that Germans were over-running the colony of Pennsylvania. History now reveals that those Germans and their descendents have made an enormous contribution to Pennsylvania and to the success of America.

The story from 1944 should encourage us to reflect upon the tremendous value immigrants bring to America. Most people today have never experienced a large wave of immigration like that of recent years, so it's only natural that some might feel uncomfortable. But with the past as our guide, we are better able to chart the future of how those new to America will assimilate into the community.

History tells us that first-generation children born to immigrants speak English fluently, and that a large percentage of second-generation children give up their native languages

altogether. Many adopt American heroes as their heroes. Their children remember their heritage, and yet they still respect and admire George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr. and other distinguished Americans who made America a better country.

There is an old saying that an immigrant is a person who got off the boat 24 hours after you. In my case, that's true. My grandmother and grandfather were "Pennsylvania Dutch," their ancestors were from Germany. On my father's side, his mom and dad immigrated from Italy. Like so many others, I, too, am the product of immigrants.

As for The Morning Call story of 1944 and Flag Day, this year more than 60 local folks became some of America's newest citizens. Flag Day in Allentown is alive and well. While the official holiday is tomorrow, many city officials and others are celebrating our flag today. "Americans of whatever origin," writes the historian Arthur M. Schlesinger in his book "The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society," "should take pride in the distinctive inheritance to which they have all contributed. Belief in one's own culture does not require disdain for other cultures."

If we could research the lives of those who became citizens in 1944 and the lives of their families, chances are good that they have labored to make America a better country. We should have every reason to believe the same will happen with today's newest citizens, too.

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