Ethnic Diversity in the City

By William Toll

Though Portland was described by journalists as a city dominated by native-born Americans, its ethnic diversity reflected that of most frontier cities. The proportion of foreign-born was less than in San Francisco, but by 1890, 59 percent of the population was either foreign-born or had at least one foreign-born parent. After 1890, Oregon's foreign-born increasingly concentrated in Portland, which became far more segmented by class and ethnic districts.

The Germans were the largest foreign-language ethnic group, with a conspicuous social presence at the Turnverein Hall at First and Ash, and the Arion Society, the local branch of a national singing club dedicated to bringing German classical music to America. The officers of the Turnverein in 1874 were working men, including barber A. Staender, bookkeeper Peter Wagner, as well as a saloon keeper and a porter. The officers of the Arion Society in 1889 included the foreman of a harness shop, the owner of a machine shop, a printer at the Freie Presse, and a police captain. The German Aid Society drew men of more means, including several German Jewish merchants as trustees. Through the 1880s, Germans from the first ward elected small businessmen to represent them on the city council.

The most conspicuous manufacturer of German descent was Henry Weinhard. Apprenticed as a brewer in his native Wurtemberg, he moved to the frontier to utilize his formal training. In 1862, at age thirty-two, he moved his brewery from Vancouver to Portland. By 1880, Weinhard's City Brewery occupied a full square block between Eleventh and Twelfth, and B and C streets. He supplied two huge beer gardens, each accommodating about four hundred people, reputedly the most prominent social centers in the city. Mayor D.P. Thompson reported to the United States census that "they are exceedingly well patronized, much more so than the theaters and lecture-rooms." Weinhard's own household was a center of German cultural life, with his wife and three daughters, one Swiss- and two German-born female servants, and eleven male employees, almost all born in Germany. His own fraternal and musical society affiliations, as well as his support for German philanthropies, typified the way Germans saw themselves as both a self-sufficient social enclave yet full participants in the public life of their city.

German Jews brought artisanal and especially mercantile skills, which by the 1870s they had expanded through familial networks that reached to remote towns in Oregon and Washington. Merchants like Philip Selling or Charles Friendly imported goods from colleagues in San Francisco or even New York and then sent younger brothers to towns like Albany, Eugene, The Dalles, or Walla Walla to open general stores. The older brother at the hub of the operation then sold the season's harvest to local wholesale grocers or forwarded the surplus to the much larger market in San Francisco. Younger cousins, nephews, and brothers-in-law were apprenticed as clerks in the wholesale operations in Portland. As the railroads made it faster and cheaper to ship manufactured goods, firms like Selling and Akin, Fleischner-Mayer, and smaller operators like Charles Friendly began to specialize in specific lines of merchandise like boots and shoes, men's clothing, or crockery so they would not compete with one another.

In Portland, German Jewish merchants selected housing sites relatively close to the old business core, perhaps to facilitate attendance at Sabbath services and at Sunday school at Temple Beth Israel at Fifth and Oak Streets. By 1880, when non-Jewish merchants were already moving their businesses south along Sixth Street and west along Harrison to Eleventh Street, as well as south along Eleventh and Twelfth Streets from Alder to Clay, Jewish businesses still clustered downtown around Fourth and Washington Streets, and in larger numbers west of the Park Blocks in a narrow corridor between Yamhill and Alder.

Portland also attracted large numbers of Chinese, whose residential area became one of the city's most distinctive features. Chinatown stretched from Ash to Market Streets, between the Willamette River and Third Avenue. Thousands of Chinese men had been attracted to the California goldfields in the 1850s, and to railroad labor throughout the West from the mid-1860s through the 1890s. As early as 1868, the president of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Society, Leland Chin, told the *Morning Oregonian* that five ships were on their way from Hong Kong, with 1,600 laborers to work

on the railroad and to perform other manual work.

The Chinese in Portland became the example of class resentment. As large numbers of Chinese arrived, the *Daily Oregonian* denigrated them as a racial menace that was polluting some of the city's "best streets." The city council in May 1873 passed a resolution suggesting that its members resented Chinese for working for low wages and for remitting funds to their families. The council encouraged contractors to not hire Chinese on pain of losing future contracts. Mayor Wasserman, an immigrant from Bavaria, vetoed the resolution because he found it in violation of treaties between the United States and China.

When a fire broke out in August 1873, allegedly in a Chinese laundry, letters to the *Oregonian* attributed its origin to white "incendiaries" committed to driving Chinese out of the city. (The 1874 city directory said that the fire, initiated by an arsonist, broke out in a furniture company at First and Salmon Streets.) Harvey Scott, in the *Oregonian*, and his sister Abigail Scott Duniway, in the *New Northwest,* sympathized with Chinese when they were attacked, but they too depicted them through stereotypes.

Chinese men settled close to Second and Oak Streets, which had become so segregated by 1880 that the federal census designated it a separate enumeration district, containing over 1,500 Chinese men—and no one else. When Chinese servants were added to the segregated laboring class, Chinese were 12 percent of the city's population, greater than in any other American city except San Francisco. The city directory reflected their status by collecting data. While data on persons eligible for citizenship—"whites," "colored," and "Indian"—were tabulated by ward, with no reference to sex or age, data on the Chinese was tabulated with no reference to political subdivisions. For cultural reasons, Chinese women rarely immigrated to America, and many who did come soon returned. Men stayed to develop community, accumulate savings, and, in some cases, sustain businesses.

The two- and three-story structures along Second Street near Oak housed many restaurants, a few pools halls, several theaters for Chinese opera, and shops for groceries, crockery, and herbal medicines. The newspapers and police, however, focused on the use of drugs that seemed both exotic and detrimental to white Portlanders. "Opium dens" seemed more menacing than the nearby saloons and brothels for white transients, because they were sequestered in rooms accessible only by "dark, winding passages and doors fastened and guarded, sometimes requiring a guide."

In 1885, when fear of Chinese labor competition led white workers in Tacoma, Washington, to drive Chinese out, many resettled in Portland. Civil authorities, despite the small police force, seemed better prepared than their counterparts in Tacoma to retain control of the streets. Local workers in East Portland in February 1886 drove between 100 and 200 Chinese workers across the river, and a Chinese camp at Guild's Lake was attacked. To suppress vigilantism and protect their own buildings, Portland's Mayor Gates deputized prominent bankers and merchants like Henry Failing, Bernard Goldsmith, and Ben Selling, as well as several hundred of their friends. Sporadic violence persisted, and then simply petered out, with many Chinese moving on.

Nevertheless, the growth of the Chinese population more than kept up with that of the city as whole. During the great flood of 1894, the Chinese were conspicuous in assisting people to safety. As the city was rebuilt and land along First and Second Streets was claimed for small stores, storage lofts, and offices, many Chinese moved to the north side of Burnside, where they rented more rooming houses and storefronts. By 1890, Portland churches sought to win the Chinese to the Christian faith. Baptists, Presbyterians, and the United Brethren had opened missions in the Chinese district, with Sunday services, Sunday schools, and Chinese preachers.

Between 1900 and 1913, the Chinese were submerged in a new multiracial migration spilling over their district. As elderly Chinese men returned to their home villages, and the Chinese population declined, Japanese and Italian laborers, black railroad porters, and others moved in to reinforce the area's image as a place of temporary residence. Japanese men came quite suddenly after 1897 in clusters of ten to twenty from a few farming villages looking for work on railroad crews or as laborers. By 1900, almost 1,200 Japanese men, many married with their wives back home, resided in rooming houses near First and Couch streets and along Flanders Street. Japanese men formed loose partnerships to open rooming houses, pool halls, barber shops, and restaurants. To staff this

network of small businesses they traveled back and forth to Japan, bringing brothers and cousins to Portland as cooks, waiters, and laborers. A much smaller number went to east Portland to work on section crews for the interurban trolleys or as farm laborers hoping to save enough to lease their own land. Japanese men were involved in their own seasonal workers' frontier, with temporary railroad jobs all the way to Nampa, Idaho.

As with the Chinese, at first very few Japanese women arrived, and those who had come typified the earliest phase of temporary overseas migration. The great majority of Japanese women in 1900 were listed in the manuscript census as prostitutes, most living in small cribs near Fifth and Pine. Prostitution was dishonorable everywhere, but was tolerated by the Japanese government as an adjunct of the migration of single men for industrial employment, either within Japan or overseas. For Japanese women from impoverished families, prostitution seemed a desperate way to ease a family's burden. By 1910, Portland's city government, under pressure from women's clubs and ministers, forced the removal of prostitutes. A letter to Mayor Joseph Simon in 1909 refers to Fourth Street as the former site of brothels, "90 percent of [whose] inhabitants are foreign born women procured and doomed to the life." No Japanese women in Portland in 1920, when virtually all were married and assisting their husbands on rented farmland or in small businesses, had been in the city in 1900.

Japanese immigrants settled mainly in northwest Portland, in an area now referred to as Old Town-Chinatown, between the Willamette River and Broadway. By the early twentieth century, Japantown, or Nihonmachi, was home to Japanese-operated businesses, including hotels and boarding houses, restaurants, laundries and baths, groceries, doctors, and dentists. Japantown became vacant following the forced removal and incarceration of Japanese and Japanese Americans during World War II. While some resettled away from the West Coast following the war, others returned to the city, where they encountered racial prejudice. In the postwar years, Chinatown migrated from southwest to northwest Portland, occupying the former Japantown. In the latter half of the twentieth century, Korean immigrants established a Koreatown in Beaverton.

African Americans came to the same neighborhood near Union Station because they found work with the Pullman Company, with railroads, or with downtown hotels. In 1900, the First African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church had been relocated to 13th and Main, not too far from the Portland Hotel, where dozens of black men worked and lived. The Bethel AME Church was at 68 North Tenth, in a neighborhood where over a dozen black women operated rooming houses and where the Golden West Hotel, on Everett Street near the Park Blocks, housed between forty and fifty men.

Scattered among the far more numerous Chinese and Japanese businesses were black-owned barbershops, pool halls, and restaurants. As in other cities beyond the American South, blacks in Portland found that patterns of discrimination could be elusive. When Oliver Taylor, an employee of the Pullman Company, and some friends in 1905 bought box seats at the Star Theater, the management refused to seat them, saying that they could only occupy general admission seats. Taylor, represented by the prominent black attorney, T. McCants Stewart, sued for $5,000 in damages, but the judge found against him. The *Oregonian*, accepting the prevalent doctrine that the law should not override popular prejudices, supported the decision. "Colored people are wise," the editor argued, "who accept conditions that they cannot change or control."

Just as Japanese families migrated to East Portland to fulfill the dream of owning farmland, so the opening of the Broadway Bridge in 1913 allowed black families to move across the river in search of homeownership. Because the Portland Realty Board instructed its members not to sell to blacks or Asians who wanted to move to blocks inhabited exclusively by whites, African Americans were confined to the ridge line above the Albina train yards and the nearby industrial sites. By 1920, the black community was divided between transients renting rooms near Union Depot and families buying homes across the Broadway Bridge. By then, 62 percent of black households and over 80 percent of couples with children lived near Williams Avenue. Because most black men were confined to low wage employment, black married women were far more likely to work outside the home than were white women, and they usually had few children. Black social life now focused along Williams Avenue, not around the Union depot. The Methodist churches had moved there, Mt. Olivet Baptist Church had been founded there, and the new Williams Avenue YWCA was the

meeting spot for women's clubs and benevolent societies.

Italians and Russian Jews also had a very visible presence, though combined they were in 1910 only about 5 percent of the total population. Between 1900 and 1910 the Jewish immigrant population grew at about the same rate as the city's population, doubling to about 2,300, while the Italian population grew five-fold to over 3,000. Like the Japanese and Chinese, large numbers of Italian men emigrated in groups, with the intent of accumulating savings and returning to their villages. In Portland in 1910, over 75 percent of Italian adults were male, and over half of these were single. Russian Jews generally emigrated as families, or husbands would come first and then send for their wives and children. Among Portland's immigrant Jews at the time, only 55 percent of the adults were males, and of these only 14 percent were single.

The most intense concentration of the two groups was in South Portland, about a mile from the central business district. The degree of concentration of the two groups in the area is a measure of their differing migration patterns. Two-thirds of immigrant Jews lived there, always in families and often with married sisters living within a house or two of one another, but only about one-third of Portland's Italians lived there, because so many young men had yet to form families. Since Jewish families arrived first, they lived along First and Second Streets, and the central crossing streets. Italians lived on the eastern and western edges. Because many Italian men were peddlers, they boarded their horses at livery stables in Marquam Gulch and lived nearby. As one Jewish resident remembered, "The gulch in South Portland was the site of horses and wagons of the peddlers. In the morning it was quite a sight to see the horses and wagons stream out of the gulch." Most of the Jewish men owned or clerked in small stores, either in the neighborhood or at second-hand stores along the waterfront closer to downtown. The great majority of Italian men, apart from a few who owned neighborhood stores, worked as laborers.

The disparity between immigrant Jews and Italians in employment, as well as differences in social values, led to major differences in the size of their families, the composition of their households, and their length of stay in the neighborhood. Jews tended to marry at a younger age than Italians and to have larger families, but they formed a network of businesses where their sons could find employment as clerks or even partners. In addition, Jews valued education for their daughters, many of whom entered the labor force as clerks or bookkeepers at Meier & Frank or Lipman, Wolfe department stores. Italian fathers depended on the labor of their sons for additional family income, and families usually took in three or more Italian men as boarders.

Neighborhood social life could be intense. Jewish and Italian children attended Failing School, and many joined social or athletic clubs at Neighborhood House, a settlement opened by the Council of Jewish Women at Second and Woods Streets. Jews formed a half dozen small synagogues in the district and opened a Hebrew school, which children attended in the late afternoon, at Neighborhood House. Italians attended St. Michael the Archangel, at Fourth and Mill, while their fraternal lodges met at the Italian Federation Hall at Fourth and Madison.

In the 1920s, Jews and Italians, like African Americans and Japanese, moved to eastside neighborhoods, but at different rates. Jews, who on average probably had higher incomes, moved faster. Small shopkeepers moved across the Hawthorne Bridge to Ladd's Addition and other areas in the southeast. Those who owned small manufacturing plants or had become professionals moved to more expensive housing in Laurelhurst. Italians tended to remain in South Portland, where during the 1920s they were able to pool family income to buy homes. Their adult children also moved to the east side, but more often than Jews they became renters. Their transition was eased because they joined an even larger Italian contingent who as early as 1910 had started small truck farms along the main roads in rural Multnomah County. The Italian farmers' market at Union and Madison Streets had become a landmark, while Italian peddlers still drove wagons to sell fruit and produce to housewives throughout the city.

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