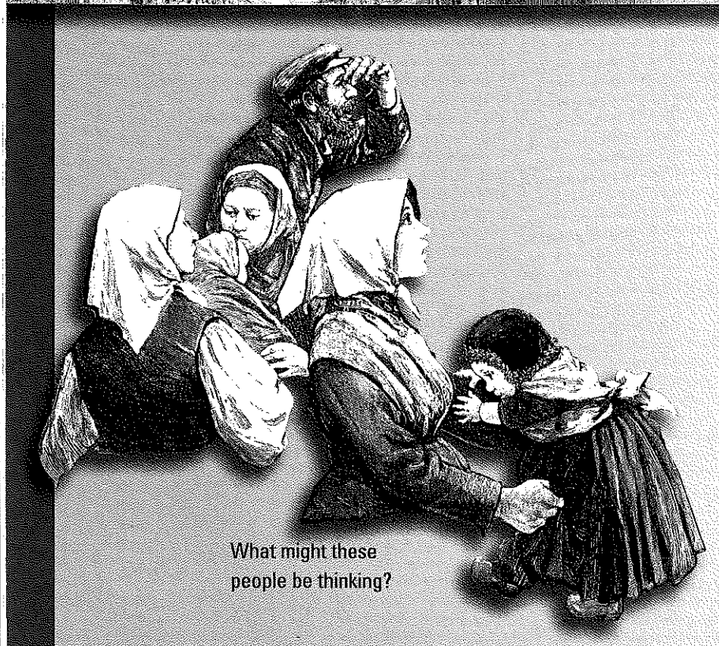


What might these people be thinking?

What does this statue symbolize?

CHAPTER

26

# The Great Wave of Immigration

## 26.1 Introduction

In the early 1880s, a young American Jew named Emma Lazarus saw a boatload of Jewish immigrants who had just arrived in New York City. The Jews crowded on the boat were fleeing a religious massacre in Russia. Inspired by their suffering, Lazarus wrote a poem in which the Statue of Liberty welcomes immigrants. The poem begins:

*Give me your tired, your poor,*
*Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.*

In 1903, a plaque inscribed with Lazarus's poem was attached to the base of the famous statue. Her words expressed the hopes of the millions of people who made their way to the United States during a great wave of immigration between 1880 and 1920. During those 40 years, more than 23 million immigrants arrived in America. Many were escaping poverty, political violence, and religious persecution. Others came seeking economic opportunity in a land of seemingly boundless promise.

Most of the newcomers flocked to cities, where industry was booming and jobs were plentiful. The sheer number of immigrants changed the face of America. The newcomers often clustered in rapidly growing ethnic neighborhoods. In both New York and San Francisco, for example, "Little Italy" districts grew up alongside "Chinatowns."

The new arrivals spurred the growth of the nation's cities and industries. Their languages, customs, music, and food made cities like New York, Chicago, and San Francisco more diverse and exciting places. Yet many native-born Americans responded to them with suspicion and prejudice. For immigrants, these attitudes added to the challenge of starting life in a new country.

In this chapter, you will learn about the experiences and contributions of immigrant groups from around the world. You will also find out how Americans' attitudes toward immigration changed by the 1920s. Never again would the United States hold open its doors so wide to people from other lands.

**Graphic Organizer: Illustration**
You will use an illustration to record information about four different immigrant groups.

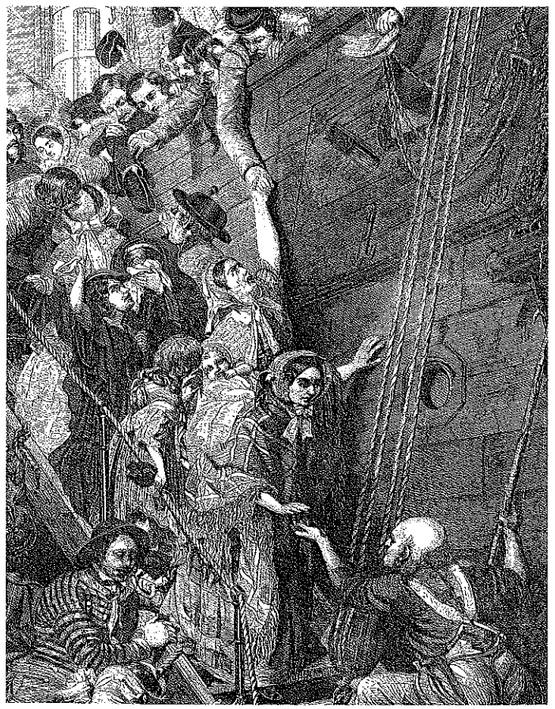
**refugees** people who flee their homes or countries because of war, persecution, or other causes

**assimilation** the process by which immigrants or other newcomers acquire the attitudes, behaviors, and cultural patterns of the society around them

## 26.2 Immigration from Around the Globe

Patterns of immigration to the United States changed in the 1880s. Before this time, most immigrants came from northern Europe, particularly Ireland and Germany. By 1890, most were coming from countries in southern and eastern Europe, such as Italy, Greece, Russia, and Poland. Others came from China, Japan, Korea, and the Philippines. Still others crossed the borders from Canada and Mexico.

Many of these newcomers were **refugees** escaping from violence or poverty in their homelands. Compared to earlier arrivals, they tended to be poorer, less well educated, and less likely to speak English. Among them were many Jews and Catholics, as well as Buddhists and Confucianists—a major change for a country that had always been largely Protestant.



Between 1880 and 1920, more than 20 million people came to the United States in search of a better life. The hardships of their journey were only the beginning of the challenges they would face as they tried to build a new life in America.

**The Struggle for Acceptance** Americans wondered how the throngs of immigrants would affect the country. Most favored the **assimilation** of foreign-born people into the culture of their new homeland. They expected immigrants to become "Americanized"—to talk, dress, and act like their native-born neighbors. Others believed that the new immigrants, especially nonwhites, were too "different" to be assimilated. Their prejudices were reinforced when ethnic groups clustered in their own towns or neighborhoods, in part for mutual support and in part because they were not accepted elsewhere.

In fact, many immigrants were eager to adopt American ways. Others had little choice. Public schools taught in English, and most stores sold only American-style clothes, food, and other goods. Many employers demanded that their workers speak English on the job.

Some immigrants did cling to their own language and way of life. But even those who tried hardest to assimilate often met with abuse and discrimination. Immigrants also faced resentment from workers who saw them as competing for jobs.

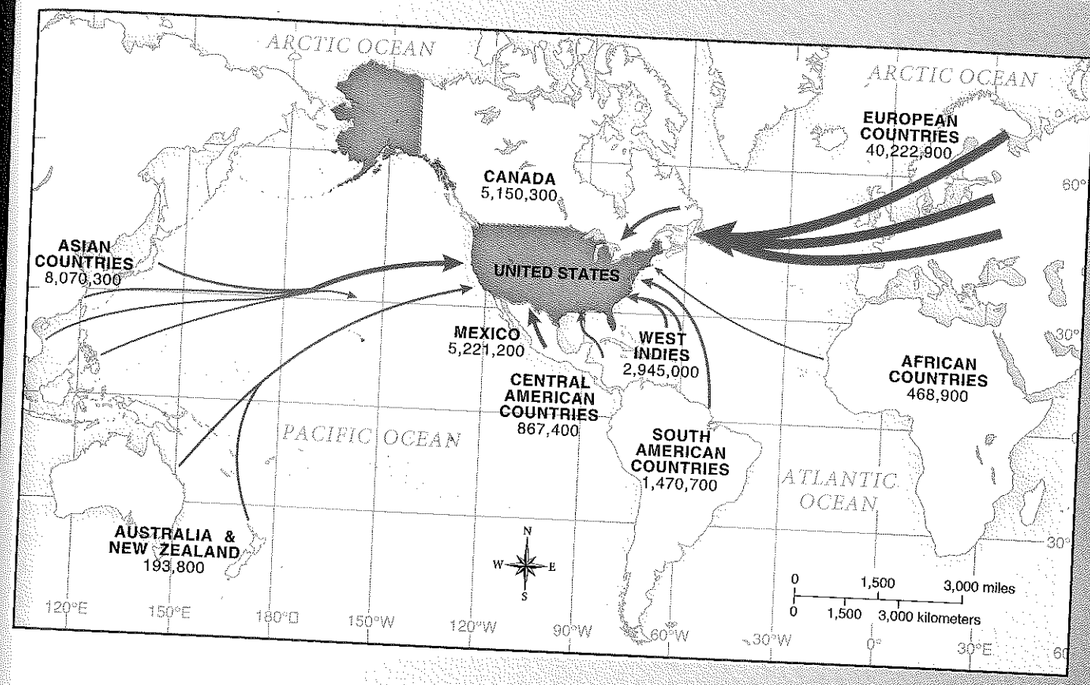
**Contributions of Immigrants** The new immigrants made vital contributions to America's rapidly industrializing society. As one historian has written, "They and their fellow workers built the railroad…mined the gold and silver…labored in the oilfields, steel mills, coal pits, packing plants, and factories…." Without the immigrants' skills and labor, the nation's cities and industries would not have grown nearly as fast as they did.

Immigrants also brought a vibrant diversity to their adopted land. America became a truly multicultural society, enriched by the customs, crafts, languages, and faiths of people from around the globe.



# Geography Challenge

## Immigration to the United States, 1820–1990




1. Identify at least four interesting details on this map.
2. What do the arrows on the map indicate?
3. Between 1820 and 1990, where did the greatest number of immigrants come from? Where did the least number of immigrants come from? How do you know?
4. Which of the arrows on the map shows where your family or ancestors came from?
5. What are or were some of the effects on the United States of the immigration patterns shown on this map?

Millions of Italians, anxious to escape the poverty of their homeland, journeyed by ship to America. During the long voyage, they endured crowded, smelly conditions and poor food.

## 26.3 Italian Immigrants

When Pascal D'Angelo heard that his father was leaving their poor Italian village to work overseas, he was angry. "America was stealing my father from me," he later said. His mother tried to soothe him, saying that soon Papa would return, "laden with riches." But Pascal begged his father to take him along. His father agreed, and the two of them boarded a steamship bound for the United States.

**From Italy to America** Like millions of other Italians, Pascal and his father came to America to escape poverty. In the late 1800s, much of Italy, and especially mountainous southern Italy, could not support the country's rapidly growing population. Farmers struggled to eke out a living on worn-out, eroded land where crops too often failed. There were few factories to provide other jobs.

Poor immigrants like Pascal and his father usually made the ocean passage in "steerage." Steerage was a deck, deep in the ship, that was reserved for the passengers who paid the lowest fares. These passengers were given narrow beds in crowded compartments that smelled of spoiled food, human waste, and sweating people who had nowhere to bathe.

Steerage passengers were allowed on deck only once a day. The rest of the time, they tried to amuse themselves by playing games, singing, and making music with accordions, mandolins, and other instruments.

After almost two weeks, the weary travelers arrived at the immigration station on Ellis Island in New York Harbor. There they had to pass medical examinations and answer questions about how they planned to support themselves in the United States. People who did not pass these inspections could be sent home, even if other family members were allowed to enter. So many families were forced to separate that Italians started calling Ellis Island "The Island of Tears."



**Starting a New Life** Judged healthy and ready to work, Pascal and his father entered New York City. A fellow Italian, a work agent called a padrone, helped them to find jobs building roads. Padrones helped many Italian immigrants get unskilled work building sewers, subways, and roads, cleaning streets, and laying bricks for new **tenement buildings**. By 1890, Italians made up 90 percent of New York's public works employees and 99 percent of Chicago's street workers.

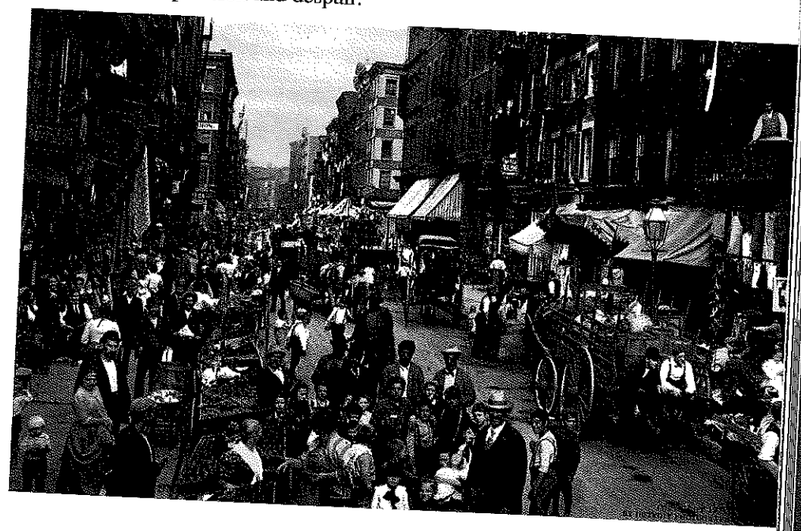
**tenement buildings** crowded and usually run-down buildings with many small, cheap apartments

Many Italian immigrants were "birds of passage"—young men who came to America to earn some money and then went back home. When several co-workers died in a work accident, Pascal's father decided to return to Italy as well. "We are not better off than when we started," he said.

Pascal, however, decided to stay in his new country. He settled in a poor Italian neighborhood in New York, one of the many "Little Italys" that sprang up in American cities. These mostly Italian neighborhoods bulged with residents who could afford only the cheapest tenement housing. Crowded together in tiny apartments, most families had no privacy. The difficulties of their new life led some immigrants to depression and despair.

Fortunately, Italian neighborhoods also offered opportunities for fun. Most Italians were Catholics who celebrated saints' days as they had in Italy. They strung colored lights, flags, and streamers along the shops and streets. Children dashed among booths that offered food and games. Fireworks, music, and dancing reminded everyone of life back home.

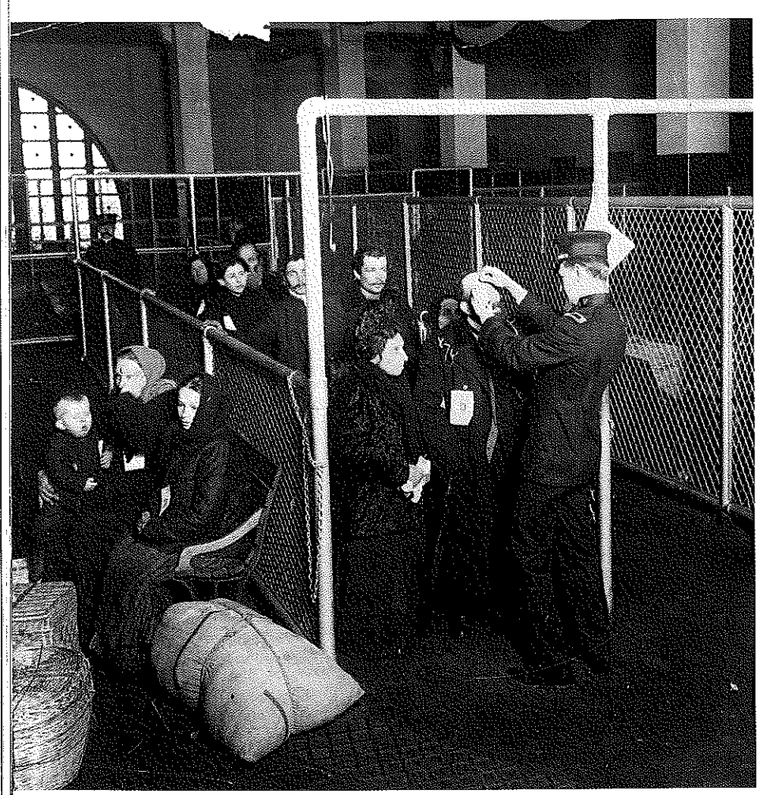
Above everything else, Italians valued family closeness. Some Italian parents didn't send their children to school because they feared that learning English would distance their children from the family. Besides, a child in school wasn't earning money to help the family. As a result, many immigrant children never learned the skills they needed for better jobs.



Italian immigrants often moved to "Little Italys" such as Mulberry Street in New York City, shown in the photograph. Here, rents were cheap and living conditions crowded.

Because many Italian newcomers were poor and uneducated, Americans tended to look down on them. When a few Italians turned to crime and became notorious gangsters, some people started thinking of all Italians as criminals. As a group, however, Italian immigrants were generally more law-abiding than average Americans.

Some Americans feared that immigrants from Italy would always be poor and illiterate. Pascal D'Angelo was one of many who proved them wrong. After arriving in America, Pascal bought himself a dictionary and learned to read and write English. In time, he became a well-known poet whose work was published in national magazines.



When immigrants arrived at Ellis Island, they faced the dreaded medical inspection. Those judged to be in poor health had to stay on Ellis Island until they were well. Those who never improved were sent home.

## 26.4 Jewish Immigrants from Eastern Europe

Maryusha Antonovksy was no more. In her place stood Mary Antin, the same immigrant Jewish girl but with a new, "American," name. Mary had also bought "real American machine-made garments" to replace her "hateful" homemade European-style clothes. "I long to forget," she said. "It is painful to be conscious of two worlds."

**Fleeing Persecution** Mary Antin's first world had been a Jewish village in Russia. For centuries, Russians had resented Jews, who dressed, worshiped, and ate differently from their Christian neighbors. By the 1800s, Russia had hundreds of anti-Jewish laws. Jews could live only in certain areas. They couldn't live in big cities or own land.

In 1881, assassins killed the Russian monarch Czar Alexander II. Nervous government leaders blamed Jews for his murder, even though the assassin wasn't Jewish. Angry Russians raged through Jewish villages, burning, looting, and killing. These attacks, called **pogroms**, happened repeatedly for more than 30 years.

Many Jews fled these terrors, hoping to find refuge in America. Between 1881 and 1924, some 2.4 million Jews came to the United States from Russia and other countries in eastern Europe. Mary Antin's father was one of them.

Mary's father left for America in 1891, hoping to earn enough money to send for his family. In his first letter home, Mary sensed "an elation [joy], a hint of triumph.... My father was inspired by a vision. He saw something—he promised us something. It was this 'America.'"

When Antin sent a steamship ticket for his family to join him, the people in Mary's village gathered, filled with longing. "They wanted to handle the ticket," Mary remembered, "and mother must read them what is written on it."

After long rides in overcrowded trains and weeks of delay, Mary's family finally boarded a ship in Hamburg, Germany. Although richer immigrants enjoyed comfortable cabins, the Antins were crowded together with hundreds of other passengers deep down in the ship. Seasick at first, they frequently came up on deck for fresh air, where "sailors and girls had a good many dances."

**pogroms** Organized and often violent persecutions of minority groups. The word *pogrom* comes from Russian words meaning "like thunder."

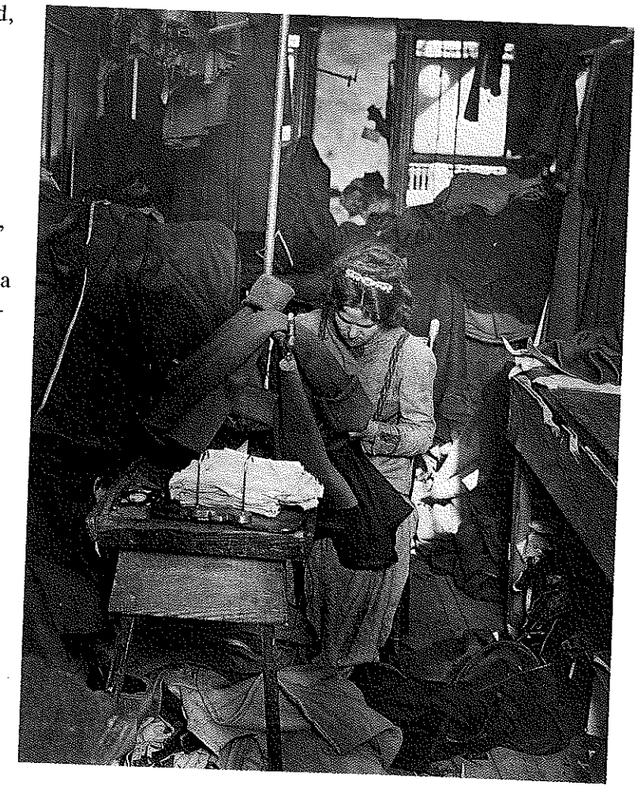


Like most European immigrants, the Antins entered the United States via New York Harbor. Wealthier passengers in first-class and second-class cabins were questioned briefly before being admitted to their new country. But the majority of arrivals were taken on crowded barges to the immigration station on Ellis Island. Often they had to wait for hours while inspectors and doctors examined each person. Fortunately, most new arrivals spent less than a day on the island before proceeding to shore and the beginning of their new life in America.

**Jewish Life in America** From Ellis Island, Jews headed for New York City's Lower East Side neighborhood. There they established shops, newspapers, religious schools, and synagogues (community centers and places of worship). The Lower East Side became the most densely populated neighborhood in the city. People lived packed into cheap tenements, often sleeping three or four to a room.

Some Jews worked as street vendors, using a pushcart to sell everything from coal to second-hand clothes. Pushcart vendors saved their money to buy horse-drawn carts and then little stores. Although most Jews were poor, they arrived in America with a wide range of skills. Jews worked as cobblers, butchers, carpenters, and watchmakers. Almost half found jobs in the city's garment factories.

Jewish immigrants did whatever they could to keep their children in school. In Europe, Jews had honored educated people, but schooling had cost money. As a result, many Jews had never learned to read and write. In America, Mary Antin wrote, "Education was free.... It was the one thing that [my father] was able to promise us when he sent for us: surer, safer than bread or shelter."

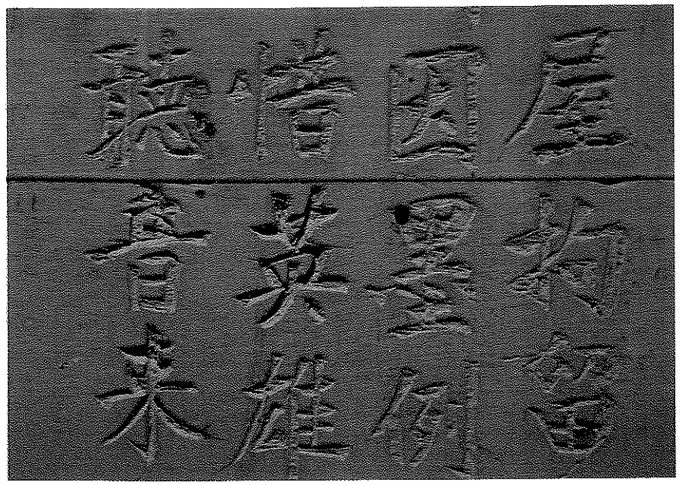


Immigrants were often forced to take jobs in sweatshops, such as the one shown here, where most of the work was done by women and children. Workers were usually paid 25 to 40 cents a day.

Parents who made a little money often sent their sons, and sometimes their daughters, to the city's inexpensive public colleges. By 1910, more Jewish youths over 16 were still in school than were young people of any other ethnic group.

Like other immigrant groups, Jews faced prejudice and discrimination. Most private schools and clubs refused to accept Jews. Hospitals would not hire Jewish doctors; the New York Bar Association would not admit Jews (as lawyers). Many ads for jobs stated simply, "Christians only."

Still, eastern European Jews were grateful to be in their new country. One immigrant recalled, "There were markets groaning with food and clothes.... There was no military on horseback and no whips."



Chinese immigrants were sometimes detained for several months on Angel Island before they were allowed to enter the United States. In their crowded barracks, some carved poems on the wooden walls, expressing despair over their condition.

## 26.5 Chinese Immigrants

As you read in earlier chapters, the first Chinese immigrants came to the United States to seek gold in California. Later, many helped to build the first transcontinental railroad. Some of these immigrants returned to China with money they had made in America. Their good fortune inspired Lee Chew to leave his poor village for the United States in 1882.

**Traveling to California** Lee paid 50 dollars for a bunk on a crowded steamship making the month-long voyage to San Francisco. On the ship, he got his first taste of foreign food and marveled at machinery he had never seen before. "The engines that moved the ship were wonderful monsters," he wrote, "strong enough to lift mountains."

Lee arrived just in time. In the United States, anti-Chinese sentiment (feeling) had been building ever since whites had pushed Chinese off their mining claims. As the number of Chinese immigrants increased, labor leaders warned of hordes of Chinese workers who would work for less pay than whites and take away their jobs. In 1882, Congress passed an Exclusion Act that banned Chinese laborers from immigrating to the United States. The law also denied Chinese immigrants the right to become citizens.

As a result of the Chinese Exclusion Act, Chinese immigration slowed to almost nothing. Then, in 1906, an earthquake and fire destroyed much of San Francisco, including most birth records. Suddenly, many Chinese men could claim to be native-born citizens. As citizens, they were allowed to bring their wives and children to the United States.

Chinese claiming American birth started arranging for people in China to immigrate to the United States as their relatives. On the long ship voyage, the newcomers studied hundreds of pages describing their "families." When they reached San Francisco Bay, they threw the papers overboard.

These "paper relatives" landed at Angel Island in San Francisco Bay. Government immigration officials "locked us up like criminals in compartments like the cages in zoos," said one Chinese immigrant. Chinese usually remained on the island for three to four weeks, but sometimes they spent months or even years there. To pass the time, they carved poems on the wooden walls with silverware smuggled from the dining halls. One wrote,

> *Why do I have to sit in jail? It is only because my country is weak and my family is poor. My parents wait at the door in vain for news. My wife and child wrap themselves in their quilt, sighing with loneliness.*



Before being allowed to leave the island, each immigrant faced detailed questioning by suspicious officials. "How many steps are there in your house?" "Where do you sleep in your house?" "Who lives next door?" Then they asked a "family" witness from San Francisco the same questions. If the answers didn't match, officials could deport the newcomer. Nearly one in ten Chinese who came to America was sent back to China.

**Chinese Life in the United States** When Lee Chew arrived, he worked first as a servant, and then set up his own laundry. Many Chinese started laundries because, as Lee explained, "It requires little capital [money] and is one of the few opportunities that are open. Men of other nationalities who are jealous of the Chinese...have shut him out of working on farms or in factories or building railroads."

Like Lee, most Chinese settled in city neighborhoods like San Francisco's bustling Chinatown. Here, they could find work at Chinese laundries, restaurants, and stores. Chinese newspapers, herbal medicines, foods, and festivals provided comfort and support.

For many years, most Chinese immigrants were men. In 1900, only about 1 in 20 Chinese on the United States mainland was female. With so few women and families, the Chinese population in America began to decline. In 1880, about 105,000 Chinese lived in the United States. By 1920, just 61,600 remained.

Gradually, more women and children arrived, especially in San Francisco. Housing was closed to Chinese in most areas, so Chinatown became more and more crowded.

For white Americans, Chinatown became a tourist attraction, a "mysterious" place to see "strange faces" and eat new foods. To most Chinese immigrants, however, Chinatown was home.

Chinese immigrants settled in Chinatowns like this one in San Francisco. There they preserved the culture they had left behind.

By 1900, railroad lines linked the United States and Mexico. Trains provided convenient transportation for Mexicans, who were free to enter the United States without passports.

## 26.6 Mexican Immigrants

Soldiers were shooting all around. A flying bullet almost hit him. That was when Pablo Mares decided he had to get out of Mexico. "I had to come to the United States," he said later, "because it was impossible to live down there with so many revolutions."

Mares had been caught in the middle of a bloody civil war. The conflict began when Mexico's president allowed wealthy landowners to take over the lands of 6 million Indians and 8 million poor farmers. In 1910, landless farmers rebelled, breaking up large landholdings and giving the land to poor families. In response, soldiers attacked villages, killing thousands of peasants.

**Crossing the Border** The Mexican Revolution dragged on for 10 terrible years. Between 1910 and 1920, about 500,000 Mexicans entered the United States. They entered freely, without **passports** or money.

**passport** a document issued by a citizen's home government that identifies a person and permits him or her to travel to other countries

Many Mexicans walked hundreds of miles to reach the border, carrying all they owned on their backs. In just one day, a Texas reporter saw "hundreds of Mexicans, all journeying northward on foot, on burroback and in primitive two-wheel carts." Others traveled north by rail. By 1900, railroad lines connected American and Mexican cities. Railroads provided both transportation and jobs for Mexican immigrants. One Mexican newspaper reported, "There is not a day in which passenger trains do not leave for the border, full of Mexican men who are going in gangs to work on railroad lines in the United States."

**Mexicans in America** Many American employers welcomed the Mexicans. Expanding railroads and large-scale farms and ranches in the Southwest depended on laborers who were willing to work hard for little pay. After Congress banned Chinese immigration in 1882, these employers looked to Mexico for new workers. "Where I came from," said one Mexican construction worker, "I used to work ten hours for $1.25.... Then I came here and they paid $1.25 for eight hours—it was good."



Some Mexican immigrants found jobs with railroads, mines, factories, and canneries. But most found work in agriculture. Mexican farmworkers moved from region to region, harvesting crops as they ripened. They picked oranges in southern California, almonds in central California, and then apples in Oregon. They harvested cotton in Texas and Arizona, and then moved on to sugar beets in Colorado.

Farmwork paid very little. One Texas farmer said, "I was paying Pancho and his whole family 60 cents a day.... He worked from sun to sun." Children worked in the fields beside their parents to help support their families. Few of these children had a chance to attend school.

Farmworkers often lived in camps that they built near the fields. "Shelters were made of almost every conceivable thing—burlap, canvas, palm branches," said one visitor. Some farms and ranches provided housing for their workers. Either way, these temporary homes usually lacked running water and basic sanitation.

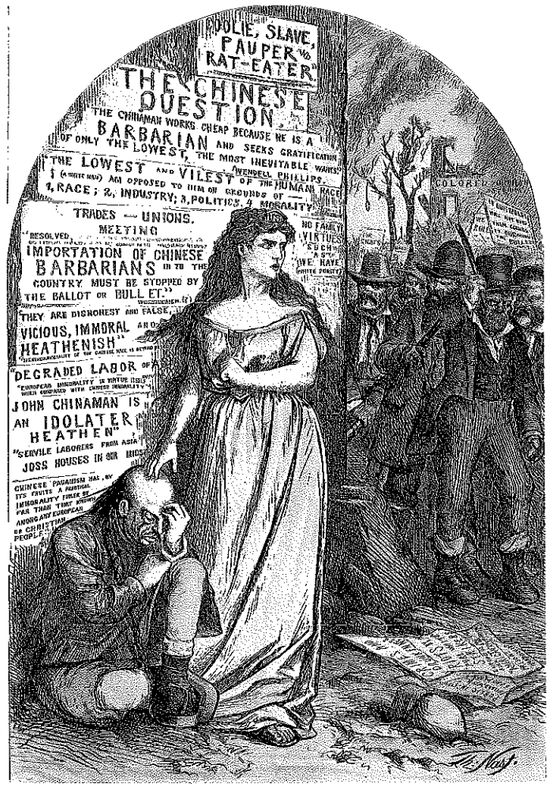
After harvest season, farmworkers sometimes moved to nearby towns. *Barrios,* or Mexican neighborhoods, sprang up on the edges of cities near such farming areas as Los Angeles, California, and San Antonio, Texas. Food stands and grocery stores in the barrio offered familiar tastes and smells. Residents helped each other take care of the sick and find jobs. On Mexican religious holidays, Catholic churches held special ceremonies. On those days, the barrio was filled with singing, dancing, and fireworks.

Many Mexican immigrants originally planned to return to Mexico once the revolution was over. Whites who believed that Mexicans were taking their jobs encouraged such returns. One wrote, "I wish the Mexicans could be put back in their country."

Mexicans who remained in the United States often faced strong prejudice. Compared to whites, they earned very low wages, and they had little say in their working conditions. In schools, white children were sometimes taught to "boss" their Mexican classmates, as they were expected to do when they grew up.

Despite these problems, many Mexican immigrants chose to stay. Like Isidro Osorio, a farm and railroad worker, they hoped for a better future in their new homeland. "I have worked very hard to earn my $4.00 a day," reported Osorio. "That is why I want to give a little schooling to my children so that they won't stay like I am."

Some Mexicans, such as those in this photograph, found jobs in mines. Most, however, were employed as agricultural workers.




The Granger Collection, New York

Immigrants like the Chinese man in the cartoon above often faced discrimination and lack of acceptance in their new country.

**nativism** an attitude of superiority and resentment toward the foreign-born.

**quota** a limit based on numbers or proportions—for example, the proportion of a country's population allowed to immigrate to the United States

**visas** government documents that allow people from other nations to enter the country for a limited period of time

## 26.7 Closing the Door on Immigration

In 1920, a mob stormed through the Italian neighborhood of West Frankfort, a small Illinois town. The crowd was frustrated by a mining strike and angered by bank robberies that Italian criminals were rumored to have committed. For three days, mobs beat up Italian immigrants and burned their homes. This attack reflected a surge of **nativism**, or anti-immigrant feeling, that peaked in the United States around this time.

**The Tide Turns Against Immigrants** The United States has always been a nation of immigrants, yet time and again nativism has sparked actions and policies directed against newer arrivals. Sometimes nativism is rooted in economic competition. Sometimes it stems from ethnic, religious, and other differences. In the 1830s, for example, Protestant nativists charged that Catholic immigrants were enemies of democracy because they owed their primary loyalty to the Pope in Rome.

The surge in immigration that began in the 1880s fueled another rise in nativism. Native-born Americans blamed immigrants for everything from slums and crime to hard times. Fearing competition for jobs, many labor leaders stoked the fires of prejudice, especially against nonwhites. In 1909, the president of the United Mine Workers wrote of Asians that "as a race their standard of living is extremely low, and their assimilation by Americans impossible."

**Restricting Immigration** Politicians responded to the growing clamor against immigrants. As you have read, in 1882 Congress banned further immigration by Chinese laborers. In 1907, Japanese immigrants were forbidden entry to the United States. In 1917, Congress required immigrants to prove that they could read and write before they would be allowed into the United States.

To further limit immigration, Congress established a **quota** system in 1921 and refined it in 1924. Under this system, by 1927 only 150,000 immigrants were allowed to enter the United States each year. East Asians were completely excluded. In addition, quotas limited immigration from any one country to 2 percent of the number of people from that country who lived in the United States in 1890. Most eastern and southern Europeans had arrived after that year. As a result, most of the quota spaces were reserved for immigrants from England, Ireland, and Germany.

The new laws did not limit Mexican immigration. However, Mexicans now needed passports and **visas** to enter the United States. For the first time, America was closing its doors.



## 26.8 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you read about the great wave of immigration to the United States between 1880 and 1920. You used an illustration to learn about the experiences of four immigrant groups from around the world who built new lives in America.

The immigrants of this period were far more diverse than earlier arrivals. Many were escaping from poverty, wars, or persecution. Others were drawn to America by the promise of economic opportunity. With their skills and labor, these new immigrants helped build the nation's booming cities and industries. But they also faced many challenges, including the tension between assimilation and preserving their way of life.

Each group of immigrants faced its own challenges in journeying to America. Once they arrived, most had to pass inspection at immigration stations like those on Ellis Island in New York Harbor and Angel Island in San Francisco Bay. There they could be denied entry and sent home.

The immigrants who did enter the country often experienced prejudice and discrimination. In cities, they crowded into their own neighborhoods and worked at lower-paying jobs. In the West and the Southwest, Mexican farmworkers labored long hours in the fields and followed the crops from region to region.

In the 1920s, anti-immigrant feeling led Congress to limit the number of people who would be allowed into the United States. These immigration-restriction laws brought an end to the great wave of immigration. But by then, the United States had become a far more diverse country. Only time would tell whether Americans would embrace this diversity and extend the promise of equal opportunity to all the nation's people.

The great wave of immigration during the late 19th century created a nation of rich, diverse cultures. People from many backgrounds came together and became Americans. In this photograph, a mix of immigrants are in class together learning English.