

Immigrants

In two big waves they hit our shores
First to the north we opened our doors
Then to the south and east Europe (1) too
They brought different cultures, a real ethnic stew

And they traveled from their royal lords
And they traveled from the starving hordes (2)

Moving to places where they'd find their kin (3)
Their lives as Americans would soon begin
Some kept their culture, some hid their past
The parents might struggle but the children learned fast (4)

And they traveled through nativist claws (5)
And they traveled to Ellis Island's (6) door

Push/Pull (7) to America
Push/Pull to a new land

Some worked on steamboats or from logging shacks
Farming the land or tailoring slacks
Smelting the silver and mining the gold
In the halls of industry (8) their labor was sold

And they traveled in steerage (9) on the ships they took
And they traveled to ghettos (10) packed to the hilt

They come still today, for much the same reasons
For freedom from tyrants or bad growing seasons
Been happening so long it's hard to tell who's who
Yesterday's immigrant, today well to do

And they travel from Vietnam
And they travel from Costa Rica and Taiwan

Push/Pull to America
Push/Pull to a new land

Notes

- 1) **two big waves**: Most immigrants to the United States during the 19th and 20th centuries came in two large demographic waves. Historians refer to the first as the “Old Immigration”, which peaked in the mid-1800s. The second and much larger wave is called the “New Immigration,” from the late 1800s until the First World War (1914). Generally, first wave immigrants were from the countries in northern Europe (Germany, England, Ireland, Scandinavia), while most new immigrants left countries in southern and eastern Europe (Russia, Poland, Italy, Slavic region).
- 2) **starving hordes**: Most immigrants sought a new life in the United States due to poor economic conditions in the Old World. They hoped for jobs in industry and businesses or farms of their own. Some believed that the streets in America were paved with gold. Many achieved a higher standard of living and others would continue to struggle in the US.
- 3) **kin**: Many immigrants came to America a few family members at a time. Often an adult male member would come first to find a place to settle and look for a job. Money might be sent back to Europe to enable the rest of the family to make passage.
- 4) **assimilation**: Assimilation occurs when one culture blends with another. Some immigrants were “Americanized” quickly, while others held onto their language and customs. Usually, younger immigrants assimilated more quickly than the older generation.
- 5) **nativist**: Nativists were people born in the US who did not want immigrants coming into the country. They feared that a growing number of foreigners would take jobs and degrade American culture. At various points in US history, nativists became powerful political forces. In 1921, they influenced Congress to pass the National Origins Act, which strictly reduced the number of immigrants allowed into the US through a restrictive quota system. The “New Immigration” came to an end.

- 6) **Ellis Island**: Located at the entrance to New York harbor, Ellis Island was the great receiving center for millions of European immigrants arriving in America. It served as a mass processing center. Ellis Island registered immigrants and conducted medical screenings, mainly to isolate immigrants with infectious diseases. The Island also provided a variety of social services to help immigrants get settled. The Statue of Liberty, looming above Ellis Island on a neighboring island, was often the first sight of land for immigrants who had been at sea for weeks. The statue symbolized new beginnings in America.
- 7) **push/pull factors**: Historians refer to “push/pull factors” to explain the reasons for large scale immigration to the United States in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. “Push” factors were conditions in Europe that made people want to leave their homelands. Immigrants were pushed by poor economic conditions, political persecution and religious intolerance. At the same time, Europeans were pulled to the United States by the prospect of abundant farmland, decent jobs and political freedom. Push/pull factors operated together to create one of the largest waves of migration in history.
- 8) **industry**: Immigration was made possible by tremendous industrial growth in the United States after the Civil War. Unskilled laborers were in high demand.
- 9) **steerage**: Many poor immigrants traveled as inexpensively as possible, often staying in the lower hold of ships, in crude quarters. This was called steerage because such immigrants slept near the steering mechanism of the boat.
- 10) **ghettoes**: Immigrants tended to congregate in cities, near people from the same country of origin. This created ethnic pockets, often poor and crowded, which became known as ghettoes.

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