

Lesson of History, Newsday, September 28, 2003, By Alan Singer

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“Paddy Works on the Railway” is a folk song about 19th-century Irish immigration to the United States. In one stanza, the balladeer sings, “In 1846, they pelted me with stones and bricks, they pelted me with stones and bricks, for working on the railway.” In the future, our children may well be singing about the mistreatment of Latino immigrants on Long Island at the start of the 21st century.

The comparison between the mistreatment of the Irish yesterday and the Latinos today gained attention during Suffolk County’s Democratic primary. Candidate Bill Cunningham called for building a shape-up site for day laborers in Farmingville, where several teens have been charged with firebombing a Mexican family’s home over the July 4 weekend. His plan is a controversial one in a community where a faction wants to just deport the men.

Pointing out that three of his grandparents came to the United States from Ireland, Cunningham said, “My dad just graduated high school but was a Navy air pilot in World War II and a commercial airline pilot. Then, the next generation, their son is running for county executive. That’s sort of the American way ... With the Latino population, we should not be treating them any differently.” Cunningham lost the race, but the parallel illustrated how Americans are notorious for their short historical memory. Many Long Islanders are descendants of Famine-era Irish, but they have forgotten the experience of their ancestors. It often took three to four generations to be accepted as Americans.

In the wake of the firebombing and other hate-driven violence on Long Island over the years, we can’t wait that long for the new immigrants in Farmingville to be accepted. A possible bias-related assault at East Islip High School last week underscores how important it is that our communities act to challenge bias. An examination of the similarities and differences between the Irish and the Mexicans can help us better understand the implications of what is happening and what we must do.

Some immigrant groups have always found it easier than others to succeed in new societies and cultures. The Irish in the 19th century and the mostly Mexican day laborers in Farmingville today share the common problem of moving from an essentially agricultural world to an industrial, and now post-industrial, economy. In both cases, although they work hard, their skills are not valued. They end up with the lowest paid, most dangerous, least desirable work. This makes it virtually impossible for them to buy homes, support families and improve conditions for their children.

Their origins in agricultural communities contribute to a cultural chasm that feeds into stereotypes about racial and ethnic inferiority. In the 19th century, political cartoons portrayed the Irish as ape-like, simpletons or drunken fiends. One of the best known was by Thomas Nast, who accused the Irish of a drunken attack on police officers during a St. Patrick’s Day Parade. The Irish were considered undesirable, unassimilatable immigrants who were undermining American institutions. Likewise, anti-immigration activists in Farmingville now call the day laborers “low-level terrorists.”

Diarist George Templeton Strong, who lived in 19th-century New York City, once complained, “It was enough to turn a man’s stomach to see the way they were naturalizing this morning.” One of the ways that he hoped to stop the mass migration was through “a vigorous attack on the Roman Catholic Cathedral with brick bats and howls.” The Farmingville firebombing is a similar effort to frighten a new group of immigrants.

But a major difference between Irish migration and the arrival of Mexican workers today is the issue of legality. Before 1921, the United States only restricted immigration from China and Japan. Irish immigrants arriving in New York, Boston and elsewhere simply walked off the boat. But not all of the day workers in Farmingville are undocumented. And the issue of legality may become less of a problem in the future. Congress is now considering a plan to allow almost 500,000 undocumented farm workers to become legal U.S. residents.

Economic conditions have changed in the past 150 years, and some immigration restrictions in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks may be justified. However it is also true that just as the Irish were driven from their homeland by British economic policies, Mexicans are being forced to risk undocumented entry into the United States because of the decimation of their country by globalization.

It might help to draw out that similarity and others to help cope with what is happening in Farmingville. The support is there. As associate director of the Great Irish Famine curriculum in New York State, I participated in developing and testing instructional material at a number of Long Island schools. We used the subject of Irish immigration to introduce students to questions that are still confronting us: What happens when bias and stereotyping are tolerated in a community? What are the responsibilities of individuals when bad things are happening to other people? What are the responsibilities of the media, community and nation when there is suffering and social inequality?

Introduced in the schools last year, the 1,000-page curriculum could almost be about the recent experience of Latino immigrants. For instance, in lessons, readings and activities about the techniques used to dehumanize Irish immigrants in order to excuse their mistreatment, teachers on Long Island could draw parallels to Farmingville. A discussion of angry, hateful protests by the Sachem Quality of Life group could provide some material, but so could much more subtle examples of how prejudice is tolerated. In that same interview where he discusses his Irish roots, Cunningham discussed how having “men on street corners looking for work” was “unfair to the people in Farmingville” because it hurts property values.

The curriculum, which spans grades 4 through 12 and is part of the state’s Human Rights curriculum, encourages students to consider the causes of major social problems as well as individual and collective responses. It encourages them to become active citizens committed to democracy and justice.

If Long Island is to avoid becoming a national synonym for irrational violence and bigotry directed at immigrants, our communities must learn lessons from the past; acknowledge, confront and overcome prejudices; and start the process of building a more just society. We cannot afford to wait three generations for today’s wounds to heal.