The Public Library and Ethnic Heritage

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Which American community does *not* have a diverse ethnic heritage? True, one may need to dig a little to find the various heritages, but they are there nevertheless. Later generations may be unaware (and even uncaring) about such roots, but if we begin with the premise that all of our families were immigrants at one time, and then find proof in a community's census, photographs or other local records, the idea of an homogenized American town soon vanishes.

This is as true of Muncie, Indiana (the "Middletown" of sociologists Robert and Helen Lynn) as any other American town. The myth that Muncie and similar communities are present-oriented and uninterested in discovering the diversity of the past may be heard, but the facts of history reveal a different story. The fabric of such ethnic cultural richness is spread across the country, and it is important for public librarians to bring it out. The purpose of this paper is to examine Hoosier ethnicity and suggest how public libraries might respond to this continuing theme.

Definitions

The definition of an ethnic group is no longer constricted by such terms as "race" or "nation." Rather, it has become more open-ended, such as in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*:

> An ethnic group is a distinct category of the population in a larger society whose culture is usually different from its own.

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> The members of such a group are, or feel themselves, or are taught to be, bound together by common ties of race or nationality or culture.[1]

A more recent examination of ethnic identity expands on the encyclopedia definition:

> An ethnic group is a self-perceived group of people who hold in common a set of traditions not shared by the others with whom they are in contact. Such traditions typically include "folk" religious beliefs and practices, language, a sense of historical continuity, and common ancestry or place of origin.[2]

But the most recent, comprehensive study of the subject, *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, posits ethnic groups as characterized by a mix of features and in combinations that vary considerably. For example, beside such traditional group features as common geographic origins and language or dialect, the definition includes migratory status, ties that transcend kinship, nieghborhood and community boundaries, and shared traditions, values and symbols. Further, an ethnic group may also be defined by settlement and employment patterns, an internal sense of distinctiveness and an external perception of distinctiveness—in any mix of combinations.[3]

Such definitions, then, encourage the historian and librarian to re-examine old questions, such as what happened after the migration of the group was completed, and how the members settled into their new surroundings.[4] And to the point of this essay, these new definitions allow the inclusion of the Appalachians, a group of Hoosiers who in no small way fulfill the American penchant for categorizing people.

Thus, when the scholars of the *Harvard Encyclopedia* view Appalachians, they see the lack of church groups, distinct language, and racial characteristics that often define an ethnic group. But they do see enough in the mountain people to include them in the work: "What consciousness [the Appalachian people] have comes from their distinctive kinship system, religion, dialect, and music."[5] Appalachian ethnicity in Muncie will be briefly examined below.

While a larger study would provide more of the theoretical background and concepts of ethnicity, it is sufficient in this paper to assert that ethnicity is a group's sense of peoplehood. No matter how much the group is assimilated or remains isolated, the sense of group both persists and transforms. Some things remain from the rich past and some things are lost, until perhaps a later generation explores its roots as a group or individual families.

The speculation underlying this essay is that the sense of peoplehood—the sense of self that is present in all nurturing—is passed on to the second and third and fourth generations, in one way

or another. The content and depth of the legacy passed will differ but the *sense* of peoplehood will be there. If we accept this assumption, then, a reading of Indiana's history and a close examination of nineteenth-century Muncie census data reveals a different shape to our past, one that is more diverse than we have previously believed.

Indiana Beginnings

Except for a few early settlers, the first of the American pioneers to come to Indiana were the squatters or landless people, the forgotten men of the frontier. Barnhart refers to their "essentially democratic character"; this was instrumental in shaping the state's government over the first century and a half. One can see in written documents, constitutional conventions, legislation, and judicial decisions an increasing democratization. It is a heritage that has been significant in the state's history, and places Indiana very much in the mainstream of American history. Practice has not always met promise, but the heritage is there.

Nineteenth-Century Population

By 1815, a rapid increase in population had occurred in the southeast and southwest sections of the state. The "Great Migration" of 1810-1820 brought 100,000 new settlers. By 1850, 525,000 residents had been born in the state, while 68,000 were from Kentucky, 41,000 from Virginia, and 33,000 from North Carolina.

With the northward thrust in the 1850's, an unusually high birth rate, and a greater number of immigrants from Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York than the Upper South, the southern areas lost their dominance.

Another aspect of the changing population profile was the number of foreign-born residents. In 1850, the count was 55,000 and by 1860, it was 118,000, led by 66,000 German-born and 24,000 from Ireland. By 1890, the total had risen to 146,000. "The increasing diversity and volume from eastern and southern Europe gradually became important during the last quarter of the century," Barnhart writes. "It was not until the present century that Hoosiers felt the impact of their more varied cultural and political traditions."[6]

Still another characteristic of the state's population during the century was the change in the number of Blacks. A 1746 report of French settlements mentioned a post on the Wabash River (Vincennes) "where there dwelt a group of forty white men and five Negroes." By 1810, 237 slaves and 393 free Negroes (many under indenture) were counted, as compared to 23,000 whites. The small percentage of Blacks in comparison to the total state population continued throughout the century. By 1860, the count was 11,000 as contrasted with 1.3 million whites. By 1870, it was 24,000 and by 1900, 57,000.[7]

More than numbers, the story of an ethnic group's settlement in an area includes the progress it makes in individual achievements and contributions to the larger society. A case in point is Indiana's Black population. Concentrating first along the southern border, Blacks soon realized the new capital of Indianapolis held more opportunities for employment. By 1920, the 35,000 Black residents constituted 11 percent of the city's population—one of the highest ratios in major northern cities. But the Black population for the state as a whole was still below 3 percent.[8]

Although exclusion laws of 1831 and 1850, and Article XIII of the 1851 Constitution, served warning to Blacks that they were not welcome in the state, the laws were not generally enforced. Even the African colonization attempts failed as a means of ridding the state of its Black population. But mob violence did occur, and the pages of Hoosier history reflect its persistence into the twentieth century.

The other side of the heritage is Black achievement. Before the Civil War, Thornbrough writes, "a sizable number were able to establish themselves as independent farmers"—976 of 2,150 in the 1850 census, holding a property value of nearly $500,000. "In clearing the forest and transforming the state from a wilderness into a prosperous agricultural society these Negroes played a part."[9] A recent tribute to the full range of Black Hoosier achievement is seen in the 1982 photo exhibit and accompanying booklet and brochure, *This Far By Faith: Black Hoosier Heritage*. It was a collaborative project of the Indiana Historical Society, Indiana Committee for the Humanities, and Muncie Public Library.

European Immigration

Because Indiana had received fewer foreign immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century than other states in the Ohio Valley, Governor Morton, in a January 1865 message to the Legislature, "urgently recommended the establishment of a bureau of immigration that would distribute information about Indiana's natural resources and institutions throughout Europe." The proposals failed but, by executive authority, on January 18, 1866, the Acting Governor appointed a Commissioner for the encouragement of immigration.[10]

In 1866, the *Circular of the Indiana Commission of Emigration* described "the great resources, progress, and wealth of the State, the energy, intelligence and refinement of her people, and the superior inducements and advantages presented." It warned Germans against the South, "where they will find but few vestiges of German society, where schools have not been encouraged, where labor is without respect and without adequate reward." Unlike the West, the circular said Indiana has no hardships of a frontier life, and ready opportunity for work on or near farms that are already opened. The Preface by John A. Wilstach, the state's Commissioner of Emigration,

spoke of the Europeans needed "to plow. . .the golden cereal wealth of our prairies and give work to those latent incorporeal but Titantic forces, those Samsons, which play in our streamlets, bathe in our rivers, and slumber in our beds of coal." [11]

Despite such allure, the immigrants did not come in large numbers, preferring the industrialized, metropolitan areas. By 1900, the foreign-born population in the North Central states was 4,000,000, with Indiana having only 142,000 (down from 146,000 the decade before.) Into the twentieth century the foreign-born population constituted less than six percent, with the Germans continuing to predominate.

Changes did occur as Roman Catholic immigrants became the majority, but Indiana was still not the magnet as the surrounding states. Immigrants went where economic opportunity was the greatest and where the influx had begun earlier.[12] But Indiana did have its share of European immigrants in farm areas, towns and small cities. The first two 25-year indexes to the *Indiana Magazine of History* list nearly 40 articles either entirely on an ethnic settlement or mentioning the group in a broader context. Thus, for example, we can read of the Swiss forming a literary society and a library in 1814 in Vevay, Germans voting strongly for free schools in the Whitewater Valley in 1848 (when the state as a whole was not voting so decisively), and a Roman Catholic Church serving as a community center for Polish residents in Laporte County in 1872. A sketch of Tell City, formed by the Swiss Colonization Society in 1858, speaks of a carefully laidout town with garden lots, theatre, chorus, and other community activities.[13]

Muncie in 1880

While we can thus speak of some significant numbers and achievements in Indiana as a whole, the popular belief is that Muncie did not have the numbers or flavor of a South Bend, a Vevay, or an Indianapolis. And, quantitatively this is true.

The close study of Muncie's nineteenth-century federal manuscript census by Bracken shows 96 percent of the population in 1850 were native-born, and by 1880, 60 percent of all residents had been born in the state. Little affected by the nineteenth-century flood, Bracken writes, Muncie was "a national, and only a very marginal international, repository for settlement." The largest foreign segment was the Irish, who came during the 1850's, as a result of the completion of the railroad connection. "The nature of the available work did not attract a large immigrant influx, [and the] immigrant population corresponded fairly closely in proportion to the state as a whole."

Bracken continues:

> The censuses for 1870 and 1880 listed approximately 83 percent of the fathers as American-born and 85 percent of the mothers as native-born Americans. The percentages of foreign born fathers and mothers. . .certainly supports the hypothesis that Muncie was not much affected by European immigration.[14]

An examination of the 1880 census does confirm the findings of Bracken, but it also provides further insight into the diversity of Muncie's population. For example, the census lists the country of origin of not only the residents but also their mothers and fathers.

Among the countries noted as place of origin are England, Germany (many regions), Ireland, France, Switzerland, Finland, Canada, Wales, Scotland, Holland, and Poland. Further, in a sampling of the census, the names "Bick", "Kline" and "Yost" included no foreign nation as the place of birth for either the husband or wife or their parents. We can assume for those three families the probability of a fairly recent immigrant past.[15]

This limited examination of Muncie's residents in 1880, having an immediate or second-generation link to Europe, raises the question of what the results would be in an entry-by-entry study of the record. It also suggests three possibilities in the transmission of ethnic heritage:

1. The children of these immigrants would have absorbed some of the ethnic heritage of the parents and the assimilation process that took place would not have eliminated all interest in the past.
2. The parents would have had daily contact during the course of living in the general community with persons not from their native land.
3. Other residents would have had at least one grandparent born in Europe.

As the more recent definitions of ethnicity suggest, ethnic heritage is broadly-defined, and includes ties that transcend kinship, neighborhood and community boundaries, and shared traditions, values and symbols. We can conclude, therefore, that Muncie's beginnings had more ethnic diversity than has previously been considered.

Librarians can nourish this diversity. We did it in Muncie with our project, *Heritage Trail: Afro-American History Alive*!, and we are now moving into the Appalachian experience, looking at our community's Kentucky and Tennessee roots. We hope eventually to honor all of our heritages, and in the process enrich each of our lives.[16] Another project currently underway in the state is *Family Heritage: Past is Prologue*, an exploration of the traditional family concept and the heritage of children in four Indiana communities.[17]

Appalachia in Muncie

As mentioned earlier, library program activities on Indiana ethnicity can legitimately include people from Appalachia. While southern influence on the formation of the state has been well-documented, there is a sense that, in the northern movement of population in the state, and the subsequent change in political and economic power, the settlement and contributions of the more-recent Appalachian migrants have a lesser importance in the state's history. A complete examination of the group will not be presented; instead, some local information will be shared.

Carmel Jones' study of Muncie's Appalachian residents revealed that 14 percent or 18,000 residents in Delaware County, in the 1970 census, identified themselves as southern-born. (These were not all necessarily white Appalachians.) Jones notes that the Appalachian heritage locally includes strong family ties and traditions:

> Upon arrival in Muncie, these migrants depended on each other for aid until they could make it on their own. . . .The establishment of migrant churches was of profound significance to many migrant members because this allowed them to retain the kind of religious organization and worship to which they had become accustomed.[18]

As support for these findings, on a regional basis, a longitudinal study of Appalachian migrants in Ohio found much the same pattern: most had numerous "close kin" who were already living in the area, a third of the families had helped other families in some way during the year, and 22 percent had received help from other families.[19]

Conclusion

This overview of Indiana ethnicity and brief close-up look at Muncie's heritage was prompted by the general expression that this is an homogeneous state and local community. While large numbers of European immigrants are not present in Hoosier history, the fact is the heritage is quite diverse. And our celebration of Afro-American and Appalachian heritages is just as important in terms of group pride as in terms of general community well-being.

Indiana's ethnic past should be more closely examined and the results disseminated wider. Parallel library activities with Indiana history should include a strong multi-cultural component, emphasizing past heritage and future trans-national linkages, for it is not only a celebration the past that makes our heritages, but also a building of the "one world" of the future.

Cultural agencies, and in particular public libraries, should bring forward the richness of yesterday for a more meaningful today and a more hopeful tomorrow. The diversity of our ethnic background in Indiana is as much a state asset as our industrial and agricultural wealth for it is about our roots as people. It should be a source of pride to all. In the process, the public library has a vital role.

Notes

[1] *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 1968 ed., Vol. 5, 167.

[2] DeVos, George. "Ethnic Pluralism: Conflict and Accommodation," in George DeVos and Lola Romanucci-Ross, ed., *Ethnic Identity: Cultural Contributions and Change*. Palo Alto, Cal.: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1975, 9.

[3] *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980, vi.

[4] For example, see Carmel L. Jones, *Migration, Religion, and Occupational Mobility of Southern Appalachians in Muncie, Indiana* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Ball State University, 1978) and Dean R. Esslinger, *Immigrants and the City: Ethnicity and Mobility in a Nineteenth-Century Midwestern Community*. Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1975, the latter a close study of the Federal manuscript census of South Bend from 1850-1880.

[5] *Harvard Encyclopedia*, 125.

[6] Barnhart, John D. and Donald F. Carmony, *Indiana from Frontier to Industrial Commonwealth*, vol. I (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1954), 99.

[7] *Ibid.*, I, p. 408; II, 299.

[8] Thornbrough, Emma Lou. *The Negro in Indiana: A Study of a Minority*, Indiana Historical Collections, vol. XXXVII Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1957, 1, 8, 31, 206.

[9] *Ibid.*, 53, 68, 75, 133.

[10] Baxter, Maurice G. "Encouragement of Immigration to the Middle West during the Era of the Civil War," *Indiana Magazine of History*, XLVI March 1950: 34, 35.

[11] LaFollette, Robert L. "Foreigners and their Influence on Indiana," *Indiana Magazine of History*, XXV March 1929: 16.

[12] *Ibid.*, 16, 18, 23, 26. See also Esslinger's study of South Bend.

[13] LaFollette, p. 16; Chelsea L. Lawlis, "Changes in the Whitewater Valley," *Indiana Magazine of History*, XLIV, March 1948, 80; Perret Dufour, "Early Vevay," XX March 1924, 33-34; Will Maurer, "A Historical Sketch of Tell City, Indiana, XIV, June 1918, *passim*.

[14] Bracken, Alexander Elliott, *Middletown as a Pioneer Community* (Ph. D. Dissertation, Ball State University, 1978), 24, 36, 41, 42, 56.

[15] *Tenth United States Census, 1880*, Delaware County, Indiana.

[16] Meyers, Arthur S. "Heritage Trail: Afro-American History Alive!," *Public Libraries*, Vol. 21, No. 2, Summer 1982, 49-51.

[17] Indiana Committee for the Humanities, Indianapolis, Grant No. 82-99.

[18] Jones, 168-69, 274. For another side to Muncie's history, see Hurley Goodall and J. Paul Mitchell, *A History of Negroes in Muncie*. Ball State University: 1976.

[19] Scharzweller, Harry K. and others, *Mountain Families in Transition: A Case Study of Appalachian Migration* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971, 122, 128, 129.