

Immigration,—Sioux City and Community House

ISSN 0003-4827

No known copyright restrictions.

Recommended Citation

"Immigration,—Sioux City and Community House." *The Annals of Iowa* 21 (1938), 226-234.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.5995>

Hosted by Iowa Research Online

have contributed notably towards the control, if not the solution, of the third of those complex and vexatious problems Man brought with him into our present era.

IMMIGRATION,—SIOUX CITY AND COMMUNITY HOUSE

As Miss Hoyt points out in her article on Community House of Sioux City appearing in this issue, the Holocaust of the World War, among other things that it did, shattered rudely the comfortable illusions of many of our people when it forced on our attention the existence of certain conditions within the nation. Mention need only be made of the revelations in the matter of literacy and physical health discovered at that time to remind one of some of the disturbing conclusions to which they pointed. The most disturbing feature of these disclosures, and of surveys similar to the one made in Sioux City in 1921 by the Y. W. C. A., was the clear and unmistakable evidence they presented that these conditions, in many instances, were not of a recent origin or of a sudden growth, but had had a past of steady development, a past whose existence had been untroubled by public attention.

This was the situation disclosed by surveys of the immigration problem in many of our smaller cities removed from the more publicized centers of immigrant concentration . . . both with respect to the illusion of their non-existence and their long past.

The gradual awakening of the state to the problem of assimilating its foreign born residents is suggestively indicated in the slow advance made by the census reports in providing even an adequate description of the nature and number of this population. The first state census that tabulated more than the total of population, that of 1851 (report of 1852), took a count of the number of alien residents in the separate counties as well as of the male and female population. In this report the immigrant has significance only in so far as he was naturalized, i. e. whether he had a right to vote. With the exception of the comprehensive report of 1856 which was

patterned after the federal census, the state reports continue with the quite inadequate classification begun in 1851 until 1875, when the rapid growth of the immigrant population within the rapidly expanding state population became significant of itself. In this year a distinct and separate classification was made of the "No. of foreign born" in which all the ninety-nine counties are completely reported for the first time with respect to their foreign born residents. In 1895 the percentages of the total population represented by those of foreign birth were worked out for a comparison of the different counties and cities. In 1905 a further advance was made in providing an adequate description of the foreign population when the report tabulated the number of native born residents born of foreign parents, together with percentage figures for comparison. This classification is somewhat ambiguous, however, for whether "foreign parents" was based on one parent or both parents of foreign extraction is not certain. This ambiguity was cleared in 1915 when the category was broadened to include the number of native born of foreign or of mixed parentage. This refinement, it will be noted, was not made until well into the first quarter of the twentieth century, when centers of the origin of our immigrant population were drastically shifting, when the World War had sharpened interest in the nationalities and the origins of our 110,000,000 population. The last census taken by the state, 1925, indicates that the interest in an adequate description of the immigrant within the state had continued to develop in the ten year interval, for in that year a quite elaborate break down of the various elements of that population is made.

This rather late interest manifested in the problem presented by these strangers to American ways and customs within the state suggests that either the problem was itself late in developing, or that it was relatively unimportant during the lush years of state-growth in the last century. Perhaps the fact and influence of the immigrant population in the development of the state was so obvious and so expected that it failed to attract attention or statistical interest for that very reason . . . its obviousness.

Thus a description of the foreign population of any sector of the state suffers in the present day from the inadequacies of the early census returns. The survey made in Sioux City in 1921, however, clearly revealed that a large foreign element had long existed "unmolested" in the communal life of Sioux City. This is further attested to by the state census reports dating from 1875 and before, down to the last report in 1925. These reports show that it was the proportionately large number of immigrants that constituted Sioux City's special problem. While the earlier reports of the state census disclose interesting trends in the immigration tide, the problem revealed by the survey of Sioux City in 1921 will be seen to better advantage if our attention is directed more to the two census reports of 1915 and 1925, one taken six years before Community House was established, the other four years after.

In 1915 Woodbury County had a population of 82,315, which ranked it second among the ninety-nine counties of the state. Sioux City then had a population of 61,774, and largely because of it, Woodbury had an urban population 83% of its total. Of these 82,315, 17.8%, or 14,635, were foreign born, a figure that ranked the county fifth in the state on the basis of percentage of residents foreign born. It should be noted, however, that of the four counties ranking higher than Woodbury, neither Sioux (25.6%), Lyons (21.6%), Audubon (19.6%), nor Winnebago (18.2%) have large centers of urban population. The particular aspect of the alien problem in Woodbury County, its acuteness and full range, is more strikingly illustrated in the contrast of its number of foreign born with its rank in the matter of native born residents of foreign or of mixed parentage. In this respect Woodbury was outranked by forty-five other counties in 1915. Thus in the Woodbury County situation of 1915, the predominating factor was the immigrant himself.

The full range of the situation is still not indicated unless one notes that of the 14,635 foreign born population in the county, nine different nationalities, and others unspecified, are well represented in the following groupings made from the data of the 1915 census:

Germanic:	Scandinavian:	English:
Germany ... 2,143	Denmark 944	England 845
Austria 449	Norway1,464	Canada 890
Holland 150	Sweden2,170	Scotland ... 205
Switzerland.. 80		Wales 26
	4,578	1,966
<hr/>		
Eastern European and Slavic:	South European:	Other Groups:
Bohemia 75	France 47	Cen. and So. Am. 16
Hungary 24	Greece 443	Ireland 675
Russia 3,034	Italy 308	Japan and China 10
	Spain 2	Other Asiatics .. 240
	800	“Others” .. 395
3,133		1,236

Of these 14,635 foreign born, only 3,041 had been in the United States more than one and less than five years; the majority had lived in this country for considerably longer periods of time.

Further analysis of the total county population gives these figures: native born of native parents, 52%; native born of foreign or of mixed parentage, 29.5%; foreign born, 17.8%; colored, .7%.

Turning from the county to Sioux City itself, the figures for 1915 show that in a population of 61,774, Sioux City had a foreign born population of 12,536, or 20.27% of the total. Its native born residents of native parents represented 49.13% of its 61,774, while the native born of foreign or of mixed parentage was 29.65%, and the colored population was .93%. However, the number and percentages of the foreign born and of those native born of foreign or of mixed parentage must be combined to obtain a true picture of the immigrant situation in Sioux City. This result gives one the arresting figures of 30,868 and of 49.6%. In other words, the *foreign element* in the population of Sioux City in 1915 outnumbered its native stock.

Six years after the state report of 1915 Community House was established. Yet already the problem facing this district

on the "lower east" side was changing, not so much in kind as in form. The terrible war years had effectually shut the sluice gates through which the immigrant flood had poured in the late years of the nineteenth century and in the early years of the twentieth. This temporary closure Congress attempted to make a matter of policy when in 1921, the first year of Community House's service to the district, it began the enactment of the first of successive measures designed to restrict the crowding millions who in years past had thronged to America as to a Haven of Promise. These two factors should be borne in mind in reading the figures of the census returns of 1925, for that the war and congressional legislation had an effect upon the complexion of the foreign population and its problem in Sioux City, in the relative quiet waters of the immigrant tide, the later figures will show.

In 1925, four years after Community House had been established, the census reports of that year reveal that Woodbury County had had an increase of 18.5% in population over 1915, ranking next to Polk both in numerical and percentage increase as well as in total population. Its urban concentration had recovered from the set-back in 1920, and had reached a high of 85%, an increase of 2% over 1915. However, among the 97,615 persons living in the county, only 11,716 were reported of foreign birth in 1925, a drop of 2,919 from the 14,635 reported in 1915. This fall represented a decline of 5.8% to an even 12% of the total population in the ten year interval. This decline served to lower Woodbury to tenth place in a percentage comparison of the ninety-nine counties of the state. Yet, save for Scott County (12.1%), as in 1915, none of the counties ranking above Woodbury in the number of foreign born were possessed of urban centers comparable to Sioux City. Other figures for this period show that 57.98% of the county population were native born of native parents, that 25.7% were native born of foreign or of mixed parentage, and 1.58% were of the colored races.

Equal in interest to the numerical changes noted in the ten year period, if not of more vital significance, were indications in the meticulous classifications of 1925 that the nature and composition of the foreign population were like-

wise changing. These changes were the result of the shift in the centers of origins of our immigrant population that set in in the first years of the present century. While this shift is somewhat obscured by the inclusive classification used in the report of 1915, the full force of this slowly gathering movement, accentuated by the World War, is all the more sharply revealed in the report of 1925, since it follows the sweeping political redistributions of racial and national minority groups brought about by that struggle. The extent and number of political boundaries this realignment involved, makes a comparison of the national stocks that made up the bulk of immigration in the two years 1915 and 1925 almost meaningless. The arbitrary grouping given below, however, may serve to show that the shifts in the foreign population noted in the country at large were also found in Woodbury County.

Germanic:	Scandinavian:	English:
Austria 138	Denmark 869	Canada 803
Germany1,766	Norway 1,236	England 701
Holland 245	Sweden1,441	Scotland 191
Luxumbourg 55		Wales 21
Switzerland.. 84		
	3,546	1,716
2,288		
Eastern European and Slavic:	Southern European:	Other Groups:
Bulgaria 5	France 78	Japan and China 27
Czecho- slovakia 129	Greece 286	Cen. and So. Am. 105
Finland 9	Portugal ... 3	Ireland 501
Hungary 32	Spain 13	
Russia1,736		633
Jugoslavia .. 5	380	
Lithuania ... 277		
Poland 362		
Rumania 22		
Serb 31		
2,608		

Additional evidence of the joint effect of the war and of congressional legislation is found in the record of the length of residence in this country reported by the foreign born in 1925. Of the 11,716 foreign born residents in the county,

those who had lived in the United States less than five years represented but 661 of that total; those who had been in this country between five and less than ten years added but 413 individuals more. By far the great majority of those living in Woodbury County had been in the United States at least fifteen years.

It is but natural that the trend disclosed in Woodbury County should be reflected in the report of Sioux City as well. In 1925 Sioux City boasted a 23.7% increase in population over 1915, giving it a total of 76,441 in the last report. The immigrant population, however, like that of Woodbury County, had fallen, from 12,536 to 10,395, or to but 13.39% of the total city population. Native born residents of native parents now represented 55.05% of the city, native born of foreign or of mixed parentage, 26.25%, while the colored population had increased to 2%. Despite numerical and percentage decline amounting to almost 9%, the total population of the "foreign extraction" (counting the first generation born of foreign parentage), remained between 30,000 and 32,000. This total indicated that the task of assimilating the immigrant into the normal American life of the community still remained a perplexing challenge in 1925. And complex too, when it is recalled that without drawing fine distinctions, Community House counted twenty-one different nationalities around its doors.

A sharpening of the focus on the immigrant problem existing in Sioux City may be obtained by a comparison of the fifteen cities of the first class reported in the year 1925. Here we find that Sioux City ranks but fifth in respect to the percentage of the population being native born of foreign or of mixed parentage. Dubuque with 33.73%, Davenport with 32.54%, Clinton with 31.24%, and Burlington with 28.03% all ranked higher than Sioux City. The problem that made the condition in Sioux City special among the cities of the state in 1925 as in 1915 is disclosed when these same fifteen cities are compared with respect to the percentage of the *foreign* born in their total population. Here Sioux City stands first, with Clinton, its nearest rival, .32% behind with 13.07%, and Davenport third with 12.07%.

These cities that ranked higher than Sioux City in one classification, and close behind in the other, are all Mississippi river towns which in the past had been the centers which caught the first influx of the swelling population, from the territorial days down to the first years of the twentieth century. In the years previous to 1925, and especially true of the years prior to 1915, these river cities and others among the fifteen, had rated higher than Sioux City, not alone in the matter of native born of foreign or of mixed parentage, but in the more important classification of the actual number of immigrants themselves. Since these towns show a general decline in all aspects of their foreign population, consequent to the decline of the river as a freight artery and the rise of other means of transportation, it suggests that this may likewise be true of Sioux City. That Sioux City will soon face as the most significant problem in its foreign population, not the immigrant himself, as has been true of the past, but the problem arising out of the first generation of Americans born of foreign and mixed parentage, is unmistakably indicated in the markedly small number of recent arrivals of actual immigrants reported in the last state census.

The small number of new arrivals from foreign lands in recent years further suggests that the picture presented by the figures given here may even itself be exaggerated. From the fact that the vast majority of the foreign born in the county had lived in this country a number of years, one might argue that while it was true Sioux City's problem centered around the immigrant, it actually had to deal with the immigrant who had already been exposed to the ways and customs of American life. Although this statement of condition is undeniably true, it must be remembered that in the report of 1925, forty-two different nationalities are recorded as living in Woodbury County, which means largely living in Sioux City. Percentages in themselves are but forms useful for descriptive purposes, and should not deceive. Despite the steady decline in the percentage of the city population represented in the foreign born from 29.8% in 1885 to 13.39% in 1925, despite the decline in the number of first generation Americans born of foreign parents from 1915 to

1925, the grand total of what formed the nucleus of the problem out of which Community House arose remained in the latter year at or above the high water mark in the history of the city. Truly it was a condition and not an abstraction of a percentage figure that confronted the city in 1921. The data given here demonstrates that the condition remained in 1925, that it was of a kind and of a degree capable of becoming a dangerous festering sore in the communal life of the city, infecting the whole from its once small part.

The problem of assimilation and integration, Miss Treglia most likely will affirm, remains, in 1937, a grave one. In the long reach of future time, if the present barriers to new arrivals from abroad remain the same, the situation of and the stimulus to Community House may change, but for the present that appears securely within the realm of the distant years.

WOODBURY COUNTY

Year	County Population	Rank in State	FOREIGN BORN				No. Native Born of Foreign Parentage	
			No.	% of Pop.	Rank in State Basis		No.	%
					No.	%		
1875	8,568	64	1,322	15.4	53	34 ¹		
1885	32,289	9	7,578	23.5	7	7 ²		
1895	46,202	4	9,130	19.8	5	31 ³		
1905	60,859	3	10,294	16.9	3	24	18,347	30.1
1915	82,315	2	14,635	17.8	1	5	24,282	
1925	97,615	2	11,716	12.0	2	10	25,134	25.7

SIOUX CITY

Year	City Population	Rank in State	FOREIGN BORN				No. Native Born of Foreign Parentage	
			No.	% of Pop.	Rank of S. C. Basis		No.	%
					No.	%		
1875	4,290	16	876	20.4	13	13 ³		
1885	19,060	6	5,682	29.8	6	3 ⁴		
1895	27,371	4	6,550	24.1	4	12 ⁵		
1905	40,952	3	7,996	19.5	3	24	12,579	30.7
1915	61,774	2	12,536	20.27	1	19 ⁶	18,318	29.65
1925	76,411	2	10,395	13.39	2	22 ⁷	20,103	26.25

¹Based on 74 counties having either greater total population and/or greater foreign born population.

²Based on the number of counties having 6000 or more foreign born residents.

³Based on the 22 most populous towns—of 2500 and above.

⁴Based on all towns (11) of 10,000 plus in population.

⁵Based on all cities of 1,000 or more (Inc.).

⁶The highest population of any of the 18 cities ranking above Sioux City was 3,455.

⁷The highest population of any of the 21 cities ranking above Sioux City was 4,553.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.