

ITALIANS IN CHICAGO

1880-1930

A Study in Ethnic Mobility

HUMBERT S. NELLI

NEW YORK

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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RICHARD C. WADE, GENERAL EDITOR

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A STUDY IN ETHNIC MOBILITY

HUMBERT S. NELLI

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF HISTORY, UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY

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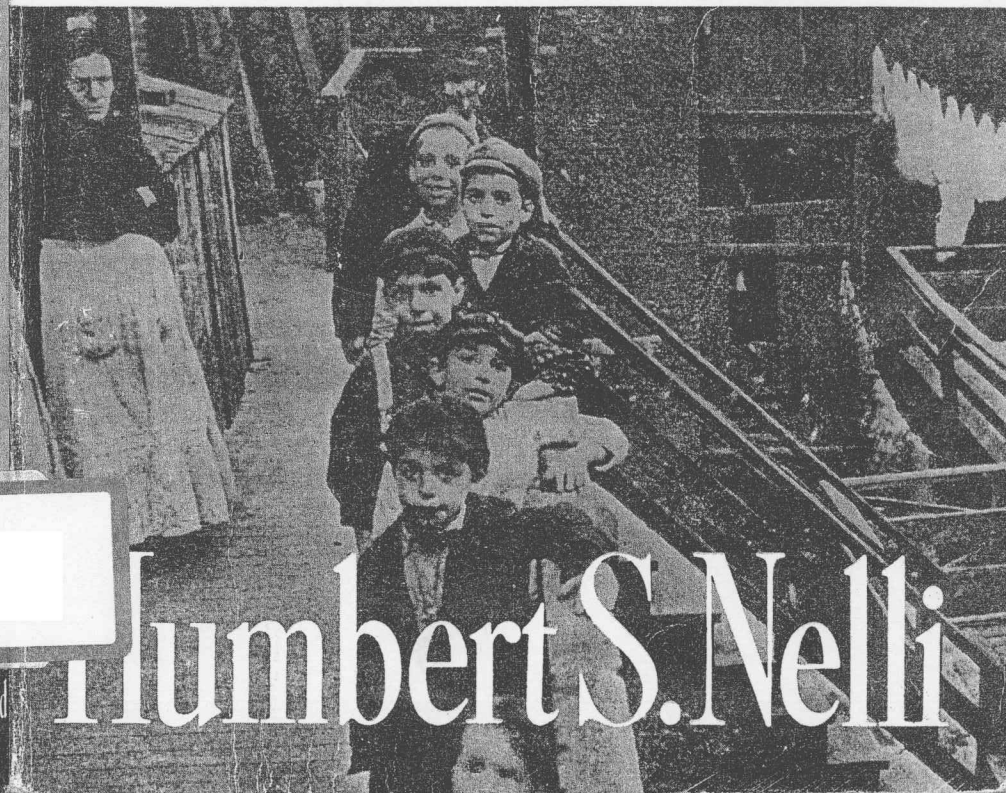
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Humbert S. Nelli

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For Florence and Humbert Orazio Nelli

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Foreword

Surely no one needs to be reminded again that the United States is a country of immigrants, or a "nation of nations" as Walt Whitman phrased it. The theme is now a conventional one, thanks to a generation of able scholars who have examined this great migration and assessed its significance in our national history. Moreover, we no longer see the process simply in the immigrant's impact on American society, but also in the way which this country transformed the immigrant as well. If the reaction to older residents was complex, so too was the response of newcomers to a strange land.

Yet, though we know a good deal about this general process, we know much less about its specific workings or its local variations. In *Boston's Immigrants*, Oscar Handlin brilliantly portrayed the acculturation of that city's most important, indeed ultimately dominant, group. But other studies handle many groups of newcomers or, like William V. Shannon's *The American Irish*, seek to encompass the whole national experience of one group over the sweep of American history. In this volume, Humbert Nelli makes an intensive examination of what happened to Italian immigrants when they came to Chicago. The story begins in the mid-nineteenth century and comes down to the Great Depression.

The choice of Chicago is a happy one. Few other cities had so large a proportion of immigrants and none so rich a mixture, "a compost of men and women of all manner of language," as William T. Stead put it in 1894. The Italians never became the dominant group, though their numbers mounted rapidly in the thirty years before the shutting off of immigration. Hence a portion of this story contains the relations of Italians with other ethnic groups as well as the more familiar theme of newcomers in a world of native Americans. But there were enough Italians to leave a clear mark on the midwest metropolis.

Mr. Nelli deals with the acculturative process in two ways. First, he sees the Italians joining other immigrant groups in "colonies" in the central city. Here the emphasis is on the initial settlement and the problems of acceptance and adjustment. Housing and jobs were crucial; there could be no future without them. However, the author also deals with the outward trek of Italians after the first concentrations had been established. Those who were modestly successful very quickly sought better conditions and more pleasant surroundings in neighborhoods farther away from downtown. Unlike other books which deal almost exclusively with immigrant "ghettoes," Mr. Nelli emphasizes the dual nature of the experience—both in concentrated settlements and the dispersal to other communities throughout the metropolis.

Indeed, mobility is Mr. Nelli's constant theme. Not only did Italians move away from the early "colonies" in large numbers, but they also continually changed residences within the old neighborhoods. A skillful use of the census, school reports, voting lists, and city directories permits the author to reconstruct this persistent migration. While outsiders always thought of the immigrant blocs as stable and unchanging, the evidence reveals precisely the opposite. Unlike Italians in the old country whose lives were likely to be bound up with the village of their birth, newcomers very quickly opted for American mobility.

Throughout the period of accommodation, Italians developed institutions to ease the transition to a new society and identify their relationships with older Americans. The church, of course, had

been central in Italy, but its role was modified by conditions in Chicago. Mutual benefit societies expanded their importance, and the newcomers invented such institutions as the immigrant bank and the "colonial press" for which there was no old world analogue. Mr. Nelli is especially persuasive when he handles the ambiguous position of the Italian editor who had to interpret America to his readers without destroying their connection with the homeland.

One of the most compelling parts of this volume is the analysis of Italian predominance in the criminal field in Chicago. Mr. Nelli notes that actually Italians were newcomers to organized crime. The doubtful credit for the founding father of the underworld belongs to an Irishman, Michael Cassius McDonald. In the 1870's his organization entered the field through political manipulation. With virtual control of City Hall secured in the 1880's, McDonald invented Chicago's first "syndicate" and perfected many of the techniques which Italians would adopt forty years later. Except for the violence, little was added.

In fact, James Colosimo, the Italian pioneer in the field, served his apprenticeship with those two doughty rascals, "Hinky Dink" Kenna and "Bathhouse John" Coughlin in Chicago's notorious First Ward. But it was Prohibition, that peculiarly American experiment in reform, that provided the opportunity for more businesslike and powerful organized activity. Before the decade was finished, the gangs, mostly Italian, had established control of the city. Al Capone proved to be the most resourceful and successful (indeed, at 32 years old he became the town's youngest "mayor"), and Chicago and gang warfare became inextricably linked in the popular imagination. Neither Chicagoans nor Italian spokesmen liked the image, and Mr. Nelli details with low-keyed irony the attempts of the Italian community to claim that the linkage did not exist at the same time that it sought means of evading it.

In a period of renewed interest in ethnicity, Mr. Nelli's volume has a particular relevance. Scholars have been re-examining the old "melting pot" notion with the conclusion that ethnicity persists even after long periods of assimilation and nearly fifty years after

the closing of the historic policy of open immigration. Those concerned about civil rights have questioned whether the immigrant experience can serve as a useful guide to public policy toward black Americans who now comprise such a large proportion of the nation's urban residents. The *Italians in Chicago*, by an intensive study of one ethnic group in a major city, illumines the historical process of acculturation and provides a framework for viewing contemporary problems.

RICHARD C. WADE

GENERAL EDITOR

URBAN LIFE IN AMERICA SERIES

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Preface

In the decades between 1880 and World War I, European immigrants and their children formed the major populations of the large industrial cities of the East and Middle West. According to the 1910 census, for example, first- and second-generation newcomers accounted for 77 per cent of Chicago's inhabitants, 78 per cent of New York's, and 74 per cent of Detroit's, Cleveland's, and Boston's. Thus the arrival of migrants, their efforts to assimilate, and the reaction of native Americans to them and the problems they created made up a large part of the story of urban America during this period.

Contemporaries expressed a deep concern over the influx of this alien horde—composed, many claimed, of criminals, paupers, ignorant peasants, and illegal contract laborers—who would inevitably inundate American cities, aggravate existing problems, and undermine the American character. As a rule, extremely undesirable conditions of life and labor typified areas of immigrant settlement. Books, articles, and numerous governmental reports examined community features, including filthy, substandard and overcrowded housing; crime; delinquency; exploitation of newcomers by their compatriots and native Americans; corrupt poli-

ticians; and overworking of immigrant women and children by American businessmen. Authors noted the tendency of successful members of the group, those who had moved away from the immigrant colony and identified with the American middle class, to ignore the needs of their original community. These characteristics appear to be the price paid by each new group in its adjustment to American urban life.¹

Like most of the later immigrants, Italians seemed to move outward from the city's core more slowly and reluctantly than had Irish, German, and other older groups, which had settled in Chicago and other northern cities considerably earlier than did most Italians, eastern European Jews, Poles, Lithuanians, and Greeks. In actuality, while contemporaries did not recognize the extensive amount of residential mobility among Italians and other latecomers, from the first years of settlement, movement occurred not only inside colonies and from one district to another, but also from the early, centrally located neighborhoods toward outlying areas of the city and even into suburbs. By the 1920's the suburban trend was noticeable and significant. World War I and the immigration laws of 1921 and 1924 closed new sources of immigration, and Italian districts, lacking newcomers to fill vacancies left by former residents, began to decline.

Even at the height of immigration from the Kingdom of Italy, Chicago, like other cities, had few solidly Italian blocks or neighborhoods. A residue of immigrants remained when the composition of a colony changed, but most of an earlier group moved eventually from the central city, partly to escape encroaching businesses and partly to avoid contact with incoming residents new to urban life.

Neither the immigrants nor the receiving society recognized the values and benefits of the ethnic colony. Yet the community of the immigrant generation fulfilled an important function, for it served as a "beachhead" or staging ground where new arrivals remained until they absorbed the new ideas and habits that facilitated their adjustment to the American environment.² It appears that—within the limits of individual abilities and aspirations—conditions and

opportunities in the receiving country (rather than old-world background) determined the economic activities of newcomers. The new urban surroundings profoundly affected other traditions and viewpoints, although immigrants themselves believed that in America they were re-creating homeland village life. In the process they created a myth that they have nurtured to the present.

Most of Chicago's Italians came from that area of the Kingdom lying south of Rome (especially the provinces of Aguilá, Campobasso, Avellino, Potenza, Cosenza, Reggio, Catanzaro, and Bari) and the western portion of Sicily. Immense differences in history, geography, and language among and within these regions promoted loyalty to the native village rather than to the Kingdom of Italy.³ Homeland or *paese* meant village of birth, outside of which lived strangers and enemies. Residents of other towns or provinces, regarded as foreigners, became objects of suspicion or contempt. This narrow perspective broke down in American cities, where new patterns and institutions influenced habits and outlooks. Of necessity, immigrants joined together in benefit societies, churches, and political clubs; they lived and worked in surroundings crowded with non-Italian strangers; their children attended schools filled with "outsiders." They read the same Italian-language newspapers, and they came to regard themselves as members of the Italian group. Thus, in contrast to the situation in the Kingdom itself, Italian-Americans from the area south of Rome can be described in group terms. In the text they will be identified as "Southerners," and their home provinces as the "South."

The five decades following 1880 comprised the years of major establishment, of pattern formation, of dynamic growth, and—after World War I—of group dispersion and the decline of core-area colonies. The purpose of this study is to describe and analyze the experience of Chicago's Italian community during this period.

H.N.

Lexington, Kentucky
June 1970

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the many Chicagoans who facilitated my research and who made my visits to their city a pleasant experience. I owe a special debt to Father Gino Dalpiaz of Our Lady of Pompei Church, who gave unrestricted use of his parish records and introduced me to priests in other Italian churches of the city; to Anthony Sorrentino for permitting me to xerox his unpublished autobiography; to Richard J. Jones of the Policemen's Annuity and Benefit Fund and to my good friend Archie Motley of the Chicago Historical Society for providing me with primary materials.

Grants from the American Association for State and Local History, Fordham University, and the University of Kentucky Graduate School made possible a number of research trips to Chicago. Summer teaching appointments in 1966 and 1967 at the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle speeded the collection of primary sources. Not the least of my obligations to Chicago Circle stems from the unlimited use of research assistants and departmental facilities, especially xeroxing equipment, provided during those two valuable summers. Summer grants in 1968 and 1969 from the University of Kentucky Research Foundation permitted me to devote my full attention to writing.

My thanks go to the editors of the *American Journal of Sociology*, the *Journal of American History*, *Labor History*, and the *International Migration Review*, for their permission to use material which appeared originally in those periodicals, although in somewhat different form.

A number of friends helped me to clarify and refine my ideas. Among those who graciously gave of their knowledge and time were Donald Klimovich and Melvin G. Holli of the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle; Robert D. Cross, then Professor of History at Columbia University and now President of Swarthmore College; Mark H. Haller, Jr. of Temple University; and Spencer Di Scala of the University of Massachusetts.

Two people deserve special thanks. Richard C. Wade of the University of Chicago guided my doctoral work on the role of the immigrant press in Chicago's Italian community, and aided the writing of this book with his advice and suggestions. My wife, Elizabeth, the only person able to decipher my handwriting, served as chief typist and editorial assistant from the first rough draft to the final galley proofs, and somehow combined these jobs with the supervision of a household and our three active sons.

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ITALIANS IN CHICAGO, 1880-1930

From Rural Italy to Urban America

Between 1880 and 1914, the period of large-scale emigration from Italy to the United States, some Italians went overseas to evade military service or to find religious freedom (as Waldensian Protestants); a few departed because of political considerations; and criminals fled to avoid punishment or to take advantage of greater opportunities elsewhere. Generally, such travelers intended their absences to be permanent, but in numbers they never amounted to an important total. Most emigrants were motivated by economic factors. Some felt driven by the desire to escape a vicious system of taxation, but the majority were attracted by the hope of bettering their income through seasonal or temporary labor abroad (or elsewhere in Europe).¹

The flow of Italian transoceanic emigration varied according to the relative economic opportunities available in the various receiving countries. The large-scale movement of Italians to the United States in the years after 1880 formed the second great shift from the homeland to the new world. The first population movement, which lasted throughout most of the nineteenth century, surged to Latin America, and especially Argentina and Brazil.²

The allure of Latin America decreased toward the end of the century, and the decline continued into the twentieth century, partly because of unsettled political and financial conditions in Brazil and Argentina. Economic opportunities for immigrants in South America diminished at the same time that expanding American industry demanded unskilled laborers. Transportation to the United States cost less than that to Latin America, and more money could be earned in North America—two simple but important facts.³

Italians still felt drawn to Argentina and Brazil, but by the time these countries had solved their immediate political and economic problems, the mainstream of Italian immigration had been diverted to the United States. Larger numbers of Italians went to North America than had ever reached the Latin American countries. Rarely did a yearly total of Italian newcomers exceed 100,000 in Argentina or Brazil; after 1900, this figure was a yearly *minimum* for the United States.⁴

The shift in destination coincided with another change: the central source of Italian emigration gradually moved from the north to the south of the Kingdom. Although living conditions in the "South" reached depths of misery and degradation equaled nowhere else in Italy, emigration started from the north. "Southern" traditions and adherence to old ways had deep roots. Under the monarchy, however, when the area received treatment more appropriate for a colony or appendage, earlier resistance to movement began to crumble. In the late 'eighties, Baron Sidney Sonnino reminded parliament that during its more than twenty years of existence the Italian government had not produced one effective measure to improve living and working conditions for impoverished toilers of the "South." Diplomat and historian Luigi Villari, in a book published after the turn of the century, echoed this sentiment: "The North has made a great advance in wealth, trade, and education, while the South is almost stationary."⁵

Before the 1890's, Italians who entered the United States came chiefly from the northern and economically more advanced areas of Genoa, Tuscany, Venetia, Lombardy, and Piedmont. The flood

from the "South" began in the 1880's, reaching its peak after the turn of the century. Between 1899 and 1910, some 372,668 Italians entered the United States from northern Italy; 1,911,933 came from the "South." These totals, however, include immigrants who entered and reentered the United States. Of the numbers given, 15.2 per cent (or 56,738) of the northerners and 13.7 per cent (262,508) of the "Southerners" had previously been in the United States.⁶

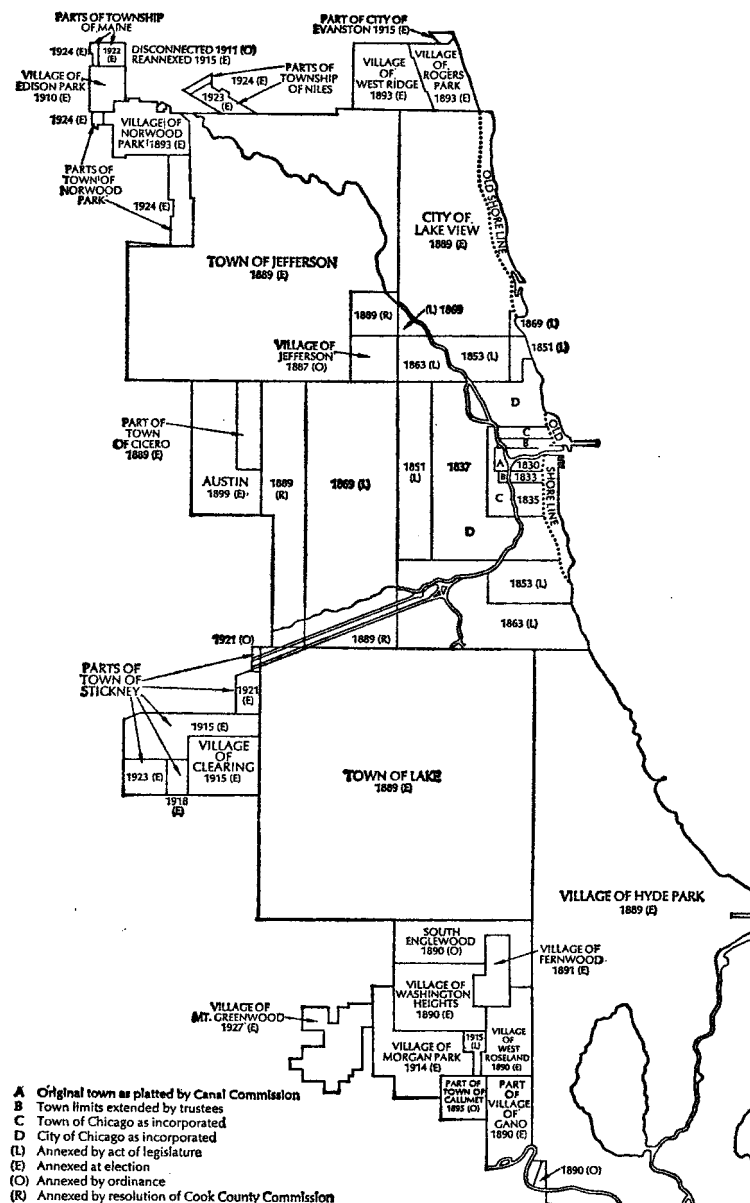
Migration did not flow evenly from all parts of the "South." It came for the most part from those areas that had experienced the breakdown of the old feudal system of class stratification, without compensating working-class organizations such as trade unions and cooperatives. According to demographer J. S. McDonald, a mixed system of property distribution developed, which provided the basis for an individualistic, open-class society. In 1901 British historians Bolton King and Thomas Okey described the "South" as suffering from an "individualism [which] runs riot; there is little mutual trust or cooperation, and industry goes limping in consequence The masses have small sense of cohesiveness or hope or effort." Political scientist Edward C. Banfield, in a study widely accepted by immigration scholars and students of Italian history, described a Sicilian-southern Italian society dominated by amoral familism. Banfield found peasants and gentry alike unable to act "for any end transcending the immediate, material interest of the nuclear family." If this analysis is accurate, it is reasonable to conclude that community and group consciousness among "Southerners" in the United States did not cross the Atlantic, but developed in the new homeland. Within the Italian system, emigration offered an important means of upward mobility and contributed toward the breakdown of feudal class distinctions. Dissatisfaction with economic conditions, aggravated by the absence of alternate group remedies (labor unions and the like) able to deal effectively with these problems resulted in high emigration rates. McDonald claimed that emigration "was related to the extent of participation and identification outside the nuclear family."⁷

While old-world habits and attitudes never disappeared entirely,

the American urban environment profoundly and pervasively influenced newcomers. One leader of a predominantly Sicilian colony in Chicago described his neighborhood as having "unusual unity and strength." He claimed to discern "the same kind of warmth, friendliness, and intimacy in our community life that was to be found in the small towns of Sicily from whence our parents came." This neighborliness in Chicago, in fact, contrasted sharply with nuclear family loyalties in the Kingdom, where "outsiders" were not to be trusted, where village life remained relatively fixed and stable, where conduct was based on face-to-face relationships, and where custom and tradition controlled and influenced most aspects of day-to-day living. The process of re-creating the homeland did not, and could not, take place in the Chicago environment of mobile population, absence of tradition, impersonal relationships, and acceptance of change. Ironically, the old-world community intimacy that Italians in America "recalled" so nostalgically originated in the new world as a response to urban surroundings.⁸

II

William H. Keating, a geologist and the historian of Major Stephen H. Long's expedition to the source of the St. Peter's River, passed through Chicago in 1823. He found the climate inhospitable, the soil sterile, the landscape flat and uninteresting, the few huts "low, filthy and disgusting," the inhabitants a "miserable race of men." Perhaps fifty people lived in the settlement by 1830. Chicago's rapid growth began only after the dispersal of the Blackhawk Indians in 1832, and especially after the completion of the Illinois-Michigan Canal in 1848. The community's 350 inhabitants organized a town government in 1833. Four years later the town obtained a charter, and the first local census showed a population of 4170. Despite a setback during the depression of the late 'thirties, some 4470 people lived in Chicago by 1840. The city's population exploded to 298,977 by 1870. By 1880, Chicago contained 503,185 residents, and after that date the number of inhabitants increased approximately 500,000 each decade until 1930. (The



1. Growth of Chicago by Annexations, 1830-1930

Based on Edith Abbott, *The Tenements of Chicago, 1908-1935* (Chicago, 1936), 12.

city's land area also expanded over the century from 1830 to 1930, growing from less than one half square mile to over 200 square miles.)⁹

The population increase came from three main sources: immigration, migration from other parts of the United States, and natural increase. While growth through births tended to expand over the years regardless of economic conditions, immigration totals bore a direct relationship to those conditions. Immigration played a large part in Chicago's population increases during the decades of 1860-70, 1880-90, and 1900-1910, but it had a much smaller role during the depression-dominated 1870's and 1890's.

Table 1
SOURCES OF INCREASE OF CHICAGO POPULATION, 1830-1930

Decade	Total Increase in Population	Increase in Foreign born Population	Increase in Negro Population	Increase in White Population from Other Parts of U.S.	Increase in Births over Deaths
1830-40	4,429				400
1840-50	25,484				2,000
1850-60	79,243				10,000
1860-70	188,717	90,133		63,000	30,000
1870-80	205,108	60,302		95,000	50,000
1880-90	496,665	244,769	7,791	144,106	100,000
1890-1900	588,725	137,584	15,879	265,262	170,000
1900-1910	468,708	194,105	13,953	48,650	212,000
1910-20	525,422	24,165	65,000	236,257	200,000
1920-30	674,733	36,575	146,000	259,158	233,000

Source: Homer Hoyt, *One Hundred Years of Land Values in Chicago: The Relationship of the Growth of Chicago to the Rise in Its Land Values, 1830-1933* (Chicago, 1933), 284.

Note: Before 1860 no accurate data is available for increase in foreign born population.

Over the years Chicago's foreign born population, like that of the whole United States, reflected a steady shift in national origin. Newcomers from northern and western Europe predominated before 1890, especially those from Germany and Ireland. After that

year, southern and eastern Europeans (particularly Poles and Italians) came in increasing numbers, although important exceptions existed. A large proportion of the city's Bohemians, for example, arrived prior to 1890, while the high point of Swedish settlement came after that time.

Whatever their place of origin, European immigrants and native Americans as well poured into the lake metropolis, lured by economic opportunities. The city offered work in packing plants, agricultural-implement works, stove factories, steel mills, electric-generating plants, mail-order houses, railroad shops, clothing shops, wholesale houses, building construction, breweries, distilleries, and retail stores. In sum, Chicago provided excellent job opportunities in manufacturing, transportation, the trades, and the professions.¹⁰

A number of questionable features accompanied the expansion. Chicago exhibited, until well into the twentieth century, many characteristics of a frontier town. It was vigorous, brash, lusty, optimistic, energetic. It also had labor violence, corruption in civic and business affairs, apathy toward poverty, inadequate housing, unsanitary living conditions, vice, and organized crime. According to English journalist William T. Stead, who lived in the city for five months (until March 1894), "The first impression which a stranger receives on arriving in Chicago is that of the dirt, the danger, and the inconvenience of the streets." Stead found Chicagoans equally indifferent to the plight of the poor, to corruption in business and politics, and to Christian precepts. Chicago's citizens worshipped "a Trinity of their own"—Marshall Field, Philip D. Armour, and George M. Pullman. Stead concluded that Chicagoans, massed together and forming a veritable congress of "different nationalities, a compost of men and women of all manner of languages," recognized one common bond—money. They "came here to make money. They are staying here to make money. The quest of the almighty dollar is their Holy Grail." Lincoln Steffens characterized Chicago thus: "First in violence, deepest in dirt; loud, lawless, unlovely, ill-smelling, irreverent, new; an overgrown gawk of a village, the 'tough' among cities, a spectacle for the nation." This environment, with its unparalleled economic