

# Chinese Immigrants

Chinese immigrants come to America to escape poverty. After the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco, birth records were destroyed. As a result, many Chinese men could claim to be native-born citizens, with the right to bring their wives and children in the United States. Chinese claiming American birth began arranging for people in China to immigrate as relatives. During the month long voyage to the United States, the newcomers memorized details about their "families." Once they arrived in their new country, they were detained at Angel Island for several weeks or longer. Immigration officials questioned them at length to determine the validity of their claims to be related to native U.S. citizens. Some carved poems into the walls there detailing their plight.

Most Chinese settled in Chinatowns, where Chinese newspapers, herbal medicines, foods and festivals provided comfort. Many Chinese worked in laundries, restaurants, and stores. For many years, most Chinese immigrants were male. When women and children began to arrive, many Chinatowns became crowded. White Americans often discriminated against the Chinese, and tended to regard Chinatowns as mysterious, foreign places to visit.

## SELECTION 3

*In 1903, a Chinese immigrant, Lee Chew, wrote the following account of his experience as an immigrant in the United States.*

The Chinese laundryman does not learn his trade in China; there are no laundries in China. The women there do the washing in tubs and have no washboards or flatirons.

All the Chinese laundrymen here were taught in the first place by American women just as I was taught.

When I first went to work for an American family I could not speak a word of English, and I did not know anything about housework....

I worked for two years as a servant, getting at the last \$35 a month. I sent money home to my parents. At the end of two years, I had \$410 and I was now ready to start in business.

When I first opened a laundry, it was in company with a partner, who had been in the business for some years. We went to a town about 500 miles inland, where a railroad was building. We got a board shanty and worked for the men employed by the railroads.

We had to put up with many insults and some frauds, as men would come in and claim parcels that did not belong to them, saying they had lost their tickets, and would fight if they did not get what they asked for. Sometimes we were taken before magistrates and fined for losing shirts that we had never seen. On the other hand, we were making money.

When the railroad construction gang moved on, we went with them. The men were rough and prejudiced against us, but not more so than in the big eastern cities. It is only lately in New York that the Chinese have been able to discontinue putting wire screens in front of their windows, and at the present time the street boys are still breaking the windows of Chinese laundries all over the city, while the police seem to think it a joke.

We were three years with the railroad, and then went to the mines, where we made plenty of money in gold dust, but had a hard time, for many of the miners were wild men who carried revolvers and after drinking would come into our place to shoot and steal shirts for which we had to pay. One of these men hit his head hard against a flatiron and all the miners came and broke up our laundry, chasing us out of town. They were going to hang us. We lost all our property and \$365 in money.

Luckily most of our money was in the hands of Chinese bankers in San Francisco. I went East to Chicago, where I had a laundry for three years. After that I was four years in Detroit. I went home to China in 1897, but returned in 1898, and began a laundry business in Buffalo, New York.

# Italian Immigrants

Italian Immigrants left their homeland to escape poverty. Their voyage to the United States was difficult. Usually they traveled in steerage, located deep inside the ship. Each person slept in a narrow row bed in a crowded compartment. Food was spoiled, there were no bathing facilities, and steerage passengers were allowed on the deck once a day. Once travelers arrived at Ellis Island, they had to pass a physical examination and answer questions about how they planned to support themselves in America. Those who did not pass inspection could be sent home, even if this meant separating from family.

Many Italians found unskilled construction jobs like laying bricks or cleaning streets. Often they lived in poor, overcrowded neighborhoods with other people from Italy. Most Italians were Catholic and celebrated saints' day. Many Italian children did not attend school because their families needed them to earn money or feared that learning English would distance them from their family. Other Americans often mistakenly looked on Italians as gangsters or as people who would always remain poor and illiterate.

## *An Italian immigrant, Joseph Baccardo, tells of his experiences upon coming to the United States in the early 1900s.*

My father was born in 1843, and when he got to be a young man, he had to go into the army. There was a war on then between Italy and Austria. After the war, he went back to Sicily and got married there, but there wasn't much work. So finally he decided to come over to the United States to try to better his condition. But he never had any luck. When he arrived here it was during Cleveland's last term, and there was a money panic and everything shut down in this country.

He suffered over here and we suffered over there, because he wasn't able to send us very much. We had to do the best we could.

Finally my father came back to bring us to this country. He brought a little money with him, and we all came back the cheapest way—steerage. At that time passage was very slow. It took a couple of weeks. My mother was sick most of the time. Finally we came to Ellis Island, and then to New York to visit some friends, and then out here to Pennsylvania, where a friend of my dad's was working. Dad had been boarding with him while he was here.

We rented two rooms in an old house and bought some furniture from a young couple who were moving out. They sold us a little stove and four chairs and a table and a few pots and pans and a bed for my mother and dad. First my brother and I slept on the floor, and then they bought a couple of little folding cots for us. We slept in the kitchen and mother and father in the other room. That's all we had for about ten years.

Pop was doing manual work; that's all he knew. He was working with a gang building the county road out to Chester, Pennsylvania. It was a gravel road then. He used to get up at 2:00 in the morning on Monday and walk to the job. That's about ten miles. That first summer I got

a job there, too, as a waterboy. I carried water to the men working on the road. We stayed in a shanty during the week, and then Saturday night we walked back home. I was getting 40 cents a day for ten hours, and dad was getting \$1.10 a day. We tried to live off my 40 cents, so that we could bring \$6.00 back home. We lived as cheap as possible—beans, macaroni—and we'd cook it ourselves in the shanty.

When it was time for me to go to school, I didn't have anyone to take me over to introduce me to the sister. I had to go on my own. There was a Catholic schoolhouse, so I went over there and I mixed with the boys, and when they saw me—well! I had a little round cap, like Chico Marx wears. I don't know whether it was home made or bought. So they started to have some fun with me—took my hat and got me bawling—and I came home and that was the last of that school for me. I wouldn't go back anymore. Later on I went to the public school.

I already had an after-school job with a barber here in town, sweeping and carrying water and all that. So when I was fourteen and he asked me if I wanted to learn the business, I said, "I'll ask dad." And dad didn't care as long as I was making money. So that's how I got into the barber business.

I started at fifty cents a week, and I got up to six dollars after two or three years. In those days, you'd open the shop at seven in the morning, and nine at night was closing. And Saturday was eleven o'clock closing. You'd be there all the time.

When I was nineteen the boss died, and I opened up the place on my own the next week. The same shop I'm in now—just one chair—that was all there ever was. I did pretty well for myself.

# Jewish Immigrants

Many Jewish Immigrants left Russia to escape the pogroms and persecution. To reach the United States, they often traveled in overcrowded trains and suffered many delays to reach European ports. From there, they traveled by ship in crowded, smelly compartments. Immigrants landed at New York harbor. Most were taken to Ellis Island, where they were questioned by doctors and inspectors before they could proceed to the shore.

Most Jews settled in the Lower East Side of New York City, where they started their own synagogues, shops, newspapers, and schools. They were poor but had many skills. Many worked as pushcart venders, cobblers, butchers, carpenters, and watchmakers. Almost half worked in garment factories. Jewish immigrants valued education and insisted their children attend school. Other Americans resented the success of the Jews, and began excluding them from private clubs and schools. Some hospitals would not hire Jewish doctors, and the New York Bar Association would not admit Jews.

## *“New Immigrant” Experiences*

### SELECTION I

*A Russian-Jewish immigrant, Michael Gold, describes his experiences in the early 1900s.*

I can never forget the East Side street where I lived as a boy.

Excitement, dirt, fighting, chaos! The noise was always in my ears. Even in sleep I could hear it; I can hear it now.

Did God make bedbugs? One steaming hot night I couldn't sleep for the bedbugs. They crawl slowly, bloated with blood, and the touch and smell of these parasites wakens every nerve to disgust.

It wasn't a lack of cleanliness in our home. My mother was as clean as any German housewife; she slaved, she worked herself to the bone keeping us fresh and neat. What was the use; nothing could help it; it was Poverty, it was the Tenement.

When I woke in the morning, I was never greatly surprised to find in my bed a new family of immigrants in their foreign baggy underwear.

They looked pale and exhausted. They smelled of the disinfectant that they had been soaked in at Ellis Island, where

the ships deposited the immigrants. The stink sickened me. “Why did I choose to come to America?” asked my father of himself gravely, as he twisted and untwisted his mustache in the darkness. “I will tell you why.”

How full I was of all the stories that were told in my village about America! In America, we believed, people dug under the streets and found gold anywhere. In America, the poorest ragpicker lived better than a Roumanian millionaire. In America, people did little work, but had fun all day. “Soon, I came to understand it was not a land of fun. It was a Land of Hurry-Up. There was no gold to be dug in the streets here. So I worked! With my hands, my liver and sides! I worked! But I will show your mother how a man makes his fortune in America! I am certain to be rich! I will make a school teacher out of you, Esther! And you, Mikey, will be a doctor. It is a great thing to be a doctor. It is better to have wisdom than to have money. I will earn the money, Mikey, and make you a doctor!”

# Mexican Immigrants

Mexican Immigrants came to the United States to escape the bloody revolutions that were taking place in Mexico. Many traveled by foot, on the back of burros, or in two-wheeled carts. Others came to America by railroad. Immigrants from Mexico entered freely without passports of money.

American employers welcomed Mexican workers because they were willing to work hard for little pay. Mexican immigrants worked on railroads and in mines, factories, and canneries. Most, however, worked in agriculture. They moved from the area or area harvesting crops. Housing for the immigrants was usually poor. Farm workers often lived in temporary shelters that had no running water. After harvest time, some moved into barrios, or Mexican neighborhoods, in the cities. In the barrio, Mexicans found helpful neighbors and familiar surroundings. Some Americans resented Mexicans whom they believed were taking their jobs. Mexicans who remained in the United States earned low wages and had little control over their working conditions.

## SELECTION 4

### *A Mexican immigrant, Anastacio Torres, tells of his experiences in the early 1900s, but a folksong represents a different view.*

I was about seventeen years old, in 1911, when I came to the United States with my brother-in-law. I had worked until then as a clerk in a small store in my home town and also knew something about farm work. My brother-in-law managed to get me across the border without much trouble. We crossed the border at Ciudad Juarez and when we got to El Paso, Texas, we signed ourselves up for work in Kansas.

Later I went to California where a brother of mine was. I worked for a long time in California. I was in the Imperial Valley, or Calipatria. I worked there first as a laborer with some Japanese. They showed me how to run all the agricultural tools.

About the end of 1918, I went to Ciudad Juarez for my sister and her children. My father also came with her. Then we went to Calipatria and the whole family engaged in cotton picking. They paid very well at that time. They paid us \$1.75 or \$2.00 for every 100 pounds of cotton we picked. Since each

member of the family picked, we managed to make a good amount every day.

When the cotton crop of 1919 was finished we went to Los Angeles. I got a job as a laborer with a paper manufacturing company. They paid me \$3.40 a day for eight hours work. I was at that work for some time and then returned to the Imperial Valley for lemon picking. They paid me \$3.00 a day for eight hours work.

In 1921 a Japanese friend for whom I was working as a laborer told me to keep the farm, for he was going to go soon. The owner of the land, who was an American, furnished the land, the water and the seeds. We shared the other expenses evenly. Half of the crop was his and half mine. The first planting that I made was of 13 acres of lettuce. I also planted squash and tomatoes. We did very well on those for the crops turned out first-class.