Immigrants in Wisconsin in the 1800's

The first quarter of the nineteenth century was marked by westward migration of small numbers French, English, and Americans from the eastern U.S. into the rich lands and waters north and west of the Ohio River. By the mid nineteenth century, the Native Americans who had been the primary inhabitants of Wisconsin had been forced to give most of their lands to the federal government, and some were relocated west of the Mississippi River.

Between 1836 and 1850, Wisconsin's population increased from a mere 11,000 to over 305,000. Economic and social changes, coupled with natural disasters such as the potato blight in Ireland, increased Europeans' discontent and desire to emigrate and seek a better life.

Of the more than 100,000 foreign-born Wisconsinites in 1850 – one-third of the state's population -- only 48,000 could claim English as their native language (and half of these were Irish immigrants). Of the non-English speaking immigrants, the Germans were by far the most numerous, followed by Norwegians and French Canadians. Other ethnic groups left their mark, including the Finns in Douglas County, the Danes in Racine County, and the Italians in Kenosha.

Between 1852 and 1855, the Wisconsin Commission of Emigration actively encouraged the settlement of European immigrants in Wisconsin. Pamphlets extolling the state's virtues were published in German, Norwegian, Dutch, and English and were distributed throughout Europe as well as in eastern port cities. Advertisements were placed in more than nine hundred newspapers. Propaganda produced by land speculators and the letters sent back to Europe by immigrants encouraging friends and family to join them also stimulated immigration to Wisconsin.

By 1855, however, the rise of antiforeign sentiment, or nativism, led to the dissolution of the Commission of Emigration. Waves of ethnic conflict between "Yankees" and Germans periodically swept through Wisconsin, in part around the extent to which German language and culture could be taught in schools.

In 1890 the state legislature enacted the Bennett Law, which required that all schools, public and private, conduct classes in English. German Americans denounced the Bennett Law as an assault on their culture by Yankees who sought to force their own values on everyone else. Opposition was loud, persistent, and widespread, and after only a single term the politicians responsible for the Bennett Law were voted out of office, and the Law itself was repealed the following legislative session.

Adapted from Wisconsin Historical Society webpages
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