

THE DANBURY CULTURAL HERITAGE INVENTORY PROJECT

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Members of the Social Science/History Departments are undertaking a history of the ethnic groups of Danbury in a two-year project designed to be part of the College's contribution to the Bicentennial celebration in this city. (Danbury itself has a Tercentenary in 1985, so there will be plenty of time to deal with any loose ends.)

The project has two sources. First, I discovered that there was a considerable body of very interesting material on Portuguese-Americans (of whom there are an estimated eight thousand in Danbury), but almost nothing on the communities in Connecticut and a flat nothing on the one in Danbury beyond a term paper or two. Second, it was my feeling that the local leadership of some of the Bicentennial committees had devolved on groups that could trace family or house origins back to the time before the Revolution, and that this emphasis, especially in this period of our political history, left out huge groups in Connecticut, which, despite its stone walls and salt boxes, is urban, Catholic, 'ethnic'. Approaching the two local history buffs within the Department, Drs. Janick and Warner, I easily obtained initial approval, and Dr. Haas has proved to be, as expected, very sympathetic.

The following parts of the project have already been put in train:

1. Library and museum resources here and elsewhere have been surveyed and inventoried, and I have started to assemble a personal library on special aspects of immigration history as they affect the local picture.

2. Since part of the future work depends on our ability to identify the nationality of surnames -- of the roster of policemen in 1924, for example, watching how the waves of ethnic movement have affected different areas of city life -- a Surname Identification Experiment was designed to test student skill. The scores of social science students (mostly mine) are being compared with those of foreign

language majors to see whether the latter have better ears, or eyes, for such nuances in identifying the background of a list of surnames whose history is known. One of the interesting results is that, although the reference books on names say a great deal about 'anglicization' in American migration, they do not report a kind of sidewise change that we have found -- from Polish to Irish-sounding, from German to Italian-looking. The final results of the Experiment await key-punching for computer analysis.

3. I wrote to all the churches listed in the City Directory in July asking for historical materials. Some of them have formal, printed histories, which I have been sent. They seem very complete in terms of real estate and personnel (when the mortgage was burned; who was the organist in 1935): however, their perception of their changing role in the community in religious and social terms is largely lacking in the printed material. Generally, how did the churches get along with each other, as the city grew and changed? What sort of role did they play in assimilating different ethnic or nationality groups, and did this vary from one group to another? What did it mean, specifically, to be the largest Protestant congregation in the state, as the Danbury Methodist Church was in 1900? What sort of social, or moral, or perhaps political influence, did this status imply? A great deal of further work will be necessary to arrive at answers to some of these questions. Individual researchers, and the students in a revised course in Religion Society and Culture which we hope to offer in the fall of 1975 will work on these problems.

4. Eventually, Dr. Bilecki willing, we shall do a complete ethnic census of the city. A pilot project this fall will consist of interviews with the 600-odd WesConn students who are Danbury residents. The focus is on family history, tracing patterns of movement into the city in their economic and ethnic context. There are two areas where we may do some pioneering, adding some depth to the barebones statistics about the changes in the international migration since the 1965 law, and offering some insight into the increasing suburbanization of the city.

5. The classes in Marriage, Family and Kinship next spring will study, from

newspapers and legal records, patterns of intermarriage for selected years. (We are using the same years that the M.A. History Program has chosen for special attention, in the hope that students in those courses will be able to contribute to the Project in their research.)

6. A list of Candidates for 'oral history' -- taped reminiscences -- has been started, and two M.A. History candidates, Sharon Noel and Paulette Pepin, will interview them during the course of the year.

7. An undergraduate on a special project has taken on the job of interviewing representatives of the local ethnic associations, focussing on their histories and changing functions in the community.

8. Some of the Social Science/History Secondary Education majors, when they return to the campus for the spring semester, will pursue the subject of Danbury's ethnic history as it affects the educational system. Have the foreign language offerings in the schools reflected the composition of the people? How have the changes in the source of immigration since the 1965 law shown up in the "S.L." (Teaching of English as a Second Language) program? Do the rosters of teachers over the years themselves mirror the changing backgrounds in the population? These are some of the questions that are appropriate to ask in the framework of an education major.

Obviously, we are looking for volunteers -- students with research projects, faculty with class assignments -- and I sit ready in my private dungeon, White 022C, to help. Eventually, the results of all our efforts will be analyzed, integrated, and, we hope, published, in some coherent form. All kind of participations are welcome and will be deeply appreciated.

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