

Letters to the Editor  
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# Opinions

## Our immigrant heritage enriches us

The strength of America has always been its people. While it's true that most of us are American citizens either by birth or naturalization, if most of us traced our family back six or eight generations, we would surely find our roots lie in some faraway land.



Mike Tschlis

Opinion  
Shaper

Like many major American urban centers, St. Louis has had a long and rich history of immigrant settlement. Following the first 18th-century French Creole settlers came wilderness adventurers and migrants from the Eastern states. African-Americans also have had a presence since the earliest days, although most arrived

under the yoke of slavery.

By the mid-19th century, more than half of all St. Louisans were foreign-born. An increasing number of Irish immigrants fleeing a famine came to settle in St. Louis at this time, many moving into a blighted area north of Downtown that came to be known as Kerry Patch; but it was Germans who flooded St. Louis in the greatest numbers, seeking to settle in an area they been told resembled their homeland.

Although this tidal wave of new people was at first met with resistance by "native" St. Louisans, the immigrants eventually were accepted. By the end of the 19th century the children of the first Irish and German immigrants began moving into the middle class and expanded their participation in local business and political life.

Eastern and southern Europeans began arriving in St. Louis in the late 19th and

early 20th centuries, and a whole new set of distinct ethnic neighborhoods developed. As the Irish and Germans began to fan out to larger areas on the city's north and south sides, Italians, Poles, Czechs, Croatians, Serbians, Hungarians, Syrians, Jews and Greeks moved into areas their predecessors had left behind.

It was a time when ethnic diversity in St. Louis was truly alive. How many of us today can begin to imagine strolling down streets within several miles of the Gateway Arch and encountering "Little Poland," "Little Jerusalem" or a "Chinatown"? How many are left who can recall there was a "Greektown" on the site where Busch Stadium now stands? My grandfather, a Greek immigrant who settled here in the years following the World's Fair, owned a grocery store for a quarter-century in what is now deep left field.

By 1930, most of the newer immigrants' neighborhoods fell victim to their inhabitants' economic success, with many seeking better housing in areas farther out in the city. Many immigrants, especially their children, later joined the flight to the suburbs after World War II, where living next to neighbors of a similar economic class became favored over living next to people of the same ethnic ancestry.

With the lone exception of the tenacious and venerable Hill neighborhood, St. Louis' older ethnic communities have long vanished, leaving only occasional traces of their presence in the churches and buildings that housed their religious and social activities.

Few today are old enough to recall those ethnic enclaves that covered the city like a patchwork quilt and gave it a truly cosmopolitan flavor.

Eighty-one-year-old Crestwood resident Nick Bouras remembers. Bouras, a

partner in a mop manufacturing business that his Greek immigrant father founded in 1904, vividly recalls as a boy watching a Chinese man walking down a street in the old Chinatown area. The man walked slowly, arms folded, head bowed and arrayed in colorful, traditional dress that fell to his ankles. The man embodied everything strange and exotic to the fascinated young Bouras.

In a different spin on those times, Bouras also remembers how his family had to move from the house they had rented on the near South Side because their neighbors didn't take to "foreigners" living on the block. It was a time, Bouras recalls, when one was often identified first by their nationality.

Today, the Bouras family business employs modern-day immigrants from many different parts of the world: Laotians, Vietnamese, Romanians, Russians and Albanians. Bouras acknowledges they are good, hard workers, with a strong work ethic characteristic of the immigrants of his father's time.

There is no doubt that immigrants today, like those of generations past, come to America and St. Louis with the goal of improving their lives and the lives of their families. They still view this country as the land of opportunity. Their hard work, resourcefulness and commitment to their adopted home is something from which we all benefit.