Documents on Nineteenth-Century Immigration

Brochure for Eastern Emigrants

> *Congress approved a federal land grant for the construction of a railroad in the Pacific Northwest in 1864, but the Northern Pacific Railroad Company encountered numerous financial problems while the railroad was being completed. To generate revenue to pay for construction, the Northern Pacific Railroad Company decided to sell tracts of land along the proposed route. The company established a Bureau of Immigration, which sent recruiters with newspapers and brochures to Eastern Europe to attract settlers. [...]*

Pages of incontestable evidence could be introduced here to prove that nowhere in the world can such large crops of wheat, barley, rye, oats, potatoes and other roots be raised as on and about the Land Grant of the Northern Pacific Railroad; that nowhere in the world are there such apples, pears, plums, and cherries as those grown on and about all the Grant west of the Rocky Mountains; that fruit-trees there invariably bear generally in two, at most in three years, from the graft; that the curculio and other insects destructive to fruit here are wholly unknown there; that nowhere do shade, fuel, and fruit-trees grow so rapidly, vigorously, and beautifully, as there; that nowhere in the world is there a grass to be compared to that combination of timothy and oats, the "bunch grass," which covers most of this Land Grant, and which on the ground is perfect hay in July and in January; that nowhere is such possibility of grazing cattle in vast herds without shelter, prepared fodder, or care, as exists all over the regions to be traversed by the Road on both sides of the Rocky Mountains, whose universally diffused "bunch grass" has justly given to it the name of "the graziers' paradise."

The materials for the greatest lumber trade the world has seen exist on and near the Western end of this Land Grant, and maintain with a single interruption to the eastern foot of the Rocky Mountains. Forests of fir of three varieties, of cedar of two varieties, of pine, spruce, hemlock, cypress, ash, curled maple, and black and white oak envelop Puget Sound, and cover the larger part of Washington Territory, surpassing the woods of all the rest of the globe in the size, quality and quantity of the timber. [...] From the eastern foothills of the Rocky Mountains to Puget Sound, this Land Grant belts the richest mineral deposits on this continent, consisting of gold, silver, platinum, lead, copper, iron and rock-salt. The banks and bars of every stream running from the Rocky range into the Columbia, Yellowstone, Missouri, and Puget Sound will pan out gold. [...]

The way-traffic and way-travel on the Northern Pacific Railroad will be that which will inevitably spring from a wide belt of this continent whose soil will yield immense crops of grain, fruit, and vegetables, whose pasturage is the marvel of travelers, the mildness of whose climate is seemingly a paradox, but is superabundantly testified to by man and beast. The domestic cattle of Montana, Idaho, Washington, and Dakota, range out all winter and are fat in March.

From Infobase. Date: ca. 1870. By: Northern Pacific Railroad Company.

Chinese Immigrant's Prostitution Contract

> *Chinese immigrants to the United States in the late 19th century faced significant challenges. They were the first immigrant group to face racism and nativism as well as race-based immigration legislation. Many poor Chinese families sold their women into sexual slavery upon arrival in North America to cover the cost of their transportation from China. This contract, which dictates the employment terms of a woman arriving in San Francisco, California, in 1883, allows for rest during "menstruation disorder" and penalizes the contractee for sickness and pregnancy. Indentured servitude of this sort was hidden by Chinese immigrants mainly living in "Chinatowns" where other social groups did not see their practices.*

The contractee Xin Jin became indebted to her master/mistress for food and passage to San Francisco. Since she is without funds, she will voluntarily work as a prostitute at Tan Fu's place for four and one-half years for an advance of 1,205 yuan (U.S. $524) to pay this debt. There shall be no interest on the money and Xin Jin shall receive no wages. At the expiration of the contract, Xin Jin shall be free to do as she pleases. Until then, she shall first secure the master/mistress's permission if a customer asks to take her out. If she has the four loathsome diseases she shall be returned within 100 days; beyond that time the procurer has no responsibility. Menstruation disorder is limited to one month's rest only. If Xin Jin becomes sick at any time for more than 15 days, she shall work one month extra; if she becomes pregnant, she shall work one year extra. Should Xin Jin run away before her term is out, she shall pay whatever expense is incurred in finding and returning her to the brothel. This is a contract to be retained by the master/mistress as evidence of the agreement. Receipt of 1205 yuan by Ah Yo. Thumb print of Xin Jin the contractee. Eighth month 11th day of the 12th year of Guang-zu (1886).

From Infobase. Source: Brier, Stephen, ed. Who Built America? New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000. Date: August 11, 1886.

Interview with M. Henri Lemay

> *Canadian immigration to the United States increased steadily from 1850 until the 1920s, as many Canadians moved south to take advantage of the plentiful jobs resulting from American industrialization. The textile mills and granite quarries of New England were particularly attractive to large numbers of French-Canadian immigrants. As a young man, M. Henri Lemay was one of the millions of French Canadians who immigrated to the United States. He settled in Manchester, New Hampshire, in 1881 after finding work in one of the city's textile mills. In 1938, at the age of 73, he was interviewed by Victoria Langlois, a reporter with the WPA's Federal Writers Project (FWP) who was herself the daughter of French-Canadian immigrants. [...]*

M. Henri Lemay in seventy–three years old. He is in good health and was active in business until two years ago when he was ill during the entire winter. Now he was retired and has sold his interests in his jewelry store to his brother. He seemed glad to answer my questions and to tell me about "old times." [...]

"In the fall of 1881, I started from Deschambe[ault] on the St. Lawrence River to carry a load of hay and grain to Lake Champlain," M. Lemay continues.

"We went [an] far as Whitehall and then my brother, Tobie, and I decided to take the railroad train for Manchester where we know we could find work in the mills. I had no intention of staying here. Yet I remained for twenty years before I even went back to my old home for a visit.

"I was sixteen and Tobie eighteen years old when we arrived in New Hampshire. How lonesome we were at first! But seen we began to got acquainted with French–speaking people and, little by little, we became accustomed to our now surroundings.

"The Manchester population was made up of Yankees, Irish and French at the time and there were no Greeks, Jews or Poles in the city.

"Oh, yes, we went to work in the mills. They more the big source of industrial life. At first I earned seventy–five cents a day and my brother fifty cents and, though you may not believe it, we lived frugally but decently an these wages. You see we could buy good steak for twenty–five cents; chicken cost twelve cents a pound; a soup bone with much meat on it was only four cents a pound; and eggs were three dozens for a quarter of a dollar! No meat came from the west and there were four or five slaughter–houses in the outskirts of the city.

"Two or three times a week, cattle going to the Brighton stockyards were driven down Elm Street and men were hired to stand at the corners of the side streets to keep the animals in line. All the public parks and private properties on the route were surrounded with iron or wooden fences to protect then from straying cattle. [...]

"Oh, yes, the parents objected more or less about letting young people go dancing. M. le Curé [the French-Canadian priest] was very such against it; but––––we arranged to go just the same! The girls told their mothers about it only the day after, you see! But no harm was done. We were not as 'excited' as the young of nowadays, but don't forget that we were hard at work from six o'clock in the morning until six o'clock at night!

"We French people kept together and made our own good times. Every Sunday evening some five or six people assembled under one roof, living up to the old saying, Les amis de nos amis sont nos amis. They were pleasant, those meetings.

"You ask how we French were accepted in Manchester. Oh, yes, we must admit that the Yankees and Irish did not like us. No, they did not like us at all! They appeared to bitterly resent our coming here." M. Lemay laughed a bit here. "Not more than twenty years ago a good friend of mine, a genuine old Yankee with whom I have had frequent business dealings and political contacts then and whom I always see with pleasure now, said to me: 'I like you, Henry! You're a good fellow! Not exactly like the other Frenchmen I have known here! Are you sure you're pure French?' I assured him that every drop of my blood was of French extraction. [...]

"The girls earned from fifty to seventy–five cents a day. Each had her 'best dress' made of fine wool and trimmed with bits of velvet, silk or lace for Sunday and she always managed a new hat for every other season. Girls wore very high boots then and I remember that once when I had a job in a shoestore I sold a pair of shoes with twenty buttons to a young lady one Saturday night!

"All the time I was looking about for a trade to follow and finally I hit upon the idea of becoming a clock–maker. That was a good move on my part for I came to like the work, and, having a flair for it, began to make a good living.

"I now became interested in politics and occupied minor posts which made me aware of the importance of civic institutions. I became a citizen in 1887 and have been active in the associations which take care of the naturalization of newcomers. Now they come no more from Canada for the government has awakened to its mistake of allowing so many French–Canadians to become citizens of the United States.

"I bought this house about thirty years ago, when Webster School was laid, a man named Martin bought several houses which had been built around there right after the Civil War and which were inhabited by veterans. He made cellars and dug wells on this street and the houses were then transported and set upon then without mishap. [...]

From Infobase. Source: Library of Congress. Manuscript Division. WPA Life Histories Collection. Date: January 10, 1939. By: Victoria Langlois.

Life in Fall River, Lowell, and Lawrence, Massachusetts

> *The Massachusetts Bureau of the Statistics of Labor, long headed by Colonel Carroll D. Wright, published annual reports on labor legislation and conditions in the Bay State during the Gilded Age. One of its most famous reports (1881) assailed French-Canadian immigrants by deeming them "the Chinese of the Eastern States." In the face of public protest, Wright organized formal hearings that enabled Franco-Americans to present their side of the story. The same report that carried their rebuttal also portrayed the dire living conditions in immigrant neighborhoods in three major cities.*

[Fall River.] A spinner [...] said, in substance, "The tenements throughout the city are in a very poor condition. The reason why I live in this one is because I am compelled to. Compulsion is used by this mill, and whether the manufacturers have the legal or the moral right to keep us in their houses I do not know; but I think it is wrong. [...] The closets [privies] in the yard are very bad, and their odor is the reverse of pleasant. There is a hydrant in the yard to which we all have to go for drinking water, having none in the house that is fit to drink. Shortly after six o'clock any night you can see a line of men, women, girls and boys, waiting their turn, laden with pails, to get the water to use for drinking and cooking. In England I never knew what a tenement house was." [...]

A resident of Fall River [...] stated, “When the mills went up so suddenly they had to be supplied with help; and the workshops and poorhouses of England were emptied of men and women, who flocked here in such large numbers that the manufacturers hastily erected blocks of tenements [...] No regard for personal comfort was consulted, and some of the houses were built on marsh land, which, in summer, renders the places the most unhealthy and disagreeable in this country. Into these they crowded eight to ten families, and used them like beasts. [...] I know of a place where there is but one water-faucet to nearly fifty families, while the privies are exposed to everybody. Dead rats and chickens and other refuse lie about, regardless of any of the common laws of health. Into these tenements families come and go, and the best of care is consequently unknown. When a man is employed by the mill he is compelled to move into their tenements.” [...]

While an agent was engaged in gathering statistics at the central police station, a lost child was brought in shortly after one o’clock in the afternoon, and remained there until after the mills let out for the day; then its mother came to reclaim it. The marshal stated that a large number of children were brought in, who had strayed from home, and whose parents worked in the mills. Several children were found supplied with a loaf of bread, which was their dinner, their parents going to the mills in the early morning, and not returning until night. [...]

[Lowell.] The general appearance of “Little Canada” was very demoralizing, the people being crowded into the smallest possible space, and the local board of health powerless to prevent the over-crowding, except in a case of an epidemic.

Extracted from the Thirteenth Annual Report of the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor (1882).