

Push and Pull

By Florence Sprague

Scientists assert that human populations on all continents today originated in Africa and migrated to all of the others over the millennia. People have continued to move, expand, explore and seek new resources and homes ever since those early migrations. The factors that cause people to move are often divided into two categories, push factors and pull factors. As you might infer, push factors are the negatives that make staying in one place difficult- such as war, famine, overcrowding, and persecution. The pull factors are positives in another place that encourage others to come into a place-such as land, jobs, safety--the chance of a better life.

Minnesota is known for the large numbers of immigrants from Germany, Sweden and Norway. So, why did they come to the U.S. and end up in Minnesota? What were the push and pull factors at play? Well, if they were farmers who came after 1862, they may well have homesteaded and earned farmland merely by the act of living and farming on the land they claimed. This was hard work and often dangerous, and the right of the U.S. government to offer land for homesteading is highly questionable since the treaties they signed were unfair and often not fulfilled, but land for the taking is one heck of a pull factor.

Every immigrant is first an emigrant, that is, first you leave one place and then you come to another. The Swedes were already experiencing the push factors of poverty, too many people on too little land, and lack of other job opportunities.

Homesteading was just one factor pulling immigrants from Europe to the plains states. (An interesting aside, people could homestead in Alaska until 1986.) Jobs in manufacturing, mining, and the general environment of economic prosperity and opportunity (remember those streets paved with gold stories?) lured immigrants from places of where they were poor, overcrowded, and persecuted. Today, despite the fact that a significant portion of the U.S. working population is struggling with the loss of manufacturing jobs and sees diminished opportunities for a better life for their children, much of the rest of the world still sees the United States as the land of opportunity, a land of safety and peaceful transitions with much less corruption than many other places.

Of course they want to follow the many earlier waves of immigrants. Push and pull factors are still powerfully working around the world. Is it less worthy to try to escape gang violence and political corruption in Central America than to escape pogroms in Eastern Europe?

I am mostly Scotch-Irish and English, with a little German mixed in, at least, as far as I know. Most of my ancestors immigrated enough generations ago that I do not know stories about the factors that pushed or pulled them across the Atlantic. I could only speculate from history books. I think that they came before there was much in the way of immigration control. They mostly did not pass through Ellis Island or Angel Island. They would not have had to battle quotas, or health tests, or the Chinese Exclusion Act, or the refusal of this country to accept many Jewish refugees before WW II.

Windows and Mirrors for All

How about you? When and why did your ancestors come to North America? What do you know about the push and pull factors that acted upon them? Do you ever consider how that might compare to today?

For African Americans, the whole concept of voluntary emigration and immigration is frequently not relevant. I would be interested in learning more about how your personal history influences your current beliefs about contemporary immigration issues. If you are Native American, some of the pull factors for immigrants from Europe were horrible push factors forcing you out of your homelands, but even the Ojibwe migrated to Minnesota within still remembered oral history. How do you feel about contemporary immigration issues?

Space, jobs, and resources are finite. The planet is ever more crowded and contentious. There are not simple solutions to the challenges of ongoing human migrations. But we must face them with compassion and open hearts. We, too, are connected.