12-1991

Archival Chronicle: Vol 10 No 3

Bowling Green State University. Center for Archival Collections

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/archival_chronicle

Recommended Citation

http://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/archival_chronicle/31

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Library Newsletters at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Archival Chronicle by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@BGSU.
Coming to America: Naturalization Records

Four Ukrainian folk dancers celebrate their cultural heritage through traditional costume and dance at a festival in Rossford in 1930. Gift of Paulette Weiser.

The United States is a nation of immigrants. The interaction between new arrivals and the local population influenced the growth of this country and is a fascinating study, whether taken from the point of the individual immigrant or from the larger perspective of demographics. Naturalization records provide vital data for such a study.

Since 1790 a variety of legislation has governed the naturalization process, but until the 20th century, no effort was made to keep the process uniform from place to place. The Ohio records discussed here may vary from those kept in other states.

Federal law required that aliens wishing to become citizens file a Declaration of Intention after at least a three-years' residence in the United States. This document is often referred to as “first papers.” Then, after a minimum of five years' residence from the date of immigration, an alien could be naturalized. Any court of record could perform this function as an agency of the federal government. In Ohio prior to 1856, the record of naturalization is usually found in the Court of Common Pleas Journal. The amount of information in the early entries depended upon the court, judge, and clerk. Often only a list of aliens and the oath of allegiance they took would be recorded in the journal, without a mention of their native country or any personal identification. Any papers giving these details may only have been "kept on file" in the court office, easily subject to loss or destruction. After 1856, the Probate Court began to take over this task, often keeping separate ledgers for Declarations of Intention and Naturalizations. These ledgers sometimes record more information, depending upon their use: name of alien, age, country of origin and date of immigration can often be learned.

Minor children became citizens when their father was naturalized, although their names were not recorded on his petition. Citizenship was also extended to the family if the alien died after filing a Declaration of Intention, but before he could obtain citizenship. Aliens who resided in the United States for at least three years prior to their twenty-first birthday and two years after could be naturalized without having to file a Declaration of Intention first. Likewise, honorably discharged veterans were not required to file "first papers," if they showed proof of service. All these “proofs” were attested to in the entry in the court record, but were not attached to the naturalization itself. The Minors' and Soldiers' Records may give the name, age, country of origin and date of immigration.
Americanized or garbled by busy clerks. National borders changed. Immigrants moved between the time they filed their entry, name of immigrant, date of arrival, and name of ship or rail line. Additional questionnaires included the alien's address, date and place of birth, occupation, port of embarkation, destination in the United States, and family information. The family information included the spouse's name, date and place of birth and marriage, and vital information on each child. The new Declaration of Intention now included a physical description of the alien and vital information about his spouse. The Petition for Citizenship (combined on a single form with the Certificate of Naturalization) also listed the name, date and place of birth of the alien, his spouse, and each child. Name changes could be documented on this form as well. Witnesses were listed by name, occupation, and address. With some modifications, this is the form in use today.

Naturalization could be a complex and intimidating process for the prospective citizen. Names and spellings were frequently Americanized or garbled by busy clerks. National borders changed. Immigrants moved between the time they filed their "first papers" and their final naturalization. Servicemen filed at the base where they were stationed, rather than their private residence. Some aliens waited many years before becoming citizens, and others were never naturalized. Information on early entries may provide no link to the old country or to the rest of the family, yet it is an important landmark in family history, and helps other researchers understand the social make-up of the communities they study.

Not all repositories hold all types of records, and part of the challenge lies in locating the right resource. In order to be successful at the genealogical research process, one must become familiar with the types of information found in a variety of records and from a wealth of available sources.

--- Stephen M. Charter