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## Archival Chronicle

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### 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.

Women took the citizenship of their husbands. Thus, foreign-born women became citizens when they married American men or when their husbands were naturalized, but no paperwork was filed. Until 1922, American-born women lost their citizenship by marrying foreign-born men. Soon after women won the right to vote, however, they were responsible for filing their own citizenship papers regardless of their marital status.

Immigration patterns changed toward the end of the nineteenth century, with more immigrants arriving from eastern and southern Europe and from non-European countries. Along with the demand for closer monitoring of this new population came a desire for uniformity in the naturalization process. A greatly revised law taking effect in 1906 sought to address both issues. Once again, the Court of Common Pleas handled the process, taking over from the Probate Courts. Gradually, by the 1930s, the U.S. District Courts assumed the function. Records for aliens entering the country after June, 1906 now included a **Certificate of Arrival** which listed the port of 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.

--Lee N. McLaird

### Going Home: Finding the Old Country

*Adding color to a tulip bulb sale in 1960, these women are dressed in traditional Dutch costumes from head to toe. Center for Archival Collections general photograph collection.*

The task of determining the hometown of an immigrant ancestor can be difficult when naturalization documents do not furnish the information. Fortunately, other local and government records exist that sometimes provide the exact place of origin. Beginning in 1850, **Census Records** list the individual's place of birth, and beginning in 1880, they list the parents' place of birth as well. While these may often give only the country of origin ("France"), they sometimes list what we might consider the province ("Wales" or "Bavaria," for example).

The **International Genealogical Index (IGI)** is an excellent survey source to use when an exact locality is not known. Published by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) in two formats, microfiche and compact disk, the IGI is an index of over 147 million names of deceased individuals. Information for the IGI was extracted primarily from original civil and church vital records, covering from the 1500s to the 1870s. The IGI can allow the user to narrow a focus of research from the country of origin to a specific province or region.

Church records, particularly those with a strong ethnic community base, often supply a wealth of information, listing not only places but dates of important events in the individual's life. **Civil vital records, biographical sources**, such as county histories, and **newspaper obituaries** often provide clues to a place of origin. **Passenger lists** usually contain the name, age, sex, occupation, the place of embarkation (often the hometown), and the final destination for each passenger. Some passenger lists include the name and address of a relative in the homeland. **Military service** and **pension files** may include the birthplace of a foreign-born soldier. **Passport applications** sometimes contain the exact place of birth of the applicant.

Lucas County **Board of Elections** records contain information on foreign-born voters, covering naturalizations as early as the 1870s through the early 1930s, often giving very specific information about the voter's date and place of birth and that of his family. Some records may state "Father's papers" indicating that the voter's citizenship was derived from his father's naturalization filed when the voter was still a minor himself. The father's records should then be located.

Researchers also need to remember that national borders may have changed since their ancestor left the homeland. Someone from Prussia, for instance, may have been recorded as "German," "Prussian," "Polish," or "Russian," depending upon the date the information was recorded.

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

