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Religion and Hard Work

An Austrian, as listed on the U.S. Census in the early 20th century, could be one of any number of Slavic and Magyar peoples. The Austrian-Hungarian Empire in its heyday reached from Milan, Italy to Tarnopol in the Ukraine. Hungarians, Poles, Slovaks, Croatians, Lithuanians and others might call themselves Austrian.

Immigrants flooded through Ellis Island from impoverished countries around the globe, all with the same goal: to find work in the land of opportunity, the United States of America. For every four foreigners, three not only would work in the United States but stay and adopt it as their new home. Industrial cities all over the country were filling to the brim. Pittsburgh, with all its ready jobs, was a magnet for these newcomers. The city's population grew to nearly 350,000, with most of the new folk looking for homes near the mills and factories where they would work. Towns like Greenfield and Hazelwood chopped their rustic farms into streets and jam-packed them with quickly built houses. It seemed to the longtime residents that, almost overnight, a full half of Pittsburgh's population was from Italy, Russia and the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. Greenfield transformed from a Scotch-Irish town to a place where English was a second language.

Americans are often filled with fear and misunderstanding about their nation's latest influx of immigrants as they worry about how they themselves will be affected. Their worries are charged with emotion. Who are these new people living next door to me and my family? What are their morals? Do I want them to live in my neighborhood, to let their children play with my children? Are they willing to work for less money—will my employer hire them, could I end up without a job?

For fear to turn into prejudice, one important thing needs to happen: those who are feared cannot be seen as individuals but only as a group. Since America's new immigrants came from different nations and spoke different languages, to create a prejudice against them all, there had to be another unifying characteristic. One was found—the countries they came from were Catholic. The United States was swept with anti-Catholic propaganda, much of it originating from an organization called the American Protective Association. Though most of the APA's members were Republican, they had no qualms about attacking William McKinley as he ran for president on the Republican ticket when it was suggested that he might be a Roman Catholic. Their membership was so widespread that, by implying that McKinley was merely a frontman for the bishop, the APA nearly cost him the presidency.