

## **Holly Christensen: Today's immigration stories aren't so different from past generations'**

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August 7, 2019

When 13-year-old Christina Gyllenskog and her family left their country forever, she had never been away from her family's farm for more than a short while.

Mormon missionaries converted the family in North Sandby, Sweden, and soon thereafter my great-great grandma Christina, her parents and five siblings traveled to Copenhagen, Denmark. There, her two sisters, presumably too old to be eligible for an immigration loan from the Mormon church, took factory jobs to earn enough money for passage to America.

The rest of the family boarded the Humboldt, a German ship, in Hamburg on July 19, 1866. Before the six-week journey, water was pulled from the River Elbe. The water quickly turned black in wooden barrels burnt on the inside or red in barrels of iron. The beds were wooden planks without mattresses, and eventually the food became so rancid that hogs onboard refused to eat.

After disembarking in New York, the family traveled by train to Florence, Nebraska, along the western banks of the Mississippi River. From there, they walked 1,300 miles to Salt Lake City. Initially, the Gyllenskogs lived in a partially subterranean sod home. When it rained, everyone ran to pick up the large bag of flour before the water flowed into the earthen dwelling.

Another branch of the family buried their 3-year-old daughter on the Mormon Trail after she was bitten by a poisonous snake. Others were confronted by Native Americans on horseback, who did not allow the pioneers to pass until they gave over whatever they could.

Eventually the Gyllenskogs built a frame house with four large rooms in Smithfield, Utah, and the sisters joined the family. Christina always chastised her sisters for speaking Swedish, but unlike herself, they were grown women when they arrived in America.

An older friend recently told me her great-grandparents sent their two children from Europe to America alone. My friend's grandfather was 18 and his sister a young child when they were put on a boat. In the chaos at Ellis Island, the siblings became separated and were never reunited.

Unless you are 100 percent Native American or African-American (or a combination of the two) you, too, have ancestral immigration stories. And I have yet to meet someone who isn't proud of what their ancestors went through to get to America and how they built good lives by working hard at any job they could get.

Irish immigrants were once disparaged as drunkards with questionable morals. Italian immigrants were stereotyped as prone to violence and crime. After decades of helping build America in a number of ways, including construction of the transcontinental railroad, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 prohibited all immigration of Chinese laborers. It remained on the books until 1940.

Born largely out of a fear of terrorism, today some Americans want to ban Muslim immigrants. Yet, according to a recent article by the CATO Institute, a conservative think tank, even when including “those murdered in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the chance of a person perishing in a terrorist attack on U.S. soil committed by a foreigner... is 1 in 3.8 million per year... [T]he chance of an American being murdered in a terrorist attack by a refugee is about 1 in 3.86 billion per year, while the annual chance of being murdered in an attack committed by an illegal immigrant is [statistically] zero.”

Meanwhile, many Muslim professionals are willing to provide necessary services, such as medical care, to under-served communities, including rural America, where attitudes about Muslims are some of the most uninformed in the country.

People leaving their countries forever, making hard journeys to distant lands where different languages are spoken. People leaving behind all they own and everyone they know and walking more than 1,000 miles to arrive at the Promised Land. People burying their children on the difficult trek; people paying off those who would bar the way to their destination.

These are my ancestors' immigration stories.

People who are in such dire straits that they send their children alone on an arduous journey, not knowing if they'll ever see them again. That is the immigration story of my friend's ancestors.

The stories of today's immigrants applying for asylum at our southern border are remarkably similar to mine, to my friend's and, I suspect, to many of yours.

In the recent Democratic Party debates, candidate Amy Klobuchar stated, “I believe that immigrants do not diminish America, they ARE America.” This is absolutely true. Yet, we must have an effective system to process immigrants at all points of entry and weed out criminals.

In my rhetoric classes, I tell students, “Never trust a simple solution to a complex problem.” Crafting effective immigration policy is complex. Placing asylum seekers in detention centers is a simple but ineffective solution. It is also unnecessarily cruel.

Continuing to separate children from the adult family members they arrive with, even after ordered by the courts to stop the practice, does not deter immigration and is a violation of basic human rights. My heart aches knowing my country does this every day.

For an example of what difficult, yet productive immigration reform could look like, Google: “This American Life Barbara Jordon Immigration” and listen to the podcast that will populate your screen.

We could use a politician like Barbara Jordon today. She brought together people with divergent positions to craft comprehensive immigration reform. Unfortunately, Jordan died before she could get her legislation passed. Had she done so, many of today's immigration problems would have been preempted.

Have heart for asylum seekers. They are like most people's immigrant ancestors, including yours. The innocent children at our borders should be protected, not harmed. In demanding that our elected representatives do their jobs and craft effective immigration reform, no matter how hard the task, we honor our immigrant ancestors.