

The Ordeal of Immigration in Wausau

Since 1970 the majority of population growth in the United States has come from immigrants and their descendants. Demographers predict that this trend will intensify in the new century if federal laws remain unchanged. For a look at a possible American future, consider the fate of a small midwestern city

by Roy Beck

It all began simply enough, when a few churches and individuals in Wausau, Wisconsin, decided to resettle some Southeast Asian refugees during the late 1970s. To most residents, it seemed like a nice thing to do. Nobody meant to plant the seeds for a social transformation. But this small and private charitable gesture inadvertently set into motion events that many residents today feel are spinning out of control. Wausau—the county seat of the nation’s champion milk-producing county—has learned that once the influx starts, there’s little chance to stop it. Regardless of how many newcomers failed to find jobs in this north-central Wisconsin city of 37,500, or how abraded the social fabric became, the immigrant population just kept growing.

In little more than a decade the immigrant families’ children have come to make up almost a quarter of the elementary schools’ enrollment, crowding facilities past their limits—and there’s no peak in sight. The majority of immigrant students are Southeast Asians, and most of these are from the nomadic Hmong mountain tribes of Laos, which unsuccessfully tried to prevent a Communist takeover of their homeland some twenty years ago. Seventy percent of the immigrants and their descendants are receiving public assistance, because the local labor market has not been able to accommodate them. Religious and other private agencies—which, through federal agreements, create most of the refugee streams into American communities—are pledged to care for the newcomers for only thirty days.

Native-born taxpayers must shoulder most of the rising costs of providing more infrastructure, public services, teachers, and classrooms for the burgeoning community of immigrants, who make up relatively little of the tax base. In 1992 alone the Wausau school district’s property-tax rate rose 10.48 percent—three times as much as taxes in an adjoining school district with few immigrants.

“At first, most saw the new residents as novel and neat; people felt good about it,” Fred Prehn, a dentist and the father of two school-age children, told me during a visit I made to Wausau some months ago. At the time we spoke, he was the senior member of Wausau’s school board. “Now we’re beginning to see gang violence and guns in the schools. Immigration has inspired racism here that I never thought we had.” Prehn accused religious agencies of swelling the immigrant population without regard to the city’s capacity for assimilation. He said that the numbers and concentration of newcomers had forced the school board into a corner from which busing was the only escape. English was becoming the minority spoken language in several schools. Many native-born parents feared that their children’s education was being compromised by the language-instruction confusion; many immigrant parents complained that their children couldn’t be assimilated properly in schools where the immigrant population was so high. For two years citizens were polarized by the prospect of busing—something that would have been inconceivable in 1980. Divisions deepened last September, when the school board initiated the busing, and again in December, when voters recalled Prehn and four other board members, replacing them with a slate of anti-busing candidates. Community divisions are likely to persist, since busing supporters threaten lawsuits if the new board ends the busing.

Even more of a shock has been the emergence of organized gang activity. Wausau Detective Sergeant Paul Jicinsky told me that Asian gangs of thieves, centered in St. Paul and Milwaukee, have recruited immigrant youths in Wausau. Most small Wisconsin cities started Asian-refugee resettlement

programs at the prodding of government and religious leaders a decade or so ago, and most are now part of a Crime Information Exchange that, Jicinsky said, had been established almost exclusively to keep track of Asian gang activity in Minnesota and Wisconsin. Hmong parents, lamenting that their difficulty with English impedes their exercise of authority over their children, were at the forefront of those asking the police to combat gang activity. The cycle of community tensions spins round as native youths link up with outside white gangs to respond to Asian gangs. Compared with the urban core of many big cities, Wausau remains quite a peaceful place. But the comparison that matters for most residents is with the Wausau that used to be. "We don't want to become another California," a Wausau businessman told me. It's a fear often expressed as residents grapple with the problems familiar to America's congested coastal urban areas after nearly three decades of federally sponsored mass immigration and refugee resettlement.

At the same time, frustration grows among immigrants whose economic assimilation is dramatically incomplete. That frustration, in combination with resentment among natives over taxes and busing, seems to be the cause of inter-ethnic violence among the young. The violence takes varied forms. A dance at Wausau East High School, for instance, had to be canceled just as it was starting because of a fight between immigrant and native girls which was serious enough that an ambulance had to be called. Mayor John D. Hess, in a newsletter to all residents, wrote, "Is there a problem with groups/gangs of school age kids in Wausau? Emphatically, yes. The number of incidents involving group violence leads all of us to believe that groups of school age kids are organizing for whatever reasons.... Is there a problem relating to racial tensions in Wausau? Emphatically, yes."

The 1980 U.S. Census found Wausau to be the most ethnically homogeneous city in the nation, with less than one percent of the population other than white. "This was a very nice thriving community; now immigration problems have divided the town and changed it drastically," Sandy Edelman, a mother of preschool-age children, told me. "Neighborhood is pitted against neighborhood. When we were moving here, a few years ago, I had this image of children walking to school. It was paradise, we thought. We never thought it was possible there ever could be busing in these schools."

A Middle-Class Dream

Although Wausau is not marked by splashy displays of wealth, the word "paradise" crops up in wistful descriptions of the recent past by all types of residents, including immigrants. They obviously aren't talking about some idyllic South Seas utopia. What they have in mind seems to be a kind of pragmatic middle-class American dream, in which labor produced a comfortable standard of living in a community that was under the control of its residents and where there existed a safe, predictable domestic tranquillity in which to rear children and nearby open spaces for north-country recreation. It was a way of life created by the descendants of German and Polish immigrants and New England Yankee migrants, who by 1978 had spent roughly a century getting used to one another and creating a unified culture.

On my visit to Wausau, I found some anger. But the overwhelming emotion seemed to be sadness about a social revolution that the community as a whole had never requested or even discussed. While most residents spoke well of the immigrants as individuals, they thought that the volume of immigration had crossed some kind of social and economic threshold. Many sensed that their way of life is slipping away, overwhelmed by outside forces they are helpless to stop.

Wausau leaders describe their city prior to 1978 as one with no social tensions and only traces of crime. Residents enjoyed a long tradition of progressive politics, education, and business. A healthy match between the labor force and well-paying jobs was the result of a diverse economy heavily reliant on the Wausau Insurance Companies and the manufacture of windows, paper, cheese, electric motors and generators, fast-food-outlet exhaust fans, and garden tools.

In the eyes of some residents, though, this “paradise” may well have been boring. “This was a rather sterile community, and we needed ethnic diversity,” says Phyllis A. Bermingham, the director of the county department that administers the jobs program for welfare recipients. “I’m glad Wausau had major refugee resettlement. It has added so much variety.” Sue Kettner, who is in charge of refugee services at a family-planning agency, says, “I have a dream that Wausau will become uniquely cosmopolitan and take advantage of its diversity.” The until-recently “sterile” and homogeneous Wausau-area schools now enroll students from Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, China, the Philippines, Korea, Japan, Norway, Albania, Egypt, the former East Germany, the former Yugoslavia, and the former Czechoslovakia.

The idea of a moratorium on immigration comes up often in discussions in Wausau. But many people told me that they don’t raise the idea in public, because they believe that religious, media, and government leaders would readily label any kind of criticism of immigration a manifestation of racism. From 1924 until 1965 the nation’s immigration laws prevented foreign migration from reshaping the social landscape of American communities. The laws no longer do. Wausau is but one example of the results of radically modified laws, and many residents are astonished at the rapidity and relentlessness of change.

From a few dozen refugees in 1978, Wausau’s immigrant community grew to 200 by 1980, doubled from there by 1982, and doubled again by 1984. Since then it has more than quintupled, to reach roughly 4,200. Even if the influx slows, Southeast Asians may become the majority population in Wausau well within the present residents’ lifetimes. In this, Wausau is not unique but only an indicator of the demographic effects of current immigrant streams in the nation as a whole.

First Stream: Refugee Resettlement

When they agreed to become local resettlement sponsors, in the late 1970s, Wausau congregations did not simply provide refuge for a few Hmong, Lao, and Vietnamese families; they also inadvertently created a channel through which the federal government could send a continuing stream of refugees. “In the beginning we had no concept of what this would turn into,” says Jean Russell, a county official who helps administer public assistance to some 2,900 local immigrants.

Wausau residents discovered that the refugees invited to stay in their home town soon began issuing their own invitations and serving as local sponsors for their relatives. (Around the same time, the congregations ceased serving as formal sponsors.) The cost of inviting was low, since government agencies paid nearly all the new arrivals’ expenses. And for the same reason the lack of jobs was no deterrent to invitations. The first wave of refugees thus sent for more.

The resettlement stream shows no sign of drying up. The main source of Hmong immigrants is refugee camps in Thailand that were set up nineteen years ago, after the long Indochina wars. But there are still roughly 20,000 Hmong in the Thai camps today. Thailand insists that it should not have to continue to provide refuge.

United Nations workers continue to move people out of the camps. Inasmuch as there are already more than 40 million refugees and displaced persons worldwide, the primary UN solution has to be repatriation to the refugees’ original home country. UN officials consider permanent resettlement in another country to be a last resort. And they and others say that it is now safe for the Hmong to return home. According to a State Department spokeswoman, “The United States believes the Hmong can go back to Laos. We have been watching [repatriations] all along. Our people investigate. There never has been one verifiable story of anybody being persecuted for having been repatriated.”

But that does not mean that the Hmong resettlement into the United States will stop. The spokeswoman explains that current U.S. policy leaves the decision up to the Hmong in the camps. If they decide they don’t want to go back home to Laos, they will be put into a pool for American resettlement, even though there is no reasonable suspicion that they face the threat of persecution in

Laos. (This is not unusual: the majority of refugees coming into the United States do not meet a “last resort” criterion for resettlement.) If most of the Hmong decide against returning to Laos, one U.S. official estimates, 19,000 may be put into U.S. resettlement channels. That may not sound like much when compared with the number of immigrants into the United States as a whole, but for a community like Wausau, where refugees have already settled and where future refugees will surely go, the potential impact of 19,000 is great.

Second Stream: Secondary Migration

Cities where refugees were resettled tend to be rewarded with a secondary migration of refugees who have first been settled elsewhere in the United States. “They heard how good it was here and moved from big cities, mostly from California, because of the crime, unemployment, and overcrowding,” Yi Vang, who was first settled in Memphis and moved to Wausau in 1983, told me. Jean Russell, of the county welfare department, emphasized in our conversation that “they are really nice people,” but nonetheless shook her head in consternation at the additional burden that secondary migration puts on the social-service system. “Why do so many come here?” she asked, and answered her own question: “This is sort of the right-sized city. It is a wonderful place to live.” Wisconsin’s generous welfare system is a big draw. A study by the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute found that when the federal government began to cut back its relief benefits to refugees, in 1982, large numbers of refugees sought out the states that provided the best Aid to Families with Dependent Children payments. Wisconsin became a popular destination.

One branch of the secondary-migration stream that provides just a trickle now will potentially add a considerable flow: As the refugees become citizens, the 1965 Immigration Act and its successors give them the right to bring in members of their extended families through regular immigration channels. A continuous chain of immigration can ensue, as it already has among many nationalities, particularly in several coastal states.

Third Stream: High Immigrant Fertility

Natives in Wausau complain about the size of Hmong families. John Weeks, the director of the International Population Center, at San Diego State University, and a colleague have studied the Hmong and believe that their birth rate in this country may be one of the highest of any ethnic group in the world.

Unremarkable in Wausau would be a twenty-two-year-old Hmong woman with five kids who comes to Family Planning Health Services for a pregnancy test and contraceptive advice, Sue Kettner says. She says that part of the reason for the big families is the terrible misery and high death rate the Hmong suffered during their long fight with the Communists. “I talked to one man whose parents and four brothers and sisters were dead,” Kettner told me. “He was having ten children. He wasn’t willing to contracept.”

Life in America boosts Hmong infant-survival rates beyond what they were in Asia, Weeks says, and the Hmong have lower infant-mortality rates than African-American natives because they have better access to social services and their culture encourages positive prenatal behavior. “They don’t smoke, drink, or get fat during pregnancy,” he says.

“We find the girls’ periods start as early as the third grade,” says Lynell Anderson, the coordinator of the Wausau schools’ English as a Second Language program. “We’ve had pregnant sixth-graders.” Pregnancies in junior high school are not uncommon. Although such cultural patterns would not be so noticeable in Los Angeles or New York City, they are conspicuous and jarring to many Wausau parents concerned about the future of the Hmong girls and about the effects on their own children. Marilyn Fox, an ESL teacher, was quoted in the local newspaper in 1992 lamenting pregnancies in her junior high. The article pointed out that such pregnancies conflict directly with Wisconsin law, which invalidates the consent to intercourse given by anyone under sixteen. And anyone sixteen or older who

impregnates an underage girl is guilty of a felony. Fox and a colleague complained that none of the Hmong men or boys impregnating the girls were being prosecuted. But many communities find it difficult to impose American standards of behavior on people who claim membership in another culture.

At one point Anderson sat down with some other teachers to take an informal look at the list of Hmong girls in high school. They calculated that 35 percent were pregnant or already had children. That, of course, didn't include the Hmong mothers who had dropped out of school. Few kids marry without having children immediately, and the Hmong culture of arranged marriages ensures that pregnant girls get married to somebody. Single-parent families—which some officials identify as a growing social problem among Wausau natives—are virtually nonexistent among the Hmong. The availability of infant formula may also contribute to the high fertility: “We’ve heard the Hmong in Laos have kids three years apart, because of breast-feeding. But here it is every one or one and a half years, because women have moved to formula to be more modern,” Kettner says. All the various factors add up to substantial population growth. The Wausau Daily Herald cited a striking statistic from the 1990 Census which illustrates the widely disparate fertility rates: 7.7 percent of European-American natives in Wausau were under the age of six, as were 30 percent of residents of Southeast Asian origin.

Both Weeks and Kettner see signs that the fertility rate is likely to come down. “The Hmong Association has a very positive view of family planning,” Kettner says, “because it sees the economic need for women to work.” Tou Yang, a young case manager for the county program that finds jobs for people on welfare, says that high fertility forces some people to stay on public assistance because a low-wage job won't replace lost welfare benefits, which can be sizable for large families. Total public assistance (AFDC, food stamps, Medicaid, and housing and energy subsidies) for a Hmong family can be worth more than \$20,000 a year, according to local officials. The welfare-use rate for immigrants in the county is sixteen times as high as it is for natives.

Yang says that some of the Hmong talk about having small families, but their idea of small is generally four children. That is a bit higher than what the demographer Leon Bouvier, in his book *Fifty Million Californians?*, says is the Latino fertility rate, which is such an important contributor to that state's rapid population growth. At four the population will still soar. A couple in a four-child culture has eight times as many great-grandchildren as a couple in a two-child culture.

Population and Taxes

In 1978 Wausau taxpayers were beginning to enjoy the fruits of the replacement-level fertility that Americans had adopted during the emergence of modern environmentalism and feminism, early in the decade. Gone were the days of the Baby Boom and a perpetual need to build lots more schools, sewers, streets, and so on. Government could direct its energy toward maintaining and improving the quality of existing institutions. The student population had stabilized and even declined some.

But in 1994 the Wausau public school system is struggling to handle an increase of more than 1,500 students in less than a decade, nearly all of them children of immigrants. Although some schools were closed in the late 1970s, according to Berland Meyer, the assistant superintendent of schools, everything available is in use now, and classrooms are bursting at their proverbial seams. Taxpayers at first refused to get back on the building treadmill, rejecting tax increases in 1990. But they later approved one that led to the opening of a \$15 million middle school last fall. A \$4.5 million addition to the old middle school has just been completed as well. Meyer says that taxpayers still need to provide another \$3.5-\$4.5 million for a new elementary school. Unfortunately, all this construction will handle only immediate population growth.

Wausau's experience, although relatively uncommon in the Midwest, is quite common among American communities of the 1980s and 1990s. The majority of U.S. population growth since 1970

has come from immigrants and their descendants. They will probably contribute two thirds of the growth during this decade and nearly all of it after the turn of the century if federal policies remain the same.

False Promises

On a main road into downtown, an ALL-AMERICAN CITY sign reminds residents and visitors alike that Wausau is not inherently incapable of rising to the challenge of assimilating new residents. It was doing a fine job in 1984, when it won the award commemorated by the sign.

Nearby is another sign. WELCOME HOME TO WAUSAU, this one says, in the homespun way of small cities. It is more than a cliché to say that many natives no longer feel at home here, even as newcomers feel less than welcome. It is noteworthy, however, that when natives told me longingly of a lost “home,” most seemed to refer not to the Wausau of 1978, before the refugee influx, but to the Wausau of 1984, when the influx was at a level that still constituted a delightful spice and community relations were harmonious.

John Robinson, who was the mayor of Wausau from 1988 to 1992, acknowledges that no government entity at any stage of Wausau’s transformation talked to residents about immigration rates or developed community-wide planning for projecting future changes or deciding whether current trends should be allowed to continue. “The Southeast Asian evolution in Wausau was not a planned process,” Robinson told me. “It was sort of a happening. Could the city have planned differently? Yes. But until there is a real need staring you in the face, you don’t always reach out and address it.” Robinson, who was a young city councilman from 1974 to 1981 and a member of the legislature from 1981 to 1988, says he isn’t sure the city could have changed anything even if officials had spoken out against continuing federal refugee resettlement.

In 1984 Wausau’s welcome of Southeast Asians was still bighearted enough, and its relations between cultures congenial enough, for Wausau to be designated an All-American City. Youa Her, an educated, articulate leader of the early wave of Hmong settlers, made one of Wausau’s presentations to the national panel of judges. The thirty-four-year-old woman’s description of Wausau’s generosity reportedly left the panelists with tears in their eyes.

Nobody is exactly sure when and how everything started to go sour. But it was probably around the time of the award—certainly before Youa Her’s tragic death, in January of 1986, of tubercular meningitis. Newspapers from those years reveal a community increasingly sobered by the realization that what had appeared to be a short-term, private charitable act had no apparent end and was starting to entail a lot of local public costs. Many natives resent that nobody ever leveled with them about costs or where trends would lead, and they feel they were misled by the local media and by federal, state, and religious leaders.

During the late 1970s residents had assumed that the congregations would cover any costs of caring for the refugees they were sponsoring. After all, it was their project. One sponsor reinforced that notion, telling a reporter, “[Sponsorship] is not something that will last three days or three months or three years. It can be something to last a lifetime.”

But the churches’ financial commitment was actually rather shallow and short-lived, as Jean Russell, of the county welfare department, explains it. “At the beginning it was good Christian people wanting to do something for somebody. What they did was pick the refugees up at the airport and drive them to our office. The churches did help some, but the Hmong couldn’t make it without social services.” (The Hmong are not unusual in this regard. A 1991 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services study indicated that nationwide about two thirds of all Southeast Asian refugees who have arrived since 1986 remain on public assistance.)

Wausau residents were assured, though, that they had no reason to worry about increased welfare costs. In 1979 Susan G. Levy, the coordinator for the state's resettlement assistance office, explained that local taxpayers would not be adversely affected by private sponsors' generosity in inviting refugees, because the federal government would pick up the welfare tab.

As long as the flow was meager, Wausau's economy did fairly well at providing jobs to keep the immigrants off the welfare rolls. "Refugees Are Very Adaptable, State Officials Say" was one 1979 headline in the local paper. In June of 1980 the paper reported that 80 percent of the city's refugees became self-supporting within about three years: "Wausau's 200 Asian refugees doing well, more sponsors needed."

Promoters seemed certain that anything that was good and worked on one scale would be even better on a larger scale. Milton Lorman, a state representative from Fort Atkinson, urged Wisconsin to speed the flow of refugees. "The Statue of Liberty symbolizes the historic support of this country for immigrant rights," he said. "Wisconsin, as a state settled by immigrants, proves that this dream works."

But by May of 1982 an important threshold of danger had been crossed. One headline read, "Most refugees now receiving AFDC, relief aid." The immigrant population in Wausau had doubled since 1980, and the nation was in recession. That spring the federal government cut back its welfare assistance to new refugees. In the years that followed, federal and state governments—having enticed communities to take in immigrants—withdraw more and more support, leaving local taxpayers to bear most of the cost. "The federal government was a silent partner and then became a nonexistent partner," John Robinson laments.

Youa Her in late 1984 accepted the idea of economic limitations. "Anybody that calls," she said, "we'll tell them to think it over and not to be so hurried [to move to Wausau]." Choj Hawj, who was the elected leader of the Hmong Association at the time, said, "When I look to the economy and the population of Wausau city, we don't want any more to come until things look up."

The former school-board member Fred Prehn recalls that Youa Her was also concerned about proportionality and the effect of continued immigration on social relationships. He says she thanked city leaders for how well Wausau had provided for her people. But she warned them not to let the Hmong become more than five percent of the population, Prehn says; if their numbers went much higher, the natives might start to resent the immigrants, and hostility would begin to replace hospitality.

A month after Her's death Robert Nakamaru, a college professor, addressed the proportionality issue at an event that was intended in part to soothe emerging ethnic tensions. "When there are just a handful, they are seen as quaint," Nakamaru said of the immigrants. "But there is a point where a minority reaches a critical mass in the perception of the majority. Wausau is getting close to that point." Since then the city's immigrant population has quadrupled.

Who Is Responsible?

Nobody involved, apparently, has the authority to stop the refugee-resettlement process if it becomes harmful to a community. Once a week representatives of twelve voluntary agencies sit around a table in a New York office and divide up some 2,000 refugees' names. The Administration has determined the overall number in consultation with Congress. The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service has determined the eligibility of each refugee, and the refugees wait in other countries until a voluntary agency picks up their names at the weekly meeting and begins the process of resettlement.

Federal officials say that refugees cannot be brought into the country unless a voluntary agency is willing to settle them. The agencies sign an agreement—voluntarily—with the State Department to resettle everybody the government wants to bring in. At the time of the annual agreement could the

agencies pledge smaller numbers than the government wants to bring in? “That is hypothetical; it never occurs,” a State Department spokeswoman says. Actually, the voluntary agencies tend to lobby the government to bring in many more refugees nationwide than it chooses to each year. They receive compensation for each refugee.

Critics in Wausau say that the national Lutheran and Catholic refugee agencies should refuse to help place anybody else in Wausau. Back when problems got serious there, says Jack Griswold, of the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, the LIRS did stop sending refugees who were not joining relatives. But 80 percent of refugees entering the United States today are joining relatives. And that, Griswold says, is why the LIRS continues to settle refugees in Wausau, which he acknowledges has an overloaded infrastructure reminiscent of California’s: “If we insisted on settling them somewhere else, then they’d be on the bus for Wausau the next day.” The message to communities considering sponsoring refugees for the first time is that once they create the channel, voluntary-agency and federal officials have no way to restrict the flow—unless all the agencies refuse to sign the agreement. But if the agencies did that, they would be out of the business of settling refugees—which is, after all, their reason for being.

One remedy might be to take the decisions away from the voluntary agencies and federal officials and put them in the hands of the local and regional entities that pay most of the bills. A variation might be for Congress to poll cities every year about how many immigrants and refugees they wanted and then offer various incentives and controls to ensure that new arrivals settled in the cities doing the inviting. This would democratize the process, allowing communities to decide much of their own demographic fate.

Nothing in the recent past suggests that Congress, the President, or federal bureaucrats take American communities into consideration at all when setting immigration numbers and policies. The U.S. Bureau of the Census has issued a report projecting that given current immigration patterns, another 134 million people will be added to the United States by 2050. No other factor in American life is likely to have such a large effect on all the other factors. Yet not a single congressional committee or presidential task force has shown any interest in considering whether the nation should become what the Census Bureau projects it will become given current policies. The outcome of those policies, however, has been more accidental than deliberate. Eugene McCarthy recently said that he and other Senate sponsors of the 1965 law that set mass immigration into motion never intended to open the floodgates. The quadrupling of annual immigration numbers has been an inadvertent and harmful result. Yet over the past two decades the federal government has made no attempt to assess the environmental, social, infrastructural, and economic consequences to communities of such rapid federally induced population growth.

A Cooling-Off Period

For twenty-eight years Billy Moy’s One World Inn served Chinese food in a former train depot on an island in the Wisconsin River. Bridges connecting the western half of Wausau to its downtown, on the east side, route traffic past the depot. Before his retirement last year Billy Moy, who arrived in Wausau as a Chinese refugee, sat with me in a darkened back room and told the kind of colorful escape and success stories that traditionally have evoked warmhearted responses from Americans. As a teenager he fled the Chinese Communists in 1951 and arrived by train in Wausau in 1952. After years of hard work, perseverance, and saving, and six years in the U.S. Army reserves, Moy bought the island depot and turned it into his restaurant in 1965.

“I didn’t know a word of English when I arrived,” Moy told me. In that he was like many of the refugees arriving today. But his reception and his freedom to move into the economic mainstream were far different. Why? One explanation may be that Moy had more education than the Hmong, whose people didn’t even have a written language until recent decades. More important, perhaps, he was a

novelty in Wausau, rather than a member of a mass of newcomers which natives may find threatening. "I started with first-grade English and high school math," Moy said. "People were very nice, especially the teachers. Kids never harassed me. Never a bad word. I guess it was because I was the only one." Fred Prehn went to school with Moy's son during the 1960s and 1970s and recalls that the young Moy was the only minority student. That son now has an M.B.A. and is a business analyst in Milwaukee.

But today's economy has not offered as many opportunities to the large number of refugees of the eighties and nineties, Mary C. Roberts, of the Marathon County Development Corporation, told me. "The Southeast Asian unemployment rate is high," Roberts said. "I think it is kind of irresponsible for churches to bring more in without at least the equivalent of one job pledged per family. Churches look at this just from the humanitarian angles and not the practical."

Various Wausau residents told me they favor a "cooling-off period" before more refugees are resettled in their city. Few residents know it, but such a period played a major role in creating the homogeneous Wausau they now consider the norm. After the turn of the century, immigration caused a social upheaval in Wausau. Back then the Germans and the Yankees were distinct ethnic groups, neither of which found particular strength in diversity. From 1880 to the start of the First World War, Germans streamed into Wausau, eventually overwhelming its New England Yankee founders. Jim Lorence, a local historian, says that the Germans became the predominant ethnic group around 1910. By the end of the decade the immigrants had turned the once conservative Republican town into a Socialist powerhouse. After the November, 1918, elections nearly every county office and both of the county's seats in the state assembly were filled by German-elected Socialists, Lorence says. Amid the political turmoil, natives felt like foreigners in their own home town. Around the nation this period was a time of sweatshops, worsening inner-city squalor, and ethnic hatred that propelled the Ku Klux Klan to its greatest popularity ever. The KKK, however, never got a strong foothold in Wausau, Lorence says.

The federal government in 1924 responded to the problems in a way that had a profound effect on the future development of Wausau and the nation. Congress lowered immigrant admissions to a level more palatable to local labor markets, according to the labor economist Vernon Briggs, of Cornell University. In his recent book, *Mass Immigration and the National Interest*, he describes how the 1924 law gave the country a much-needed forty years to assimilate the new immigrants. The KKK's power receded nationally, and cultural wounds began to heal. Labor markets gradually tightened. That helped stimulate improvements in technology and productivity which supported the middle-class wage economy that Americans took for granted until the 1970s—when the labor supply ballooned owing to renewed mass immigration, the entry of the Baby Boomers into the job market, and a radical increase in the number of married women in the workplace. Since then wages have declined and disparities of wealth have widened.

After publishing his book, Briggs called for a moratorium on most immigration until the federal government figures out how once again to tie the immigration rate to the national interest. Among others independently urging a temporary halt to immigration (with varying exceptions) are the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR); the National Hispanic Alliance; an Orange County, California, grand jury; the University of California ecology professor Garrett Hardin; Harold Gilliam, the environment columnist for the *San Francisco Chronicle*; and the environmental group Population-Environment Balance. A 1992 Roper poll commissioned by FAIR found that a majority of Americans support the idea of a moratorium. It and other polls have found that a majority of every substantial ethnic group in the United States desires reduced immigration.

Congress began to take part in the discussion about a cooling-off period late last year, when Senator Harry Reid and Representative James Bilbray, both Democrats from Nevada, introduced comprehensive immigration-reform bills that would cut the number of legal immigrants by roughly

two thirds, to 300,000 and 350,000 a year. (The U.S. average from 1820 to 1965 was 297,000.) In February, Representative Bob Stump, an Arizona Republican, introduced a “moratorium” bill that would reduce immigration even further. The last time Congress cut the flow of immigrants, in the 1920s, Wausau began to experience social healing, Jim Lorence says. Though it took another thirty years for the major divisions between the German immigrants and the native Yankees to disappear, the disparate ethnic groups slowly began to achieve a unified and harmonious culture—the paradigm of a recoverable paradise.

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