

The Fourteenth State

A classic study of Burlington in the 1930s

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The city of Burlington was the subject of a 1930s sociological study that examined “cleavages” of all sorts – in neighborhoods, schools, hospitals, social clubs, civic life, the workplace, marriage, race, class, ethnic origin, and religion. The project focused on a cross section of the six largest ethnic groups: French Canadians, Irish, Jews, Germans, Italians, and “Old Americans.” Results were published in 1937 as “We Americans: A Study of Cleavage in an American City” by Elin L. Anderson.

This slice of culture – during years of the Great Depression's drawdown but before World War Two – was a time when for working folks \$20 a week was a pretty good wage and 75 cents the going hourly rate. Burlington's population was a stable 25,000 and Sunday was for going to church, walking along under Gothic arches of ubiquitous elm trees.

Author Anderson held the position of assistant director of the Eugenics Survey of Vermont, which was headed by Professor Henry F. Perkins of the UVM Zoology Department. But by the time “We Americans” was completed the term “eugenics” had been vastly upgraded from the 1920s, when it was fashionable to think that people could be bred, somewhat like dogs or pigeons, for best traits.

As Nancy L. Gallagher, author of “Breeding Better Vermonters,” described the transition: “We Americans' thus transformed the meaning of eugenics in Vermont by replacing the characteristic angst over 'the alien in our midst' with a warning of the far more dangerous . . . force of 'the bigot in our midst.'”

One oddity of the study was that though citizens of Burlington were surveyed during a time period still considered Depression, few references were made to hard economic times. On the other hand, the study was seen as a response to fear and distrust caused by economic insecurity and resulting political instability such as protests against immigrants or even communist agitation.

As for cleavages, many were examined. There were eleven divisions among Protestant churches, three among Catholic churches (two French, one Irish), and three among Burlington's Jews. A YMCA had failed to enlist Catholics, who also refused to join the Boy Scouts. There were two hospitals: Mary Fletcher, established in 1879, serving all classes and creeds; and the Bishop DeGoesbriand, erected shortly after the first Catholic high school was opened. Boards of directors strictly met the religious lines.

The religious split was also seen in the 5,701 Burlington pupils registered in 1935. Of that total, 3,291 were in public schools and 2,550 in the parochial. Racially,

Burlington was a very white place, but there was occasional difficulty with the definition of that term. Anderson and her volunteers found that some Old Americans, as she called them, were not sure that Greeks or Italians should be considered “white,” and there were even some doubts as to whether Irish or French Canadians should be included in that rarified category.

Her treatment of so-called Old Americans as equal to other ethnic groups carried the subtle suggestion that they too must learn to treat others equally. Another lesson was that when Americans become confused or insecure about their identity and develop antagonisms about “outsiders,” it can lead to pressure toward the enactment of so-called patriot laws, compulsory saluting of the flag, loyalty oaths, or prohibition of certain subject matter in public schools.

Thus the old UVM-sponsored Eugenics Project, which had earned such a sordid reputation in the 1920s by appearing to endorse Nazi human experiments, was redeemed by a more enlightened turn of sociological events.