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TARGETING COLORADO: Part I

The America of memory

Old meets new in this story of immigration and assimilation



Mike Littwin
[email](#) | [bio](#)

July 6, 2006

PUEBLO - I didn't come here looking for Slovenians. Looking back on it, it was almost as if the Slovenians here - who call themselves Bojons - had come looking for me.

I showed up here - for this series on Colorado and politics - in search of an up-to-date immigration story.

You know, *illegal* immigration. Brown-skinned people. Spanish-speaking people. The issue that brings us Tom Tancredo and talk of walls and fear and anger and, as a bonus, a special session of the state legislature.

Instead, I run into Bojons, who are so irresistibly American - even though the term Bojon is apparently an Anglicized version of *beaux gens*, which originated with the then-not-so-hated French.

Bojons are as American as a grandfather throwing down shooters with his (drinking-age) granddaughter here at a Slovenian neighborhood street fair - but we'll get to that later. And also to an immigration story where today and yesterday meet, as told to me in part by Tim Pechek, who has come back to the old neighborhood, which is linked forever to the old country. It's America, or at least the America of memory. First, though, to the best version I heard of the Bojon story, which is that during the great European immigration of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the French would see Slovenians passing through on their way to America and say, "Look at those good-looking Slavic dudes." In French, that would be *beaux gens*, which, in Pueblo, via Ellis Island, turned into Bojons.



Todd Heisler © News

Families gather at Eilers' Place in Pueblo during a recent weekend street festival on Mesa Avenue. The bar — historically a gathering place for the Slovenian community in the city once known as the Pittsburgh of the West — is an ideal spot for perspectives on immigration past and present. The neighborhood and city have changed over the past 100 years, but the underlying theme has not: Pueblo is a town built on ethnicity.

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"Great article, Being born and raised in



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True?

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What matters is that the story is good and that 100 years ago or more, Slovenians, as well as Germans and Irish and Italians and the rest, came to America, many of them in search of mining and mill jobs.

They came to Pueblo to work at CF&I - Colorado Fuel & Iron - which would eventually employ thousands when Pueblo was known as the Pittsburgh of the West. And many of those with Slovenian roots remained, even as the mills shut down and the steel industry, for the most part, went away.

Pueblo is a town built on ethnicity, including a population that is now 44 percent Hispanic. This is a town of neighborhoods, a Midwestern industrial city carved out of the Mountain West.

The Hispanic heritage is multigenerational. In fact, if you travel south to the nearby San Luis Valley, you find towns where families, like Ken Salazar's, have lived for hundreds of years. I went down to Sunday Mass in Conejos at Our Lady of Guadalupe, the oldest church in the state, a church built before Colorado was a state.

Father Benito Hernandez, who arrived there from Mexico six months ago, does a bilingual Mass, but only five families in the congregation, he says, are Mexican. He says many in the congregation are ambivalent about illegal immigration.

"They say they speak Mexican, you know what I mean," he says. "You speak Mexican - not Spanish."

Most people there speak American English. But Hernandez says the families who do speak Spanish use a tongue that goes back to the original settlers and that, sometimes, he can barely understand them.

But what really puzzles him, though, is that the valley seems abandoned by the rest of the state. The only growth industry is prisons.

"We have big political families in this valley," he says. "So, I don't understand. Why do you have a big political family and you can't get help for this community."

The new immigrants don't stop in the valley as much as they used to, although a few pick potatoes there. They don't stop as much in Pueblo either. They go to Denver or to the resorts or to wherever the jobs are. Pueblo has been struggling to recover from the loss of heavy industry. It's a story a lot of small factory towns face. Its population, at around 100,000, is either stable or stagnant, as one Pueblan put it.

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Mesa Avenue, looking into the past, at what is left of the once-proud CF&I factory.

This was a union town at the center of the old union wars. The site of the Ludlow massacre is not so far away. The struggles are still felt. So are the effects of the mill, which helped move immigrant families quickly into the middle class.

One story I heard to explain the reason for so many ethnic groups here is that when the unions were trying to organize, the company would import labor from one more different country - so the organizers and organizees couldn't understand each other.

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At the bridge, a man who used to live in the neighborhood is standing with his daughter, telling her, and me, about all the smokestacks there used to be, and the ashes falling everywhere, and the coal-burning smell that made Pueblo Pu-town. The smell was of money.

On one side of the bridge was an Italian neighborhood. On the other, a Slovenian.

On the Slovenian side is St. Mary parish, built in 1924, which is where many of the people in this neighborhood went to school. There's a Slovenian library in there. And standing outside is Ken Weber, who has retired to Pueblo and is now volunteering for the Bessemer Historical Society, a co-sponsor of the street fair.

A man goes into the school who says he hasn't been there since graduating from eighth grade. He worked at the mill for seven years, losing a middle finger on one hand to an accident there. His dad worked at the mill for 35 years.

"It was just the best place to be," he says of the neighborhood. "You could hear the clang of the steel. You could smell the smoke. You could see the hot ash going up. It was great growing up here."

Weber looks as the guy walks into the building and says, "He moved away because he had to, but you can tell where his heart is."

I keep walking. It's a warm night. Kids, mostly Hispanic, are out on their bikes. In front of many of the bars there are karaoke bandstands. One guy unaccountably sings Neil Diamond for hours.

I make it to Eilers' Place, which is the centerpiece of the neighborhood. I know I went to a bar for last Saturday's column from Gardner. And I know, this series shouldn't be a pub crawl. But they're giving away kielbasa. And there's dollar draft beer, not that I'm drinking on the job.

Eilers' is more than a neighborhood bar. It's the definition of a neighborhood bar. I don't have to tell you what that means. Eilers' is said to have been the second bar in Pueblo to have gotten a license at the end of Prohibition. Gus's Place, across the bridge, is said to be the first. That's what I hear from Jack Quinn, who is the guest bartender at Eilers' this night.

He's the one who showed me an article about how the name Bojon came to be. He showed me as I was talking to Tim Pechek, who grew up in the neighborhood.

Pechek worked at the mill during college, got his own business and headed to the suburbs. His mom still lives in the neighborhood. And he still comes to Eilers'. Our conversation hits on ethnicity and change. You should never infer too much from one guy, especially when he's in a bar. But it's the kind of conversation you might hear wherever two cultures have rubbed up against each other. "The neighborhood was so close-knit, it was unbelievable," Pechek begins. He's got sunglasses tucked in the neck of his T-shirt. "The neighborhood was segregated, but everyone got along."

I asked him where the Hispanics lived when he grew up.

"We called it Dogpatch back then. To be politically correct, you have to say Eastwood Heights. Don't get me wrong. I had Mexican friends. I went to high school with Mexican friends. We were just like this."

He puts his fingers together. And then he goes to his point.

"You didn't lock your cars at night in this neighborhood. You didn't lock your houses at night. Now, you wouldn't even think of that - you know what I'm saying. It's changed a lot."

And he really gets to his point when I ask about the Hispanic population in the neighborhood.

"It's all the Mexicans now. I think they're taking over the country, don't you? Whatever they want, they get.

"I know I'm kind of stereotyping. I'm from the old school. The family means something. You need something, everyone comes over to help out. That's the way this neighborhood was - from here to the bridge. The lawns were immaculate. You drive through there now . . .

"It's just almost sad to see how it's gone downhill. That's just my opinion, but you talk to a lot of people here . . . you talk to Kenny here."

He asks Kenny and Kenny nods his head and Pechek talks about his grandmother, Anna, who had 15 kids.

"They came through Ellis Island," he says. "When they came, they wanted to learn the culture. They wanted to work hard. They wanted to learn the language."

But then he tells me his grandmother spoke "Bojon" in the house.

And Jack Quinn, the bartender, who also is Pueblo housing director, says memory can play tricks. He's been at the housing authority for 38 years.

Quinn knows that memory tends to smooth over rough spots from childhood and that changes, while inevitable, are too easy to blame on the newest wave of immigrants.

Quinn's grandparents, he says, came from England and Ireland, and he doesn't know if they would even be allowed to immigrate today.

He recognizes the pattern of this neighborhood. One ethnic group gradually moves out and another gradually moves in. The mill meant everyone could afford to buy - but not anymore.

Quinn was raised in Connecticut, then moved to Pueblo. He knows how neighborhoods change and why.

"The neighborhood where I grew up has changed, too," he says. "And there are no Mexicans there."

littwinm@RockyMountainNews.com

About Mike Littwin

Mike Littwin has moved back to writing a news column. He came to the *Rocky Mountain News* as a sports columnist from the *Baltimore Sun*, where he wrote a sports column for seven years and a general column for five. Before that, he worked at the *Los Angeles Times* as a sports and national news feature writer. Mike has contributed to many magazines, including *Sports Illustrated*, *Esquire*, *TV Guide* and *Capital Style*.

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