

## PITTSBURGH'S COMMUNITIES OF COLOR

**From Laurence A. Glasco**

**University of Pittsburgh History Department...**

**I**N THE SPRING of 1995, Editor Paul Roberts asked me to be the guest editor of a special issue of *Pittsburgh History* devoted to the histories of "people of color" in Pittsburgh. The time frame was short — a September deadline for all articles — but the opportunity to highlight the presence of Pittsburghers who have normally not been examined and recorded was too good to pass up. My own specialty is African-American history, and I had long approved of the idea of linking the history of black Americans with those of other people of color, thereby placing all of our histories in a broader context so that we can better appreciate the similarities, as well as the differences, that concern us.

I felt that, with a little help, a useful issue could be put together. For assistance, I turned to my friend and colleague in Pittsburgh at Carnegie Mellon University, historian Joe Trotter. Joe's field also is African-American history and he shares my desire to broaden the coverage of ethnic groups in American society. Moreover, Joe had recently served as co-editor (with historian Alan Dawley) of a special issue of *Labor History*. Titled "Race and Class," the *Labor History* issue suggested that race can no longer be viewed as a "bi-polar" one between blacks and whites, but as a "multi-polar" one between Hispanic, Asian, African, and white Americans.

We set out in earnest, for there was little time to solicit new articles. Our first problem, however, was a conceptual one: which groups are in fact "communities of color"? White, after all, is a color, as much as brown or yellow or black. Moreover, strictly speaking, these color designations are quite arbitrary — no one, after all, is actually brown or yellow or black or white. There is the issue of self-definition. Do Native Americans or Asian Indians or Chinese, for example, consider themselves "people of color"? Not really; they have a national, or perhaps regional, identity. Indeed, one of the groups I chose to include in this issue — the Muslims of Pittsburgh — are not a nationality group but a religious group. They were included because of their very diverse composition of colors. While some may reject the notion of "communities of color," we hope all can agree on a main goal of bringing some attention to the histories of people who have received too little attention in the past, and to make Pittsburghers more aware of their existence and contributions to the region's history.

Because in some cases we could not obtain a suitable essay, we decided to create a section called "Voices," in which members of these other communities would have the opportunity to present their experiences. Indeed, if this issue has one major impact, we hope it will be to stimulate students and scholars — and members of the respective communities — to investigate the histories of these under-studied groups and to present their findings in a more complete fashion in future issues of *Pittsburgh History*.

**From Joe W. Trotter**

**Department of History, Carnegie Mellon University...**

**W**HEN LAURENCE GLASCO asked me to coedit a special issue on Pittsburgh's "communities of color," I readily agreed because it offered an opportunity to build upon a recent 25th anniversary issue of *Labor History* and a subsequent conference at Carnegie Mellon University on the same subject. Indeed, ideas explored and developed in the special issue of *Labor History* and the conference "Race, Workers, and the Urban Economy," provide a useful framework for thinking about the essays in this volume.

In 1969, *Labor History* published a special issue entitled "The Negro and the American Labor Movement: Some Selected Chapters." In the context of the modern Civil Rights and emerging Black Power movements, the issue focused exclusively on the African-American experience. Race, as viewed in this period, was essentially a question of black-white relations. Over the past quarter-century, however, we have become aware of race as a multifaceted social phenomenon that involves a variety of ethnic and nationality groups.

The 25th anniversary issue of *Labor History* suggests that race can no longer be viewed as a dual relationship between blacks and whites. Focusing on the experiences of Latin-Americans, Asian-Americans and African-Americans, the issue not only underscores the necessity of treating race as a historical phenomenon, but urges us to consider how and why social relations come to be defined in racial, and especially, in racist terms, and how those terms change over time.

This special issue on Pittsburgh's communities of color also compels us to acknowledge the multipolar nature of race and race relations in the city and the region. Essays and reflections on Muslims, Native Americans, Asians, Blacks, and Latino-Americans reveal the rich cultural past and present of this region. Nowhere is the contingency of cultural formation more apparent than in the evolving African-American community in Pittsburgh. Once marked by the dramatic influx of African-Americans from the rural and urban South, Pittsburgh's African-American community is again undergoing significant cultural change as a new Caribbean community takes shape within its midst.

The experiences of Pittsburgh's diverse communities of color have large social implications. The essays in this collection suggest that Pittsburgh — like the nation — is again reformulating definitions of race, of nationality, and of what it means to be American. This change is going on within communities of color as well as between communities of different ethnic and nationality backgrounds. Based upon the experiences of Pittsburgh's Caribbean community, for example, it is clear that Pittsburgh has not one but many identities. As Myrven Caines puts it in his interview,

“Caribbean people don’t talk about a Caribbean ‘identity,’ they talk about ‘identities’ because they are aware of the Spanish, the French, and the English influence on their Africanness that produced the Caribbean identity.” We hope that this volume will facilitate definitions of race that will not only accent the contributions of diverse communities of color to the well-being of the city and region, but strengthen our struggle to eradicate racial and class inequality and conflict.

### About the Contributors

• **Chandrika Rajagopal** was born in Bombay, India, and grew up in Bangkok, Thailand, where her father worked for the United Nations. Living in a foreign country helped make Chandrika more, rather than less, Indian. Her parents did not want the children to lose their Indian identity, and so were especially careful to expose them to Indian culture and customs while encouraging the appreciation of differences among other cultures and religions. For example, they carefully maintained their vegetarian practices.

After returning to India and completing a bachelor’s and master’s degree at the Delhi School of Economics, Chandrika married in 1975. She and her husband moved to Minneapolis, where he pursued graduate work in engineering and she did the same in anthropology. In 1982 they settled in Pittsburgh, where he became a professor in Pitt’s School of Engineering. In 1987 Chandrika finished her graduate work, with a doctoral dissertation examining Hinduism and caste.

Chandrika has devoted herself to raising her family and also works as a manager in a small engineering firm. She is active in community affairs. Her latest project is serving as chair of the committee dedicated to building an Indian Nationality Room in Pitt’s Cathedral of Learning. Chandrika is excited because the room is one way of telling the outside world something about Indian cultures, while common involvement in this meaningful experience will also help unify Pittsburgh’s diverse Indian community. A woman of high energy, high spirits, and a quick sense of humor, Chandrika originally planned to prepare an essay on the history of Pittsburgh’s Indian community for this special issue. Unfortunately, after almost completing the essay, she misplaced the computer disk on which it was written. Perhaps the gods did not mean for her to do so! With time running out for the essay, Chandrika agreed to sit for an interview.

• In 1983, **Buba Misawa**, a large, jolly and soft-spoken professor at Washington & Jefferson College, came from Nigeria to study in the Graduate School of International and Public Affairs at the University of Pittsburgh. Buba got his master’s degree in 1985, and in 1992, a doctorate in political science. Buba has long been active in the affairs of African students in Pittsburgh.

• **Joe William Trotter, Jr.**, is professor of history at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. He is the editor of *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender* and the author of *Coal, Class, and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia, 1915-32* and *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-45*, both in the University of Illinois Press’ Blacks in the New World Series. He is currently conducting research on African-Americans in the urban deep South.

• **Scott Smith and Steven Manaker** were graduate students in the History Department at the University of Pittsburgh. Smith, a journeyman wireman and member of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, is a Ph.D. candidate in the department, with a focus on British labor history. Manaker obtained his M.A. degree in 1984, and now is an associate and researcher at Oppenheimer & Co., investment bankers in New York City.

• **Gaoying Bolinger** is an example of the adjustment of recent Chinese immigrants to Pittsburgh society and American culture. She came to this country to study English at Pitt, but ended up staying after she fell in love with an American, Jeff Bolinger, and married him. Gaoying had already written an essay about her confusing first experiences in the United States for *Pittsburgh* magazine. An excerpt from that essay, along with an interview and Gaoying’s more recent writing comprise the package about her attempts to bridge two cultures as a Chinese-American.

• In 1994 **Patricia Schulte** earned a master’s degree in history from the University of Pittsburgh. She became interested in Chinese immigration while teaching English in an “English as a second language” program in Seattle, 1989-1991. She, her husband Charles Mckhann, and daughter Emma live in Walla Walla, Wash., and will spend 1996 in Yunnan, China.

• **William Jakub** is a supervisor in Hillman Library at the University of Pittsburgh. He has presented papers at the Ohio Baseball Hall of Fame, the National Baseball Hall of Fame at Cooperstown, N.Y., and at the Conference Commemorating the 100th Birthday of Babe Ruth, held recently at Hofstra University.

• **Miguel Sague** was born in Cuba but grew up in the United States. He and his musical group “Guaracha” perform at many Latin-American cultural events, such as the annual Festival of Caribbean and Latin American Culture, as well as at local night-clubs such as Cozumel and Rosebud. Miguel is proud of his African and European heritage. The same is true of his Indian heritage, and Miguel is one of the directors of Pittsburgh’s Three Rivers American Indian Center. These multiple identities make Miguel a perceptive observer and commentator. In a recent interview, he elaborated on the question, “What does it mean to be a person of color in Pittsburgh?”

• **Laurence A. Glasco** is Associate Professor of History at the University of Pittsburgh and director of its Program for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in Global Perspective. He has investigated the history of immigrants in Buffalo, of blacks in Pittsburgh, and (more recently) of race relations in Cuba. Glasco is the author of “Double Burden: The Black Experience in Pittsburgh,” which appeared in *City at the Point* and a contributor to *African-American Historic Sites Survey of Allegheny County* and *A Legacy in Bricks and Mortar: African-American Landmarks in Allegheny County*.

• **Ancella Bickley Livers** is pursuing her Ph.D. in history from Carnegie Mellon University, with a research specialty in African-American women. She also is a Senior Program Associate at the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, N.C. Prior to working for the Center, Ms. Livers spent six years as a journalism professor at West Virginia University in Morgantown, W.Va. She went into teaching after working 10 years as a newspaper reporter and editor. ©