

Museum Notes

by Kristen Parrott, curator
for the week of March 31 – April 6, 2019

Immigration and naturalization will be the topic of the next genealogy class. The class will view a webinar called, “Why Didn’t My Ancestor Naturalize? Navigating U.S. Naturalization Records.” This class will be held on Thursday, April 11, at 10AM, at the museum.

The majority of U.S. citizens today are the descendants of immigrants, but not all of those immigrant ancestors became naturalized citizens. The webinar’s introduction explains that, “Naturalization is the process by which a native or citizen of one country becomes a citizen of a different country. Immigrants to the United States have never been required to apply for citizenship. Some began the naturalization process to become a citizen, but never completed it.”

Immigrants seeking to naturalize first filed a “declaration of intention”, also called “first papers”, and then a “petition”, also called “second papers”. The final step was to take an oath of allegiance. The U.S. census records of 1870, 1900, 1910, 1920, and 1930 indicate some of these steps. For example, the 1920 census asked three questions of people who weren’t born here: what year did you immigrate to the U.S., what is your naturalization status, and if you are a naturalized citizen, in what year did you become a citizen? Naturalization status was indicated by either “Al” for “Alien”, “Pa” for “first papers”, or “Na” for “naturalized”.

The issue of naturalization became especially important during World War I. Many of the immigrants in Wisconsin had not yet become U.S. citizens when war was declared. The *Vernon County Censor* noted in July of 1917, “That there were 25,000 unnaturalized Germans in the state of Wisconsin between the ages of 21 to 31.”

In January of 1918, under the headline, “Does This Affect You? Here is Another Block to Full Citizenship”, an article in the newspaper announced the recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling that anyone who had filed a declaration of intention to naturalize, or “first papers”, more than seven years earlier would have to start the process over again and re-file them: “The Censor fears this will affect many men in Vernon County who may have taken out their first citizenship papers.”

Why was this so important? Because also in 1918, rules were issued requiring unnaturalized Germans age 14 and over living in the U.S. to register as “alien enemies”. American-born women who had married unnaturalized German men were also classified as “alien enemies” and had to register. Those who did not register could be arrested.

Learn more about the naturalization process and its records at the genealogy class on April 11. New students are welcome to join at any time. Vernon County Historical Society members attend classes for free, and non-members are asked to pay \$5 per session. Classes are held in the handicapped-accessible conference room.