

HOME *sweet* HOME

Museum exhibit showcases refugees and immigrants of Greeley

story by LUANNE KADLUB photos by LINDSAY PORTER

A COLLECTIVE NARRATIVE

"One City, One Community," an exhibit on view through March 3 at the Greeley History Museum, looks at Greeley's history in context of refugees and immigrants to the area, beginning with the Union Colonists in 1870 to modern-day refugees who are learning what it means to not live in fear.

Or, as Nicole Famiglietta, curator of exhibits said, the exhibit helps visitors understand the diversity of Greeley and the diversity of the human experience.

Famiglietta said the exhibit was years in the planning, which allowed time for staff to meet with organizations that help newcomers and to sit down with numerous residents who volunteered to share their stories as to why they left their countries.

Some are included in the exhibit. Here are just a few snippets:

I come from Burma but I lived in a refugee camp in Thailand for more than 12 years ... Fleeing from Burma to Thailand was very difficult. With my family, we had to run away in the battlefields. I was only 5 at the time and the only thing I remember is eating food off the leaves of trees.

— *A Kyi*

The most important thing is that here, we can live in peace because there is no fighting. Our children can get a good education and have support.

— *Pu Sein*

I miss my family still in Somalia. I left my parents there and I often cry when I think of them or when I hear their voice. I fled from my country because of civil war.

— *Fatuma*

In addition to a display showing the progression of newcomers to Greeley and Weld County, the exhibit includes artifacts and newspaper clippings from the past, as well as items from the newcomers' native countries.

"We want newcomers to the area to have a sense this is their community museum," Famiglietta said is one outcome she hopes the exhibit will create.

Visitors are invited to add their story to the collective narrative.

THE BACKDROP

Greeley is a patchwork quilt of ethnicities, nationalities and languages.

It wasn't always this way.

Founded by New Yorker Nathan Meeker in 1870, Greeley began as a utopian community of 700 wealthy, educated and temperate Caucasian Easterners. Agriculture was their primary pursuit and businesses such as produce warehouses, a flour company, a mercantile, a lumberyard and banks were established as a result.

As farms grew, so did the need for laborers.

Scandinavians were the first in the 1880s to locate here to do just that, followed by German-Russians who worked in the fields, as well as at sugar beet factories in Greeley, Windsor and Eaton. Some eventually became farmers themselves.

This created a need for more farm workers, so Japanese laborers from Denver were brought in to work in the fields and at the sugar factory. And then World War II happened and Japanese workers and their families were taken to internment camps.

Hispanics from Mexico were encouraged to move here to fill the void left by the Japanese and, to ensure they would stay, Spanish Colony, an enclave of 60 adobe homes, was built at what is now the corner of 23rd Avenue and O Street.

Today, many of Weld County's farmers are descendants of all of these early immigrants.

Personal refugee stories are the heart of the exhibit. Somali refugee Fatuma with her youngest son is one of the featured narratives.



LEARN

Refugees are persons fleeing armed conflict or persecution. Their situation is often so perilous and intolerable that they cross national borders to seek safety in nearby countries, and thus become internationally recognized as “refugees.”

Immigrants choose to move not because of a direct threat of persecution or death, but mainly to improve their lives by finding work, or in some cases for education, family reunion, or other reasons.



OF AGRICULTURE, MEATPACKING AND ALL THINGS BUSINESS

Sugar beets also played a starring role in the growth of feedlots and meatpacking in Greeley when Warren Monfort used byproducts of sugar beets to feed his cattle.

In 1960 he founded Monfort of Colorado Inc., a meatpacking plant that would later become ConAgra, then Swift and now JBS.

Workers at the meatpacking plant north of Greeley were largely Latino until 2006, the year hundreds of Monfort workers were suspected of having false documents and were picked up by federal agents.

Who would take their places?

It's no coincidence that this is the same time frame that Greeley became a destination for refugees from Somalia, Burma and other war-torn countries who were being resettled in the U.S. Meatpacking throughout the U.S. is a major employer of refugees new to the country because the jobs, though grueling, offer higher than minimum pay, according to "Refugees as Employees," a May 2018 report compiled for TENT and the Fiscal Policy Institute.

In this time of low unemployment, refugees are prized by employers for two primary reasons, according to the TENT/Fiscal Policy Institute report. First, refugees tend to stay with the same employer for longer than other hires, and second, once employers create a positive relationship with the first few refugees, it opens the door for the recruitment of many others.

Refugees, 20 percent of whom have a bachelor's degree or higher, according to a report from the Colorado Office of Economic Security, also find work in manufacturing, hospitality, health care and construction sectors. The report also noted that refugees fill critical labor gaps that otherwise would hinder economic growth and expansion of Colorado businesses.

In Greeley, immigrants and refugees have gone on to own their own businesses, evidenced in part by the Asian markets in south Greeley, African retailers in downtown Greeley and Mexican restaurants and mercantiles throughout the region.



THE MOST
IMPORTANT THING
IS THAT HERE, WE
CAN LIVE IN PEACE
BECAUSE THERE
IS NO FIGHTING.
OUR CHILDREN
CAN GET A GOOD
EDUCATION AND
HAVE SUPPORT.

PU SEIN

Greeley resident/ immigrant

A MELTING POT OR CHOPPED SALAD?

The U.S. has long been said to be a melting pot, but in modern day it might be more appropriate to consider the U.S. a chopped salad, said Collin Cannon, director of advocacy and development for the Immigrant and Refugee Center of Northern Colorado in Evans — formerly two separate organizations: the Greeley Refugee Center and Right to Read.

That's because refugees who speak the same languages tend to live in the same neighborhoods, much like the Russian-Germans, who initially lived near the sugar factory, and Latinos before them. As a result, neighborhoods along 10th Street, the U.S. 34 corridor and east Greeley are home to large populations of refugees.

The Immigrant and Refugee Center is integral in helping immigrants and refugees integrate into the community, however, and to help them find meaningful employment. Classes for adults include English as a second language, adult basic education, high school equivalency and citizenship.

The center also utilizes navigators, all refugees themselves, to help newcomers with such tasks as translating mail, setting up necessary appointments or finding legal representation.

EDUCATION IS KEY

Just how diverse is the refugee population in Greeley? You need look no further than Greeley-Evans School district where students speak at least 72 languages, said Jessica Cooney, a CLD specialist for the district. CLD is an abbreviation for culturally and linguistically diverse.

Last year, countries from which the most refugees fled included Afghanistan, Bhutan, Burma, Cuba, SS Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iraq, Somalia and Syria.

Many school-age refugees enrolled in Greeley-Evans School District 6 have little or no schooling and limited English language skills, Cooney said. One-third of the district's 21,000 students are currently learning English or are a former English learner.

"The first thing we do if students need help is to place them into specific classes to help them develop their language skills," she said, adding that for some students, English is their fourth or fifth language and for at least one student it is their eighth.

Classroom placement of refugee and immigrant students is taken case by case with an emphasis on age-appropriate placement.



GO&SEE

The Greeley History Museum is located at 714 8th St., Greeley.

Hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday and noon to 4 p.m. Sunday.

Admission is charged. GreeleyMuseums.com

"We get some students as old as 17 or 18 who have not had much schooling," she said. Some choose to stay in school for as long as they can, which is age 21, and others opt to pursue their GED.

"My experience working with student refugees is that they're harder working students who value and appreciate education," Cooney said.

Outside of the classroom, soccer is the chosen extracurricular activity, although Cooney said as time goes by many students are beginning to show interest in other sports, as well as music and theater.

The district maintains a zero tolerance policy for anything related to bullying or racial intimidation.

"It is never perfect, but things continue to get better as students get to know each other better. They're realizing we're not that different.

"By and large, our community is becoming more integrated. When you look at statistics, when you have immigrants come into the community, it makes it safer and crime goes down." #



ABOVE: This interactive display allows visitors to simulate what many refugees experience — deciding what important items to take to a new country.

RIGHT: A display of Greeley high school student stories and photos.

