The "tribal twenties," according to most accounts, was an era marked by racism and nativism. The decade brought the passage of strict immigration restriction laws, an upsurge in anti-Catholic sentiment, the entrenchment of Jim Crow segregation in the South, lynchings and racial violence, the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan, the establishment of the border patrol to limit Mexican immigration, and anti-Japanese agitation on the West Coast. Cultural anxieties led many native-born white Protestants to seek ways to limit the influence of immigrants and racial minorities and to halt the social transformations that accompanied modernization. Proponents of scientific racism argued for the genetic superiority of northern Europeans, while advocates of the melting pot theory of Americanization aimed to strip immigrants of their Old World traditions.

But the 1920s also gave rise to efforts to embrace America’s cultural diversity. Even as many Americans reacted to immigration with fear and alarm, others urged respect for racial, ethnic, and religious minorities. These activists rejected eugenics and the melting pot model, proposing instead that the nation benefited from the cultural backgrounds of its many peoples. Each group had made—and would continue to make—important contributions to American life. Liberal thinkers urged the preservation and sharing of ethnoricial traditions as a way to enrich the common culture. Minority group identity, they argued, was compatible with American institutions and ideals and could be a source of strength for the country.

Intellectual developments of the era helped precipitate these efforts. The theory of cultural pluralism, most clearly expressed by writer Horace Kallen, urged the persistence of ethnic groups as a means to national unity. In Kallen’s metaphor, the nation was a symphony orchestra in which each group played an instrument. The cultural relativism of anthropologist Franz Boas and his students offered another framework for rejecting racial hierarchies and valuing cultural traditions. According to Boasian theory, which began to shape popular understandings by the 1920s, racial differences were due to environmental rather than hereditary forces and no race was inherently superior to another. At the same time, the peace movement that emerged after World War I advocated respect for all nations and peoples as a way to eliminate racial strife and abolish war. Peace activists argued that people taught to respect differences at home would be less likely to wage war overseas.

These insights inspired liberal activists and educators. In schools and churches and homes around the country, they designed programs to combat racial, ethnic, and religious prejudice, implementing cultural pluralism on a grassroots level. They voiced liberal faith in the power of education to transform the social order. In an era that brought the expansion of American high schools, these activists directed their programs at young people in particular, who promised the best hope for a future of tolerance and understanding. They predicted optimistically that the celebration of cultural difference would eliminate prejudice in the next generation, creating an inclusive American identity and reinvigorating American society.

This teaching strategy explores the work of Rachel Davis DuBois, a white Quaker from New Jersey who in the 1920s pioneered school assembly programs on the contributions of various cultural groups to American life. Born in 1892, DuBois (who was no relation to W.E.B. Du Bois, although they became friends), took part in the post-World War I peace movement before becoming a teacher. At Woodbury High School in New Jersey, she designed a series of assembly programs that discussed ethnoricial groups one by one. She aimed to replace stereotypes with positive images. Since prejudice resulted from ignorance, she believed that greater knowledge about each group’s achievements would bring sympathy and understanding. She timed the order to coincide with holidays—Italians at Columbus Day, the British and Native Americans at Thanksgiving, African Americans at Lincoln’s birthday. Students and teachers helped plan and direct the programs, which often included guest speakers from the cultural groups. In the 1920s, she directed these programs at the white native-born children.
who would come to hold dominant positions in American society. DuBois went on to become a national leader in the antiprejudice movement. The “Woodbury Plan,” as she called her assembly series, became the basis for the educational programs that she promoted throughout a long career. In the 1930s, she established a clearinghouse on intercultural education, published widely on the contributions of ethnic racial groups to American life, and designed the first teacher-training courses on the topic. Her work suggests that reactions to cultural diversity in the 1920s were complex and varied.

National Standards
Era 7: The Emergence of Modern America (1890-1930)
Standard 3: How the United States changed from the end of World War I to the eve of the Great Depression.

Time Frame
One or two class periods.

Student Objectives
To interpret primary sources from the 1920s.
To connect school programs to broader cultural debates.
To define and problematize the notion of the “tribal twenties.”
To describe cultural pluralism as a precursor to multiculturalism.

Procedures
1. Opening question: How did Americans respond to cultural diversity in the 1920s? Introduce students to the range of responses to immigrant groups and racial minorities in the decade. Remind them that immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, who were sometimes considered as distinct racial categories, often encountered prejudice and discrimination. Review the extent of antiblack discrimination in the era, widespread suspicion of Jews and Catholics, and regional hostilities towards Mexican, Chinese, and Japanese immigrants. Discuss as well the native-born Americans who welcomed diversity and promoted pluralist ideas.

2. Document analysis: Distribute the selections from pamphlet by Rachel Davis DuBois, A Program in Education for World Mindedness (See pp. 43-46). Explain that this pamphlet describes a series of assembly programs given at Woodbury High School in New Jersey during the 1926-1927 school year. Note that it was printed and distributed by the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom.

3. Divide students into small groups of four to five students. Each group considers one program:
   - October, on Italians;
   - November, on American Indians and the British Isles;
   - December, on Germans;
   - February, on the Negro;
   - March, on the Hebrews;
   - April, on the Orient.

4. Each group should examine its program and answer the following three questions:
   a. What took place at this assembly program?
   b. What information about this cultural group did students encounter?
   c. Who participated in these programs?
   d. Each group then describes its program and reports its observations to the entire class.

5. Class discussion: Discuss the document with the class as a whole. The following questions are designed to encourage critical analysis:
   a. Why were these groups chosen in particular?
   b. What prejudices existed against these groups?
   c. What messages do these programs communicate?
   d. How might this program have affected the students who participated?
   e. How has the terminology used to describe these groups changed over time?
   f. Did all of the groups presented encounter similar levels of prejudice and discrimination?
   g. What elements are missing from these programs?
   h. How might students have responded to programs about their own cultural groups?
   i. To what extent do you think that knowledge of a group’s achievements eliminates prejudice?
   j. What do these programs tell us about understandings of race in the 1920s?
   k. How is it significant that this pamphlet was distributed by the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom?

6. Writing exercise: Imagine that you are a student at Woodbury High School in 1926-1927. At the end of the school year, a teacher asks you to write a paragraph that describes what you learned through the assembly series and how your views have changed. What would you say?

7. Conclusion: Encourage students to consider how this document modifies standard portrayals of the “tribal twenties.” How do we reconcile this expression of cultural pluralism with the racism and anti-immigrant sentiment of the era?

8. Extension activity: The task of analyzing high school materials might inspire students to look at their own education in a new light. Have students consider how future historians might analyze current high school assembly programs and other school activities. What do contemporary materials reveal about responses to America’s cultural diversity today? What are the similarities and differences between today’s multicultural education and the 1920s assembly programs?

Suggestions for Further Reading

Diana Selig is assistant professor of history at Claremont McKenna College. She is completing a book on the history of the “cultural gifts” movement in America from the 1920s to the 1940s. forthcoming from Harvard University Press in 2008.
Selections from a pamphlet created by Rachel Davis DuBois for her intercultural education program in the 1920s. (Pamphlet courtesy of the Immigration History Research Center, http://ihrc.unm.edu/.)
**PROGRAM FOR OCTOBER**

Contribution of the Italians to Our Complex American Life.


| II. Italian Art. | Art Dept. |
| Costumed speakers at right and left of platform. Central tableau—characters of the Italian Renaissance: the Doge of Venice, Duke of Milan, Beatrice D'Este, Lorenzo de Medici, etc. Speech: "Italy, the Source of Arts and Crafts (Architecture, Venetian glass, mosaics, etc.)." |

| III. Italian Literature. | English Dept. |
| Original sketch, Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. Prologue by a Herald showing their Italian background. At rise of curtain Pilgrims shown on journey in costume reciting tales. |

| IV. Columbus Day. | Special speaker. |
| Speech. |
| Demonstrations showing Galileo's experiments with falling bodies and the pendulum. Volta's discovery of the simple cell. Speeches on their life history. |

| VI. History. | History Dept. |
| "Why My Father Came to America," by a student of Italian parentage. Important Names: Educators—Madame Montessori; Angelo Patri. World Liberators—Garibaldi; Mazzini; Count Cavour. |

| VII. Italian Folk Dancing. | Phys. Tr. Dept. |
| The folk dances of almost every nationality may be seen in our American cities as the children renew the experience of their racial past. An Italian Folk Dance was given by some of the Physical Training students. |

| VIII. Music. | Music Dept. |
| Speech: "The Italian Contribution in the Realm of Music." Italian, the original language of music. Church music. Italian opera, etc. Lives of Caruso and Galli-Curci. Italian music records on the Electrola presented to the High School by the Parent-Teachers' Association. Scene showing group of Italian peasants; music of "Cavalleria," sextet from "Lucia"; Italian Dance, Tarantella. As a finale an Italian boy sang, "O Sole Mio!" to one of the dancers. |

**REFERENCES**

PROGRAM FOR FEBRUARY

I. CONCERTS

Contribution of the Negro to Our Complex American Life.

   "Several spirituals sung by the combined glee clubs.
   Vocal and piano solos of Negro composers: Coleridge, Taylor, Dr. E. DuBois, etc.

II. GIFT OF FOOD

Domestic Science Dept.

1. Demonstration by several girls on the making of peanut bread.
2. Talk on the Life of Dr. Carver, of Tuskegee, who discovered 300 uses of the peanut and created peanut plants and peanut butter.

III. SPECIAL SPEAKER: LINCOLN'S BIRTHDAY

English Dept.

A talk on Lincoln poetry from the Uncle Remus stories to Countee Cullen, by several Negro authors. A poetry program (Negro humor) composed by several Negroes from the "American Negro Aesop." (William Pickens.)

IV. GIFT OF FINE ART

"American Negro Spirit of Art and Music." Hon. Frederick Douglass and others.

V. GIFT OF FAMOUS MEN (See "Some Racial Contributions to American Inventions.)

Jan Messeler invented a machine for lasting shoes in the 1850s. The first successful suturing operation on the human heart in 1887 was performed by the Negro surgeon, Dr. D. H. Williams. The Negro artist, W. E. B. DuBois, with his "Timbuctoo," won the Prix de Rome of the National Academy of the Arts.

VI. SCIENCE

The Negro performed the first successful surgical operation on the human heart in 1887. The Negro, W. E. B. DuBois, with his "Timbuctoo," won the Prix de Rome of the National Academy of the Arts.

REFERENCES


Racial Contributions to American Science. Walter Locke. New Tuber, 200,000 girls of the Negro race are educated in the United States. The Negro is the wealthiest industrial nationality in the country. The Negro is the first successful surgeon in the United States.

Gifts. The Afro-American Song, H. E. Seligman.


Piano. The Faces of Negro Piano (Negro Aesop.)"
VI. Hebrew Influence on American Theater

Speakers and sketches showing influence of:
- Lincoln's Gettysburg Address
- Hebrew Scriptures
- Hebrew on the American Stage

VII. Hebrew Influence on American Literature

Dramatic contributions of:
- Hebrews in the Civil War
- Hebrews in the Revolution
- Hebrews in the War of 1812

REFERENCES

- Origin of the Republican Form of Government
- The Jew in Civilization
- The Hebrew in American Life

Patriotsim of the American Jew
- G. W. McCall
- W. H. W. McCall
- A. A. Berliner

Jews in the Revolution
- F. H. Berliner
- I. Berliner

REPRESENTATIVE SPEECHES

- E. S. Chauncey
- A. A. Berliner
- W. H. W. McCall

OUTSIDE SPEAKER

- Story of the Hebrew Contribution to Art

- By a member of the Club.