FEMALE SPEAKER: Major funding for BackStory is provided by an anonymous donor, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the University of Virginia, the Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation, and the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations.

[THEME MUSIC PLAYING]

MALE SPEAKER: From the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, this is BackStory.

NATHAN: Welcome to BackStory, the show that explains the history behind today's headlines. I'm Nathan Connolly.

JOANNE: I'm Joanne Freeman.

BRIAN: And I'm Brian Balogh.

JOANNE: Brian, Ed Ayers, Nathan, and I are all historians. Each week, we explore a topic that's been in the news. And we're going to start today's show in New York City in 1915.

It's Columbus Day, and a crowd of 2,500 people is gathered in glittering Carnegie Hall. The Knights of Columbus, an Italian fraternal organization, is hosting an event. It's a celebration of Christopher Columbus, a source of Italian-American pride and a man that many considered to be the first Italian immigrant or, as some saw it, the first immigrant to America of any nationality.

THEODORE ROOSEVELT: Four centuries and a quarter have gone by since Columbus, by discovering America, opened the greatest era in world history. It is eminently fitting to make an address on Americanism before this society.

BRUCE SCHULMAN: And Theodore Roosevelt, the former president, war hero, is addressing the subject of what it means to be an American--

[MUSIC - PODINGTON BEAR, "BATED BREATH"]

NATHAN: This is historian Bruce Schulman.

BRUCE --of whether people from other countries can fully be American, whether you can trust the
SCHULMAN: loyalty of immigrants and their children.

NATHAN: He says this address remains a touchstone in the debate over multiculturalism.

BRUCE: So Roosevelt, in the speech, says that there is no room in this country for "hyphenated Americanism."

SCHULMAN: When I refer to hyphenated Americans, I do not refer to naturalized Americans, Americans born abroad. But a hyphenated American is not an American at all.

THEODORE ROOSEVELT: The man who calls himself an American citizen, and who yet shows by his actions that he is primarily the citizen of a foreign land, plays a thoroughly mischievous part in our body politic. He has no place here. And the sooner he returns to the land to which he feels his real heart allegiance, the better it will be for every good American.

BRIAN: Roosevelt's speech came at a critical moment. As the First World War thundered across Europe, the former president and other leaders feared immigrants would not be loyal to the United States if and when America joined the conflict. But Schulman says Roosevelt's address reflected an additional concern.

BRUCE: In the period between 1880 and World War I, some 20 million foreigners emigrate to the United States. In fact, the majority of the population of some of the largest cities are either immigrants or their native-born children. So the great problem for Americans at the turn of the century is, can the United States accommodate itself to this massive wave of immigration and still retain its democratic institutions, still retain its national identity? How will it do it? And there are various responses.

BRIAN: Many Americans were convinced that this wave of immigration posed a mortal threat to the republic. These were nativists, who believe that--

BRUCE: The white Anglo-Saxon Protestant tradition is what defines the United States. It's a racial, or ethnic, version of nationalism. And people can only be Americans insofar as they fully endorse that. And, in contrast to that, people like Theodore Roosevelt championed a civic notion of American identity.
That civic notion of American identity, Schulman says, is one based on a devotion to democratic values. So Roosevelt was deliberately pushing back against the nativists.

And so what Roosevelt is saying at the Carnegie Hall speech is that being American is not a matter of where you come from. It’s not a matter of what religion you have. If he is heartily and singly loyal to this republic, then no matter where he was born, he is just as good an American as anyone else.

Sounds pretty progressive. But Roosevelt's open-to-all brand of Americanism was only progressive by the standards of the early 20th century. It's not a celebration of America's ethnic diversity.

We of the United States need, above all things, to remember that, while we are by blood and culture kin to each of the nations of Europe, we are also separate from each of them.

This is the vision of assimilation into a single, composite, American culture. On the one hand, it’s inclusiveness. It’s saying that anybody can be American. On the other hand, it’s insistence that you can’t retain your culture, that having some kind of mixed identity, is not really allowed into this vision.

The next day, the New York Times ran a headline that blared "Roosevelt Bars the Hyphenated." But it's important to note that, in his speech, Roosevelt had only certain groups in mind.

--an intricate knot of German-Americans, Irish-Americans, English-Americans, French-Americans, Scandinavian-Americans, or Italian-Americans, each preserving--

So in that list, he doesn't even mention the millions of people who have come from Eastern and Central Europe, from Russia, from the Ottoman Empire, from Mexico.

In other words, the welcome mat did not extend to Asians or, basically, anyone who wasn’t white at the time.

But the fact is that the battle over the nature of American identity-- is it defined by race ethnicity? Is it a matter of blood? Is it a melting pot that requires a kind of assimilation to a common set of norms? Or is it a tapestry, a salad bowl, of diverse groups that retain their distinct identities? Now, that battle is still very much undecided.
NATHAN: And that battle touches on a tension at the heart of American history. What does it mean to be an American? And who gets to decide?

MALE SPEAKER: Well, we need to insist, people that want to come to our country should come legally, should learn English, should adopt our values, roll up their sleeves, and get to work.

MALE SPEAKER: I can say, as an immigrant, if I wanted to maintain Indian culture, I could have stayed in India.

BILL MAHER (ON TV): If you’re going to come to the melting pot, melt a little. You’ve got to melt a little.

NATHAN: So today on the show, we’re looking at assimilation in America, the idea that Americans, both past and present, have an obligation to adapt to the so-called mainstream culture. Is there one path to becoming an American or many different narratives, depending on one’s race, religion, or culture?

BRIAN: We’ll hear stories about Japanese-Americans trying to become 100% American in wartime Chicago and boarding schools that tried to civilize Native American children. We’ll also explore whether assimilation was even an option for African Americans in the era of Jim Crow.

JOANNE: But first, Americans have used a variety of metaphors to describe immigration and assimilation-- a salad bowl, a symphony, and a mosaic. But no image has been as enduring as the melting pot. This is the idea that, like steel in a crucible or cheese in a fondue, immigrants will shed their differences and meld together to become Americans.

NATHAN: The melting pot metaphor took off in popular culture in the early 20th century. More immigrants than ever were coming to the United States, including millions from Southern and Eastern Europe. Immigration peaked in 1907, when 1.3 million immigrants arrived in that single year.

BRIAN: In October of 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt stepped out to see a hot new play by a British author. He was a personal friend of Roosevelt named Israel Zangwill. The play was called-- you guessed it-- The Melting Pot.

EDNA NAHSHON: It was a long production. I think it lasted over three hours.

BRIAN: Three hours?

EDNA NAHSHON: Yeah. Well, you know, theater, in the old days, gave you your money’s worth.
BRIAN: This is historian Edna Nahshon. She says the hero of *The Melting Pot* is a Russian-Jewish immigrant named David Quixano who has embraced his new life in America. His older relatives are much more ambivalent.

Now, we're not going to make you sit through the full, three-hour production. But Nahshon says the play's closing moments convey its hopeful message. At the end of the play, David stands on a rooftop looking out over New York Harbor with his Christian fiancee, Vera.

EDNA NAHSHON: "There she lies, the great melting pot. Listen. Can't you hear the roaring and the bubbling? Slav and Teuton, Greek and Syrian, black and yellow," and Vera interject, "Jew and Gentile." And David goes on, "yes, how the great alchemist melts and fuses them with his purging flame.

Here shall they all unite to build the Republic of Man and the Kingdom of God. What is the glory of Rome and Jerusalem, where all nations and races come to worship and look back, compared with the glory of America, where all races and nations come to labor and look forward?" And the president just stood up and yelled, "it's a great play, Mr. Zangwill!" So it was very enthusiastically received.

BRIAN: Critics weren't quite as enthusiastic as Roosevelt was on opening night. But the play did launch "the melting pot" as a kind of shorthand for assimilation. Melting pots soon began popping up all over, sometimes in very strange places.

EDNA NAHSHON: For instance, in 1916, a melting pot pageant was organized by the Ford Motor Company, where immigrants in original, native dress went into a very large pot topped by the inscription E pluribus unum, then reemerged in American business clothes holding an American flag and naturalization paper. This was not Zangwill.

BRIAN: Nahshon says Zangwill was often frustrated by the way some Americans, like Henry Ford, for instance, used his metaphor to promote conformity. That wasn't his vision at all. The son of East European Jewish immigrants, Zangwill grew up poor in London's East End.

He never actually lived in the United States, but he did admire the ethnic and racial diversity that he observed on his frequent visits. Zangwill was well-known in the US as an author and a Zionist activist. He saw America as a place where Jewish refugees could prosper without having to relinquish their religious identity.
And he corrected those who he thought misread his play. And here's what he writes in 1914. That is five years after the play is produced on stage. "The process of American amalgamation is not assimilation or simple surrender to the dominant type, as is popularly supposed, but an all-round give and take by which the final type may be enriched or impoverished."

And again, in 1923, on his last visit to America, he warned against an America that misunderstands the richness produced by the diversity of its people. So no, he did not want a zillion little clones who all spoke the same language, thought the same thoughts, dressed the same way, and totally lost their own self.

How did Zangwill's image of America captured by this metaphor, the melting pot, how did that square with the real America? I mean, surely there was a lot of anti-immigrant sentiment. There were already discussions of restricting immigration. Some immigrants were associated with radical political ideas. How did this image of the melting pot square with reality?

Well, first of all, I have to say that America, to Zangwill, was not so much the real America, as we think of it. It was an ideal and an idea. What he presented is a very idealized version of, really, of a new creation of the world. Now, did others see it the same way? Not necessarily.

Did he ever come to doubt the America that all of these immigrants were melting into?

No, he would call on America to rise up to his ideal. And again, in 1914, he said when he's faced with people who complain about various aspects of American society, he says that "America is not yet fit to be a melting pot, I quite agree. But the object of my play is to shame it into greater fitness. I have recalled America to the noble conception of its Constitution. It is up to America to do the rest."

Have you ever seen the play performed?

Yes. Yes.

So what was your reaction the first time you saw it performed?

It was done in 2006 at a small theater in New York called The Metropolitan Theater. And I was stunned when they contacted me and said they're doing a full production of the play. I thought it was a very old and worn warhorse and that the rhetoric was just too much for our time.

And I was supposed to do a talk-back and said, no one's going to stay for this. This is crazy. If
it were me, I would just leave. And to my surprise, great surprise, almost everyone stayed.

And the audience was not a Jewish audience, even though the play’s a very Jewish play. And there were Asian people, there were people from the Caribbean, a total mixture of audiences. And people started talking. And I remember one girl said, this is just like my own family.

And then, other people butted in. And you realized that he touched, even though the play is kind of specific and very much of its time, he touched on something very, very deep that, as long as, you know, America is a nation of immigrants-- is very much alive. So yes, the production worked, to my great surprise.

**BRIAN:** And what was your reaction? Were you still moved, even though you’ve studied every word of this play?

**EDNA NAHSHON:** You’re still moved by some of it, yes. The grand finale never ceases to amaze people and to evoke very strong feelings. Because the inclusion, at such an early date, of other religions, of other races, is quite something.

**BRIAN:** As you know, both immigration and assimilation are very much in the news today. And I would like to know from you what you think the meaning of the melting pot is today and whether that idea really endures.

**EDNA NAHSHON:** I think it does endure. When you live in New York, it certainly endures. Does it mean that you lose yourself in this melting pot, that you become an Anglo-Saxon, so to speak?

I mean, that ideal is over. The WASPs are no longer in control. And it's really, it's pointless to even talk about that.

But I think we do. We do live in a society where, A, we have to, and B, we also want to engage with people who are different. And that's the way it is. Just walk on a New York street, and you see it.

[MUSIC - JAHZZAR, "SIESTA"]

**JOANNE:** Edna Nahshon is a theater professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary and editor of *From the Ghetto to the Melting Pot, Israel Zangwill's Jewish Plays*. Earlier in the show, we heard from Boston University historian Bruce Shulman.
BRIAN: Nathan, I'm sure you loved all that 20th century material. But I do think we should nod to our colleague, Joanne, and try to explore what assimilation was like back in the days of the early Republic and across the 19th century.

JOANNE: Well, I mean, if you're looking at the 18th century, America is really localized. So it was possible-- for example, in Pennsylvania, you have a really large population of Germans. For a while, they lived in a community that was largely other Germans. And that was possible in a localized kind of an America.

That becomes less possible as Americans really begin to spread out. And for those people, for German Pennsylvanians, what's interesting about that is they take advantage of something that's distinctly seen as American at the time. And that is, America is known as a place where, religiously speaking, it was assumed that your religion wouldn't be bothered with when you went to America, that there was not so much intervention on the part of the nation into what kind of religion you wanted to practice.

So for Germans in Pennsylvania, even as they were adapting and assimilating into American culture, they were very comfortable clinging to Lutheran and German reform religious practices that let them really keep a sense of themselves, of their own identity as a people, even as they were assimilating and merging into American culture.

BRIAN: I want to hear a little more about that, Joanne Are, you saying that the fact that they did not have to be defensive about their religion allowed them to embrace other aspects of becoming American?

JOANNE: Yeah, or to be less fearful about abandoning things because they weren't abandoning their sense of who they were.

NATHAN: I had heard somewhere that German almost became the default language in America. Is that true?

JOANNE: I don't know about the default language. But I know that when you look at, for example, elections in early America, you had people who were asked to go into German wards in various cities and speak German and pitch things in German. And there were German newspapers. So there was a really large German population, for sure, who were German-speaking in America. And even just the electoral process was accommodated around those people.
BRIAN: Joanne, that's German-Americans, and there were a lot of them. But what about the people who were already here? What about Native Americans?

JOANNE: Well, that's a really good question. Obviously, that's a huge issue throughout early America. But it particularly becomes an issue for Thomas Jefferson when he's president because of the Louisiana Purchase, which happened in 1803, which doubles the size of the United States but also adds all these different kinds of people-- the Creole, all around Louisiana, New Orleans.

There are all kinds of different people that come into the nation but, in particular, his concern is Native Americans. Because, of course, what he is most concerned about is Americans spreading west. And so what he really has to worry about is, well, what do we do with Native American peoples?

His answer to that was, well, in one way or another, they're going to assimilate and become part of us. And he says in a number of different letters to a number of different people that he has, almost, a plan. That, among other things, we need to get them to use American manufactured goods because they won't be able to afford them, ultimately, and they'll probably try to pay with land.

NATHAN: Wow.

JOANNE: And he has, sort of, a system of ways in which, without using force, America can increasingly get land to the point that, ultimately, Native Americans are a farming people like any other American farming people, and they've given up their old ways. He even says, at the end of one particularly striking letter, you know, we really shouldn't talk about this in any way that they can know. Because these Native American peoples, they really shouldn't be able to see what's in the future for them. Which is painful. Painful.

BRIAN: Joanne, this is a very naive question, but did the white colonists ever give serious thought to assimilating into the culture that they stepped into?

JOANNE: Well, you know, that's a really good question because some people did. And particularly, for example, traders, fur traders-- this was the traders who were out west-- some of them very much did marry into Native American families, sort of merge into Native American society.

NATHAN: Didn't you see Dances with Wolves, Brian?

[LAUGHTER]
BRIAN: Too violent for me.

JOANNE: But no, it's a really good point that we shouldn't be talking about everything going one way.

NATHAN: So the Louisiana Purchase really does provide a kind of staiestep for thinking, then, about the opening of the great West. I mean, there are all of these French Creole cultures and Native American cultures that get brought in with the Louisiana Purchase. And then, you have Native American and Spanish peoples being brought in with the opening of what is, ultimately, Mexico.

And so, you think about places like Colorado and Nevada and California and Texas. And, essentially, the border crosses these places, right, and brings these people into the country in ways that really make assimilation take on entirely new meaning?

JOANNE: Right. And you know, what's interesting about that kind of assimilation is on all sides, some assimilation and some immigration is voluntary. And some, in the way that you've just suggested it, Nathan, just sort of sweeps across. You're talking about sort of a process of land passing hands and then, suddenly, change is happening.

To me, one of the interesting things about that is when you look at Americans adjusting to that fact, that that is happening, and you look at the late 19th century, there are these dime novels. And a stock character in those novels was the Mexican bandit. And the Mexican bandit represented someone who was not assimilating, was aggressively not assimilating, into American culture.

NATHAN: Who refused.

JOANNE: Right, who refused, and thus was sort of extralegal and scary, kind of a bad guy. And apparently, some of those novels also had what were, essentially, good guy Mexican characters, who were known as peaceful Mexican characters who either were willing to live separately or assimilate. So Americans, even culturally, are kind of grappling with that change.

[MUSIC - KETSA, "NIGHT LIGHTS"]

NATHAN: So we were just talking about what assimilation meant in early America and as the country expanded west. Joanne, as you pointed out, white Americans as far back as Thomas
Jefferson did not envision any place for Native American culture. In this case, assimilation really meant one thing-- Indian cultural erasure. Our next story, from the BackStory archives, is about the effort to Americanize Native American children.

**BRIAN:** In 1879, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School opened in Pennsylvania. This was the first federally-funded, off-reservation school designed to educate Native American children. The basic idea was to "kill the Indian, save the man." School officials taught the native children English, dressed them in Western-style clothes, and tried to convert them to Christianity. All this required taking children away from their families, often by force, and often across great distances.

**JOANNE:** As the century wore on, the government opened more and more of these schools out west. Many of them operated well into the 20th century. One was the Chilocco Indian Agricultural School, located on the Kansas-Oklahoma state line. After its founding in 1884, the US government brought thousands of Indian students from all over the region to, in effect, teach them to assimilate.

**TSIANINA LOMAWAIMA:** My family was "introduced," shall I say, to Chilocco when my dad and his older brother were placed there by order of the court.

**BRIAN:** This is Tsianina Lomawaima. She is Muskogee and an Indigenous Studies scholar at Arizona State University.

**TSIANINA LOMAWAIMA:** Because their mom was an Indian woman-- their dad had left the family-- so by definition, as an Indian woman trying to raise her kids by herself, she was deemed incompetent. So my dad, Curtis, was about eight, nine years old. His brother, Bob, was a little bit older when they went into Chilocco in 1927. And my dad remained there until 1935, when he managed to get away.

**BRIAN:** Inspired by her father's experiences, Lomawaima began to collect oral histories from other Chilocco alumni. She says her father and his fellow students bristled under the school's strict, military-style regime.

**TSIANINA LOMAWAIMA:** Students wore uniforms. They marched in close-order drill. There were 22 bugle calls every day. Even though they were schools, academic instruction was quite secondary and never proceeded much higher than the equivalent of grade six in US public schools.

That did not change until, really, after the Depression, maybe even after World War II. Students were taught to labor. And that was an important part of the ideology of believing that
what civilization meant was that native people were required to learn how to work. It was assumed that they were not, by nature, industrious, self-disciplined people.

So work details, as they were called, constituted half of the school day. The ideology was, well, we're teaching them to become civilized through this labor. But the reality was it's what was necessary to keep the schools functioning.

**BRIAN:** What about your father's story? You've mentioned that he went to this school. And you suggested he didn't have such a great experience.

**TSIANINA LOMAWAIMA:** He was eight years old. I think, at that age, it was impossible to understand the emotional dynamics of being placed there. And he did not take well to the military discipline and the attempt to eradicate individuality.

So my dad started running away, oh, gosh, it must have been about 1933. So he was about 14 or 15 the first time he ran away. There was a bounty system, you could call it, for capturing students who'd gone AWOL. So farmers in the immediate area, if they brought a student back, I think it was $5 a head, which in the Depression era was a lot of money.

He did not make it far the first time. The second time, he hopped a freight. He made it all the way to Los Angeles and was caught there and was brought back. It was the third or fourth time he made it home to Wichita.

That's actually why he was running away. He had not seen his mom since he had been brought to the school at age eight. So at that point, the school authorities allowed him a summer off to go home and spend that time with his mother.

And he came back in the fall to give it another try and just could not stand, just could not stand it. So he ran away again. And by that point, he and his mother were pretty estranged. They just were not able to reestablish a relationship.

So he hit the hobo trail. He rode rails, as a teenager, all over the western United States, worked on hotshot fire crews, and ended up in a CCC camp, where the commander of the camp is the caring adult who took an interest in him and enabled him to finish high school and actually go to college.

**BRIAN:** Long before you became a scholar, you must have heard about these schools from your father. How did that change your own life?
Well, of course, Chilocco is the place my dad grew up. And so his stories of childhood were stories of Chilocco. And when my sister and I were young, they were funny stories. He was a great storyteller, really funny stories.

But when I did this research, then, I first went to my dad and asked him, do you think this is a good idea, to get these stories and tell the history of Chilocco? And he was so supportive and so excited and yes, yes, yes. And then, at that point—later, he was more forthcoming about some of his experiences and his brother’s experience that were so tough. I mean, we had never heard those not-funny stories.

And then, as time went on, after the book came out, and we were doing public speaking, and my dad would come along with me, what came out later, much later, after years and years, was his anger at his mom for feeling abandoned. Never saw that one coming.

I mean, he was a fiercely intelligent man. He worked his way through that. But there was a point a few years after the book came out when he was deep into that anger when I thought this was the worst thing I ever did. I never should have done this.

I see. Looking at the history of these schools, how do you explain the long-running practice of separating kids from their families, often against their family’s will?

That’s a wonderful question because you do hear this mantra of family values so often. The key thing to remember is, whose family? I think what this speaks very directly and very transparently to is a very longstanding reality upon which the nation, the US, was founded, which was the dispossession of Indian land.

So you have a fundamental tension from the very creation of this nation of, what do we do with native people? That was defined as the Indian problem. And the problem was, frankly, that Indians were sticking around, a rather uncomfortable reminder. So I think this long-term—and it’s still going on—denigration of native society, the assumption that native people live in the past and cannot cope with modernity, that’s deeply ingrained into the US perception of self as a nation.

So native families, by definition, I think, could not be valued. That was a way of life that, in the ideology of the US, had to pass away. It had to pass away. Because that would show that Euro-American civilization really was a better way of life, that Christianity and the technology
and capitalism really were chosen by God.

[MUSIC - JAHZZAR, "PLEASE LISTEN CAREFULLY"]

BRIAN: Tsianina Lomawaima is a professor at Arizona State University. She is the author of They Called it Prairie Light, The Story of Chilocco Indian School.

NATHAN: And now, a word from our sponsors.

BRIAN: Hey, BackStory listeners, we’re doing a live show in Charlottesville, Virginia on October 5. It's part of the University of Virginia's Bicentennial Celebration. Nathan, Joanne, Ed, and I, along with a special guest, will debate, who speaks for America? We'll look at how public figures have clashed over this question, from Thomas Jefferson and Shawnee leader Tecumseh to Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. We'll hear them all and consider who speaks for America today.

Our live show is free and open to the public. It's Thursday, October 5, at Charlottesville’s Paramount Theater. To reserve tickets, just go to backstoryradio.org. Hope to see you there.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

JOANNE: We’re going to turn now to Chicago with a story from Curious City. That's a radio program and podcast produced by WBEZ. The staff answers listeners’ questions about Chicago and the region.

Listener Irene Brown says that, when she was younger, her parents often took her to a bustling Japanese neighborhood in Lakeview on Chicago's North Side. But that neighborhood, now, is gone. Today, the area is dotted with sports bars and chain stores.

So Brown wanted to know, what happened? Curious City reporter Katherine Nagasawa went in search of the answer. She brings us the story of the hard choices Lakeview’s Japanese-American community made in order to assimilate.

KATHERINE NAGASAWA: The reason the Lakeview neighborhood disappeared is complicated, and part of it has to do with how Japanese-Americans got to Chicago in the first place. They didn't come by choice. The US government forcibly relocated 20,000 Japanese-Americans to Chicago during World War II. And that group was pressured to shed their ethnic identity, their language, and their culture in order to survive. That story doesn't start in Chicago. It starts on the west coast in the
December 7, 1941. No American will ever forget this Sunday morning in Hawaii. High overhead, Jap raiders are on the loose. Without warning, they circle Pearl Harbor and the city of Honolulu, a surprise attack born of infamy.

It was the beginning of World War II. Approximately 120,000 Japanese-Americans were living in what were called Japantowns on the west coast. These were, essentially, Japanese neighborhoods, similar to other immigrant neighborhoods around the country. But with the threat of an invasion from Japan, the US government was worried about the loyalty of the highly concentrated west coast Japanese-Americans. So they incarcerated them, in what were later called internment camps, around the country.

We are protecting ourselves without violating the principles of Christian decency.

But keeping 120,000 people locked up was expensive, and the country needed workers. So after a couple years, the government changed its focus to reintroducing Japanese-Americans back into society. Researcher Laura Fugikawa says the government didn't want Japanese-Americans to return to the Japantowns they left on the west coast. They wanted them to spread out and assimilate.

The government told them that part of the reason you ended up in these camps was because you hung out with your own kind.

They were basically saying, you’re too Japanese. So when the government allowed Japanese-Americans to leave the camps, they set specific conditions. One, they closed the west coast to Japanese for the duration of the war. And two, they forced them to answer a series of questions about loyalty before they were allowed out.

So one of the questions said, you have to promise that you’re not going to hang out with other Japanese-Americans.

They also told them to avoid speaking Japanese and to develop, quote, "American customs."

So the government says, we’ll let you go, as long as you stop acting what we think of as Japanese, and as long as you integrate into the society.
KATHERINE NAGASAWA: So how do we get from the camps to Lakeview? Well, in 1943, the government chose Chicago as the first city to pilot their vision for Japanese assimilation. They believed Chicago would be more tolerant to Japanese-Americans.

Unlike the west coast, Chicago didn't have the same pre-war racial prejudice towards the Japanese, since there were so few of them living in the city at the time. And when they first arrived, Japanese-Americans found it was easy to find jobs in Chicago's light industries, like garment manufacturing, bookbinding, and candy factories.

ROSS HARANO: So you could get a job at McClurg. You could get a job at Curtiss Candy. You could get a job at Baby Ruth. All these places wanted these, say, because they're good workers.

KATHERINE NAGASAWA: That's Ross Harano. He was born in a camp and just a couple years old when his family arrived in Chicago, along with a wave of 20,000 other Japanese-Americans. Harano says his family, along with many others, received housing assistance from the government and other local agencies. To encourage assimilation, the government made sure to settle people in different neighborhoods on the South and Near North Sides.

ROSS HARANO: So there wasn't any clustering. It was sort of-- you understood what you had to do. You had to, basically, be unseen.

KATHERINE NAGASAWA: But once the government stopped paying attention, Japanese-Americans did begin to cluster together, moving out of the South and Near North Sides. By the 1960s, the biggest cluster was in Lakeview between Belmont and Addison Streets. Lakeview was thought of as safe and affordable. And it was close to white, middle class neighborhoods, which was in line with the government's directive to assimilate into the dominant American culture.

To understand what it was like to grow up in Lakeview and why the neighborhood disappeared, I met a group of people who grew up in the area. We went to the Nisei Lounge bar, one of the last establishments still left from that era.

They're from a generation that was shaped by the government's efforts to force assimilation. You can see traces of it in the first names their parents gave them-- Ken Funamura, Elaine Kaneshiro, Mike Higa, and Tracy and Linda Oishi. But as kids, they weren't really aware of everything their parents had gone through to get to Chicago and Lakeview. They just knew it was a nice place to grow up.
MALE SPEAKER: We'd get out of school at 2:30 there and, basically, what we would end up doing, we would go right over to Wrigley Field. Because they would open up seventh inning there.

ELAINE KANESHIRO: All the churches used to host dances not too far from here, at Viking Hall. And so, during my high school years, that was my social life.

MALE SPEAKER: Our parents would say, go out and play. So we would go out to Lemoyne School, where I went to grammar school at. And they would flood the playground lot there, and and we'd go on out and ice skate there.

KATHERINE NAGASAWA: There's nothing particularly Japanese about these memories. They could be anybody in Chicago. But looking back, the group said they now see that their very American childhoods came at a cost for their parents, who had been traumatized by the war and resettlement. Here's Linda Oishi and Mike Higa.

LINDA OISHI: I mean, my dad was like, you know, you guys are 100% American. Don't ever forget it. We were also striving to break away from the stigma of the war, subliminally.

MIKE HIGA: My father-in-law actually went so far as to tell his children, you are not going to learn Japanese. And they wanted to assimilate so badly that they actually went to that extreme. And they probably lost a bit of history doing that.

LINDA OISHI: I mean, not that we were blaming ourselves or feeling, you know, responsible. It was like we were totally identified as being the enemy. Other ethnic groups were not identified, like the German-Americans or the Italian-Americans.

They were not identified as being the enemy. It was because of our faces. So you can't get away from that. You can't run away from that.

KATHERINE NAGASAWA: But there was a way to try to get away from it. And that was to do what the government wanted the Japanese to do in the first place-- achieve white, middle class markers of success. When you look at that post-war generation that grew up in Lakeview, you find professionals dispersed throughout the city and suburbs, a group that a recent study found had the highest level of intermarriage to whites of any Asian ethnic group.

I wanted to know, what was the cost of all of this? I asked everybody how their experiences might have been different had there been less pressure to assimilate and if there was still a neighborhood to anchor the community. Linda Oishi feels like, in that case, she might have felt
like she didn't have to make a choice between being Japanese or being American.

**LINDA OISHI:** Would we have to decide, are we American first or are we Japanese first? And what do we push? Do we push our culture, which is, you know, Japanese language, dancing, music?

I mean, we have all these wonderful art things—pottery, kimono making, all this stuff that is just being lost though this third and fourth generations. I don't want that to die. I want it to be part of my kids and my grandkids. But how do you do that?

**KATHERINE NAGASAWA:** Without strong ties to Japanese culture or a neighborhood like the one that used to exist in Lakeview, it's harder to do that. But Elaine Kaneshiro says it's possible. It just requires effort. As she's gotten older and reflected more about what her family lost during the war and in the camps, she says it's been more important for her to seek out other Japanese-Americans, even if there's no neighborhood.

**ELAINE KANESHIRO:** I am still part of a Japanese community here in Chicago. And in that setting, I am very comfortable. There is still, even though we don't see each other a lot, there's a commonality there. There's a connection there that is important to me. So I think there's a community. Maybe it's not geographic.

**KATHERINE NAGASAWA:** Sure enough, a couple weeks after I spoke with the group at the Nisei Lounge, I saw Elaine Kaneshiro at an event there.

**HOST:** Can I get you a beer or glass of wine or something?

**ELAINE KANESHIRO:** No, actually I'm fine.

**KATHERINE NAGASAWA:** It was a fundraiser for a local project that sends young, Chicago Japanese-Americans on a pilgrimage to one of the incarceration camps in California, a way of reconnecting to that history. For a few hours, the lounge was filled with Japanese-Americans across generations—third generation sanseis drinking Old Style beer with fourth-generation yonseis.

They live all across Chicago and in the suburbs. But when it came time for this scattered community to choose a place to meet and think about history and heritage, they chose the Nisei Lounge, right at the center of the old neighborhood in Lakeview.

[MUSIC - BLUE DOT SESSIONS "ON BELAY"]
NATHAN: Katherine Nagasawa reported this story. It came to us from WBEZ's *Curious City*. Support for *Curious City* comes from the Conant Family Foundation. If you want to learn more about the story, *Curious City* has an interactive feature, with lots of photos of Japanese-Americans moving to Chicago and living in Lakeview. Just go to wbez.org/curiouscity.

BRIAN: We've talked about what assimilation has meant for different groups, from Japanese-Americans and Native Americans to immigrants from Europe. But what about the people whose ancestors were brought here by force? What has assimilation meant for African Americans?

At the end of the 19th century, the scholar and civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois asked, what, after all, am I? Am I an American, or am I a Negro? Can I be both?

It was a question that Du Bois wrestled with throughout his long life. We asked historian Chad Williams how Du Bois tried to answer it.

CHAD WILLIAMS: For Du Bois, personally, and, again, I keep going back to the context is very important.

BRIAN: Guy, you talk like a damn historian. That's such a pain in the ass. Turns out, the context matters.

In 1897, when Du Bois asked, am I an American, or am I a Negro? Americans on both sides of the color line saw race as the driving factor of history. So did Du Bois. But he had a more nuanced understanding of race.

CHAD WILLIAMS: He very explicitly says that you cannot think about race as something biological because it falls apart. You really need to think about race as something that is socially constructed, that is cultural, but that is, fundamentally, historical, as well.

BRIAN: And it's important to point out that this might have even been a minority view among well-educated, white Americans, at any rate, at the time. This is the high point for what we, today, call scientific racism, where people believe that there were absolute physical, biological differences between races that determined the behavior and the future prospects of people of different races.

CHAD WILLIAMS: Oh, absolutely. Yes, when Du Bois writes *The Conservation of Races* in 1897, he very clearly sees himself as a social scientist. And he feels that, through demonstrating the inherent
humanity of black people, of refuting the pernicious stereotypes that had undergirded-- and lynching and all the other ills that were facing African Americans-- that he would be able to undermine the race problem and, eventually, create a space for African Americans to be treated as equal human beings.

And the durability of white supremacy throughout the 20th century eventually erodes Du Bois's confidence in the United States. And that really starts early on when he's at Atlanta University. He experiences a lynching.

I believe this was in 1899. A black farmer outside of Atlanta, Sam Hose, was brutally lynched. And he went to register a complaint to the local newspaper, the *Atlanta Constitution*. And while he's walking to the newspaper office, he sees Sam Hose's knuckles in a grocery store window.

**BRIAN:** Oh, my god.

**CHAD WILLIAMS:** And he realizes that being the calm, cool, detached social scientist is ultimately insufficient when faced with that type of brutality and barbarism.

**BRIAN:** In 1934, Du Bois wrote an article titled "Segregation." And as a result of that, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the NAACP, kicked him out. What did he say in that article that got him kicked out of the NAACP?

**CHAD WILLIAMS:** Well, he was having a lot of personal beefs, if you will, with NAACP leaders.

**BRIAN:** He wouldn't have been the first person.

**CHAD WILLIAMS:** Oh, he was very difficult to get along with. Du Bois was notoriously cantankerous. But, again, context is important.

This is during the Great Depression. African Americans are suffering, arguably, more than any other group in the country. And he's making the argument that African Americans need to pull together and establish economic cooperatives.

But more importantly, he makes the argument that segregation was nothing new, that African Americans, throughout their history and particularly in their modern history, had always embraced various forms of segregation, sometimes by choice, other times by circumstance. But that it was not necessarily a bad thing.

But of course, this ran completely against the dogma of the NAACP and their core message.
And that, really, led to Du Bois's split from the association.

BRIAN: Du Bois doesn't, necessarily, live to see this. And perhaps we haven't lived to see it. But he must have had some conception of what the ideal looked like for the ability of African Americans to embrace both their African heritage and their Americanness. What did that look like, in his mind?

CHAD WILLIAMS: I think, in some ways, we could put it very bluntly-- to be able to live. He writes in *The Souls of Black Folk* that, and I'm paraphrasing, one strives to be an American and a Negro without being cursed and spit upon. So I think, kind of at a fundamental level, Du Bois wanted the ability, the safety, for black people to fully embrace their humanity and to be able to share and cultivate their gifts with the rest of the nation and with the rest of the world.

That, in some ways, is what democracy looks like for Du Bois. And this idea of democracy was so poignant and rife with possibility but still unrealized. And Du Bois, I think, really committed his life, until he decided to leave the United States altogether, to pushing the United States to perfect its largely-failed experiment.

BRIAN: You're working on a book about Du Bois. And surely, you're going to have to answer Du Bois's question to himself, am I an American, or am I a Negro? How are you going to answer that?

CHAD WILLIAMS: Well, if you take Du Bois as a person, he left the United States. I mean, he ultimately abandoned the United States and his American citizenship. He died in Ghana. So it was, I think, a harsh reality that he came to.

But I think he always felt that there was some redeeming value in America. Because it was the place where black people had established a culture, had made significant contributions to the history of the nation. But I think he believed in this kind of enduring tension, this idea of a hyphenated African American identity. And I think within that, there is an inherent tension that, perhaps, can never be reconciled.

[MUSIC - KETSA, "DONE DOWN"]

NATHAN: Chad Williams is a historian at Brandeis University and is writing a book about W.E.B. Du Bois.

And now, a word from our sponsors.

JOANNE: And now, back to the show.
NATHAN: So that mention by Chad Williams about Du Bois and the idea of America is extraordinarily powerful. I mean, Du Bois was part of a group of African Americans who actually left the United States and went to Ghana to help with a number of nation-building projects there in the late '50s and early '60s. And like Du Bois, many of them actually felt more American abroad than in the United States.

Because they had this identity, that Chad points to, of being American but also a kind of freedom of movement, a freedom from state surveillance, in some cases a freedom of suspicion that they enjoyed while in West Africa that made them feel fully American, a kind of citizenship that they simply did not enjoy. And so this has to resonate with some of the present immigration questions, I would imagine.

BRIAN: Nathan, I think it resonates directly with a very current debate that's going on right now. That's what to do about the DACA program--

NATHAN: Right, the Dream Act.

BRIAN: The Dream Act. And these are the Dreamers. Many of these kids couldn't be more American. They're serving in the military. They're employed. They're paying taxes.

They're going to college. Some are even defending their dissertations. What could be more American than that? That's in tension with their status in America, being the children of people who violated the immigration laws. They arrived in the United States illegally.

JOANNE: So here's the perverse question that that makes me want to ask. Is there such a thing as assimilation? If someone like Du Bois gets to the point where he needs to leave to fulfill that idea of potential or possibility, then what is assimilation?

Is it invisibility? Is it merging? Is it adapting? Is it total erasure? I mean, what does it mean? And depending on those meanings, is that something that anyone really wants?

NATHAN: Right. I mean, yeah, I think there is a really clear sense that people are after a really full bundle of rights-- the right to own their own home, potentially, the right to be able to move, to send their kids to a good school, to, like you say, invest in a future. And you know, you think about someone like Du Bois, or now, these young people looking over their shoulders worrying about deportation-- there's the constant fear about the state potentially coming and taking people away, the dividing of families happening without their choice.
I mean, there's a great deal of anxiety that's now shot through the experience of these Americans that is very much an echo of an earlier kind of anxiety from the 19th and 20th century around something like Jim Crow. And so I think, you know, very much to your question, assimilation really does mean a kind of peace of mind.

JOANNE: But what about the other half of that equation, the people who are the ultimate judges of who assimilates and who doesn't, the majority population? I mean, there's two halves of the equation of assimilation, I guess, is part of what I'm saying.

NATHAN: Sure, sure.

BRIAN: It all comes back to being able to not be the perfect American and not have to worry about being called un-American.

NATHAN: Right, I mean, misbehave, to politically dissent, to be an everyday, rule-breaking or simply self-actualizing American. I mean, again, just to round out the circle, you know, Du Bois was somebody that went out of his way to learn foreign languages, to aspire to Victorian values, wear suits. And it didn't make a lick of difference, right?

And so many of these Dreamers, with their college degrees and their military service under their belt, are now being considered, somehow, to be suspect. And that stuff should, actually, at least matter, in terms of getting people a measure of respect in the country. And now, that's an open question.

JOANNE: Well, that leads me back to my original question, though, which is, is there such a thing as assimilation?

NATHAN: So Joanne, I think the idea of assimilation as the obliteration of one's culture or one's language or one's history is not a real thing. I think that most people are on some kind of path or a part of a process. You know, so for people of African descent or indigenous descent or people who happen to speak Spanish, those kinds of variables can, oftentimes, be called up at a moment's notice to make a person suspect.

And so part of what assimilation is really about, frankly, is about the whole society, more so than about the individual, right? To what extent are we allowed to simply be our full, complete selves and not worry about an object or part of our identity being criminalized at a moment's notice?
BRIAN: And I think it's exactly when a group feels, and is, sufficiently accepted when that group is actually much freer to rediscover and embrace all kinds of racial and ethnic histories that can be built back into this mosaic of difference.

JOANNE: That's going to do it for today. But you can keep the conversation going online. Let us know what you thought of the episode or ask us your burning history questions.

You'll find us at backstoryradio.org. Or send an email to backstory@virginia.edu. We're also on Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter at BackStory Radio, and feel free to review the new show in the iTunes store. Whatever you do, don't be a stranger.

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[MUSIC PLAYING]