

**Bill Hall:**

## **Potatoes and pickled herring**

**Bill Hall/Lewiston Tribune**

Countries like the United States and Canada have been populated in large part by families with a fierce desire to fight for a better lot in life. As a consequence, such nations are comprised in large measure of the kind of people who had the get up and go to get up and go.

This nation is a product of people who weren't content to lie down and die in their original country when their survival and that of their children was at stake.

With some exceptions, if you are not an immigrant, somebody back there near the trunk of your family tree was, whether or not you fully realize where people like you came from. Some of the children of earlier immigrants now dwell harshly on the crime of today's immigrants who left hunger and hopelessness behind to go find America. And technically today, that is a crime.

I thought of that the other day when South Carolina Sen. Lindsay Graham was campaigning for re-election on a platform of finding a way to avoid throwing 11 million immigrants out of this heavenly haven of the dispossessed. The senator was traveling his state, shaking hands and kissing babies (which is better than kissing hands and shaking babies).

The New York Times reports that Graham met some resistance to the notion that coming to America is an admirable course for get-up-and-go families. A constituent of Graham's, who seemed ignorant of how he came to be born here, urged the senator to carry a message to other members of Congress:

"Make 'em understand the word 'illegal,' " the guy said.

In other words, some immigrants are breaking the law against "illegal" entry into this country today. But in the diverse meanings of words, there is hard-core illegal and then there are other kinds of illegal. The only difference between those families today and my great grandparents - who kindly brought my genes to this shore from Denmark - is that excessive immigration had not yet been declared a crime when my great-grandparents arrived.

The same is true of my Irish genes that came here a century and a half ago because the potato famine forced my ancestors to choose between being among the million Irish who stayed home and starved and the million Irish who came to America. I am grateful they brought part of one of my favorite people - me - to this country.

(How ironic that my Irish genes survived the potato famine but ended up inside me in Idaho, the potato state, where my only challenge is keeping my weight down from eating too many of those tasty tubers.)

It was not against the law when my genes arrived for hungry families to invade America. However, I have no doubt, if it had been against the law to come to America, that both my Irish and my Danish genes would have sneaked in here anyway. That's just the kind of criminal type we Danish/Irish people are when our kids are hungry.

As crimes go, moving to a survivable place without the permission of a government is a small infraction in the whole scheme of illegality. It's in the same ballpark as stealing bread for a starving child. It's like a rolling stop at a stop sign in the middle of the night with no traffic in sight.

Coming to America isn't murder or bank robbery or wife beating. Some crimes are vastly different from other crimes. The mercy killing of a beloved elderly mate shrieking with cancer pain is not the same degree of wrong as murdering a stranger for his wallet.

And some crimes aren't crimes at all in other circumstances. The difference between a prison term and a medal of honor is whether you are bravely risking your life while fighting for your country or killing like an animal without reason or remorse.

And surely poaching deer during an economic depression is understandable.

There are vast differences in the degrees of illegal. The 11 million illegals who have migrated to this country in recent decades are almost all some version of my Danish great-grandparents, neither of whom was lawless scum or even undesirable as a new neighbor.

(However, they were Danes, and I am compelled to admit that Danes are the sort of people who eat pickled herring. I have tasted pickled herring. If that isn't illegal, it should be.)

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