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A CITY DIVIDED: LEWISTON'S ACCEPTANCE AND RESISTANCE TO THE SOMALI REFUGEES IN LEWISTON, MAINE FROM 2000 TO 2011

BY ANNA CHASE HOGELAND

This article depicts the nature of the resettlement, acculturation, and reception of the Somali refugees in the city of Lewiston, Maine from their arrival in 2000 until 2011. As refugees from their war-torn country, Somalis faced a mixed welcome in their new home. Racial and religious tensions rose as the black, Muslim Somalis moved into the predominately white and Christian Lewiston community. In opposition to the cold reception, as this article argues, the vast majority of the Lewiston community greeted the Somalis with tolerance, adaptability, and embracement. This article chronicles the historical contexts of Lewiston and Somalis before and during the immigration, explicit episodes of aggression and acceptance of the Somalis in Lewiston, and the nature of their integration in schools, workplaces, and the community as a whole. The author studied history at Bates College. She recently earned a Master of Social work degree from the Smith College School for Social Work.

OVER THE lifetime of Lewiston, Maine, peoples from foreign countries have migrated to “the city on the river” to create a new home. The newcomers changed the city and the city changed the newcomers. With each immigrant group, Lewiston evolved its perception of, and accommodations to, the foreigners. Since Europeans first came to American shores, there have been three primary waves of immigration to Lewiston: the Irish, the French-Canadians, and the Somali. The nature of Lewiston’s reception and perception of the immigrants was dependent upon the city’s economic condition, American politics, media portrayals of foreigners, as well as the prevailing cultural attitudes towards the language, race, religion, and other defining characteristics of the immigrant group. Immigration to Lewiston has been marked by tension and even physical confrontation, yet the city’s history consistently confirms that a vast majority of Lewiston’s popula-

tion demonstrated tolerance, adaptability, and eventual embracement of those immigrating to the city.

This article explores the nature of the resettlement, acculturation, and reception of the Somali refugees in Lewiston from their arrival in 2000 through 2011. In contrast to the Somali refugees, Irish and French-Canadians were of Caucasian descent – like a preponderance of their Lewiston hosts – and served as needed labor to the city’s development. When the Irish came in the 1850s, Lewiston was in the midst of rapid industrialization and demographic growth. The Irish filled vacant jobs in the mills and on construction sites. The Irish’s Catholicism, and their perceived alcohol abuse, caused the most conflict between them and the predominately Protestant Lewiston community.¹

The French-Canadians were also valued employees in Lewiston’s industrial era immigrating to the city in the late nineteenth century. At times, their Catholicism, French language, and cultural heritage caused tension between them and the native-born Lewiston residents.² The several decades following the French-Canadian demographic influx saw a drier stream of migration. This had the effect of blurring the lines between who was “from” Lewiston and who was “from away.”

By the millennium—the eve of the Somali influx—Lewiston was a community of approximately 36,000 citizens, virtually all Anglo-Americans, French-Canadians, Irish-Americans, and every combination of the three.³ Tensions between immigrant groups had greatly minimized. Conflicts in Lewiston were mostly due to economic hardship and competition for dwindling jobs. Ethnic enclaves in the struggling “old mill town”, like Little Canada, had largely dissipated, and many Franco- and Irish-Americans were distinguishable by surname alone in the predominately Caucasian region of the “whitest state” in the U.S.⁴ in the early 2000s. Unlike the Irish and French-Canadian immigrants the Somalis were not moving to Lewiston for economic opportunity, but instead, because they were refugees, fleeing from violence in Somalia and relocated to the United States without the option to return home.

The Lewiston community’s reaction to the Somalis demonstrated both their hostility and reservations, as well as the great efforts of many to accommodate and welcome the refugees. The community’s perception of, and reaction to, the influx was shaped by the political and economic status of Lewiston as well as the United States’ foreign policy and relations with Somalia. Furthermore, the perception of the Somalis, a predominately Muslim people, was shaped by the attacks of September 11, 2001 which occurred just months after their initial arrival in Febru-

ary, 2001. The coincidence of these two events likely inspired some of Lewiston's population to express racist, anti-Muslim, and anti-Somali sentiments that occasionally erupted into hostility and violence.

The Lewiston community, however, also made great strides towards accommodating the Somalis and their unique needs as transplanted, non-English speaking, African Muslims. Every attack by an individual or small group was overshadowed by a much larger community response advocating acceptance and tolerance. Lewiston was especially receptive of the Bantu, the subordinate citizens in Somalia who arrived in Lewiston a few years after the ethnic Somalis.

Gender also played a role in how Lewistonians responded to the Somali immigrants. The Somali women, due to their traditional veils, were visibly displaying their Muslim religion and thus were easily targeted for hostility. However, most of the community was overtly welcoming and eager to learn about the *hijab* and the unique experiences of Muslim women. Overall, Lewiston's reaction to the sudden influx of the Somali demonstrated community tolerance and adaptability, and the future looks relatively promising for peaceful interactions and celebrations of diversity.

Some academics have researched and written, or are currently writing, about the Somali community in Maine, including Catherine Besteman, Patricia Buck, Elizabeth Eames, Mazie Hough, Kim Huisman, Kristin Langellier, Heather Lindkvist, Andrea Voyer, as well as former Lewiston Mayor, Larry Gilbert.⁵ Many of these writers' findings have shed light on the Somalis' migration experiences, yet some articles and books are still in progress, are not yet published, or are inaccessible to the public. For that reason, I have relied largely on newspaper articles, documentaries, personal accounts, and scholarly articles to inform and develop this article's perspective.

An important consideration of the sources utilized in this article is the predominance of white-American voices. The writings of reporters for the Lewiston press, academics, and politicians are predominately from a white native-born American perspective. Their perception of acculturation likely differs from that of the Somalis. This article strives to present voices of all parties, though the majority of sources were created by, and arguably for, the white population. The authors may have an incentive to promote acts of toleration and to diminish the micro-aggressions, struggles of the Somalis, and subtle, yet powerful, hostilities that colored the settlement experience. Similarly, some Somalis may have withheld their candid accounts of discrimination so as to appease the –

likely white – reporter and audience. Lewiston readers may interpret a Somali's public expression of a turbulent integration as ingratitude, which could heighten tension, resentment, and marginalization. I recognize media's tendencies to both exaggerate the negative and promote the positive in an effort to make compelling news stories and to boost the city's reputation and morale. I also acknowledge that the identity of the interviewer and presence of a camera – particularly in Ziad Hamzeh's *The Letter: An American Town and the 'Somali Invasion'* – can influence people to behave and express themselves differently than they would off-camera.

Unlike the Irish and French-Canadian populations, the Somalis' acculturation is a contemporary process and townspeople and historians cannot yet put it into historical perspective. The decade since their arrival is rich with evidence that suggests the reception and assimilation of the Somali refugees were more dramatic and turbulent than those associated with the preceding immigrant groups. As this article describes, the clashes between Lewistonians and Somalians at times escalated to violence and hate crimes within the American zeitgeist of suspicion of Muslims and racism. Yet in response to these conflicts, the Lewiston community demonstrated a dedication to providing resources, understanding the culture and religion of the refugees, and aiding the Somalis integration within their new home.

Setting the Stage

Lewiston's economic slump and the United States' infiltration in Somalia in the 1990s and early 2000s inspired greater turbulence in the Somalis' settlement in Lewiston than there may have been in a more favorable economic and political climate. American troops intervened in the conflicts in Somalia in the 1990s, and the media coverage often portrayed Somalis as violent anarchists. Thus a portion of the Lewiston population was wary of the refugees from Somalia. Exacerbating this wariness was the nationwide suspicion of Muslims which was greatly intensified after the attacks of September 11, 2001. The refugees also absorbed public benefits and competed for employment in a time when local jobs and city resources were increasingly scarce. Contrary to the circumstances of the Irish and French-Canadian migrations, Lewiston did not have vacant unskilled labor positions immigrants could fill. Nearly all the textile mills and shoe factories were closed and employment insecurity was rampant. In the words of Allan R. Turgeon from the

Bates Mill, “it’s been a very difficult transition to go from a very prosperous town 50 years ago that is struggling to stay afloat. We’ve suffered from . . . a decline in self-esteem.”⁶

The Somalis were not the first African refugees to come to Lewiston. In the fall of 2000, shortly before the Somali influx, Lewiston hosted a relatively small population of Togolese refugees. The city appeared to adjust to the population quite easily and many residents were fond of the immigrants. A *Lewiston Sun Journal* article reported that the Togolese were middle-class, found jobs quickly, spoke French (a commonality with some Franco-Americans) and were a “good fit for the area.” The Togolese refugees were small in number, relatively economically stable, fluent in a familiar language, and most were not visibly Muslim.⁷ These factors appear to have shaped the Lewiston residents’ perceptions of the Togolese as non-threatening. However, with their greater numbers, poverty, foreign language, and Muslim religion, the Somalis challenged Lewiston to make more drastic accommodations.

Many white Lewistonians experienced insecurity in housing, employment, and benefits before the Somalis arrived. Thus when the Somalis came and received refugee benefits, some members of the white community were envious, confused, and hostile towards both the immigrants and the government. Anne Kemper, counseling coordinator at Lewiston Adult Education where many Somalis took classes, observed that the Somalis “started arriving when the job situation in Lewiston became more and more precarious. Many people were losing their jobs they had held for 10 to 15 years. There were no jobs to replace them.”⁸ Kemper claims that the white Lewistonian resentment was not only due to differences in race, religion, or background. Being replaced by anyone, white Christian or black Muslim, would have likely provoked some animosity from the community.

Some community members were angry with the Federal government and perplexed at how the Somalis received benefits that they – the hardworking longer-term residents – did not. *The Letter: An American Town and the ‘Somali Invasion,’* a documentary that chronicles the first years of the Somali influx, films white citizens on streets of Lewiston expressing their agitation. The townspeople exclaimed, “for six years they don’t have to pay any taxes,” “thousands of Somalians are getting help and nobody will help me,” “they don’t get in trouble for anything they do,” “they get 800 dollars for rent and then 800 dollars for play,” and “we should take care of our own before we start taking care of other people.”⁹ The protestors primarily directed their hostility toward the

government and its policies that they believed favored refugees rather than to the Somalis themselves.

The protesting citizens were somewhat misinformed – the Somalis did pay taxes and did not receive 800 dollars “for play” – but the local and federal governments did use city resources to provide Somalis with refugee benefits. Yet the city’s allowance for refugee benefits was minimal. Lewiston was disadvantaged in that it did not receive the funding and programming the federal government allotted to other primary refugee resettlement sites; most Somalis went to other United States cities.¹⁰ City resources, instead of federal aid, supported the accommodation the refugees.¹¹ As of October 2002, Lewiston had spent approximately 450,000 dollars on the Somalis in the city.¹² Most of the refugees received general assistance, section eight housing vouchers, and food stamps. City officials claimed the Somalis strained social services, including welfare, job training, and English-as-a-second-language programs.¹³ In 2001, Lewiston’s General Assistance Administrator, Sue Charron, acknowledged “of course there’s an impact on the budget. You can’t deny that we haven’t spent some money. But it doesn’t last forever.”¹⁴

American Relations with Somalia

In addition to Lewiston’s precarious job market and insecure economic climate, the American invasion of Somalia in the early 1990s and its media coverage helped to shape Lewiston’s perceptions of the Somalis. The chaos and violence in Somalia that erupted during the reign of dictator-warlord Siad Barre prompted domestic and international forces to intervene in an effort to regain order and peace. In 1991, these forces drove Barre out of power; subsequently, the central government of Somalia collapsed. Starvation, anarchy, and disarray overcame Somalia. In response, the United States, among other nations, launched Operation Restore Hope to bring aid to fractured Somalia. In October 1993, American involvement in Somalia made headlines when Somali soldiers shot down an American helicopter. A violent interaction between the American servicemen and Somalis ensued, resulting in the death of eighteen American soldiers memorialized in the 2002 film *Black Hawk Down*.¹⁵

Violence towards Americans in Somalia especially affected Mainers. In the midst of Operation Hope, two Maine natives were killed: Gary Gordon of Lincoln and Thomas Field of Lisbon. The Maine and national media portrayed these men as heroes and victims of savage and

violent Somalis. Both Gordon and Field posthumously received several medals to recognize their sacrifice, bravery, and accomplishments. Mainers even named the major thoroughfare through Lisbon the Sgt. Thomas Field Memorial Highway.¹⁶ Gordon's wife, Cameron, was quoted in the *Beaver Country Times* claiming that her husband's body "was dragged through the streets of Somalia and dumped in front of the U.S. embassy. They tried to take the hero and warrior out of Gary and tried to disgrace him in their world."¹⁷ Many Mainers perceived Somalis as savage, anti-American Muslims attacking local men bravely serving our country. And then the Somalis moved in next door. Some white supremacists from the National Alliance in Portland held signs on the street corner in Lewiston that read "how long will it take before Lewiston is like Somalia?"¹⁸

The anti-Muslim sentiment across the United States that intensified after the attacks of September 11, 2001 further influenced Lewiston's perception of the refugees. The witch-hunt for Muslim terrorists became an American obsession. Muslims played the role of the Catholic Papists in the nineteenth and early twentieth century and the Communists in the mid-twentieth century. Media and political efforts to portray Muslims as dangerous, anti-American, misogynistic and violent successfully tainted American trust of Muslims living in the United States.¹⁹ One Lewiston employer expressed his fear of hiring Muslims and new immigrants; he believed, "people need to have been in the country at least one year . . . because they may be terrorists. They might plant a bomb or something."²⁰

Somalis in the Workplace

Additional obstacles Somalis faced to living comfortably in Lewiston included learning English, finding jobs, and battling racism. Many Lewistonians struggled financially and competed with each other for jobs before the Somalis arrived, and some projected the preexisting feelings of resentment and fear onto the newcomers. A few episodes of employment discrimination occurred based on race, religion, and assumed inability of Somalis to complete tasks, yet non-fluency in English appeared to be employers' most paramount concern about Somali workers. Employers voiced their apprehension to hiring non-English speaking Somalis for practical concerns, such as the inability to understand safety regulations and communicate with customers, rather than more blatant xenophobic reasons. One employer explained that he cut short interviews with a Somali with limited English because,

a lot of interviewing comes from the feeling you get from a person when you are interviewing them . . . their body language and they way they react to questions and the way that they hesitate . . . all that stuff and you don't get that when you are using a translator.

Some employers also noted that Somalis tend to have a looser interpretation of deadlines and appointment times. Employers observed that “having people show up for appointments or interviews on time is really difficult,” and that many Somalis “have not been very reliable and I think that that has a lot to do with communication . . . they tend to disappear or not show up to work on time and they will say that they have a family emergency and not call us.”²¹

While employers pointed to the cultural and language differences as reasons for their reservations about hiring the refugees, many Somalis perceived that their exclusion from the workplace was due to more xenophobic rationale. One English-speaking Somali woman recalled when her friends told her to apply to the open position at a local bank, “when I got there and the manager saw me and that I'm Somali, she told me no, no, I'm not looking for people like you. Go.”²² Another Somali remembered applying for a job and was told that “if you don't have any GED or diploma we can't hire you” – even for menial labor, such as housekeeping, that would not otherwise require a degree.²³ Degrees obtained in Somalia were worthless in the United States; many employers would not recognize the degrees as legitimate and, even if they were, the language deficiency undermined the Somalis' ability to practice their trade. One employer noted that “regardless of what they have done in their past country . . . we have placed doctors, teachers, accountants, into production positions here because that is . . . where the language allows them to be.”²⁴ Presumably some employers used the language barrier as an excuse to discriminate because of xenophobic prejudices, while some appear even proud to assert “I won't hire black people.”²⁵

Despite the prevailing anti-Muslim sentiment across the United States, especially post 9/11, most Lewiston employers did not overtly take issue with the Somalis' religion and its practices. One Somali employee noted “yes, I am religious and I do pray and never had a problem with that...it is just five minutes every break.”²⁶ Occasionally the Muslim dress – specifically the *hijab* – violated workplace dress regulations for safety reasons. Additionally, some cafeterias were reluctant to extract pork from the menu to accommodate Muslim prohibition of contact with swine. That said, nearly all Somalis, employers, and other townspeople in surveys and interviews did not name religious differences as a

major point of conflict; rather, limited English appeared to be the primary reason for discrimination and subjugation of the Somalis. This may be due in part to the cultural taboo and fear of publicly vocalizing anti-Muslim bias.

While some Lewistonians had concerns about the Somalis' tardiness and limited English, many townspeople were receptive to hiring Somalis and were often impressed with the refugees' work ethic. Robert Duranleau, director of Portland's social service department, observed that the Somalis "find jobs very quickly. They're actually a pretty good role model for some of the other folks on general assistance." Duranleau's sentiment is positive, although his use of the word "actually" suggests he initially had lower expectations of the refugees' performance. Lewiston's general assistance administrator, Sue Charron, saw the Somalis as "real go-getters," and assistant city administrator, Phil Nadeau, was optimistic that the refugees were "looking to become productive members of the community immediately."²⁷ Employers like Wal-Mart and L.L. Bean were especially appreciative of the Somalis' willingness to work long hours and perform less desirable tasks. One employer saw the Somalis as "very concerned with the quality of their work . . . and that their supervisors are happy with the job that they are doing," not to mention their willingness to work nearly any shift for a modest wage.²⁸

Somalis in the Schools

Unlike workplaces, public schools were unable to exclude local children based on concerns regarding language or customs. The Somali influx presented multifold challenges to the teachers and administration in Lewiston public schools, including classroom fights, parental objections, a shortage of resources for the refugees' language needs, and orientation of the Somalis' religious and cultural practices. Prior to the Somali migration, the schools had hosted a virtually homogeneously white, Christian, English-speaking population ever since the Francophone French-Canadians had migrated a century earlier. In the face of the parental concerns and strains in the classroom, Lewiston schools adjusted to the changes by hiring English as a second language (ESL) teachers and combating intolerance on school grounds. Administrators, teachers, and students made efforts to create a welcoming environment at school, despite the extra expense of money, time, and personnel. The schools and adult education programs were largely responsible for the progress the Somali made in mastering English, finding jobs, and living

in relative peace as a racial and religious minority in Lewiston.

Initially, tensions arose between white and Somali students in the classroom, and physical fights between the two groups were not uncommon. Some Lewiston parents expressed concern that their children were “taking baseball bats with them in the morning to school and fighting with the other kids,” and that “cops at the Lewiston High School have to be on duty all the time now ‘cause they’re beating up the Somalis.”²⁹ In 2004 alone, forty-eight violent, racially-motivated reported fights occurred in the Lewiston-Auburn high schools.³⁰ Some white Lewiston parents were resentful of what they perceived as “special treatment” the Somali students received in school. School administrators provided Somali students with extra tutoring and meal options when pork was for lunch, and they allowed Somali girls to wear a *hijab* when other students were forbidden to wear bandanas. Parents asked, “why should the needs of the minority affect the habits of the majority?”³¹

The schools were especially proactive in addressing the limited English of Somali students, as the language barrier hindered the refugees’ comfort and engagement in the classroom. Before the Somalis came to the city, one ESL tutor worked with forty students in the entire school district. Between February and March 2001, about twenty-four Somali students enrolled. By September 2001, over 200 Somali students had entered the Lewiston-Auburn schools, and most of them spoke limited English.³² Despite their tightened budgets, Lewiston and Auburn schools hired several more ESL teachers as well as a community specialist named Mohammed Abdi.

Acting as a liaison between the Somali and native-born Lewiston residents, Abdi informed school administrators of how to best teach the Somali students. Abdi also gave talks to parents and teachers on the intricacies of Somali and Muslim culture. He requested that schools be sensitive to the special needs of the students, such as offering alternatives to pork during lunch. Teachers and administrators were largely receptive to Abdi’s insights and made efforts to create a welcoming and tolerant atmosphere for the Somali students.³³ During Ramadan, the superintendent did not provide the Muslim Somalis their own praying room, but he did offer students the option of remaining in the study hall instead of going to the cafeteria during lunchtime to respect their fast.³⁴

Lewiston community members also provided classes for Somali adults to increase their competency in English and job skills. At Lewiston Adult Education, Somalis enrolled in English, Adult Basic Education, and GED classes. In these classes Somalis developed workplace lit-

eracy skills and gained access to computers and the Internet. As in the elementary and high schools, the Somali migration challenged Adult Education to quickly adjust to the needs and numbers of the new population. Anne Kemper, counseling coordinator at Lewiston Adult Education, recalls how:

with the number and the speed in which the Somali arrived in that every agency was put under great stress. We didn't have translators, we didn't have money to serve the needs of the populations, and all the social service organizations were innovative and all of us had to learn how to change our existing programs to change our new population's needs. . . . Our teachers have done an extraordinary job of designing a curriculum for folks that are not literate in any language which is unique to our city.³⁵

Because of the local and federal government funds and dedicated local volunteer instructors, many of the approximately 400 Somali students at Lewiston Adult Education became competent in English and obtained degrees and jobs necessary to support their families and increase social mobility within the first decade of their migration.

Hostile Acts and Community Responses

Racism and prejudice were evident in the first years of the Somali influx to Lewiston, but a much larger and louder community response followed each hostile act to welcome the refugees and express their unwillingness to accept community intolerance. Notable events during this period included former Lewiston Mayor Laurier Raymond's letter addressing the Somali community, the white supremacy rally, and a mosque desecration. Each of these acts inspired the Lewistonians who welcomed the Somali to show their support with several events including a march downtown, a counter rally to the white supremacists, and punishment for hate crimes.

The Mayor's Letter

The first public controversial act over the Somali came in October 2002, when Raymond wrote a letter on the front page of the *Lewiston Sun Journal*. The letter presented Raymond's concerns about, and agenda for, the Somalis in Lewiston. The following is an excerpt from the second half of the letter:

I would ask that the Somali leadership make every effort to communicate my concerns on city and school service impacts with other friends and extended family who are considering a move to this community. To date, we have found the funds to accommodate the situation. A continued increased demand will tax the City's finances. This large number of new arrivals cannot continue without negative results for all. The Somali community must exercise some discipline and reduce the stress on our limited finances and our generosity. I am well aware of the legal right of a U.S. resident to move anywhere he/she pleases, but it is time for the Somali community to exercise this discipline in view of the effort that has been made on its behalf...Only with your help will we be successful in the future-please pass the word: We have been overwhelmed and have responded valiantly. Now we need breathing room. Our city is maxed-out financially, physically and emotionally.³⁶

Raymond's letter quickly gained national media attention and prompted both local support and outrage. Raymond framed his concerns, at least those he expressed publicly, in practical terms regarding the city's capacity to accommodate the refugees rather than in terms of their race and religion. Yet he based his claims upon assumptions and biases rather than factual evidence. The mayor never met with the Somali leaders and did not sufficiently research the refugees and their impact on the city before writing the letter. Raymond expressed his view of Somalis as people "without skills, no language skills at all, no working skills" who do not pay taxes – even though many of the refugees have higher education and specialty degrees from both Somali and American schools and were taxpayers, English speaking, small business owners and valued employees.³⁷ Raymond cited local citizens' support as validation for his controversial request for the Somalis to stop coming to the city. Raymond claimed he received 650 emails from residents in response to the letter and only thirty-five expressed opposition to his message, which lead him to believe that he "spoke for the majority of the citizens."³⁸ Many emails allegedly conveyed the message: "you said what we were thinking. We need some breathing room." The negative responses were not enough to convince Raymond that he had been inappropriate:

for me to apologize just to placate them, when I didn't believe I did anything wrong, would be an insult. They understand that it would be impossible for me to apologize for something I believed and still believe was a request, and a reasonable request.³⁹

A tense dialogue followed between the two opposing sides of the community: those who supported Raymond's standpoint and those who saw his message as unjustified, unfounded, and prejudicial. The latter group made extra strides to make the Somali feel welcome, and their numbers revealed to be much larger than what Raymond had assessed.

In response to the growing controversy, many community members, white and Somali, organized a march – called the Unity Walk – to demonstrate their support of the Somalis' presence in the city. The Unity Walk was planned before the Mayor's letter was published, yet it is probable that the Mayor's words inspired more community members to participate in the march to demonstrate their opposition to his message. On Sunday, October 13, 2002, approximately 250 people, most of them white long-term Lewiston residents, marched through downtown streets holding signs that read, "Love Thy Neighbor."⁴⁰ Participants met at the Calvary United Methodist Church and marched to the mosque to forge a symbolic connection and sentiment of respect between the two religious centers. Many Somalis who were offended by Raymond's letter expressed their appreciation of the community's positive response. Mohammed Abdi believed the march "will strengthen the community. It will bring the people closer together. It was a matter of solidarity and a show of unity."⁴¹ The march passed picketers from the white supremacist group National Alliance, most of who had traveled from Portland. The march increased the divide between citizens who were tolerant and those who were intolerant of the Somalis while demonstrating the dedication of the majority of community members to embracing the refugees.

The Rallies

Fractions within the Lewiston community became more obvious in January 2003, when Raymond's letter and the community's positive and negative responses caught the attention of the Illinois-based white supremacy group: The World Church of the Creator (WCOTC). The WCOTC, which had very few members from Maine, felt compelled to expel the Somali population from Lewiston. They planned a rally in the town to make their stance known. In response, Lewiston community members organized a rally called the Many and One Coalition to promote diversity and to publicize their opposition to the WCOTC's message. Both rallies were scheduled for the same Saturday morning of January 11, 2003; the pro-diversity rally at Bates College's Merrill Gymnasium and the WCOTC across town.⁴²

In the days preceding the rallies, local newspaper reporters struggled to hide their bias in support of the Many and One Coalition. The *Lewiston Sun Journal* published articles that advised attendees to the Coalition to arrive early and to park in certain lots. The newspaper even advertised rides to the Coalition for those without transportation. Such articles were not written or published pertaining to the WCOTC rally.⁴³ Reporters showed their support more explicitly in the opinion section of the paper, where pro-diversity letters were abundant and white supremacy or anti-immigrant letters were nonexistent. On January 10th, the day before the rally, the *Lewiston Sun Journal* published an opinion article by an anonymous writer:

We strongly encourage people to avoid The World Church of the Creator rally, no matter how curious they may be at the spectacle of demonstrators and the media throng. We just as strongly encourage people to attend the Many and One Coalition rally to demonstrate to ourselves and other what we are a community of people who hold respect paramount . . . Tolerance must rule the day, for people who many feel inconvenienced by security, for people who many want to clamp down hard on freedom, for racists seeking headlines and for demonstrators taking a stand against hate.⁴⁴

The editor did not publish, or perhaps even receive, a letter representing the opposing view. The attention the newspaper did pay to WCOTC described the organization's track record of violence and the trial of leader Matt Hale, who was under investigation for the murder of a federal judge in the days preceding the rally.⁴⁵

The turnouts for the rallies on January 11th indicated that the majority of the Lewiston population shared the newspaper's endorsement of diversity and the Somali people in the city. Only 300 attendees came to the WCOTC rally, including the press, supporters from out-of-state, and an anti-hate group who dressed in black and chanted "this is our community! Nazis out! Nazis out!"⁴⁶ The Many and One Coalition drew a much larger crowd; an estimated 3,000 to 5,000 people, many of whom were white, packed the Merrill Gym and the surrounding area outside. Maine Senators Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins, Lewiston Mayor John Jenkins, and Maine Governor John Baldacci were in attendance. The politicians vocally supported the Coalition's goals to demonstrate that Raymond did not speak for all Maine political representatives. Snowe said to the crowd, "we want people to know that we are a diverse, tolerant community," and Baldacci asserted "there's no place for hatred

in our society.” The enthusiastic attendees held signs that read “Stop Racism Now.”⁴⁷

A follow-up article reported that, “the hate rally was actually anticlimatic, drawing just a fraction of the number of people who jammed the Bates gym to rally for diversity and compassion.”⁴⁸ The overwhelming majority of the Lewiston community had made themselves clear: the Somali were welcome and intolerance was not.

The Pig’s Head

The three years following the rallies saw a relatively calm acculturation period during which the Somalis adjusted to Lewiston and Lewiston adjusted to the Somalis. With the aid of many Lewiston community members, the refugees opened businesses, enrolled in adult education classes, and sent their children to school with white peers. Some residents remained resistant to the Somalis’ integration; their hostility was relatively subtle until the summer of 2006, when a hate crime in Lewiston made headlines and again provoked a community response expressing disapproval of community intolerance.

Lewiston native Brent Matthews, age thirty-three, rolled a frozen pig’s head through the Lewiston-Auburn Islamic Center while Somalis prayed inside. Matthews insisted the act was supposed to be a “big joke.” He claimed he did not know the significance of the pig in Islam and was unaware that Somalis were worshipping in the room at the time.⁴⁹ The police and the FBI monitored Matthews and alerted the Maine Attorney General’s office of possible Civil Rights Act violations. The District Attorney’s office charged Matthews with a misdemeanor offense of desecration of a place of worship and banned him from coming near the mosque. The court did not find Matthews guilty of a hate crime due to his alleged unawareness of the significance of the pig in Islam; a ruling that enraged many Somali and white Lewiston residents.⁵⁰ Non-Muslim religious leaders were particularly sympathetic to the Somalis; about 150 people, including Governor John Baldacci, gathered to condemn Matthews and to support the Somalis and their right to worship peacefully. Rabbi Hillel Katzir of Auburn’s Temple Shalom Synagogue Center stated:

after we heard about what happened at the mosque, many of us in the local interfaith clergy group felt that an attack on anybody’s house of worship is an attack on all houses of worship. This is not ok. This is

not approved of by the majority of the community. He might think it's funny, but the rest of us don't, and it's not acceptable.⁵¹

Police Chief William Welch also denounced Matthew's act; he claimed that the police "take this very seriously, whether an isolated incident or a hate crime . . . this just can't be tolerated."⁵² Members of the Lewiston community in support of Matthews and his desecration of the mosque were either nonexistent or ignored by the press.

Matthews's crime was an isolated incident, but it reflected the continued existence of Islamophobia, accompanied by racist and nativist prejudices, within the Lewiston community. Phil Nadeau, assistant city administrator of Lewiston at the time, believed that the act was "a reflection of where we are right now. There's a small group of people that will never accept this type of change in their community, ever." Yet many Somalis recognized that the act did not reflect the predominant sentiments of Lewiston residents, who one Somali believed "don't tolerate hate."⁵³

The Visible Women

Arguably more so than their male counterparts, Somali women were subject to distinct perception and treatment due to their heightened visibility as religious and ethnic outsiders.⁵⁴ As devout Muslims, Somali women wore *hijab* – traditional head coverings – and *jilbab* – traditional shawls. A Somali man was not as easily distinguished; his appearance could suggest that he was one of the few African-American Christians who grew up in Lewiston. Native-born Lewiston residents' response to the women's Muslim garments was occasionally negative, especially in the first years of migration. The prevailing American sentiment that the veiling is archaic and misogynistic at times hindered the integration of Somali women and girls in the community, schools and the workplace. Yet Lewiston's intrigue and embracement of the women in *hijab* seems to have outweighed the negative attention, as much of the community sought to understand and to welcome the religion and appearance of the Muslim women.

Drawing from liberal justifications of gender equality and female empowerment, western media often portrays Muslim women as oppressed and voiceless in a male-dominated, archaic society. Thus when Muslim women wear the *hijab* in the United States, many Americans interpret their decision as resistance to American culture or continued degradation by the men in their family.⁵⁵ The Center for the Prevention

of Hate Violence conducted interviews of roughly eighty Somali women, and virtually all participants revealed they had experienced derogatory language from white Lewiston residents in a public place.⁵⁶ The Somali women reported that Lewistonians shouted “dress like us” as the women walked by. White parents expressed sympathy for what they viewed as poor, oppressed girls in *hijab* who came home after school to help with housework while their brothers played sports.⁵⁷ The *hijab* signified modesty, protection and devotion to God to those who wear it, but difference and oppression to the Western eye.⁵⁸

Lewiston schools’ permission of the *hijab* ignited controversy among parents and administrators. Some Lewistonian parents perceived a double-standard, as *hijabs* were permitted and bandanas were banned. The schools diplomatically addressed the parents’ concerns and explained how dress for religious purposes was an exception to the dress code. In 2004, Lewiston High School revised its handbook to allow for religious headgear as an exception to the no “caps, hats, bandanas, hoods, helmet hats, or other type of headgear” rule.⁵⁹ Occasional complaints from Lewiston parents persisted, but the Somali girls continued to wear their *hijab* with protection from the school administration and the approval of the majority of students and parents.

Interactions between Somali and white girls in the school were arguably more respectful than in public and workplace spheres. While the physical and cultural contrast between a white American girl and a Somali girl is stark, most girls of each background treated each other with respect and sought understanding of their respective cultures. Violence between boys, two Somalis, two white, or Somali and white, in school was much more prevalent than between girls. Lewiston teenagers, Lisa of Franco-American descent, and Aisha, her Somali friend, spoke maturely of their differences. Lisa expressed that she does not want to offend Aisha “so I would not wear something that would make her feel uncomfortable. I have been to Aisha’s house wearing skirts, but not fully dressed like Aisha.” Aisha responded, “it is [Lisa’s] culture and religion. She does not have to dress like me.”⁶⁰

In April 2008, Edward Little High School partnered with the Center for the Prevention of Hate Violence to organize a fashion show for Somali girls in an effort to understand and appreciate their style and tradition. Somali girls stated their reasons for wearing the *hijab* were to combat prejudices and the preconceived notions many Americans had of garment’s significance. Somali students insisted that their parents did not force them to wear the *hijab*. One student revealed she dressed in *hi-*

jab “because I want to. My mom is not forcing me . . . it makes me happy. I can look at myself and say I’m a Muslim girl.”⁶¹ The article also featured a side-column with a list of the various Muslim clothing pieces, their purpose and ways to wear them, so as to educate white readers on the sophistication of Muslim dress and to send a message of acceptance to Somali readers.

The reactions of the school administration, students, and newspapers revealed much of the Lewiston community’s drive to understand rather than to exclude the Somali women and their Muslim attire. Over time, Somali women noticed a decrease in side-glances and unsolicited comments from white Lewistonians. Fatuma Hussein, leader of the United Somali Women of Maine, observed that in the early 2000s “it was hard to wear Muslim clothes as a woman and move in the streets of Lewiston-Auburn.” By 2010, Hussein noted “people are more friendly, people are open about cultures, and acceptance that we really are here to stay . . . it’s very, very different.”⁶²

The Bantu Arrive

When the Bantus of Somalia came to Lewiston around 2005 they added another dimension to the immigrant complexion of the city. The numbers of Bantu were less staggering and shocking than the first-wave of ethnic Somali immigrants; approximately 500 Bantu arrived to Lewiston in about eighteen months. The Bantu were descendants of slaves in Somalia and, as such, they were “ethnically, linguistically, and culturally distinct” from the ethnic Somali already in Lewiston.⁶³ Many Bantu had migrated to Somalia as refugees from further south on the East Coast of Africa. In Somalia, the ethnic Somalis treated the Bantu refugees as second-class citizens and, in many cases, slaves. Most Bantu were illiterate and less accustomed to modern technologies than the ethnic Somalis. Like the ethnic Somalis, the Bantu were caught in the chaotic violence of the Somali civil war, and thereafter they were granted the status of refugees and fled to American cities such as Atlanta, Georgia; Springfield, Massachusetts; and Lewiston, Maine. Many Bantu saw the move to the United States as a chance to be reconsidered as full members of society and to raise their children to be educated, respected, self-sufficient citizens.⁶⁴ As it turned out, the Bantu arguably experienced more prejudice from their former Somali hosts than from members of the native-born Lewiston community.

Despite the Bantus’ distinct foreignness, the Anglo-American Lewiston population appeared to adjust to the Bantu migration more easily

than to the influx of the ethnic Somali a few years prior. Lewiston had already learned how to accommodate to the non-English speaking Africans, and the peak of the conflicts between the natives and refugees were in the past. Lewistonians who were more resistant to the Bantus' arrival included some of the already-settled ethnic Somalis as well as white residents who continued to harbor prejudice towards the black Muslims. Some ethnic Somalis presumed that the subordinate role of the Bantu in Somalia would remain in place in their new home. These tensions did not escalate into violence, and the Bantu, Somali, and white Lewistonians developed a relatively tolerant understanding of each other.

Due to the Bantu's marginalization in Somalia, they were less prepared for the challenges of living and working in Lewiston than were the ethnic Somalis. However, perhaps due to their disenfranchised history, many Bantu became highly motivated to learn the skills to achieve a better life in Maine. One Bantu recalled that, "we Bantu were not allowed to go to school. We were treated like beasts of burden. We were illiterate because of the subjugation we suffered in Somalia, the torture and discrimination. We couldn't even open our eyes there".⁶⁵ Many Lewistonians were aware of the disadvantage of the Bantu and helped them to acclimate to life in the city. Carla Harris, manager of the resident services for Lewiston's public housing, noticed the Bantu were:

behind at first. Their knowledge of indoor plumbing, thermostats—stuff like that—wasn't up to speed. I wasn't sure what was going on between them and the other Somalis. Then I had one of them hang back after a meeting with our translator, and when everybody was gone he said to me, 'we were their slaves.'⁶⁶

In February 2006, soon after the Bantu arrival, the *Lewiston Sun Journal* labeled the Bantu as "fugitive slaves" who "didn't have the electricity or other modern conveniences and couldn't read or write in any language." The story also noted that they were here for the same reason as many Anglo and Somali families: "a new life in Maine: a better economic future, a good education for their children and a chance to live safe and free." Lewiston institutions and the community attended to the Bantus' needs, despite the tight budgets and some residents' fatigue from catering to the first wave of Somalis. The city assisted Bantu with finding employment and affordable housing and hired six new ESL teachers for the 150 Bantu students at a cost of about 2.2 million dollars. Lewiston suffered relatively little strain and turmoil accommodating to the Bantu, perhaps because, as Nadeau observes, "we have systems to respond to

non-English speakers of all types. We've been down this road before, but this time we know what to do."⁶⁷

Many native-Lewiston residents demonstrated their welcome to the Bantu by providing the children and adult refugees with tutoring in English and employment skills. As with the ethnic Somali migration, the Lewiston Adult Education Center and in-school programs were crucial to the Bantus' acculturation and employment. Dozens of community members further showed their support by volunteering at the Somali Bantu summer camp in 2007. Catherine Besteman, a professor at Colby College and researcher of the Somali Bantu in Lewiston, observed, "although incidents of misunderstanding certainly have occurred, relations among native Mainers and new Mainers are generally tolerant."⁶⁸

While the Anglo-Lewiston population appeared to accommodate relatively smoothly to the Bantu, ethnic Somalis experienced greater discomfort with the new arrivals. Many Somalis were accustomed to subordinating the Bantu while in Somalia, and they presumed the Bantus' status would not be elevated upon their arrival to Maine. One Bantu recalled when his friend went to the mosque to pray, a Somali told him "come back with six guys to wash the mosque. For free! They still think we work for them!" Some Somali children teased new Bantu students in school and encouraged white students to follow suit. An ethnic Somali Imam even claimed that the Bantus were not the victims they claimed to be, "they just say that so they can get distinction as refugees."⁶⁹ The difficulty of some Somalis to accept the Bantu as equals continued the historical animosity between the two groups, but the hostility did not escalate into violent or extreme action.

Tension between the Somalis and the Bantu eased with time, and the future looks relatively promising. Carla Harris noticed the two Somali groups with white children play basketball together; she is hopeful that "it'll be o.k...they seem to get along."⁷⁰ Kemper sees the integrated classrooms of white, Bantu, and Somali children as reason to hope they will grow together rather than apart. She predicts, "different individual youngsters will make alliances with themselves who may not have gotten together ten years ago. Now that you have Somali and Bantu who are on the honor roll and basketball team, in ten years there will be less of an issue."⁷¹

Conclusion

When the impoverished black Muslim Somali refugees moved into the struggling former mill city in the "whitest state" in the country, con-

flict seemed virtually inevitable. Some white Mainers saw the Somalis as a violent and anti-American people to whom the government gave special treatment, financial aid, and increasingly scarce jobs. Tensions rose; verbal and physical conflicts occurred in schools and on the streets, white supremacists marched in Lewiston streets, and a local man desecrated a mosque. However, a small minority of resident performed these actions. The majority of Lewiston residents and officials were overtly welcoming and intolerant of racism and xenophobia. For every overt offensive act there was an overwhelming community response in support of the Somali's presence. Mayor Raymond's letter was followed by the Unity Walk, the World Church of the Creator rally was countered by the Many and One Coalition with over ten times as many attendees, and the pig's head stunt was vocally condemned by the police, community members, and religious leaders of various faiths. Obvious or publicized hateful actions were few and far between. The majority of the white Lewiston population sent the message that the Somali were welcome and that the city would not tolerate discrimination and hate crimes.

The future is uncertain for the Somali population in Lewiston, but there is reason to be optimistic that tensions will continue to ease and acceptance will become more widespread. Lewistonians have praised Somali storeowners for reviving downtown Lisbon Street and bringing diversity and awareness of differences into the previously homogenous community.⁷² Confrontations in schools and streets have diminished significantly in the past few years. As the refugees learn English, become trusted employees, active community members, and friends, one can hope that tensions will diffuse. Racism and xenophobia are not to be discounted as they continue to plague the city and country as a whole, yet reported incidences appear to be decreasing rather than increasing with time. Kemper, who has witnessed the evolution of the Somali assimilation and community reception, sees Lewiston as "a real model for how challenging this adventure has been and truly how well we've done it. Warts and all, warts and all."⁷³ Because of the increasingly tolerant environment, many Somali have expressed that they have no intention of leaving.

NOTES

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