

Today's 'Us vs. Them' a twist on tourist bashing

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There's us, there's them, and then there's me.

I have a different vantage point of the massive growth and development in the Poconos, the population and cultural changes since the late 1960s. Though I wasn't part of the Pocono Record reporting team working on this week's "Us vs. Them" series, I probably come the closest among staff reporters to being a "native."

I wasn't born here but spent many of my formative years in Monroe County. I attended Stroudsburg junior high and high school, graduating in 1974.

I was there when Monroe's population was about one-quarter of what it is today. I left for college in 1976 and didn't return to live in the Poconos until 2000, when the region was in the midst of the latest boom in the historic boom-and-bust cycle of area development.

Though much has changed, I'm struck by the common parallels between the so-called cultural tensions of today and yesterday.

Today you hear and see resentments between long-timers and newly arrived residents from New York and New Jersey play out in traffic. If someone with out-of-state plates is slow to recognize a green arrow or gets in the wrong lane, the rest of us are quick to let him know it with blaring car horns and angry gestures. The same thing happened decades ago — but then we derisively called them "tourists" and today we call them "New Yorkers" or "newbies".

One source quoted in the series contends the Poconos remained "WASPy" — compared to other parts of rural Pennsylvania — because the Poconos didn't attract the immigrants that went to the coal and steel regions of the state. What I saw when I moved here in 1969 was hardly a 100-percent white Anglo-Saxon Protestant landscape.

The first thing I noticed was the large Roman Catholic community. There were large parishes in Stroudsburg and East Stroudsburg and smaller Catholic churches throughout the county. Notre Dame of East Stroudsburg School was alive and well then, too.

There was a significant Jewish population here. And though the black population has grown tremendously in recent decades, there were far more African-Americans in the burgs than in other rural Pennsylvania areas. At least that was and is my personal perception.

In playing school sports I was struck by how totally "white" opposing teams — and the crowds — were in the Slate Belt and parts of the Lehigh Valley, compared to Stroudsburg and East Stroudsburg. I remember at least one black-owned business on Stroudsburg's Main Street. A small colonial style home in Stroudsburg's Hill District served in the 1800s as a school for black migrant farm workers.

Interracial dating was common here in the early '70s and — at least from my vantage point — socially

accepted by the school population long before other parts of the country came to accept it. It wasn't exactly embraced by all adults.

A black high school friend — someone who traces his Poconos ancestry to the 1700s — told me of the physical education teacher who called his white girlfriend's parents to warn them that she was dating a black guy. I guess the white parents told the teacher to mind his own business, because I sometimes visited them at her parents' house where he seemed welcomed by all. Eventually they married and moved to the West Coast.

There was plenty of migration into the area in the 1970s, albeit on a smaller overall population scale. Residents moved in from New York, New Jersey, and like myself, from parts of the Midwest. There were the usual cliques, students who attended the same elementary schools and shared common experiences forming special bonds. But I never felt any tension, any insinuation that I and others were resented in any way because we came from elsewhere. We shared the same classroom stories, same club memberships, and attended the same parties. One student who moved into the district from New York loved to tell jokes and funny stories, and rapidly acquired a popular following.

After leaving the Poconos in 1976, I returned a few times each year to visit family. I saw and heard about the endless cycles of a local economy so dependent on home construction. It seems the Poconos has always been in a boom or bust when it comes to construction, with little between. In a region where tourism was the only other job game in town, construction offered relatively high wages. Tomorrow, I'll discuss some of the changes that the last housing booms have brought both to Pocono residents and newcomers, and how that is shaping attitudes here.

David Pierce has been a reporter for the Pocono Record since 2000. In 2004 he received the Richard E. Dew Award for Journalistic Service for his coverage of real estate fraud in the Poconos.