



THE LITHUANIANS OF PENNSYLVANIA'S LOWER ANTHRACITE REGION: A STUDY IN THE PERSISTENCE OF ETHNIC IDENTIFICATION

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This paper will attempt to partially answer the question of whether Lithuanian ethnic identification persists into contemporary times. It will focus on people of Lithuanian heritage living in a sector of eastern Pennsylvania's lower anthracite region (Schuylkill County.) These people make a good case study because they are relatively numerous (over 12,000 in 1960) and accurate records are kept on them by local parish priests.¹ Therefore, the tendencies of these Lithuanians to remain strongly tied to their ethnic heritage can be clearly tested.

Schuylkill County has been part of the Roman Catholic Church's Allentown Diocese since 1962.² The Roman Catholic Churches in Schuylkill County are of two types — ethnic and territorial. The ethnic churches are Lithuanian, Polish, Slovakian, Italian and German. Territorial or "English speaking" parishes are not based on ethnicity but serve geographic boundaries.³ A Catholic of Lithuanian heritage can be a member of either his closest ethnic (Lithuanian) church or his territorial church. The pastor of a "Polish" parish could not officially admit a Lithuanian ethnic into membership in his church. Conversely, a Lithuanian pastor can admit only Lithuanians. Hence, the Lithuanian parish records reflect clearly "Lithuanian" statistics.⁴

The conclusions made in this paper are based largely on marriage and family data secured from the spiritual reports required yearly of all pastors. These spiritual reports are in fact very detailed census type reports compiled by priests as they make their annual visitations. The Allentown Diocese standardized its reporting methods in 1964. Hence, this study focuses on the years between 1964 and 1980.

Simply because all ethnic Catholics in Schuylkill County can join one of two churches, the stability of membership in parishes is a measure of the persistence of various ethnic identifications. Table I clearly indicates that the Lithuanian parishes have flourished in Schuylkill County since 1964.

TABLE I: Average Church Membership (Families)

Nationality	1964-70	1971-79	Percent Change	Number of Parishes
Lithuanian	3313	3664	10.6	10
German	1033	1034	.1	5
English-speaking	6598	6740	2.2	5
Italian	1127	1059	-6.0	9
Slovakian	997	934	-6.0	5
Polish	2447	2681	9.6	8

Lithuanian families showed no signs of abandoning their ethnic parishes in the fifteen years under study. In fact, the 10.6 percent gain in family membership in Lithuanian parishes was made more remarkable by the fact that Schuylkill County has been an area of gradually declining population since the 1930's⁵. This decline was most pronounced in the coal towns of the region. All ten of the county's Lithuanian parishes are located in boroughs oriented to the coal trade. Simply put, membership in Lithuanian parishes has thrived despite conditions not at all conducive to growth.

Notably, Table I reveals that the area's Polish parishes reflected a growth in family membership (9.6 percent) second only to the Lithuanian parishes. East European ethnic Churches were notably more successful in terms of growth than Italian, German, Slovakian or English speaking parishes.

Lithuanian parishes could show a 10.6 percent growth in family memberships because of several factors. First, statistics reveal that few families from Lithuanian parishes opted to transfer to territorial churches — a right granted to all Catholics. Secondly, an analysis of marriage materials contained in the spiritual reports and other sources indicate that when a member of a Lithuanian parish marries a Catholic of another ethnic persuasion, the couple most often would decide to become members of the Lithuanian parish. Hence, another family enters a Lithuanian ethnic church. For example, a Lithuanian and Italian marry and decide to enter the Lithuanian ethnic parish rather than the Italian ethnic parish or the English-speaking parish. In a county where Catholics tend strongly to marry fellow Catholics, this is of critical importance to the growth of a parish. Lastly (and of least importance), Lithuanian Churches received a slight influx of new parishioners or Catholics moving into the county from outside the Schuylkill County area. This source of parishioners is minimal because of the simple fact that the county has been in a population decline for over half a century.

The data in the spiritual reports between 1964 and 1979 also enabled a study of the degree to which marriage choices were structured by ethnicity. Are Lithuanians loyal to their heritage when marrying? The evidence clearly proves the Lithuanians in Schuylkill County are very reluctant to deviate from their Catholic faith and church when selecting a marriage partner. This becomes clear when an analysis is made of "mixed marriages" and "invalid marriages" among people from Lithuanian parishes.

A "mixed marriage" is defined by the Catholic Church as one in which one partner is non-Catholic. However, the Catholic partner received permission from his or her church to undertake the marriage. In essence, while the non-Catholic partner does not convert, the marriage is "sanctified" or recognized by the Catholic parish. The Catholic partner remains a member in his or her parish. An "invalid marriage" is one in which a Catholic marries a non-Catholic

without church approval. The marriage is not recognized. The Catholic in an invalid marriage can be kept in the parish but should technically be refused certain sacraments.

A person loyal to his ethnic church would obviously find difficulty in a mixed marriage or invalid marriage. Table II indicates the Lithuanians are indeed very uncomfortable with even mixed marriages.

TABLE II: Percent Mixed Families 1964-1979 by Parish Nationality

Nationality	Mixed Families		
	1964-70	1971-79	1964-1979
Lithuanian	6.5	6.6	6.4
German	19.2	18.5	18.8
English-speaking	15.3	16.9	16.2
Italian	7.9	8.3	8.1
Slovak	7.0	9.3	8.3
Polish	3.9	4.8	4.1

Only 6.4 percent of the Lithuanian families were defined as mixed. This was a lower rate than all other groups under study except the Polish ethnics (4.1 percent). The tendency of German Catholics to marry non-Catholics was almost triple the Lithuanian rate. Certainly, a strong sense of Lithuanian heritage is not the only factor which would deter a person from entering into a mixed marriage but the factor cannot be totally discounted.

It must also be noted that Lithuanians of Schuylkill County live in an area that is almost 50 percent non-Catholic; hence, the opportunity to enter a mixed marriage is very great. Table III depicts the religious composition of the County's major non-Catholic groups:

TABLE III: Major Non-Catholic Religious Groups of Schuylkill County⁶

Number of Churches	Group	% of County's Population	% of Total Adherents
49	Lutheran	15.0	18.3
51	UCC	9.9	12.0
49	United Methodist	5.4	6.6
16	Evangelical	2.2	2.3
4	Episcopal	0.8	0.9
6	United Presbyterian	0.8	0.9

Lithuanians also exhibited great hesitancy in entering invalid marriages. Table IV describes the percentages of invalid marriages among the county's Catholics.

TABLE IV: Percent Invalid Marriages by Families, 1964-1979

Nationality	1964-1970	1971-1979	1964-1979
Lithuanian	2.2	2.1	2.1
German	3.0	3.2	3.1
English-speaking	2.3	2.1	2.2
Italians	2.6	2.3	2.4
Slovakian 1.4 1.9 1.7	1.4	1.9	1.7
Polish	1.3	1.4	1.3

These figures reveal that most Catholics of the Schuylkill County area avoided marrying completely outside their respective churches. In fact, the Slovakian and Polish parishes had slightly lower rates of invalid marriages than the Lithuanian churches. The continued strength of religious identification in the area is clear. However, marriage figures succinctly reveal that Catholics of Lithuanian lineage are very reluctant to take steps which in any manner would lessen their ties to the Church of their forefathers. To a certain extent, Lithuanian tendencies to marry within the Church could be attributed to theories such as "homogamy" or "assertive mating" which basically state that people tend to select marriage partners who are in many ways similar. This paper in no way refutes these ideas; however, it does assert that a sense of Lithuanian heritage can also be a strong factor in leading to the choice of a marital partner.⁷ There are many more obvious facts which help validate the continued persistence of Lithuanian identification in the lower anthracite area. For example, a Lithuanian Day has been celebrated on a continual annual basis in Schuylkill County since 1914.⁸ This is the longest continuing annual ethnic festival in Pennsylvania. The county's Knights of Lithuania Council 144 boasts of close to 300 members and is among the most active councils in its district. A socially oriented Lithuanian Women's Club actively promotes formal dances and other events to commemorate various Lithuanian holidays including Lithuanian Independence Day. A Lithuanian museum-library facility has been established and developed in the county within the last five years.

Conclusions

1. Lithuanians of the lower anthracite region continue to identify strongly with their heritage. This is demonstrated in the fact that Lithuanian festivals and organizations flourish into contemporary times.
2. Lithuanians continue to identify with ethnic Lithuanian parishes. Indeed, in a region of continued strong ethnic churches, the Lithuanian churches have shown the strongest growth rate.⁹ Annual pastoral reports show that few Lithuanians elect to join territorial churches thereby ending ties with Lithuanian parishes.
3. People of Lithuanian Churches have low rates of mixed marriages. Only the Polish churches showed a slightly lower rate since 1964.
4. Lithuanian ethnics almost totally avoided invalid marriages which would have prevented them from fully participating in the sacraments of their church.
5. Statistical evidence points to the fact that when a parishioner of a Lithuanian ethnic church marries a fellow Catholic of different ethnic persuasion, the "new" family opts to join the Lithuanian parish. This has been the single biggest factor in producing a 10 percent growth rate in the member of families within Lithuanian parishes between 1964 and 1980.

The author of this paper does not necessarily claim that these theories apply to Lithuanian-Americans throughout the United States. Admittedly, the existence of ethnic churches alone would help to cause a continuance of Lithuanian identification. It is possible, for example, that in areas where all Roman Catholic Churches have become territorial, "Lithuanianism" might diminish to some degree. Future studies will hopefully be better able to test these ideas.

However, it appears that in Pennsylvania's lower anthracite region, Lithuanians persist in both the public sector and private religious areas to strongly assert their ethnic identities.¹⁰

1 Virtually all Schuylkill County's Lithuanians are Roman Catholics. Therefore, parish records give a very clear picture of the religious tendencies of these people.
 2 The Allentown Diocese was created out of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.
 3. Technically, a Catholic of any ethnic background can join his or her designated territorial church. In actual fact, most territorial churches in the county are comprised of people of Irish ancestry. The "Spiritual Reports" indicated the following about the ethnic churches of Schuylkill County between 1964 and 1980:
 (1) There were 10 Lithuanian churches serving about 12,000 people or 7.1 percent of the county's population.
 (2) 8 Polish churches served about 9,800 people or 5.6 percent of the county's population.
 (3) 5 Slovakian churches served about 4,500 people or 2.5 percent of the county's population.
 (4) 5 German Catholic churches served 4,300 people or 2.4 percent of the county's population.
 (5) 5 Italian churches served 3,900 people or 2.2 percent of the county's population.
 4 The Allentown Diocese defines a "Lithuanian" ethnic as a person who was from a family which had at least one Lithuanian parent. The same rule applies to the other ethnic churches of the region. For example a person with at least one Lithuanian parent living in the town of Minersville could be a member of the town's Lithuanian parish (St. Francis of Assisi) or the town's territorial parish (St. Vincent's).
 5 For a detailed view of Schuylkill County's economic, political and demographic trends since World War II see: William Gudelunas and Stephen R. Couch, "Would a Polish or Protestant Kennedy Have Won? A Local Test of Ethnicity and Religion in the Presidential Election of 1960," *Ethnic Groups*, 3:1-21; William A. Gudelunas, "The Ethno-Religious Factor Reaches Fruition: The Politics of Hard Coal, 1945-1972," in David Salay (ed.) *Hard Coal, Hard Times* (Scranton, 1984), 169-188.
 6 The figures are taken from Douglas Johnson, Paul Picard, and Bernard Quinn, *Churches and Church Membership in the United States* (Washington, D.C., 1974). It should be noted that a very small Jewish synagogue was established in the county. A small congregation of Polish nationals was also in existence. Overall, this study concluded that 56.6 percent of the county was Catholic.
 7 J.H.S. Bossard, "Residential Propinquity as a Factor in Marriage Selection," *American Journal of Sociology*, 38:219-224; H.F. Christensen, *Marriage Analysis* (New York, 1958); G.K. Zipf, *Human Behavior and the Principle of Least Effort* (New York, 1949).
 8 The Lithuanian Day event was held from 1914 to 1984 on a continual basis in Lakewood Park in northern Schuylkill County. This is very near Shenandoah, Mahanoy City, St. Clair, Minersville and other boroughs which had sizable Lithuanian parishes. The closing of the main areas of the park forced the removal of the festival in 1985 to a park just north of the Schuylkill County border.
 9 Ten Lithuanian churches were established in Schuylkill County between 1888 and 1914. No Lithuanian parish has ever been forced to merge with a territorial church because of lack of parishioners. Currently, these figures describe the Lithuanian parishes:

Parish	Location	Average number of families 1964-1980	Founded
St. John's	Coaldale	69	1914
Annunciation	Frackville	263	1907
St. Vincent's	Girardville	281	1907
St. Joseph's	Mahanoy City	535	1888
St. Louis	Maizeville	145	1907
St. Francis	Minersville	519	1985
Sacred Heart	New Philadelphia	306	1985
St. Casimir	St. Clair	186	1912
St. George's	Shenandoah	993	1981
SS. Peter and Paul	Tamaqua	315	1911

10 Recent studies have noted the solidarity of the "Lithuanian vote" in the lower anthracite region. For a detailed analysis of recent (post WWII) voting trends in Lithuanian precincts see: Gudelunas and Couch, op. cit., Gudelunas, "The Ethno-Religious Factor Reaches Fruition;" a general history of Lithuanian voting in the lower anthracite area is discussed in Richard Kolbe, "Culture, Political Parties and Voting Behavior: Schuylkill County," *Polity*, 8:241-268. A discussion of the origins of ethnic voting in the lower anthracite region can be found in William Gudelunas, "Nativism and the Decline of Schuylkill County Whiggery: Anti-Slavery or Anti-Catholicism," *Pennsylvania History*, 45:225-236 or William Gudelunas and William Shade, *Before the Molly Maguires: The Emergence of the Ethno-religious Factor in the Politics of the Lower Anthracite Region* (New York, 1976).