After the depression of the 1890s, immigration jumped from a low of 3.5 million in that decade to a high of 9 million in the first decade of the new century. Immigrants from Northern and Western Europe continued coming as they had for three centuries, but in decreasing numbers. After the 1880s, immigrants increasingly came from Eastern and Southern European countries, as well as Canada and Latin America. By 1910, Eastern and Southern Europeans made up 70 percent of the immigrants entering the country. After 1914, immigration dropped off because of the war, and later because of immigration restrictions imposed in the 1920s.

The reasons these new immigrants made the journey to America differed little from those of their predecessors. Escaping religious, racial, and political persecution, or seeking relief from a lack of economic opportunity or famine still pushed many immigrants out of their homelands. Many were pulled here by contract labor agreements offered by recruiting agents, known as padrones to Italian and Greek laborers. Hungarians, Poles, Slovaks, Bohemians, and Italians flocked to the coal mines or steel mills, Greeks preferred the textile mills, Russian and Polish Jews worked the needle trades or pushcart markets of New York. Railroad companies advertised the availability of free or cheap farmland overseas in pamphlets distributed in many languages, bringing a handful of agricultural workers to western farmlands. But the vast majority of immigrants crowded into the growing cities, searching for their chance to make a better life for themselves.

Immigrants entering the United States who could not afford first or second-class passage came through the processing center at Ellis Island, New York. Built in 1892, the center handled some 12 million European immigrants, herding thousands of them a day through the barn-like structure during the peak years for screening. Government inspectors asked a list of twenty-nine probing questions, such as: Have you money, relatives or a job in the United States? Are you a polygamist? An anarchist? Next, the doctors and nurses poked and prodded them, looking for signs of disease or debilitating handicaps. Usually immigrants were only detained 3 or 4 hours, and then free to leave. If they did not receive stamps of approval, and many did not because they were deemed criminals, strikebreakers, anarchists or carriers of disease,
they were sent back to their place of origin at the expense of the shipping line.

For the newcomers arriving without family, some solace could be found in the ethnic neighborhoods populated by their fellow countrymen. Here they could converse in their native tongue, practice their religion, and take part in cultural celebrations that helped ease the loneliness. Often, though, life for all was not easy. Most industries offered hazardous conditions and very low wages—lowered further after the padrone took out his share. Urban housing was overcrowded and unsanitary. Many found it very difficult to accept. An old Italian saying summed up the disillusionment felt by many: "I came to America because I heard the streets were paved with gold. When I got here, found out three things: First, the streets weren't paved with gold; second, they weren't paved at all; and third, I was expected to pave them." In spite of the difficulties, few gave up and returned home.

**References:**