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OPINION

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Who makes a good citizen?

Viewpoint

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In his first weeks as president, Donald Trump has already begun enacting some of his campaign promises, including a ban on immigrants from predominantly Muslim countries. Discrimination based on either ethnicity or religion is, of course, un-American, yet both have a long history in the U.S. Nativism has waxed and waned since at least the 1830s, as earlier immigrants (which we all are except for Native Americans) have tried to shut the door on later arrivals. I learned this as an undergraduate history major from reading John Higham's classic work "Strangers in the Land." But since our new president does not read books, I'd like to offer a personal story as an example.

My parents moved to Connecticut in the late 1960s, where our family met Billy Pagani. He was the owner of the West Side Barber Shop, down the street from the church where my father was the minister. For as long as I can remember, my dad got his hair cut there, and when I was small, so did I. Pagani was old school and, as I remember it, knew roughly one style — a buzz cut — which I soon outgrew.

My dad continued to go there, though, and learned a lot about our town from his barber, since Pagani went

to every town council meeting he could. A concerned and often skeptical citizen, he questioned many of the town's actions and, you might say, kept the board of directors honest. He certainly made them aware they were being thoroughly scrutinized. In a 1992 article in the Hartford Courant, he was quoted as saying, "If you always give them what they want, they'll give the town away."

Though he lived most of his life in Connecticut, Balilla Pagani was born in Italy about 1907. By then, anti-Italian sentiment in the U.S. was quite strong. In the late 19th century, Italians bore the brunt of disdain formerly reserved for the Irish, another group unfairly maligned by nativists. According to Higham, the historian and philosopher John Fiske once wrote of Italians, "The lowest Irish are far above the level of these creatures." Discrimination and attacks against Italians came to a head in the 1890s. Among other incidents, 11 Italians were murdered by a lynch mob in New Orleans in 1891. As a result, diplomatic relations between Italy and the U.S. were broken off and talk of war ensued.

Stereotyped as violent people — somehow all connected to the Mafia — Italians might very well have been banned from the U.S. altogether. Beginning in the 1880s, laws were passed restricting immigration based on ethnicity, such

as the infamous Chinese Exclusion Act. Such efforts continued in the 20th century, with an eye toward limiting immigrants from southern European countries like Italy through the use of quotas. That became reality when the first federal law restricting European immigration was passed in 1921. Pagani came to this country that very year.

Had he been prevented from doing so, our community would have been the poorer for it. Not only was he a small business owner for 70 years, but during the Great Depression, he gave free haircuts one day a month and sometimes bought food for customers who could not afford it. He was such a strong supporter of youth baseball teams that the town named a baseball diamond in his honor. He was a member of various organizations and a local Catholic church. And because of his unwavering attendance at town meetings, a former mayor called Pagani a "town crier" who helped bring issues to the board's attention.

In short, my dad's barber was a model citizen, someone who could give President Trump a lesson about what it means to be American. And were he still around today, Billy Pagani could give Trump another valuable service: a good haircut.

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Brian Kuhl is a writer who lives in Newburyport.