

## “Our Immigrant Stories: South Asians in Illinois, 1945-1965”

### **Executive Summary**

This oral history project is focused on a group of South Asians who lived in Illinois before the major wave of Asian immigration began in 1965. They are a little known community of pioneers who have made significant contributions to the building of America but whose story has never been told. They are a highly educated articulate group, eager to tell their stories, as seen in the interviews conducted for this project.

Thirty-three interviews were conducted for this project under the supervision of qualified researchers. Many of the interviews were conducted by relatives of the interviewees themselves, usually members of the younger generation. This report presents an analysis of those interviews.

A methodology section describes how the project was conducted, using community events to seek input from community members and elicit the involvement of volunteers, donors, and students from area universities.

The analysis is divided into the following sections:

- *General Profile of Immigrant Interviewees* describes the demographics of this group
- *Origins* traces the diverse backgrounds of the immigrants before they came to the U.S.
- *Coming to Illinois* identifies what drew the immigrants to Illinois, why they came, and why they decided to stay
- *The Journey* describes their arduous travel by boat in the days before commercial jets
- *The Early Days* reveals what it was like to be away from home, what measures the immigrants took to deal with their loneliness, and who were the people who helped them overcome their difficulties
- *Looking for a Place to Stay* places the Indians in turbulent times, squarely in the middle of the civil rights era, when they encountered issues of racism and prejudice, yet found ways to cope with them
- *Proud of their Achievements* showcases the contributions they made to their new homeland
- *Conclusion* is an attempt to summarize the significance of their immigrant experience.

### **Conclusion**

What emerges from these oral histories is the portrait of a group of adventurous young men and women who set forth on an unknown journey, and made good in a strange land. They experienced the isolation and alienation that every immigrant goes through, but in even greater measure because they were so few in numbers. They created their own support systems but also merged into the society in which they lived and worked. They developed strategies to cope with discrimination, and used available opportunities to find their own best occupations. By choosing to stay on in a country to which they had come

seeking only higher education, they carved their own path to success and permanence in America. Yet they stayed in touch their roots, always conscious of their role as a pioneering group, as ambassadors for their homeland.

These stories needed to be told, and told now. Without a historical record of this vanguard group, South Asians would be missing a vital link to their past, a link that bridges the gap between the gradual trickle of Indians who came soon after WWII and the surge of immigrants after 1965.