

By WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

I can't understand all the fuss about removing Gay and Lesbian History Month from Philadelphia's public-school calendar.

My own group, Lithuanian-Americans, have never been celebrated in the schools, or in the

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larger society, for that matter. I've always felt that my people have been among the most unappreciated and unrecognized ethnic groups in this country. And they have contributed just as much as anyone to its economic prosperity and rich cultural fabric.

Like most other immigrant groups, Lithuanians came to this country to enjoy the civil, political and economic liberties guaranteed by the Constitution. They were persecuted by both the Rus-

sians and the Poles during the November Revolution of 1830 and the Russo-Polish War of 1831.

Lithuanian immigration began in earnest in 1850 when a great famine sent peasants and laborers streaming to the United States. A second insurrection against Russia in 1863 was followed by bitter retaliation. With worsening economic conditions, the czarist political oppression led to another mass wave of Lithuanians to the United States in the late 19th century.

By 1910, 285,000 Lithuanians had immigrated to this country. In New England, they became farmers. Those who settled in northeast Pennsylvania worked in the coal mines for slave wages.

Others who planted roots in

West Virginia, Ohio and Illinois were recruited to build the railroads that connected the east coast to the west. Lithuanians who settled in Michigan, Wisconsin, Indiana and Minnesota labored in foundries, mills, shoe factories and slaughterhouses.

Lithuanian-Americans were among the workers who formed the backbone of labor in this country during the industrial era. Upton Sinclair's "The Jungle," published in 1906, testifies to the sacrifices made by one Lithuanian-American family in their desperate struggle to survive in Chicago's stockyards.

From 1910 to 1953, 290,000 more Lithuanians came here, primarily because of Russia's ef-

forts at re-annexation.

Among these immigrants and their descendants are astrophysicist Sallie Baliunas; clothing designers Lane Bryant and Beth Levine; Bruce Bielaski, director of the FBI from 1912 to 1919; pro football players Johnny Unitas, Dick Butkus and Joe Jurevicius.

PLUS GOLFER Johnny Goodman; heavyweight boxing champ Jack Sharkey; tennis pro Vitas Gerulaitis; actors Nick Adams, Charles Bronson, Genie Francis and John C. Reilly; underground filmmaker Jonas Mekas; *Playboy* model Lisa Boyle.

These remarkably talented Lithuanian-Americans made significant contributions to our na-

tion's cultural heritage. Why shouldn't they be celebrated?

Today, it seems as if every ethnic and racial group in this country is remembered with a special day or month, except for the 1.7 million Lithuanian-Americans.

African-Americans have Black History Month, Italians have Columbus Day, the Irish, St. Patrick's Day. Even Polish-Americans have a special day to honor Revolutionary War heroes Casimir Pulaski and Thaddeus Kosciuszko. And Kosciuszko wasn't even Polish. He was Lithuanian.

If gays and lesbians insist on history month in the schools, then my people deserve a Lithuanian-American History Day.

It's not that much to ask. In fact, it's about 29 days less of recognition than we deserve. ★

William C. Kashatus is proud to be a Lithuanian-American.

What, no Lithuanian Day?