Description: In this class, we will examine the challenges and joys that people confront in a society that is ethnically, religiously, politically, economically, sexually, and linguistically diverse. We will focus on several events in upstate New York in the last 250 years, specifically Binghamton and nearby towns. I have selected these events because they are legendary in this region – some of them are surprising, others are funny, and some are tragic. But we can use all of them to think about the forces that have shaped the United States (capitalism, freedom of expression, inequality, patriotism, racism, and innovation) and how its people have dealt with the realities of diversity.

Goals:

1) Mutual understanding: We should be ready for some language/cultural challenges in this class. I want you to understand what I’m teaching and (more important) I want to understand your questions and knowledge. Throughout each class, I will ask if you have questions about my lecture or ideas for discussions. We will always have time for this.

2) Critical Analysis of Local History: We cannot possibly learn everything about the past of this (or any) country. But by examining the local contexts where people lived their lives, we might get a better understanding about their beliefs, fears, desires, and the decisions they made. When we do this, we have to remember that: these people were not always in control of their own lives, their actions need to be understood in terms of the time and place, and there’s always the possibility that we might be totally wrong. So we’ll be careful and compassionate while we look at their lives.

3) A ‘Character Analysis’ of the United States: The United States is incredibly diverse, but maybe we say some general things about its people, their habits, and the historical forces that contributed to their ways of thinking and behaving. As we move through these weeks, I will be suggesting some possible patterns of behavior and belief that I see in the events we discuss. For example, I will point out conflicts between science and faith or problems in the media’s balance between information and spectacle. Please help build this list… it might be very useful when you have to deal with Americans in the future!

Readings: In the past, the biggest challenge for students in this program has been academic readings and research in English. Instead of professional articles, I am going to give you short documents (3-4 pages) with general details and discussion questions for each class topic. We will use these for class discussions, so I would like you to read and consider each one carefully. I will be sure to give you plenty of time to read each handout.
Inside and Outside Class: The events and topics in this class have changed the lives of many people, and some of them have tried to express this. They have made movies, written novels, built monuments, composed songs, and made websites so that we can see these events the ways that they see them. Inside class, I will include as many different perspectives as I can – we will examine photos and advertisements, listen to music, watch short films, read poems, and hear recorded speeches. I will also direct you to other resources, either online or in the Binghamton University Library. Finally, many of the places we talk about in this class are quite close to us (easily reachable via bus or by foot). I encourage you to explore… but only if you tell me about what you find!

Schedule and Topics:

Tuesday 29 July: The New York State Inebriate Asylum (1864-1879)  
(Discussion topics: Religion/science, medicine, addiction, media spectacles)

Wednesday 30 July: The Oneida Community (1854-1881)  
(Discussion topics: Utopianism, gender politics, sexuality, eugenics, religion/science, communalism in the US, communism/capitalism)

Thursday 31 July: The Cardiff Giant (1869-1870)  
(Discussion topics: Media spectacle, capitalism, religion/science)

Tuesday 5 August: The Ku Klux Klan in Binghamton (1923-1928)  
(Discussion topics: Racism and anti-racism, nationalism, immigration and immigrants, media spectacle)

Wednesday 6 August The Gillette-Brown Murder (1906-1908)  
(Discussion topics: The American Dream, social mobility, gender and labor)

Thursday 7 August: The Binghamton Clothing Company Fire (1913)  
(Discussion Topics: Labor policies, gender, public health, unions, striking)

Tuesday 12 August: Margaret Sanger and Planned Parenthood (1916-1942)  
(Discussion topics: gender, religion/science, public health)

Wednesday 13 August: Rod Serling and the Twilight Zone (1959-1964)  
(Discussion topics: Cold War paranoia, media spectacle, the American Dream)

Thursday 15 August: Student Presentations and Tearful Goodbyes!!