

Italians in the Santa Clara Valley

An Essay

Presented to
the California Pioneers
of Santa Clara County

by

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PREFACE

Many Italians immigrated to Santa Clara County in hopes of making a better life. They not only accomplished their dreams, they became successful. Their stories of the old country added color to the Santa Clara County, and their lives and accomplishments impacted the valley. Italian parts of town such as "Goose Town" added spice to the flavor of the county. Their many achievements within the County contribute greatly to the allure of Santa Clara County today.

IMMIGRATION: THE BEGINNING

The Italian Americans of Santa Clara county had the most colorful backgrounds of all California's immigrants. Their lives and accomplishments added to the vibrance of life in the Santa Clara County. Every Italian that immigrated to the Santa Clara Valley used his or her talents to add to the development of what is now one of the biggest culturally diverse valleys in the United States.

Many Italians tired of the hard work, and came to San Jose in search of more enjoyable work in orchards. This was paradise compared to the difficult factory work. Italians spent their days outside. This was especially enjoyable since the climate in Santa Clara is near to the climate in Italy.

Before the 1860's, Italian immigration to the United States was limited to two main groups of people: the affluent and the adventurous. Many early Italians came to California because of a sense of adventure or wanderlust. But, as one Italian stated, "The cost of getting to California in those days required more than wanderlust. It necessitated considerable money."¹ The most wealthy Italians in the prosperous Northern provinces of Italy were some of the few who could afford the expense of moving to the United States. However, as more Italians heard about life in California, immigration to the valley increased.

Other groups of Italians found their way to the promise of the Santa Clara Valley. Diseases such as cholera, malaria, and typhoid drove Italians out of Italy, and many turned towards California. Unhappy lives and peasant riots were other causes of immigration to California. Italians could make a better life for themselves working as cheap labor in mines, steel mills, and

railroads in the Santa Clara Valley. Poor families from Italy's southern provinces saved about forty dollars to send their eldest son. He would find work and return with money to bring his family to the promised land. Some young Italian men went back to Italy, found wives, and moved back to the valley. Fishermen on Italy's coast avoided travel expenses by taking their boats to the United States. In 1880, the Mafia brought a number of Sicilian Italians. However, they were mostly law-abiding citizens.

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An influx of Italian immigrants came in 1890, and another in 1910.

In all Five million Italians came to the united States.
Ten percent of those immigrants came through the Santa Clara Valley. (After this influx) thirty percent of Santa Clara's population was Italian.²

GOOSE TOWN

Many of these Italian immigrants who had found their way to San Jose lived in immigrant communities. However, Italians dominated two of these immigrant communities. They were known as Riverside and Goosetown, the more famous of which was Goose Town.

Goose Town was bordered by present-day San Carlos Street, First Street, the Guadalupe River, and the old Alma Street Orchards. It was called "Goose Town" because the Italian families had many geese. It was home of the third Italian-speaking church in San Jose, Sacred Heart. Many of the businesses there were owned and operated by Italians.

Most of its Italian residents were Italian peasants who had come in hopes of finding a better life. Residents of Goose Town have memories of smelling baked bread, drinking wine, and eating dinners in the basements of friends' homes. Their children mostly attended Gardner Elementary School. Many attended high school at San Jose High. A number of them continued their education by going to college.

As Italian families came to the Santa Clara Valley, their lives changed, but many kept their Italian values. As a group, "Italians had more of a tendency to intermarry than all other immigrants but the Chinese."³ Most Italians had strong personal ties with their homeland. They maintained strong family ties. Many Italians looked at close friends as members of their family. The families of these Italian settlers began to mature, bringing a second generation of Italian-Americans.

The second generation differed in many ways from the first generation. The first generation was made up of men and women who were craftsmen like stone cutters, barbers, bakers, woodworkers, and masons. They were also

cattle breeders, orchard workers, and viticulturists. The second generation, with strong, educated backgrounds began to have more specialized jobs than their predecessors. They became orchard owners and cannery workers as well as entrepreneurs. They went into the fields of real-estate and banking.

EFFECTS OF WORLD WAR II

The lives of Italian Americans in the Santa Clara valley were affected in many ways during the time World War II took place. Before the war, the Italians lived the life of Italian peasants in the villages from which they came. They enjoyed winemaking, home-made tomato sauce, and home-made bread. Their recreational time was spent playing bocce, (Bocce is an Italian game that is played on the grass with hard, heavy balls. The object is to hit or come closest to hitting a small ball with the player's larger ball.) or visiting Italian neighbors. After the war, Italians could afford to buy their bread and wine. They could also buy chickens and rabbits which they had needed to raise before the war. Also after the war, many Italians had an education and had become professionals. They moved to larger cities and the old Italian neighborhoods dissolved.

THE BANK OF ITALY

Amadeo Giannini, one of San Jose's more famous bankers, was born in San Jose in 1870. He opened a bank in San Francisco he called "The Bank of Italy" or "Banca d'Italia." Over half of the bank's shares were bought by Italian fishermen, grocers, produce handlers, bakers, and shoemakers in North Beach. They were all small investors. The workers at the bank were all Italian, as well as many of the early depositors. Giannini personally greeted each when they came to the bank.

The established banking community regarded the opening of Giannini's Italian bank as a joke. They called it "the little Dago Bank in North Beach." Other haughty bank workers made wagers concerning the longevity of the bank and its business. However, Giannini had the last laugh.

On April 17, 1906, the date of the big San Francisco earthquake, Giannini was ready. The bank's cash reserves, about \$80,000 in gold, and all the bank records were safely boxed in empty orange crates. After being loaded onto a produce wagon, the valuables were covered with a layer of fruit and leaves. Giannini and two employees dressed as fruit vendors and brought the cargo to safety at Giannini's house in San Mateo.

When Giannini returned to San Francisco, he found that nearly all the San Francisco Banks were burned or damaged by the fire. He set up temporary locations for his bank complete with a counter made from two planks supported by two barrels.

He proceeded to give loans using his own methods of approval. If he did not personally know the applicant, he would ask the man to show the palms of his hands. If the applicant had calloused hands, he received the loan. Without callouses, the applicant would have to seek funds elsewhere.

After San Francisco recovered from the quake, The Bank of Italy had made quite a good impression. Thousands of new depositors packed the bank when it re-opened on May 22nd. Another branch of the bank opened in 1910. This "little Dego bank" was definitely here to stay!

NOTED ITALIAN WOMEN

Among Santa Clara Valley's most noted Italian ladies are three women from San Jose. Maria Bressani was a noted midwife in San Jose. Lelia Marchisio Cali was noted for her work with the San Jose Water Works. Irene Dalis, known for her work in the opera, made many accomplishments in San Jose.

After graduating from the Royal University of Padua in Midwifery, Maria Bressani came to San Jose in 1889. She was one of the few women who had attended a university at that time. She was one of the select few of those women who graduated. Many San Jose doctors referred their expecting patients to Mrs. Bressani for delivery. She delivered over 6,000 babies, many of whom are current members of the Italian Heritage Foundation. Her sons quoted her as saying that many of her "babies" were paid for in food, love or in kind!⁴

Mrs. Lelia Marchisio Cali was another noted lady in San Jose. In 1927, she began working at the San Jose Water Works as an office clerk. During her 42 years of dedicated service to the company, she progressed through the company. One of the few women in the business world in the 1920's and 1930's, she was the first woman elected to the position of Vice President of the San Jose Water Works.⁵

Irene Dalis began her work in the opera in 1953. She served twenty consecutive seasons as an international star and principal artist for the Metropolitan Opera. She was the first mezzo-soprano to perform Lady Macbeth at the Metropolitan Opera. By the end of her career in which she played forty-four roles, she had performed in every major opera house from Naples to San Francisco. She is responsible for initiating the resident artist

program at San Jose State University which allows young opera singers to *perform locally and be nationally* recognized without traveling abroad as she did when launching her own career. In 1991, she was recognized for her fourteenth year as Artistic Director of Opera San Jose.⁶

RICH WITH FRUIT

Some of California's largest and most famous workers in the orchards are Italian. Italians have succeeded at everything from packing, to pruning, to picking.

In 1859, an Italian man named Marco Fontana founded the California Packing Company, later known as Calpac. His packing company became the largest fruit and vegetable packer in the world at the time.⁷

Joseph Costa arrived in San Jose in 1881 with money to spend. He had earned his fortune as a fruit and vegetable farmer in New Almaden supplying quicksilver miners with fresh produce. He used the money he had earned to buy sixty acres of land near Monterey Road in San Jose. He called this land Costa Ranch.

Joe Perrucci was an Italian with ambition. He was working for one of the major dried fruit packing plants in the 1920's. Times were tough, and when his salary was cut for the fourth time, he quit.

He secured an old dried fruit plant and threw all his energy into making his business a success. In 1931 he established the Eastside packing company. With a few more years, and a lot more of his hard work, his company became the Mayfair Packing Company with three plants in San Jose, one in Santa Clara, and a dozen or more prune dehydrator plants throughout the state.

Mr. Perrucci ran his dried fruit business as if it were a small shop. He knew and greeted every permanent employee by first name. And, he knew every cog and wheel of his plant almost as well as he knew his employees.

Aside from his own success in the dried fruit industry, Mr. Perrucci has contributed his time to the state of California. He served as director of the

Dried Fruit Association of California for 40 years. He has served as vice president and director of the Italian-American Chamber of Commerce of Italy with headquarters in Rome. In 1973, he was one of the few Americans invited to attend a trade fair in Red China. He sold walnuts there as a result of his trip.⁸

OTHER NOTEWORTHY ITALIANS

A man named Nicolo Dodero accomplished something much less famous, but very important, indeed. He is the first known Italian settler in the Santa Clara Valley.⁹ He was stationed at the Pueblo of San Jose in 1790. He was quartered with Spanish soldiers. Later, he settled in San Jose and became a sore keeper in a general store.

Domingo Davini opened the first drug store in San Jose in 1850. The store was later sold to a German immigrant.

Another Italian who made great accomplishments was Reverend John Nobili. Like Many Italians in San Francisco's little Italy, he was attracted to the Santa Clara Valley because of its warm and moderate Mediterranean climate. He was a Jesuit Missionary who worked to serve the spiritual needs of cholera patients in 1850. In 1851, he opened what he called a "little day school." This "little day school" he had founded became what is now the University of Santa Clara. The reverend served as the president of the school until his death in 1856.¹⁰

Sam Della Maggiore came from a ranching family. After growing up in the orchards of the San Jose area, he went into education and became the wrestling coach at San Jose High School. He also coached at San Jose State and Santa Clara University. Since then, he has served four terms on the Board of Supervisors and was chairman of the board of supervisors four times. He spent four years on the Franklin-Mckinley school board. Also among his accomplishments was the position of chair of the Bay Area Pollution Control District. He serves as president of the Santa Clara County Association for Good Government.

In 1949 Salvatore and Angelo Marino founded the California Cheese Company. The company soon became one of the largest distributors and manufacturers of cheese in California. It is known for Precious Brand ricotta and mozzarella cheese. A trip to the store will probably earn a treat for a young visitor, as the Marinos are known to be generous when it comes to a cute smile or a young face.

Ed Pianto, owner of Pianto's Delicatessen on Stevens Creek Boulevard in Santa Clara learned a special trade when he was young. His father and uncle who owned Fior d'Italia hotel and restaurant in downtown San Jose taught him to make pasta. Since then, Mr. Pianto estimates he has made conservatively 30,000,000 thumb-sized pastas. In all those thirty seven years of work, he made every piece by hand. Customers pour into the shop at Christmas time in hopes they can have his pasta for dinner.

San Jose City Councilman Frank Fiscalini grew up in San Jose and did some graduate work at Stanford in 1949 and 50. He became the principal of an east side San Jose high school. He later became the superintendent of the Union High School District. He is known most for his work at Independence High School where the first multi-unit campus was formed from his initiative and ideas.

Anthony Turturici is a noted civil engineer in San Jose. During his time with the City of San Jose from 1951-1981, he accomplished much. Starting as a Junior Civil Engineer in 1951, Mr. Turturici progressed to the position of Director of Public Works. He was the head of the department responsible for designing and constructing the Center for the Performing Arts, the main library, and expansions on other buildings in downtown San Jose.

Another noted Italian was Peter DeVincenzi, who moved from Italy to San Francisco in 1898 after his older brothers and his uncles urged him to come. He worked there with a horse and buggy. He moved things for people for work. A few years later, he moved to Oakland. There, he opened Oakland's garbage collecting company. He was its president from 1907 until 1914. In 1915, he was asked to come to San Jose because he had experience in the garbage business. After helping with the merging of two companies, he helped found the Scavenger Company in San Jose.

Peter's son, John De Vincenzi followed his father's footsteps and went far in the Italian community. He grew up in a mostly Italian neighborhood in San Jose. As a child, he picked prunes and apricots to earn spending money. Many of the other children did this as well. He and his parents spoke an Italian dialect, which caused him to stay back and repeat the first grade. He matured and became a teacher of the arts at San Jose State University. He retired in the 1950's. He was one of the founders of the Italian American Heritage Foundation and became its president in 1978. He is now a member of the cultural committee and board. He is the originator of the annual Italian American Heritage Foundation Festival. He also helps out in the foundation's library.

BIG PLANS

In 1979, The Italian American Heritage Foundation had a dream of building a culture center. Thirty six Italian organizations including about 3,000 Italians were working together to raise two million dollars. The money was raised to pay for an Italian Culture Center on the site of the old Hawaiian Gardens on Almaden Road. The site was chosen because it was a former part of Goose Town. The center would include meeting halls, an Italian catering service, as well as banquet and wedding facilities. Eventually, it would have a senior citizen complex for elderly of Italian descent. One of the plan's organizers, Murphy Sabatino, said "We're also going to put in a bocce ball court. What kind of an Italian Culture Center would it be without a bocce ball court?"¹¹

Unfortunately, the plans fell through. Funds were not raised by the set deadline. The Italians who owned the land made the gardens into a park. It is now used for weddings and large group celebrations or private parties.

ITALIANS TODAY

Today, there are an estimated 340,00 people of Italian descent in the Santa Clara Valley.¹² These people work hard to keep Italian traditions alive. Every year the Italian American Heritage Foundation has an annual festival. There is Italian food and music. Italians play bocce ball. The festival offers traditional costume and company. It is set up to look like an old Italian village.

The Italian American Heritage Foundation has also established a culture center on North First Street. It sponsors dances, dinners, and classes in Italian cooking and language.

Their talents and achievements have not only changed the face of the valley, they have changed the culture. They have made a name for themselves in the history of the valley with stories of their immigration to California. With the ideas they brought from Italy, they added a new dimension to life in the valley. Their contributions to the valley range from the shaping of the buildings in the valley's cities, to the shaping of pasta in small Italian shops. From educators to fruit growers, to bankers, the Italians have contributed to the vibrance of the Santa Clara Valley. The Italian population today adds a loving, determined note to the music of the Santa Clara Valley.

ENDNOTES

- 1 "The Italians," CalToday, p.16.
- 2 Ibid., p. 14.
- 3 Ibid., p.19.
- 4 "Maria Bressani, Midwife," On Display at Italian American Heritage Foundation
- 5 "Mrs. Lelia Marchisio" caption of photo on display at Italian American Heritage Foundation.
- 6 "IAHF's Most Distinguished Member, Irene Dalis, Reflects on the Past," IAHF News, p. 5.
- 7 "The Italians," CalToday, p.17.
- 8 "The Way It Was In 1976: Joe Perrucci," Displayed at the Italian American Heritage Foundation.
- 9 Clyde Arbuckle, unpublished pamphlet file, p. 1.
- 10 "The Italians," CalToday, Jan. 17, 1982, p. 17.
- 11 "Hawaiian Gardens May Rise Again as Italian Culture Center," Mercury News, Dec. 8, 1979, p. 12B.
- 12 "Li'l Ol' Triarico-It Gave So Generously to San Jose," Mercury News, Jan. 8, 1961. p. 19.

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