

# **Southern California People: Italians In Los Angeles**

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In 1836 when Los Angeles was still a Mexican pueblo, a census reported 46 citizens who were foreign born. Of these 31 were from countries other than the United States. Today the city continues to reflect this rich ethnic mix. One-quarter million of these Angelinos by choice are of Italian descent. Their reasons for choosing this city as home differ widely, and their many contributions have been varied. But all carry forward the long, rich heritage of the Italo-American community of Los Angeles.

Italian influence even preceded the actual founding of the pueblo in 1781. Nearly 250 years before, Spain's casual interest in these northern reaches of empire was intensified by the discoveries of the Coronado expedition which arched through the American Southwest, inspired by accounts of the elusive seven cities of gold provided by the Italian Fray Marco da Niza.

Spanish claim to this area was later strengthened through the efforts of Jesuit priests, the most famous being "the Padre on horseback," Eusebio Kino, "a zealous apostolic man of the best blood of Sicily." It was he who declared in 1702, "California non e' un isola."

The myth of the fable island of Calafia ended, and the plans for missionary expansion began. First, in Baja California under the direction of Fr. Juan Maria Salvatierra, S.J., born of a noble Hispano-Italian family in Milan in 1648. With the aid of fellow Jesuits, including Fathers Francesco Piccolo and Giovanni Ugarte and Francesco Clavigero, Salvatierra extended the mission perimeter and established the Pious Fund which for the next century and a half would help support these outposts of Christianity including the 21 missions later built in Alta California by the followers of St. Francis of Assisi. Not until 1769 was the first of the Franciscan chain built at San Diego, following a plan of settlement outlined by Antonio Maria Bucareli, the Spanish viceroy who apparently was also of Italian ancestry. Soon after, several Italians visited this Spanish outpost which edged the coast along El Camino Real. The first to actually anchor offshore was Captain Alessandro Malaspina who visited during his circumnavigation of the globe. So impressed was he with the climate and hospitality that he returned in 1791.

Three decades later Paolo Emilio Botta, a doctor aboard the French ship Heros, recorded his views for later publication in Italy entitled *Viaggio Interno al Globo principalmente alla California ed alle isole Sandwich*.

Shortly after California became part of an independent Mexico, Italian visitors increased. In *Two Years Before the Mast* Richard Henry Dana tells of the arrival of the Genoese bark, *Rosa*, undoubtedly laden with large blocks of Carrara marble, the usual ballast used on Italian ships visiting the coast. Dana describes the Italian sailors at San Pedro "in blue jackets, scarlet caps...bound ashore on liberty singing 'O pescator dell 'onda.'" The young seamen were headed for the settlement of Los Angeles located inland on a plain first sighted by Europeans in 1769, and described by Fr. Juan Crespi as "good land for planting all kinds of grains and seeds."

In the buildings surrounding the central plaza of the town several Italians already claimed residence. Battisto Leandri, after arriving in 1823 had become a store keeper on Calle de los Negros, a justice of the peace, part owner of Rancho San Pedro and grantee of Rancho Los Coyotes. To young Scotsman Hugo Reid who managed a portion of his ranch land, Leandri was an Italian land baron. With his wife, Maria, the colorful Sardinian resided until his death in a house directly adjacent to the site of the current Plaza fire stations.

Across the Plaza lived Father Baas Raj, a Neapolitan described by Los Angeles chronicler Harris Newmark as a "genial, broad-minded Italian." In 1857 and 1858 he made several attempts to restore the local church which had fallen into disrepair. In that same decade Giuseppe Gazza and an Italian from Trieste, Giuseppe Cavacchi, operated several wine cellars on Olvera Street, known then as Wine or Vine Street. Another native of Trieste, Matteo Sabiche, a seaman, married Josepha Coronel and constructed a town house at the southeast corner of the Plaza. After the early deaths of the parents, the two Sabiche sons were educated abroad. Frank, a lawyer, returned to serve as a member of the City Council for a decade and its president in 1872. Another early Italian settler was Antonio Pelanconi who married Isabel Ramirez shortly after his arrival in 1860. Their home, one of the oldest brick buildings in Los Angeles, still stands on Olvera Street. After Pelanconi's death, his widow married Giacomo Tononi. Together they became successful wine makers, attending their operations from the family home to a site facing Alameda Street.

The oldest adobe remaining in Los Angeles, the Avila Adobe on Olvera Street, was also once occupied by Italians. At one time Secondo Guasti and Rosa Morelli operated a restaurant in the building. In the 1880s it was a boarding house known as the Hotel Italia Unita. The grapes still thriving in the patio may have inspired Guasti, a hardy Piedmontese, to establish in the sands of Cucamonga what came to be called "the globe's largest vineyard," the Italian Vineyard Company, where he produced millions of gallons of dessert wines including his favorite Grignolino.

Street names remind us of yet another Italian settler, the large, honest and frugal, Alessandro Repetto. In 1874 to his isolated ranch, nine miles from Los Angeles, came the famed bandit Tiburcio Vasquez who demanded \$800, purportedly to finance a revolution in Baja California. A decade later the lonely settler died at the Sisters Hospital on Ann Street. James Castruccio, Italian Consul and President of the Italian Benevolent Society, and a few members made up the congregation of mourners in the Italian Church on San Fernando Street. Repetto's ranch was sold and later became the community of Montebello.

In response to the needs and interests of the growing community, the Italian Mutual Benevolence Society was formed and soon grew to a membership of 120. Founding officers Vignolo, Pelanconi, Marcotti and Ginocchio could hardly have anticipated their success. In 1977 the Garibaldina Society, its successor, celebrated the organization's centennial.

By nineteen hundred the 1,062 Italians in Los Angeles were avid readers of the local newspaper "L'Eco della Colonia," in 1908 renamed L'Italo Americano. The community also sought a meeting place. Accordingly, in 1907 the Pozzo Construction Company completed the Italian Hall at Macy and Main streets. Its upper floor was to be the site of festivities sponsored by the Italian Benevolent Society, Il Circolo Operaio Italiano and

other groups. Today the sturdy brick building, graced by a Sequeiros mural, currently being restored, is being restored as a museum for Los Angeles Italians.

By 1917 an avalanche of immigration had brought 10,000 Italians to Los Angeles. They now represented 6 percent of the city's population. A contemporary survey revealed that of all national groups in the city, Italians were the fifth largest number of home owners.

Near the center of the Italian residential community, Saint Francis Xavier Cabrini established her school for girls. Today the vacant site on Hill Street overlooking the Civic Center betrays not a whisper of the heroic narrative of "La Santina" and her missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart who in 30 years established 67 million houses where 5,000 youngsters were given shelter and 100,000 patients were cared for.

Francesco Franceschi, or Dr. Emauele Orzo Fenzi, was another Italian who made an indelible impression upon southern California. Between 1904 and 1931 at his Santa Barbara home known as Montarioso, this gifted Florentine introduced "more plants to California than any other individual or firm." Before leaving for Libya where the Italian government had asked him to develop an agricultural program, Franceschi had propagated in his 40-acre experimental park such seeming natives as the Pittosporums and the pineapple guava.

Indeed, the southern California land was fertile and productive, causing Los Angeles County to be the leading agricultural county in the United States until 1950. Soon, however, oil, aircraft, films and the fashion business stimulated the city's commercial economy.

Capital formation, critical to this transformation, was supplied by such institutions as Security Pacific Bank, the successor to Southern California Security Trust and Savings Bank, headed by Iowa-born Italian Joseph Sartori. Another Italo-American, Victor Rossetti, served as vice president of Isaiah Hellman's Farmers and Merchants Bank. Without question, however, it was Amadeo Gianinni's Bank of Italy, now the Bank of America, which was the innovative pioneer in branch banking, specialized agricultural loans and services suited to small savers.

As more citizens crowded the sunlit landscape, a new enthusiasm for things Italian found expression among Californians who noted the similarities in the Mediterranean climates of each. Communities emerged with such Italianate names as Arcadia, Rialto, Verona and Venice. The latter was the creation of Abbot Kinney who in 1905 gave reality to his dream of Venice in America. Using the family fortune from the manufacture of Sweet Caporal cigarettes, he began building 16 miles of waterways. While the success of the canals, gondoliers and the miniature St. Mark's Square was short-lived, the enthusiasm was contagious. Articles abounded entitled: "The Italy of California," "What We Can Learn from Rome," and "Italy's Message to California."

The fascination was reflected in landscape design and the choice of street names ranging from Strada Corta to Bellagio Road. It was reflected as well in the introduction of Romanesque accents in college courtyards and the creation of facsimiles of the architectural landmarks San Miniato of Florence at Adams Boulevard and Figueroa Street and the facade of San Michele in Lucca recreated in the Fine Arts Building on Seventh Street near Figueroa.

By the 1920s Los Angeles experienced another economic boom, stimulated in part by a burgeoning population. New construction was accented by the stone masonry of

Michael de Palo, the sgraffitto designs executed by Italian craftsmen and the frescos of Giovanni Battista Smeraldi which graced the walls and ceilings of the Biltmore Hotel. Italian musicians also enriched the local scene. In 1871 M. Arevala directed the Los Angeles Musical Association. Decades later in 1924 Gaetano Merola founded the Los Angeles Opera Association in the city which had hosted the American premiere of Giacomo Puccini's "La Boheme."

The musicians and artists blended into la Colonia which by 1930 numbered 40,000 in the county. The community supported such organizations as the Italian Women's Club, the Dante Alleghieri Society and an Italian language school, Scuola Giovanni Pascoli. Activities were reported on the several radio programs and the two community newspapers, L'Italo Americano and La Parola.

Unfortunately, the clouds of war soon shadowed the lives of Italian immigrant residents. Approximately 40 radio broadcasters, journalists and community leaders were interned at For Missoula, Montana, receiving presidential pardons in 1943. Amidst calls for internment of all enemy aliens by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors and the General Federation of Women's Clubs, local Japanese, Germans, and Italian resident aliens were ordered to register and surrender contraband including flashlights. Their movements were prohibited in certain areas and their travel was restricted to between 6:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m., and to no more than five miles from home except for employment. By mid-February Italian aliens had been removed from Terminal Island and orders had been published stipulating enemy alien evacuation of 58 local areas, including Burbank and Huntington Park. As the Los Angeles Times warned, no one was to be exempted because of age or infirmity. Only with the issuance of Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942 did the U.S. government decide to exempt Italian and German aliens from the internment.

Postwar economic development provided new opportunities for Italian settlers as they engaged in real estate and construction as well as the produce, restaurant and automobile business. Although the new prosperity led to a residential drift away from the traditional Italian center on North Broadway, St. Peter's Italian Church remained a center for the myriad activities sponsored by the many organizations represented by the Federated Italo-Americans of Los Angeles, including the Patrons of Italian Culture, the Italian Cultural Institute, the Dante Alleghieri Society and many groups specific to the regions of Italy. The groups sustained the many festivities including the San Pedro Fishermen's Fiesta first organized in 1938, the preparation of bountiful St. Joseph tables in March, the celebration of Italian Republic Day in October and the staging of the Vendemmia Festival marking the fall grape harvest. Italians, the sixth largest ancestry group in the United States, cherish the fact that the American dream has become reality for them. They also celebrate a legacy that has included the contributions of explorers, agriculturists, entrepreneurs and artists.