

NOSTRA STORIA

= Our History =



The Italian Legacy In The Mother Lode



The story of the American West would be incomplete without telling the story of the Italian settlement of the West. This is especially true of California and the settlement of the Gold Country counties of the “Mother Lode” of Northern California.

The Italians were one of the earliest and most important groups of people to settle in the California foothills of the Sierra Nevada referred to as the “Mother Lode.” The Italian settlement in the Mother Lode began with the Gold Rush. From the 1850s through the 1880s, Italian immigrants from Northern Italy, primarily from the area around Genoa in the region of Liguria, settled in large numbers in the Mother Lode counties of California’s Gold Country.



Italian family boarding ship at Genoa - 1884.

ARRIVAL & SETTLEMENT

The Italians came early in the state’s history. Lured by the promise of gold and land, the early Italian pioneers of California came to stay. Here they could use the traditional skills of their cultural heritage to develop the land and the region. The Italian immigrants established themselves in the mining, cattle ranching, lumbering, construction and stone masonry, fruit and vegetable market gardening, orchard, grocery, olive oil, railroading, mercantile, banking, restaurant, hotel and boarding house, and the vineyard and wine industries of the California Gold Country. Their descendants still carry on the traditions brought to early California by the people from Italy.

Their heaviest settlement was in the southern Mother Lode and by 1870, 25 percent of the Italian population of California lived in the three foothill counties of Amador, Calaveras and Tuolumne. They were soon one of the largest immigrant groups in the Mother Lode. Most came from the same region of Italy and represented the distinctive chain migration of the Italians from the area around Genoa, especially from the province of Chiavari. Later waves of Italian immigrants from Liguria



The Seven Sisters arrived from Genoa in 1853.

and other regions of Italy, such as the Venetians from the Veneto region also settled in the Gold Country and carried on the traditions brought by the early Italian pioneers.

To this day, the Mother Lode is populated by many Italian families that have their roots in the Gold Rush.

THE GOLD RUSH & MINING

Beginning with the Gold Rush of 1848, Italian miners played an important role in the mining industry of California. Attracted by the discovery of gold, the early Italian gold miners left their legacy emblazoned in history on historic places with names like *Italian Camp*, *Italian Diggings*, *Italian Bar* and the *Italian Bar Trail* in Tuolumne County, the *Italian Mine* in Nevada City and *Italian Bar* on the American River in El Dorado County.

Between the 1860s and 1890s, numerous quartz and gravel mines along the mining belts of the Mother Lode were operated by Italian miners such as *La Fortuna Mine*, the *Volponi*, the *Garabina*, the *Porto Fino*, and the *Bella Vista*.

During the later deep mining period of the late 19th and 20th century, Italian miners were recruited from Italy by the large mines to work the deep veins in both the northern and southern mines. By the turn of the century, the Italians were among the largest of the European immigrant groups in the mines.



Italian Camp - 1870



THE ITALIAN "GARDENS"

Mother Lode residents, isolated from major population centers, were dependent on local market gardeners and ranchers for their foodstuffs. Many Italians, attracted by mining, turned to market gardening and farming to meet the demands of the local population for fruits, vegetables, meat and dairy products, grain and wine. By the 1860s, many Italians in the Mother Lode were operating these agricultural enterprises. By 1880, around 1200 commercial market gardens were being operated in California by an estimated 10,000 people from the region around Genoa, Italy, who dominated the industry.

The Italian Gardens involved the entire Italian family. Women as well as men worked raising the vegetables. The plowing and cultivating was done with horses while the hoeing and cultivating of small plants was done by hand with a *zappa*, a short-handled Italian hoe.

Italian Gardens were operated throughout the Mother Lode. Some of the most prominent were the upper and lower "Italian Gardens" at Mokelumne Hill. Another, The Italian "Pa-ta-ta" Ranch at Bald Mountain was started in 1862 as a cooperative garden by six young Italian miners. The Ranch was referred to as "Little Genoa" because of the large number of Italian families that lived there and their use of the Genovese dialect.

Some of the other well-known Italian Gardens were the Volponi Gardens in Sonora, the Podesta Gardens in Columbia, The Gardella Gardens in Mokelumne Hill, the Sanguinetti Gardens in Vallecito, the Costa Gardens in Calaveritas, the Cavalero Gardens at Sonora and the Palemone Gardens in Tuolumne.

The Italians also played an important role in developing the early Olive Oil industry in the foothills. The Orsi family in Roseville was a major producer of olive oil until the mid 20th century. The rolling hills of the Gold Country, which resemble the Mediterranean hills of Liguria, are dotted with the remnants of the early Italian olive tree orchards and with new orchards reflecting the rebirth of this ancient tradition from Italy.



Italian Gardens at Mokelumne Hill.



The Oneto Family - Italian Potato Ranch c. 1884

STONE MASONS & WOODCUTTERS



Old stone mill, Liguria, Italy.

Italians have worked in the Lumbering industry throughout the forested hills of the Mother Lode since the Gold Rush. They were heavily involved in logging and harvested timber off their ranches which they delivered to the mines by horse team. Many of the Italian immigrants were woodcutters and the landscape was covered by the cabins of Italian woodcutters who split wood to make the charcoal used in the mining forges.

The Italian immigrants brought their skill in working with stone from Liguria, a rugged and mountainous land with an estimated 25,000 miles of terraced hillsides. Crews of Italians skilled in rock work helped build the stone walls that shore up the mountain roads carved out of the canyon walls of the western Sierra's from Nevada City to Yosemite. The old stone terraces on today's Gold Country ranches and along its roadsides are a reminder of this cultural tradition.



Foot's Crossing in Nevada County.



Old blacksmith shop on Fregulia Ranch at Jackson dating from the 19th century.

Some of the oldest ranches in the Mother Lode were started by the early Italian pioneers, The Fregulia Ranch in Jackson was started in 1852 by Domenico Fregulia from Genoa and is operated as a cattle ranch today by great-granddaughter Carolyn Fregulia and her three children. Giuseppe Rosasco came from Genoa in 1860 and by 1907, the Rosasco family owned seven ranches in Tuolumne County. The family still operates a 5,000 acre ranch near Sonora. The Cuneo ranch at Calaveritas was started in 1850 by immigrants from Genoa and is still operated by the Cuneo family as is the Sanguinetti Ranch and scores of other Italian family ranches in the region.



RANCHING

An Italian American Tradition

For the past 150 years, many Italian families have made their living off of cattle ranching in the Mother Lode foothills at the base of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The early Italian immigrants became one of the main groups in the ranching industry of the Sierra foothills which are dotted with Italian family ranches to the present day.



Italian rancher Henry Sanguinetti, 1968 Mother Lode Round-Up Parade.



Costa Store at Calaveritas.



ITALIAN MERCHANTS

The history of the Mother Lode is also the history of the many Italian merchants that have operated businesses from the Gold Rush to the present. Some of the earliest merchants in the Gold Country were Italian Immigrants. Among the early Italian pioneers who established general stores were Luigi Costa in 1852 in Calaveritas; Louis Trabucco in 1850 in Hornitos; Joseph Arata in 1854 in Vallecito, Domenico Ghiradelli in 1855 in Hornitos, Agostino Chichizola in 1850 in Jackson; Frank Cuneo in 1857 in San Antonio Camp, John Garibaldi in 1857 in Altaville, Nicolas Pendola in 1859 in Angels Camp, John Peirano in 1854 in Angels Camp, Carlo Marre in 1858 in Jackson, Francesco Bruschi in 1854 in Coulterville, Angelo Rossi in 1860 in Volcano, Andrew Olcese in 1861 in Mariposa, Enrico Bruno in 1857 in Butte City, Nicolas Quirolo in 1861 in Todds Valley, Bartolomeo Dughi in 1860 in Mountain Ranch, Bartolo Brignole in 1858 in Sutter Creek, Pietro Solari in 1883 in Columbia, William Pedrini in 1853 in Garden Valley, and Gerolomo Tiscornia in 1868 in San Andreas. The Costa Store in Calaveritas has been restored by the Cuneo family as has the Chichizola Store at Jackson Gate. The Butte Store, operated by the Ginocchio family until 1926, is a State Historic Landmark.

One of the best examples of Italian architecture in the region is the Giuseppe Murer House in Folsom which was built by an enterprising immigrant who arrived in 1906 from the Veneto region of Italy. The Murer House is now a historic site and museum.



Murer House, Folsom.



BOARDING HOUSES & HOTELS

In the rural settlements of the foothills, miners and single men often lived in boarding houses owned and operated by fellow Italians. Some of the well-known Italian boarding houses of the past were the Calaveras

Hotel in Angels Camp; Bisordi's Italia Hotel in Sonora; the Torino Hotel in Nevada City; the Trabucco Hotel in Mt. Bullion; the Colombo Hotel in San Andreas and the Europa Hotel in Sonora.

Olivia "Grandma" Rolleri came to Sonora from Genoa in 1860 at age 16. Left with 11 children after her husband died in 1884, she became a prominent businesswoman who established the Calaveras Hotel in 1887 and owned several cattle ranches and mining interests. The Calaveras Hotel contained more than 50 rooms, a butcher shop, saloon and barber shop under one roof. Sunday dinners were famous and people came from across the county for family homestyle dinners and to take home "ravioli." She operated the the hotel for 40 years until 1927.



Grandma Rolleri.



Bisordi's Italia Hotel.

ITALIAN STONE OVENS: A Unique Tradition



Genocchio Ranch oven at San Andreas.

One of the cultural traditions brought to the Gold Country by the Italian immigrants was the tradition of baking in stone ovens. Many Italian families used outdoor stone ovens to bake bread, a vital part of Italian culture. Around 100 stone ovens have been identified in Calaveras, Amador and Tuolumne and dot the countryside where the Italians settled. "Victoria's Oven" was moved from the Ratto Ranch to the Calaveras Museum in 1994 where bread is once again fresh from this historic oven.



Stone oven on Fregulia Ranch.



Victoria's oven at Calaveras History Museum.



Stone baking oven on Cuneo Ranch.



ITALIAN WINEMAKING

Italians were among the early winemakers in the Sierra foothills. One of their most important contributions was the introduction of dry farming techniques from Italy to grow grapes. Nearly every Italian family had a small vineyard and produced wine for themselves and friends. The groundwork for the foothill wine industry of the Mother Lode was laid by these Italian immigrants. One of the earliest Italian pioneers of the wine industry in the Mother Lode was Giovanni Lombardo who started the Lombardo Winery in 1863 in El Dorado county. It is now the award winning Boeger Winery, also an Italian family. By 1880, the Italians were responsible for most of the wine produced in the Mother Lode and Calaveras was one of the largest wine producing counties in the state. Some of the families making wine and growing grapes in 1880 in Amador county alone were the Arata, Bacigalupi, Belloumini, Caminetti, Carroli, Cuneo, Devoto, Ferdinando, Fregulia, Garbarini, Ginocchio, Lavesso, Marre, Molfino, Oneto, Piccardo, Raggio, Ratto and Vicini families. Other prominent Italian winemakers of the region have included D'Agostini, Bianchetti, Previtali, Ghiradelli and Montevina.



Enrico D'Agostini in his vineyard, 1949.

FAMILY & COMMUNITY

The Italian immigrants to the Mother Lode established their own cultural communities wherever they settled. They had their own "Little Italy" communities such as at Jackson Gate and at Clinton in Amador County. To this day, Jackson Gate Road is the site of several Italian family restaurants and Clinton Road is lined with Italian Ranches.

The Italian pioneers celebrated their pride in their Italian heritage by building "Bocce" courts, holding Columbus Day celebrations, and forming mutual benefit organizations.



Angelo Noce - 1862.

There are a number of Italian organizations serving the Italians in the Mother Lode. The *Gold Country Italian American Club* in Grass Valley plays bocce at the courts it has built in the local public park and the *Italian Benevolent Society* in Amador, organized in 1881, holds an annual "Italian Festa" at the "Italian Society Park" at Sutter Hill. The Society is 118 years old and made up of descendants of the early Italian immigrants to the Mother lode.

Angelo Noce, an Italian immigrant to Clinton in 1858, is credited as the "Father of Columbus Day" in the United States for obtaining recognition of Columbus Day as a legal holiday by thirty-five states. Native son, Andrew Caminetti, born in Jackson Gate in 1854 of Italian immigrant parents, was the first native-born Californian elected to the United States Congress. Angelo J. Rossi, son of Ligurian immigrants who arrived in 1852, was born in Volcano and was elected mayor of San Francisco from 1932-1944.



Columbus Day Parade - Mokelumne Hill - c. 1890.



The Miner's Shrine at Ferretti's, c. 1900.



FROM ITALY TO CALIFORNIA

The early Italian settlement of the Mother Lode mining counties of northern California was part of the larger settlement of California by Italian people from the region of Liguria.

During the mid-19th century, Italian immigrants from the region of Liguria in Italy settled in the major cities of the United States and established Italian communities in places like New Orleans, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Chicago, Boston, and New York. The arrival of these “*Genovesi*” in California, beginning in the 1850’s, coincided with the early development of the state. As a result, the Italians played a vital role in the creation of California.

It wasn’t long before Italian fishermen had established themselves in fishing villages from Eureka to Benicia, Martinez, Pittsburg, San Francisco, Santa Cruz, San Diego and Monterey. By the 1880’s, California had become a leading fishery and it’s coastal waters were dominated by Italian fishermen and their graceful sailing “*felucca’s*.”

Across the state, the Italians also settled the state’s farmlands and played a prominent role in developing today’s fruit, vegetable and dairy industries. By the 1880’s, Italians dominated the fruit and vegetable industry in the great Central Valleys of California. Italian immigrants also left their

mark on the California food processing industry. Marco Fontana arrived in the United States in 1859 and along with another Ligurian, Antonio Cerruti, established a chain of canneries under the “Del Monte” label. Most of their workers were Italian and their cannery soon became the largest in the world.

Another enterprising Ligurian was Domenico Ghiradelli who traveled through the gold mines in the 1850’s selling chocolates and hard candies. He settled in San Francisco after the Gold Rush and founded the Ghiradelli chocolate empire, with Italian immigrant labour, at the site of the present day Ghirdelli Square.

The California wine industry also owes much to the Italian founders of the industry. Italians have been planting vineyards and making wine in America since the early colonial days when Filippo Mazzei planted vineyards with Thomas Jefferson. The founding of the Italian Swiss Colony at Asti in 1881 by Ligurian Andrea Sbarbaro as a cooperative of Italian immigrants from the wine growing regions of Northern Italy promoted the widespread participation and success of the Italians in the California wine industry and the vineyards of the Napa and Sonoma valleys.

One of the most inspiring of California’s Italians was Amadeo Pietro Giannini who was born in 1870 to immigrant Italian parents from Genoa. He started the first statewide system of branch banks in the nation by opening branches of his Bank of Italy in the Italian neighborhoods across the state. He later changed the name of his bank to Bank of America which became the largest bank in the world.

More than most people realize, the Italian Americans helped shape the cultural landscape of California and the modern West. The enterprise and success of these Italian pioneers is a unique legacy - one shared by all of us.

THE EXHIBIT

The exhibit, NOSTRA STORIA, “The Italian Legacy in the Gold Country” tells the story of the Italian settlers to the “Mother Lode” and the 150 year legacy they have left in shaping the life of the California Gold Country. The contributions of the Italians to the development of the Mother Lode and of California are often unrecognized by historians and left out of the history of the region and the state.

It is the hope of the exhibit organizers that this exhibit will encourage the study of the Italian migration to the Mother Lode and promote the preservation of the many historic Italian sites that dot the Gold Country and are being lost to the ravages of time and neglect.

It is also hoped that this exhibit will encourage regional historians and museums and the Italian communities of the region to safeguard and protect this distinctive legacy.

The exhibit is sponsored by

THE ITALIAN CULTURAL SOCIETY OF SACRAMENTO

P.O. Box 189427, Sacramento, CA 95818

916/482-5900 • Fax: 916/482-5909

email: italy@winfirst.com

internet: www.italiancenter.net