



1. Southern California's Italian Roots

Italians and Italian Americans have played an instrumental role in the development of Los Angeles as one of the world's greatest metropolises, yet the history of Italians in Los Angeles is a largely unknown topic in our country's history. Though Los Angeles is home to the nation's fifth-largest Italian population today, and the Italian presence in the American West predates the nation's founding, seldom is the city mentioned in dialogs surrounding contemporary Italian American communities. As early as the 16th century, accounts of Italian explorers encouraged colonial interest in present-day California. Fray Marco da Niza's electrifying statements about the legendary "golden" city of Cibola inspired Coronado's 1541 expedition of present-day New Mexico. Sicilian Jesuit Eusebio Chino, nicknamed the "Father on horseback," explored California and declared in 1702 that it was a peninsula, not an island, as previously believed. Explorations by Father Juan Crespi led to the European world's discovery of the San Francisco Bay in 1772. Crespi, the diarist of the Portola exhibition, said the first Catholic Mass in Southern California, established the famed Camino Real trail and named the Los Angeles River. The Los Angeles Italian experience contrasts from that of Italian immigrants elsewhere in the country and reveals the complexity of the Italian American diaspora. Given the tremendous upward mobility achieved by Italian Americans, it may seem implausible that at one time, prejudice and discrimination punctuated the lives of Italian immigrants. Italians were the second most common targets of lynchings in many parts of the United States during the 1800s. In the early 20th century, eugenicists described Italians as racially inferior while political cartoons of the era depicted Italians as rats embodying the "ills of immigration." In Los Angeles, however, a city profoundly influenced by its Spanish and Mexican heritage, Italians faced little hostility.

2. Italians in Early L.A.

Los Angeles' earliest Italian enclave was located at the site of the city's original settlement (present-day El Pueblo Historical Monument), where Italians lived side by side with the Mexican, French, Anglo, and later, Chinese communities. Arriving in 1827, sailor Giovanni Leandri was the city's first Italian settler. Because Spanish remained the lingua franca of Los Angeles for much of the 19th century, Italian settlers often learned Spanish before they learned English. Some, including Leandri, assumed Spanish names.

The city's hospitable social climate provided considerable opportunities for upward mobility, and by 1850, Italians had joined the ranks of the city's civic and religious leaders and business community. Other Italian immigrants, encouraged by Southern California's Mediterranean climate, pursued agriculture and viticulture, which formed the backbone for the state's early economy. The numerous, thriving, Italian-owned wineries in the plaza area were responsible for Olvera Street to originally be named Wine Street, or Calle de las Vignas, and by 1869, Los Angeles had become the wine capital of California.

This early period contains many success stories. Secondo Guasti, who immigrated from Asti, worked as a cook before establishing the Italian Vineyard Company in 1883. Two decades later, his 5,000 contiguous acres in present-day Rancho Cucamonga constituted the world's largest vineyard and Guasti became one of the 20th century's most prominent men. Financial mogul Joseph Sartori established two of the city's principal financial institutions, First National Bank (1887) and Security Trust and Savings Bank (1889). Sartori played an integral role in the growth of downtown and the financing of key development, transportation and infrastructure projects, such as the construction of the Los Angeles Aqueduct.

3. Los Angeles' Little Italy

Los Angeles's Italian enclaves, like other Little Italies, functioned as extensions of the mother country and eased the immigrant's transition to the new land. By the late 1800s, the Plaza area and "Sonoratown," (the foothills of Elysian Park), the Sixth and Seventh Wards (present-day wholesale produce district) and present-day Chinatown comprised the heart of Los Angeles' "little Italy." In the years that followed, the most populous of the city's Italian enclaves could be found northeast of downtown in Lincoln Heights and Dogtown, (once home to Frank Capra) where the melodic sound of Italian could be heard amidst bustling Italian grocery stores, bakeries, banks, pharmacies and cafes. Meanwhile, scores of Sicilian and Ischitani fisherman lived in San Pedro, the city's historic waterfront, where more than 40,000 Italian Americans reside today.

By 1910, the Italian population of Los Angeles reached 3,800. Twenty years later, "La Colonia," as the Italian community came to be known, numbered 12,700. Its size supported several Italian language newspapers, of which *L'Italo Americano* remains, and was home to numerous socio-cultural and benevolent organizations, such as the Garibaldina Mutual Benefit Society, founded in 1888. For over 100 years, the community's ethnic churches, St. Peter's Italian Church and Mary Star of the Sea, have tended to the spiritual needs of Italo Angelenos while preserving cultural-religious traditions. Their celebrations for the feasts of St. Joseph, Santa Lucia, San Trifone and St. Peter are amongst the West Coast's largest.

4. The Birth and Rebirth of a Community Center

In 1908, a community center was constructed in the heart of the enclave with the words "Italian Hall" emblazoned in gold lettering on its yellow brick façade. Listed today on the National Register of Historic Places, the Italian Hall served as the community's focal point, hosting countless social and cultural events, such as the vendemmia, or fall wine harvest. It held fundraisers for victims of natural disasters and charitable causes. Over the years, the Italian Hall launched careers in entertainment and welcomed dignitaries, celebrities and historic figures, from early 20th century social and political activists Emma Goldman and the Flores Magon brothers, to Italian flying ace Francesco de Pinedo. The Italian Hall also played an integral role in the city's free speech and labor movements and survived pivotal events in Italian American history, including the registration, relocation and arrests of so-called Italian "enemy aliens" during World War II. It witnessed the creation of Simon Rodia's artistic masterpiece, the Watts Towers, the publishing of John Fante's novels and the creation of Gaetano Uddo's canned food Uddo-Taormina Company (which became Progresso).

While remaining connected to their ethnic identity during the post-War years, neither nostalgia nor tradition bound Italians to the neighborhoods they first settled. In the 1950s, the community, numbering 30,000, ceased to use the Italian Hall and it fell into disrepair. Little by little, the city's Italian enclaves became masked by subsequent ethnic settlements or were erased entirely as a result of redevelopment.

In the late 1980s, a commercial development threatened to erase the Italian Hall's historic significance. The community then created a group, later known as the Historic Italian Hall Foundation, to restore the Italian Hall and create a museum. More than \$1.5 million was raised and work to address the building's most critical deferred maintenance and historic preservation issues began.

From pioneers to entrepreneurs, educators to civil rights leaders, artists, designers, restaurateurs and scientists, Italian Americans are an integral part of the Southern California's complex social fabric. Should history prove as inextricably connected to memory as it is to place, the Italian American Museum promises to assist Italian Americans in their journey of self-discovery, and provide all visitors with a more meaningful understanding of the multi-layered history of Los Angeles and that of the nation.