

THE WORKING HISTORY OF ITALIAN-AMERICANS



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**"IT'S ABOUT THE HISTORY OF A
PEOPLE WHO WORKED HARD TO
EARN A SPOT IN THIS COUNTRY."**

By Ted Costa

Here at CFG, we know how culturally and ethnically diverse the New Jersey/New York area is with many waves of first-generation immigrants and their familial successors. Whether it be due to my blood lineage (50%) or just my overall obsession with the foods and culture of its peoples, I have always taken a strong fascination to the Italian population surrounding our home in this part of the world. Today, Italian-Americans are the fifth largest ethnic group in the USA, and continue to keep strong traditions of cultural heritage and work ethic.

October is Italian-American Heritage month. We come to find that it's about much more than just what the secret ingredients were inside of Grandma's "gravy." It's about the history of a people who worked hard to earn a spot in this country. It's a people who struggled endlessly to make ends meet. They stuck together as family against many odds, and who tirelessly did their best in the face of many unwelcoming already-established Americans in their time.

From around 1880 to the 1920's, around 5 million Italians immigrated from Italy and its islands over to America in hopes of a brighter future. What drove this mass exodus for many of the Italians at the time? Mostly exploitation of the "peasant" class, poverty, disease, famine... times weren't easy back then in the Motherland! Interestingly enough, roughly 50% of the immigrants would eventually repatriate back to Italy after having earned enough money to keep them afloat back "home." These people who would repatriate did not particularly care to learn the local language or customs, but instead left when the time was right to do so for them financially. In the time it would take an Italian to earn \$1 in Italy, that same person could make up to \$10 in a week working in America. However, many of the Italians that chose to make America the new "home" often did what the likes of my great-grandparents did and had no less than 8 to 12 kids.

Talk about a lot of mouths to feed! But scarcity of money and food never scared the hard-working types away from having large families. Take my great-granddad for instance. He found a job in North Jersey under a padrone (an already established Italian immigrant who acted as a labor-organizer).

The man would travel from his home in Brooklyn, 2 hours each way so that his wife and kids may live down the street from their relatives. But that's the working ethic needed to feed a family of 10! And it beat his initial job when he came here – bootlegging alcohol across different states.

Having large families was a way to stick together – which is exactly what the Italian people needed to do when they came here. Most came through Ellis Island in NYC. This "New Immigration", as it was known, was the third largest immigration of its type. This included many Slavs and Jews as well which constituted a major change from the "Old Immigration" which mainly consisted of Germans, Irish, British, and Scandinavians.

What can we say today looking back about the whole ordeal? In the context of the times, the radical change of cultures coming to the "New World" scared many of the people already immigrated here. New languages, customs, and competition of skills and labor was seen as a threat by the people who had gone through much the same assimilating process a generation or two prior. When the original workers of the times would go on strike or have disputes with



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employers' conditions, the new Italian immigrants would fill the positions at lower wages than what was being fought for. Italians also did not mind working alongside the African-American population, which many others at the time would simply not do. This working ethic and attitude pulled so many Italian immigrants to the ends they had been struggling for in only a generation or two.

My grandma who had grown up sharing beds and rooms with her siblings until she had married would eventually turn out to become college-educated and able to start her own family. Many of her relatives who saved up enough money to move out of such cramped living conditions could eventually migrate to Philadelphia. This city had many Italian-concentrated neighborhoods. Another relative of mine worked down in the Philly food docks during WWII. Each week he would make visits to the dozens of his relatives around the Philly blocks delivering meat and sugar throughout the war when such things were nearly impossible to obtain. Ah, Great-Uncle Frank.

Prejudices against the Italian peoples would eventually shift, and Italians would come to make up the working force everywhere you would go. What can I say as part of that lineage? Well, it seems you can't hold an Italian down for too long. We seemingly stick together no matter what, and we show up to work no matter what. This month, we honor the people who were able to come here from a distant land to take a chance at a better life. Throughout history, Italians were able to create a life of their own through hard work, great efforts to assimilate, while holding onto their rich culture – and yes, that includes keeping the family gravy recipe a secret.



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