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Now They Know Who We Are

The little known, and rarely told stories of Siskiyou County's Italian immigrants are brought to life by author Mary Salanti Silva
As descendants, we are the realization of our Italian ancestors dreams of a better life for themselves and their families. We must recognize these strong-willed individuals for their endeavors in a country where they had little or no understanding of the English language or the American culture, but still managed to adapt and prosper wherever they lived.

While public awareness of the Italian immigrant history seems focused on the populations in large cities, it is also important that we acknowledge the unusual history of the relatively small immigrant population in the northern most part of California.

The life and times of Italian immigrants living in the "company-owned" lumber towns is unique. Sons followed fathers into the mills, setting the example of endurance and stability. Every first generation Italian began working as a laborer and retired as a laborer. Advancement opportunity for Italians in this profession was negligible. The men who worked thirty or forty years in the lumber industry are now in their senior years. With the elimination of the lumber companies, a way of life has now disappeared.

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The oral histories of these families indicate that each family unit improved economically as well educationally with each succeeding generation. Their cultural and economic contributions to these small communities can be seen today. They were frugal by nature and self-sufficient; so saving whatever they could was a way of life. Rather than replace with new, Italians repaired what was broken. Most backyards included large gardens, fruit trees and chickens raised for meat and eggs. Their frugality provided the financial resources for educational opportunities for their children. Today, descendants of these first immigrants are represented in nearly every profession, including politicians, accountants, educators, attorneys and owners of large and small ranches and businesses.

Regardless of where they settled, Italian families were proud and always lived within their financial means - however meager that might have been. Transportation was limited; most laborers did not own an automobile. Money earned in the Mills, mines, railroad, and on the farms was spent locally, providing economical stability in the community. With no social support systems in place during the early to mid 1900s, difficulties of any kind were answered with help from fellow Italians.

Today. Some of their Italian heritage has been lost, partially due to the desire for a new life and the need to assimilate to the culture of the new country in which they lived. Because of this, there are few descendants able to speak or understand the Italian language. Children raised during the World War II era were not encouraged to be bilingual and, in fact, Italian was spoken sparingly outside the home. As generations evolved, major changes occurred within the family units. Children married into other ethnic groups making it difficult to maintain the strong Italian family base. Many no longer even live in the same community as their parents. Family members are separated by distance, and by choosing not to perpetuate family traditions. The strong Italian family structure of past generations is struggling, yet descendants still seek the enduring stability demonstrated by their ancestors in this ever-changing world.

Descendants, many in their 70s, 80s and 90s. Lament the loss of the "old days" but have the confidence of their ancestors that some of their Italian heritage and the strong family unit will survive. All of us must recognize and honor the foundation that our Italian American ancestors provided for us, only then can we truthfully say: **"Now WE know who WE are" and "Now THEY know who we are."** Article courtesy of In Buona Salute Magazine.

The author, Mary Salanti Silva will speak about the unique history of the Siskiyou County Italians at the Italian Center on Sunday April 26 at 1:00 pm. Her book will be available at the lecture.