

Italy In California

“AMERICA” WE DISCOVERED IT WE NAMED IT WE BUILT IT

This expression of ethnic pride is often found on T-shirts worn by Italian Americans at their cultural festivals. To Italian Americans, this is more than a statement of ethnic pride; it reflects their perception of American history and the role they have played in it. Italians have played a very important role in shaping American life since the European discovery of North America.

The 500th anniversary in 1992 of the European entrance into the Americas reminds us it was an Italian from Genoa, Christopher Columbus, in the service of Spain, who was first to open the American continent for the Europeans on October 12, 1492.

Other Italian explorers of the time also played a prominent role in the discovery of the “New World.” Such early explorers as the Venetian brothers, Giovanni and Sebastiano Caboto laid claim to North America for England in 1497. Another Italian, Giovanni da Verrazzano, in the service of the King of France, explored the Coast of Canada in 1524.

In fact, even the name “America” is Italian, named after the Florentine cartographer Amerigo Vespucci, who explored the South American coastline in 1502. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Italians put “America” on the map.

Italian settlement in the United States covers more than three-and-a-half centuries and begins with the earliest settlers. The Italian presence started at Jamestown, Virginia, when sixteen Venetian craftsmen settled there in 1621, just one year after the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock. The Italians have been coming ever since.

Beginning in the 1880's, the number of Italian immigrants coming to the United States swelled dramatically. Between 1880 and 1920, over four million Italians landed on these shores. An equal number arrived in South America during the same period. The Italians were the last large European group to arrive in the United States before the Second World War. They were also the largest single group of immigrants from Europe to come to ‘America.’ In all, over six million Italian immigrants settled here and today they are the fifth largest ancestry group in the nation. Some two million live in California.

The story of the Italians in Northern California is a story of individual and collective accomplishment. They came early, lured by the discovery of gold. Attracted by the climate and resemblance to their native Italy, they stayed. Their descendants still live in the foothill towns of the “Mother lode.” A visit to the village of Sutter Creek in Amador County where their names are emblazoned on historic buildings or a walk through the Catholic cemetery at Jackson in Calaveras County attests to the sojourn of these Italian pioneers.

They continued to arrive in great numbers during the mass migration at the turn of the century. Restrictive immigration laws in the 1920's closed the “Golden Doors.” Even so, up to the 1940's, they were the largest foreign born immigrant group to settle in California. The early immigrants came primarily from the northern regions of Lombardy, Tuscany and Liguria. It is estimated that sixty percent of California's Italian population is of northern Italian extraction.

The largest settlement arose by San Francisco Bay where the early Italians settled in San Francisco's North Beach District. As the stream of Italian immigration continued, the district became an Italian colony. Here they built a successful cultural and economic community and spread throughout the Bay Area. Many Italian families in California can trace their American roots to the North Beach colony.

By 1859 the first Italian language newspaper in California, “L'Echo della Patria,” was published semi-weekly in San Francisco. A successor, “L'Italia,” was published until 1966. Other Italian presses soon brought the news to the burgeoning Italian communities of California. As late as

1931, Italian newspapers operated in Sacramento, Stockton, Martinez and Weed. Today, the statewide weekly Italian newspaper, “L'Italo Americano,” is still published in California.

The arrival of the Italians in California coincided with its early settlement by Americans. As a result, The Italians were able to play a vital role in shaping the destiny of California and its economy.

It wasn't long before Italian fishermen had established themselves in fishing villages from Eureka to Benicia, Martinez, Pittsburg, San Francisco, Monterey and Santa Cruz. By the 1880's, California's waters were dominated by Italian fishermen and their graceful sailing feluccas. By 1900, the fishing industry of California had become the second leading fishery in the nation and by 1910, eighty percent of the state's fishing business was managed by Italians. During World War II, Italian fishermen were prevented from using their fishing boats by wartime restrictions on Italian immigrants living along the coast.

Across the state, the Italians also settled the states farm land and played a prominent role in developing today's fruit, vegetable and dairy industries in places like Marin and Sonoma counties and the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys. By the 1880's, Italians dominated the fruit and vegetable industry. The western tomato industry began in earnest when Camillo Pregno, an Italian immigrant, taught Merced farmers how to grow tomato vines on stakes as was the custom in Italy.

Italian immigrant, Marco Fontana, arrived in the United States in 1859 and along with another Ligurian, Antonio Cerruti, founded the California Packing Company in 1889. Under the popular “Del Monte” label, their canneries soon became the largest food processing corporation in the world. Most of their workers were Italians.

One of the enterprising Italians who left his mark on California was Domenico Ghirardelli, who traveled through the gold mines selling chocolates and hard candies. He settled in San Francisco after the gold rush and founded the Ghirardelli Chocolate empire, with Italian immigrant labor, at the site of the present Ghirardelli Square.

The California wine industry also owes much to the Italian founders of the industry. In 1881, the Italian Swiss Colony was founded at Asti in Sonoma County by Andrea Sbarbaro as a cooperative of Italian immigrants from the wine growing regions of Italy. The Colony soon became one of the largest producers of wine and dominated the US wine market during its heyday. The founding of the Italian Swiss Colony promoted the widespread participation of Italians in the grape and wine industry. The Mondavi, Sebastiani and Gallo families later achieved success in the vineyards of the Napa, Sonoma, and Central Valleys.

Perhaps the most inspiring of California's Italians was Amadeo Pietro Giannini, the “Giant of the West.” Born in San Jose in 1870 of immigrant Italian parents, Giannini organized the Bank of Italy in North Beach in San Francisco in 1904 to aid his fellow Italians. His innovative banking practices attracted large numbers of small depositors and earned him a reputation as the common mans banker.

When the earthquake of 1906 destroyed much of San Francisco, Giannini dispensed loans from a plank and barrel counter on the Washington Square Wharf to help rebuild the City. The Italian section was the first to be rebuilt. Breaking new ground, he established the first statewide system of branch banks in the nation by opening branches in the Italian neighborhoods across the State. Italians provided most of his workforce. In 1930, he changed the name to Bank of America. Mr. Giannini's Italian bank soon became the largest bank in the world.

Italians played a prominent role in the creation of California. Their story is our story - their experience our experience. Their contributions are often overlooked but the enterprise and success of these Italian pioneers is a unique legacy, one shared by all of us.