

THE GENOVESI OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA



Photo Above: *Italian family boarding ship at Genoa, 1884*

The Genovesi of Northern California

Ligurian immigrants were among the earliest Italian immigrant groups to settle in the United States during the mid-19th century.

Italian immigrants from the Italian region of Liguria 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. These communities laid the foundation for the Little Italy neighborhoods that exist to this day.

Genovesi settlers from Liguria, primarily from the area around Genoa [the provincial capital] and the province of Chiavari, became one of the largest regional groups to settle in San Francisco and the other counties of northern California.

The early Italian settlement of the Mother Lode mining counties of northern California by bands of *Genovesi* during the Gold Rush of the 1850's was part of the larger settlement of California by Italian people from the region of Liguria.



Photo Above: *The Seven Sisters arrived from Genoa in 1863*

Lured by the promise of gold and land, the early Italian pioneers came to stay. Here they could use the traditional skills of their Italian heritage to develop the land and region.

The Italian immigrants established themselves in the mining, cattle ranching, lumbering, construction and stone masonry, quarrying, fruit and vegetable market gardens, orchard, grocery, olive oil, railroading, mercantile, banking, restaurant, hotel and boarding house, and the vineyard and wine industries of the California Gold Country.

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. **To this day the Mother Lode is populated by the descendants of these Italian pioneers who carry on the traditions brought to early California by the people from Italy.**



Photo Above: *Columbus Day Parade float, Mokelumne Hill, CA., c 1890*



Photos Above: (L) **Enrico D'Agostini** in his Vineyard, c. 1949 and (R) **Angelo Noce**, an Italian immigrant to the Mother Lode in 1848 is credited as the “Father of Columbus Day” in the United States.

The arrival of these GENOVESI in California coincided with the early development of the state. As a result, the Italians played a vital role in the creation of California.

Across the State, the Italians settled the state's farmlands and played a prominent role in developing today's fruit, vegetable and dairy industries.

By the 1860's, a large number of *Genovesi* had established themselves as truck farmers in Northern California and soon controlled much of the production of fruits and vegetables. By the 1880's, Italians dominated the fruit and vegetable industry in the great Central Valleys of California. Across the state 1,200 "*Italian Gardens*" employed 10,000 people, mostly from the provinces surrounding Genoa. Today's Agri-Business in California is heavily Italian.

Skilled in cultivating fruits, flowers and vegetables in the coastal valleys of their home Regions, immigrants from Liguria and Lucca in Tuscany established truck farms in the empty lands around San Francisco to feed the booming city. The Italian farmers introduced specialty crops from the Italian kitchen – broccoli, eggplant, cardoon, artichokes, sweet basil, the pear-shaped tomato and fennel.

Italian immigrants also left their mark on the California food processing industry.

One such *Genovesi* pioneer was Marco Fontana, who arrived in the United States in 1859 and along with another Ligurian, Antonio Cerruti, established a chain of canneries under the "***Del Monte***" label from their base in San Francisco. Most of their workers were Italian and their cannery soon became the largest food processing corporation in the nation.



The Genovesi also dominated the early fishing industry in California.

The Italian fishermen of the 1850's were mostly *Genovesi*, later to be followed by Sicilian immigrants. 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, San Pedro, and Monterey. By the 1880's, California had become a leading fishery and its coastal waters were dominated by Italian fishermen and their graceful sailing "***feluccas***." By 1910, Italians controlled 80 percent of the fishing industry in California.

Another enterprising Ligurian was Domenico Ghirardelli 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 formed the Ghirardelli Chocolate empire, with Italian immigrant labor, at the site of the present day "**Ghirardelli Square.**"

The California wine industry 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. Mazzei is credited with influencing Jefferson to add the words that “all men are created equal,” to the Declaration of Independence.

The founding of the Italian Swiss Colony at Asti in 1881 by Ligurian Andrea Scarboro 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. The Colony soon became one of the largest producers of wine and dominated much of the US wine market during its heyday.



Photos Above: **Lombardo Winery** - est. 1863. One of the earliest Italian pioneers of the wine industry in the Mother Lode was

Giovanni Lombardo who started the winery in El Dorado County. It is still owned by an Italian family.

Italian Ranches dot the Mother Lode, and many have Italian Stone ovens from the past that were used to bake bread or focaccia



One of the most inspiring of California's Italians was Amadeo Pietro (AP) Giannini, who was born in San Jose in 1870 to Italian immigrants from Genoa.

Branch banking as we know it was started in the United States when Giannini started the first statewide system of banking in the nation by opening branches of his “Bank of Italy” in the Italian neighborhoods across California to serve the Italian immigrants. Italians provided most of his workforce. In 1930, he changed the name to “Bank of America.” Mr. Giannini’s bank soon became the largest bank in the world.



Photos Above: One of the first Bank of Italy branches in Los Angeles, Pico Heights, 1918 and A. P. Giannini in 1935 at age 65 (1870-1949)



Photo Above: The Giovanni Oneto Family, circa 1884.

Left to right, seated: Mary, Aurelia, Kate: standing: Americus, Geronima, "J.B.," Giovanni, and Amelia. All the children were born on the Ranch.

The Oneto family at the Italian Pa-ta-ta Ranch started at Bald Mountain in 1862 by six young Italian miners and referred to as "Little Genoa" for the large number of Italian families that lived there and their use of the Genovesi dialect

These Genovesi pioneers: Giannini, Fontana, Ghiradelli, and Sbarboro were all business associates as well as Italian community leaders. All established companies that had national markets and relied upon Italians as their primary workforce. They played a prominent role in the creation of California's basic industries and today's economy.

All four men were also actively involved in the Italian community. They served together on the first Board of Directors of the Italian Welfare Agency established in 1916 to serve the needs of the rapidly growing Italian Colony of the San Francisco Bay area. The Italian Welfare Agency is still in operation and has been renamed the Italian American Community Services Agency.

The *Genovesi* immigrants were responsible for much of the success of the Italian immigrants from all regions of Italy who

streamed to California during the decades before and after the turn of the 20th Century. **Genovesi pioneers played a prominent role in creating industries that provided work to the Italian immigrants and aided in their advancement in American society.**

The Italian immigrants were often relegated to the lowest occupations and in San Francisco were excluded from the trade unions until the 1920's and beyond. As a result, some Italians in San Francisco turned to occupations open to them like the garbage industry. Soon, they turned these occupations into successful cooperative enterprises that exist to this day.

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 contributions of the Italians to the development of California are often unrecognized by historians and left out of the history of California. This history and their accomplishments deserve to be acknowledged, studied and told.

