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*The lesson of Roseto, Pennsylvania*

## US town was healthier with Italian values

For nearly three generations Roseto, a close-knit Italian American community in east-central Pennsylvania, was a very special place to live. With a diet that often included fatty meats, peppers fried in lard and much wine, the Rosetans boasted a remarkably low death rate from heart disease, less than half that of surrounding communities. These extraordinary findings prompted medical researchers Dr. John Bruhn and Dr. Stuart Wolf to conduct a 15-year study comparing medical histories on Rosetans and those of their Italian American neighbors in nearby Bangor and Nazareth, Pa.

The results were astonishing. Despite a greater prevalence of obesity in Roseto and despite similar dietary, smoking and exercise habits and similar ethnic and genetic background, the inhabitants of Roseto were relatively immune to heart disease at the beginning of research in 1963. They were also strikingly tenacious in adhering to Old World values and customs. Family relationships were very close and mutually supportive. This cohesive quality extended to neighbors and to the community as a whole. There was a well defined relationship between the sexes in Roseto. The elderly were cherished and respected and they retained their authority throughout life.

Roseto, Pa., was founded in 1882 by immigrants from the southern Italian town of Roseto Valfortore in the province of Foggia, in the region of Puglia, the heel of the "boot." The Italian atmosphere of Roseto is unmistakable - the grapevines and fig trees in the gardens, the obvious physical traits of the people, the names on the shops and front doors, the food stuffs for sale and many Italian street names (e.g., Dante, Colombo, Garibaldi, Falcone).

The American Roseto had a remarkable degree of cohesiveness, a legacy of the *campanilismo* (village spirit) which the settlers had shared in the Italian Roseto. By the 1960s the town had more than 2,000 people, 95 percent of whom

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were descended from the namesake village and spoke its dialect.

As a community, Roseto had not been isolated from mainstream America. Its very existence as a community depended upon close contacts with other well defined and long established ethnic groups, especially the English, Welsh and Germans who lived in surrounding communities and who owned the slate quarries that had employed many Rosetans. The town came into being largely as a result of the intolerance of these earlier immigrant groups.

But as succeeding generations of Rosetans abandoned the traditional values and relationships of family loyalty and clannishness, the death rate from heart attack climbed toward the American norm until in 1971 deaths from heart attacks occurred for the first time among men under 50. Deep changes have occurred in the lifestyle of Rosetans and of most Italian Americans in recent decades. Heart attacks and strokes are up. intermarriage has jumped to 70 percent from the 15 percent that existed at the time the study was begun. The family is no longer the center of Rosetan society.

It was the conclusion of the study that unconditional interpersonal support counteracts life stress and thus preserves life. "The lesson the Roseto experience offers Italian Americans is that the thwarting of their biological need for social cohesion, community and emotional security is doing them tremendous harm."

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