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## ITALIAN AMERICAN HERO - A.P. GIANNINI

On October 17, 1904, the one-room Bank of Italy opened in a remodeled saloon in North Beach, the Italian area of San Francisco and home of the largest Italian settlement on the west Coast. The founder of Banca d'Italia was Amadeo Pietro Giannini, who was destined to change the face of banking forever.

Giannini's story is one of the most remarkable success stories of the 20th century. The son of immigrants from Liguria in northern Italy, he was born in the Santa Clara valley in 1870.

At the turn of the century, banks served primarily the wealthy, a system the young A.P. Giannini did not agree with. Giannini's roots were in the Italian immigrant community. His goal in establishing the new bank was to meet the needs of the burgeoning Italian communities of California. Giannini's philosophy was to put money to work in the community.

When the Great earthquake of 1906 destroyed San Francisco, the young banker was 17 miles away. The six-foot, two-inch Giannini hurried to the smoking city. With a few trusted employees he rescued its cash reserves of \$80,000 in gold before the bank was destroyed by fire. As a result, his was the only bank that still had its assets intact.

When the other banks announced they were closing their doors, Giannini's Italian bank was the first to reopen after the earthquake. Giannini set up a plank on two barrels on the Washington Street Wharf and began lending money on easy terms to people who wanted to rebuild their homes and businesses. Amid the smoking ruins, A.P. lent money to people whose only collateral was their character. With Giannini's help, the Italian District of North Beach was the first to be rebuilt. His customers never forgot it.

Giannini pioneered branch banking in the United States. Initially, he opened the first branch banks in the nation in the Italian communities across California. Italians provided most of his workforce. He opened his first branch in San Jose, in the Santa Clara Valley where he had grown up. Then came San Mateo and Los Angeles.

Whenever a customer came in with a child, Giannini would present the parents with a dollar and suggest they open a savings account for their little one. By 1919, The Bank of Italy had the largest number of depositors of any American bank. By the early 1920s, an expanding network of more than 60 branch banks served customers from Chicago to San Diego.

In 1928, Giannini changed the name of his bank to Bank of America. By 1930, he had established 352 branches in California. His plan to extend branch banking nationwide was blocked in Congress by the banking establishment.

Giannini's career was central to the development of the early twentieth century West. The emergence of the Bank of Italy coincided with the population boom of the West. Giannini's expansion of bank banking and the resources it offered enabled him to meet the financial needs of California's expanding industries.

Giannini financed not only the building of the Golden Gate, he helped finance the early motion picture industry and today's modern agribusiness and aerospace industries. In the 1930s, at the height of the depression, Walt Disney showed Giannini a few rushes of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs and Giannini gave him a loan to make the first full length animated film.

At the same time he served the working people with easy terms for loans. He pioneered home loans with affordable monthly payments.

Giannini's Italian Bank established the West as a financial center independent of Eastern financial interests. When he died in 1949, the Bank of America was the largest privately owned bank in the world. And he, the leading banker of the twentieth century.

But A.P. Giannini did not profit from the success of his bank. Giannini had a vision of economic democracy that money should not lay idle but should serve all. He did not own the bank personally. Instead, inspired by democratic ideals, ownership of his bank was widely held by employees and others.

Giannini's vision and his success aided the advancement of the Italians in California. At the same time, the hardwork and savings of the Italian communities helped finance the rapid growth of the state's economy. No person and no group contributed more to the development of California than A.P. Giannini and the Italian Americans.

