

The Little Italys Of America

The Effects of Urban Renewal

By Teresa Hauge Giovanzana

Throughout both the 19th and 20th centuries, "Little Italy" communities were created in the hearts of American cities by immigrants from Italy. From New York to Portland Oregon. From San Francisco to Port Arthur Texas. From Chicago to Boca Raton, Florida. Italian immigrants came to America by the millions. They spread their wings and flocked to all corners of the United States and brought their hopes, traditions, skills, and their seedlings to cultivate in the New World. These hopefuls were responsible for the establishment of hundreds of "Little Italy" communities across the nation.

These communities shaped the character of urban America. After World War II in 1945, America experienced tremendous growth in population and industrialization. The Federal government decided to pour billions of dollars into further developing the nations infrastructure. Many of the projects were for highways, railroads, airports, power plants, communication systems, and suburbanization. These projects, invaluable to the growth of America, marked the end to literally hundreds of Little Italy communities across our nation.

Other forces at work in the post war period that contributed to the decline of the cosmopolitan Italian enclaves in American cities were urban and racial policies that were generally hostile toward white ethnic Americans and their concentrations in American cities. Italian Americans are one of the last of the European groups to maintain their urban communities. The decline of the Italian communities was also influenced by the anti- Italian immigration laws passed in the 1920s which cut Italian immigration to literally nothing from the millions that had been coming to America. Between 1890 and 1920, some 4 million Italians had arrived in the United States

Another factor was the suppression of Italian Americans during the second world war, especially on the West Coast of the United States. During the war, Italian American community leaders were arrested and interned, and large segments of the Italian population were relocated and restricted during the war. Italian American cultural institutions, especially the Italian language schools, the Italian American newspapers and Italian community organizations were suppressed during the war by the government. They never recovered.

While diversity has replaced assimilation as a goal for Americans in recent decades, Italian Americans were subjected to tremendous pressures to assimilate in previous decades, especially during the early decades of the 20th century when the nativist movement was at its height, and that pressure weakened the Italian spirit and the Italian communities further. This was a time when Italian immigrants were viewed as a threat to democratic institutions and were considered undesirable in the United States. These attitudes and perceptions toward Italians were acted out in various lynchings of Italian Americans across the nation and the Massachusetts trial and execution of Italian anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti in the 1920s.

Typically, Little Italys were located in the center of metropolitan cities with their beginnings as immigrant tenement blocks, usually relegated to the least desirable real estate within the city limits. Plans for urban renewal and interstate highways by local, state, and federal agencies were almost always on a collision course with these thriving "Little Italy" communities.

Government urban renewal projects targeted less desirable neighborhoods, especially those without a political voice and that meant Italian American communities and their physical destruction.

San Jose was such a community. Downtown San Jose had three distinct "Little Italy" communities. The oldest " Little Italy," the River Street area, was founded in 1850. Due to San Jose Airport in the 1930s, Highway 280 in the 1970s, and Highway 87 in the 1980s, coupled with suburbanization throughout the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, the three communities began to slowly suffer. The urban renewal projects fractured the three communities into sub-neighborhoods, separating Italian from Italian, to the point of total disbandment. San Jose's "Little Italy" communities are now just a mere memory.

Chicago faced nearly an identical situation. Chicago had four distinct "Little Italy" communities. During the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, one by one, the Italian American communities were overtaken by a highway, an expressway, a university, and a low-income housing project. While there continue to be Italian neighborhoods in Chicago, the larger "Little Italy" communities have ceased to exist because of government intervention.

Other major Italian American communities that have suffered a similar fate include Newark, Milwaukee, Madison, San Diego, Sacramento, Pittsburg, San Francisco, Cleveland and Boston,

In Missouri, the St Louis "Little Italy" community "**The Hill,**" was threatened during the 1970s by a highway project as well. Due to the relentless efforts of an Italian American priest. The Italian community, led by the priest, formed the Hill 2000 Committee and fought both the City and the State government unsuccessfully. They took their fight to the federal government and the President and finally saved their community from having a highway routed through their community. Today, the Hill is one of the largest and most successful Italian communities in the Nation.

The effect of urban renewal projects on Italian communities has been total destruction and the devastating cultural and communal cleansing of Italians. The close bonds of family and community in the Little Italy communities provided its inhabitants the kind of cultural, religious and language support Italian Americans have not received from the larger community or American institutions.

The Italian communities in the United States were not just geographical communities or urban villages but encompassed large numbers of people throughout metropolitan regions. These communities formed a distinctive and separate social system and were a source of personal identity and group cohesion. The physical destruction of the Italian neighborhoods resulted in the loss of a way of life, of livelihoods, of family and community and a large part of the Italian heritage, a heritage lost to today's Italian Americans.

For Italian Americans, a people who have evolved from Italian immigrant to Italian American ethnics to evolved ethnic Americans, the question is how do they reclaim, reshape and celebrate their Italian heritage during the next millennium.