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LITTLE ITALY IN AMERICA: **La Via Vecchia- Coming To America**

(Photo): Little Italy Sacramento, California: St. Marys Church Italian Catholic Federation #45 Woman's Drill Team in 1941

Throughout both the 19th and 20th Centuries immigrants from Italy were responsible for the establishment of hundreds of "Little Italy" communities across the world and the United States. Why did they come?

Italian people first began to immigrate to America in the early part of the 1600's along with many of the earliest settlers to the Virginia colony. But it wasn't until the 19th and 20th centuries that Italy experienced the largest migratory exodus in its history.

For four hundred years Italy had endured foreign invasion and control from Spain, France and Austria. In the mid 1800's, the Italian people revolted against foreign domination and in 1870, Italy became a unified country. Due to the occupation of Italy by foreign powers, Italy was plagued by extreme poverty and a large peasant class. After the revolution, Italian leaders hoped that the unification of Italy would improve the status of the Italian people.

Instead, the Unification of Italy in 1870 sparked an exodus which led to almost nine million Italians to cross the Atlantic to North and South America in search of the promises denied them by the unification movement. During the 50 year span of 1870 to 1920, twenty six million Italians left their homeland for a better life elsewhere in such continents as Europe, Africa, Australia and South America as well as the United States and Canada.

Some 6 million Italian immigrants have come to the United States of America to make a better life for themselves, their families and future generations. After emigration processing in Ellis Island (**nearly one-third of all immigrants that went through Ellis Island were Italian**), the immigrants primarily settled in the metropolitan centers and Italian agricultural communities across the United States. Italians typically went to cities and communities in which they had relatives or where Italian communities existed.

The Italian immigrants to America were primarily from villages with powerful local traditions and loyalties. Italian immigrants turned their blocks and neighborhoods in the heart of American cities into their substitute villages they had left behind. These communities became commonly referred to as "Little Italy." The Italian communities were not just geographical communities or urban villages but encompassed large numbers of people throughout metropolitan regions.

In the Little Italy's across America, Italians held strong loyalties to their heritage. In many Little Italy's, peoples from different regions of Italy settled in different sections. One reason was because of language barriers. Dialects were all that were spoken. Being able to speak their dialects gave the early immigrants a semblance of emotional order, because the transition they faced was enormous. The New World into which these immigrants had come was truly a new world for them, filled with cultural and linguistic diversity, and a new sense of racial prejudice and discrimination.

In the face of these immense obstacles, "Little Italy" communities provided a source of personal identity and group cohesion. The close bonds of family and community provided a sense of security and safety. It was the feeling of extended family and group belonging that gave this sense of safety. These people trusted one another and helped each other in time of need. The community was an intricate part of the Italians daily life. The community would come together as the extended family for a variety of both religious and traditional celebrations.

The Italian spirit and identity is a communal one: it has always been intimately connected to where Italians have come from and where they have lived. Italian people lovingly refer to this as "La Via Vecchia." - family, tradition, the life blood.

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