

"La Nostra Storia" The Italian Legacy in the Mother Lode

ITALIAN HERITAGE & COMMUNITY

(On display now at the Italian Cultural Center)



PHOTO ABOVE: *The Amador County Columbus Day Parade Float, c. 1890*

The story of the American West would be incomplete without telling the story of the Italian settlement of the West. This is especially true of California and the settlement of the Gold Country counties of the Mother lode of Northern California.

The Italians were one of the earliest and most important groups to settle in the California foothills of the Sierra Nevada referred to as the "Mother Lode." The Italian settlement in the Mother Lode began with the Gold Rush of the 1850s. From the 1850s through the 1880s and into the 20th century, Italian immigrants from Northern Italy, primarily from the area around Genoa in the region of Liguria, settled in large numbers in the Mother Lode counties of California's Gold Country. By 1856, the Italian Consul in California could report "there is not a village in California where the Italians are not well represented.

The Italians came early in the States history. Lured by the promise of land and gold, the early Italian pioneers of California came to stay. Here they could use the traditional skills of their cultural heritage to develop the land and the region. Their descendants still carry on the traditions brought to early California by the people from Italy.

PHOTO BELOW: *The Garibaldi Sisters on their way to town, Amador County, 1911*



Beginning with the Gold Rush, Italian miners played an important role in the mining industry. By the turn of the century the Italians were among the largest of the European groups in the mines. The early Italian miners left their legacy in historic places with names like *Italian Bar, Italian Camp, Italian Diggins, The Italian Mine*, and the *Italian Trail*.

Many of the Italian immigrants were woodcutters and stone masons. The landscape was covered by the cabins of Italian woodcutters who split the wood to make the charcoal used in the mining forges. They brought their skill in working with stone from Liguria, a rugged and mountainous land. The old stone terraces on today's Gold Country ranches and along its roadsides are a reminder of this cultural tradition.

Many Italians turned to farming and operated agricultural enterprises to feed the local population, which was isolated from major population centers. By the 1860's, Italian Gardens were operated throughout the Mother Lode. Italians were among the early wine makers in the Sierra foothills and introduced dry farming techniques from Italy to grow grapes.

A large number of Italian pioneer families made their living off cattle ranching and the foothills are dotted with Italian family ranches to the present day. One of the cultural traditions brought to the Gold Country by the Italian immigrants was the tradition of baking bread in outdoor stone ovens, a vital part of Italian culture, and which still operate where the Italians settled.

PHOTO BELOW: *Italian Ladies' Motorbike Outing, Amador County, 1910*



In the rural settlements of the foothills, miners and single men often lived in boarding houses owned and operated by fellow Italians. Many Italian merchants have operated businesses, mines, and general stores in the Mother Lode from the Gold Rush to the present.

The Italian immigrants also established their own cultural communities wherever they settled. A number of Italian organizations serve the Italians in the Mother Lode. The Italian benevolent Society established in 1881, holds an annual "Italian Festa" At its own " Italian Society Park at Sutter Hill in Amador County.

The story of these immigrants and the communities they established is often lost in the tales of the other groups who came to California but the Italians gave the Gold Country a distinctly Italian flavor that lingers to this day and their descendants continue to carry on the traditions of the people that came from Italy.

The exhibit, NOSTRA STORIA , tells the story of the Italian settlers to the "Mother Lode." and the more than 150 year legacy they have left in shaping the life of the California Gold Country. The contributions of the Italians are often unrecognized left out of the history books. This exhibit is our effort to preserve and safeguard this distinctive legacy.



PHOTO ABOVE: *The Seven Sisters arrived in Coulterville, Merced County, from Liguria in 1853*