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DISCRIMINATION AGAINST AND ADAPTATION OF ITALIANS IN THE COAL COUNTIES OF OKLAHOMA

DAVID G. LOCONTO

In the late 1800s and early 1900s coal reigned supreme in what is now southeastern Oklahoma. As was the case in the northeastern United States, Italians and other immigrants from southern and eastern Europe were brought in as a form of inexpensive labor to work the mines. Italians had different customs, a different language, a unique appearance, and a lack of training in mining compared with the American, English, Irish, and Scottish miners that preceded them. These differences were the foundation of an atmosphere in which immigrant groups would settle in communities. The results were struggles between southern and eastern European immigrants on one side, and American and western and northern European immigrants on the other. Italians as well as other southern or eastern European immigrant groups in Oklahoma suffered through this discrimination. Italians have since dealt with the stigma of discrimination and developed a stable economic industry within southeastern Oklahoma.

This essay is an account of the discrimination experienced by Italians and people of Italian descent in the coal counties of southeastern Oklahoma from the late nineteenth century to the present day. In addition, the methods of response from the Italian community in negotiation with the larger acculturative or assimilative forces will be discussed. In turn, this group has been able to maintain a stable and enduring ethnic identity in the heartland of America.

PIECING TOGETHER THE STORY OF ITALIAN IMMIGRANTS

To study the discriminatory processes and the subsequent responses negotiating these
processes toward and among Italian Americans in southeastern Oklahoma, I employed a variety of research methods. They include in-depth interviews and the analysis of archival sources. In-depth interviews were well suited for this study because they allow for the collection of a rich source of data and for follow-up questions and further probing. For example, the first respondents were identified by asking the priest at a local Catholic church for assistance. This led to interviews with three prominent individuals in the Italian community. As connections were made with these individuals, they allowed their names to be used as a reference in letters sent to 222 persons listed in the area telephone directory whose surnames were Italian and who had street addresses. In the letters, I described the purpose of the research and the types of information to be gathered, and I requested permission to conduct interviews. Some letters were returned because of problems with addresses, some were returned from family members who stated the target person was deceased, but only two wrote saying they were not of Italian descent. Of the 147 letters delivered, 60 respondents were interviewed. Most interviews occurred in group settings. Interviews combined structured, semi-structured, and unstructured formats, because the interview began with standard historical questions, and then gradually allowed each group (or individual) to discuss various issues related to the social dynamics (past and present) of their community and their being “Italian.” A major reason for conducting the interview in this manner was that 40 percent of the respondents were age 65 or over. It was easier for these individuals to reflect on their social world and discuss these issues in a chronological manner starting as far back as they could remember and proceeding forward in time. Initial interviews typically lasted two to three hours, with a number of follow-up interviews conducted over a twelve-month period. Most interviews occurred in people’s homes. Two took place in restaurants and one took place in a church.

Sixty individuals (thirty males and thirty females) were interviewed, fifty-eight of whom were of Italian descent. Ages of participants ranged from sixteen to ninety-eight. Twenty-four of the respondents were sixty-five or over, and another twenty-three were between the ages of thirty-five and forty-four. Three individuals were first-generation Italian Americans. Twenty-four were second generation; twenty-three were third generation; and eight were fourth generation. Twenty-four were, in their terms, “full-blood” Italians, seventeen were three-fourths, and fifteen were half Italian. The two individuals who were not of Italian descent proved to be quite valuable. One of the individuals worked for Saint Joseph’s Church in Krebs, while the other had been married to an Italian immigrant. Both individuals provided outsider information about the social dynamics of the region and offered suggestions on how to approach various individuals within the community. They also provided historical information about the region.

I examined numerous historical documents to add to the accounts provided by the informants, including a study on immigration sponsored by the Sixty-first Congress of the United States (1911). From the Oklahoma Historical Society in Oklahoma City I obtained various local newspapers from different time periods. In addition, I read minutes dating from 1904 through 1939 from Local Union 2327 (in Krebs) and the Italian fraternal organization Societa di Cristoforo Colombo (in Krebs). Finally, I examined mining reports from 1910 through 1955 and other historical documents found in the Pittsburg County Historical Society in McAlester, Oklahoma. Among the materials studied at that historical society were several collections of newspapers and personal testimonies by miners and residents of the area.

Additionally, I conducted observations over a two-year period from such places as restaurants, festivals, people’s homes, and business establishments. Various historical sites I visited included cemeteries, the Miners’ Monument, and the fairgrounds. My participation took the form of working at an ethnic festival,
garding for some of the elderly in the community, cooking meals with families, helping with the care of the elderly, and taking part in many family functions such as birthdays, anniversaries, and informal gatherings. This observation and participation gave me a sense of what aspects of Italian heritage were passed on, and what the people today consider important parts of their history.

**DISCRIMINATION**

Discrimination in the coal-mining areas of Oklahoma occurred in both the business and social sectors. In the 1870s, when people from southern and eastern Europe began entering the mines, there were problems with discrimination in the mining profession. Miners organized the first union, the Knights of Labor, but typically, the Americans, English, Welsh, Scots, and others did not want southern and eastern Europeans to join. Although southern and eastern European immigrants were not allowed in the unions, they still went on strike with other miners. Often these immigrants were singled out as instigators. A strike that occurred in 1894 was seen by some to be an insurrection begun by foreigners, mainly southern and eastern Europeans. One report from 1894 stated that “the majority of the miners who had struck were foreigners, and they either did not understand or did not respect American law and American institutions, and preferred anarchy rather than a reign of law and order.” When mining companies removed striking miners’ families from their homes, they placed them on trains for the Arkansas border. The governor of Arkansas during the 1894 strike stated he did not want “undesirable characters” in the state. Most of the striking miners then were southern and eastern Europeans.

The strike of 1898-1903 gave some hope to race relations, as common circumstance brought all miners together. However, neighborhoods continued to be segregated, and immigrant women and children rarely met “Americans.” A quotation from the United States Sixty-first Congress on Bituminous Mining states the overall sentiments of the United States and the people of southeastern Oklahoma toward Italians:

> The South Italians are slow in becoming Americanized and many in the coal regions who have been in this country from fifteen to twenty years are scarcely able to speak English. They live in colonies, have very little association with natives, and show little interest outside of their own immediate neighborhood. They are suspicious of Americans, do not trust their money to the banks, and trade at American shops as little as possible. They are making little progress toward Americanization. Each year the South Italians are investing more money in homes and real estate, and in becoming property owners, they are naturally led to take more interest in civic affairs. Even after the South Italian, however, has made his permanent home in the Southwest, he seems to make little effort to adopt American ways. He does not encourage his children in attending school but takes them away at an early age, thus preventing the second generation from having the opportunity of becoming assimilated. The children hear only Italian spoken in the colony and in the home, and their only opportunity to learn English is at school. . . . The Poles, Slovaks, and Magyars are almost as backward as South Italians.

These sentiments were common for years to come, and sometimes manifest themselves even today. Italians kept to themselves where numbers allowed, and women and children in particular did not associate with others outside their immigrant community. Children were exposed to Americans normally only at school. This was a source of hostility, as children were ridiculed and called names for being Italian and Catholic. Some reported being called “niggers.” In the early years of statehood and before, many Italians did not finish school, or they attended predominantly Italian schools. This may have postponed racially
hostile encounters simply by lack of contact. Hostilities did erupt, however, when Italians interacted with non-Italians. Many respondents talked about how they stood up for themselves, family, and friends against the Americans when being called names such as "dago" or "wop."

Although men were more likely to interact with others outside their colony and therefore experience discrimination, women retaliated as well when confronted with discrimination. For women, this discrimination often occurred in markets owned and/or operated by Italians. Italians had the reputation of being good cooks and for making excellent sausage. These markets were frequented by non-Italians for these delicacies. Several people interviewed in the various coal counties told stories of people coming in and asking for "dago bread." The stories vary from one place to another but follow the same pattern:

I remember when Ornorina was working at a local market owned by her father, when a woman came in and asked for some "dago bread." Ornorina, who was all of about five feet tall, walked around the counter and decked the woman, saying, "Here's your dago bread!"

Fights also occurred in the mines over racial issues. On January 10, 1914, during a race war at the Kali Inla Company coal mine in Cambria, Italian timberman Mike Satalia got in an altercation with Charles Doyle. Satalia died from a blow to the head with a mine timber, leaving his wife and four children. These fights were typically racially or
ethnically motivated. Nevertheless, Italians were staunch supporters of the new union, the United Mine Workers Association, and were ready and willing to buy into the ideology of the Anglo-Saxon socialist leaders who were prevalent in the first two decades of the twentieth century in Oklahoma. Concern about the socialist leanings of Italians led Americans to distrust them even more. However, this concern may be more of a justification for discriminatory behavior against Italians than a real concern, as socialism was popular in Oklahoma, especially in the 1914 and 1916 elections in the coal counties.

In the 1920s and 1930s Italian school-aged children experienced discrimination when they were bused to school in the nearby town. One second-generation Italian American tells the story of waiting for the school bus:

I would be out there in the morning waiting for the bus to take me to school. The bus would pull up, the door would open, and the bus driver would say “Protestant or Catholic?” I would say “Catholic” and the bus driver would shut the door and leave. I would have to wait for a car to come and take me to school just because I was Catholic.

Children would go to school and find themselves being attacked verbally for being Catholic. Several people interviewed talked about being called “cat-lickers.” The actual statement was “cat-lickers, cat-lickers, kiss the cat’s ass.” Many respondents stated that teachers would make up new names for the Italian students because they (the teachers) would not or could not pronounce their names correctly.

Italians also developed a reputation for making “choc beer” and selling it to help make ends meet. Americans would often stop to have some “choc” at the home of an Italian. This helped alleviate some problems associated with prejudice, as “choc” was popular. Often the police would call a home before raiding it, in order to give the occupant time to hide most of the “choc” but leave enough out for the police to find, destroy, and be able to report that they were successful in their endeavor to squelch the illegal activity. Although this kind of agreement showed a reduction in hostilities toward Italians, things would change when World War II began and Italy joined the Axis powers who were opposed to America and its allies.

Italians had always encountered some opposition for their aloofness and for their lack of trust, not only of American government but government in general. Italians were the slowest in getting their naturalization papers, and even after several decades, many Italian immigrants had not received theirs. Although these immigrants had businesses, owned land, and had children and grandchildren in the US military, many Oklahomans were concerned about them. Theodora Giacomo, at the time an elderly Italian immigrant who emigrated to Oklahoma in 1908, was shocked to find police entering her home and taking weapons and radios. Pete Prichard, who was already famous for his restaurant, “Pete’s Place,” had his home broken into by police, who removed weapons and radios. Frank and Eda Antonelli’s home was under surveillance. One immigrant woman remembers the police coming to her home:

My father used to love playing around with clocks. We had boxes of them. When the war broke out, suddenly the police came to the door [and made] their way in. They of course wanted all weapons and radios. However, they found this box of alarm clocks. They thought my father was building bombs. So they took them.

Italians were also harassed outside their homes. Angelo Bartolucci was an immigrant who was outspoken against military involvement in the war. This did not sit well with Oklahomans. One day, Bartolucci was forced to prove his allegiance to the flag and to America. Although Bartolucci did not belong to any subversive organizations and did not write anti-American literature, he was forced to
crawl up the steps of the courthouse building and kiss the American flag, supposedly to show his allegiance to the United States.20

Nevertheless, not all discrimination came from non-Italians. Early Italians initially made regional distinctions between themselves and other Italians. In the 1920s and 1930s Sicilians were still viewed as suspect. One gentleman brought home a friend who was Sicilian, and his mother said, “Don’t you ever bring that Siciliano in my house again!” It was for no other reason than the young man was Sicilian.21

In the postwar years discrimination seemed to be subsiding, but fears persisted. One Italian family who bought a flower shop retained the name of the shop, an already existing business. One reason was they knew the shop had a good following and reputation, but a second reason was that they were afraid no one in the neighborhood would patronize a flower shop with an Italian name.22

Fewer of the third-generation immigrants mentioned experiencing discrimination. Some told stories about people’s reactions if they dated non-Italians, stating that things were okay as long as the relationship did not get serious. If it did, the other person’s family would step in to stop it.23 One respondent said that her paternal grandparents could not stand the sight of their son, the respondent’s non-Italian father, with her mother, simply because she was Italian.24 Others stated that while in school in the 1970s and 1980s, they were called “mobsters,” “niggers,” “dagos,” “ravioli,” “spaghetti winders,” and “helicopters.” Some were still harassed for being Catholic. One woman mentioned being told by classmates to “wash the dirt off,” referring to her olive-colored skin.25 In a November 21, 1980, Shawnee News-Star article on Oklahoma’s Italian heritage, a reporter asked Bill Prichard (son of Pete) if prejudice still existed in the area. Bill Prichard’s response was “Does the sun come up in the morning?”

In the 1990s there continued to be some discrimination, more subtle perhaps. One respondent said, “There was an anti-Italian and anti-Catholic sentiment, and both of those are still pretty strong.”26 Another talked of a discussion he had with a non-Italian:

He said to me, “You know we refer to all of you as dagos.” And I said, “Yes, I do. And you know that I refer to you as a bunch of semiliterate hillbillies.”27

The second-generation Italians, now mostly more than 65 years old, still talk about attitudes of those around them. Some remarks are as follows:

You must never underestimate [prejudice] in terms of business . . . if you are in a profession. You must always be aware of the fact that this is an extremely strong Baptist area. It is the center of the Masonic life.

The antagonism is still here. We get along pretty well on a daily basis, but if we step on somebody’s toes the antagonism comes to the surface . . . . They never forget where you came [from].

My family has been here since 1883, but unless my name is Green, Brown, or Jones, you can’t pronounce it.29

One woman I spoke to, a non-Italian nurse who worked with elderly Italian Americans, seemed delighted to hear about my research on Italians in southeastern Oklahoma. Then she added, “Well, you know, they have their own dago day there. Of course we are not allowed to call them that, but they can call themselves dago.”28 In addition, mafia stereotypes persist, possibly more so since movies like The Godfather, Goodfellas, and Casino have been successful. Before I began this research, a person who grew up not far from the coal counties said that “the” headquarters of the mafia was in southeastern Oklahoma.

A respondent who wrote for a local newspaper stated that in the spring of 1998 a prospective teacher was refused a teaching position in the area. The respondent was told
privately by an alleged insider that it was because the applicant was Italian, Catholic, and from the East. As the respondent told it,

recently, a man was not hired because he was an easterner, Catholic, an Italian. . . . They said to me, if you do anything to bring this to light in the newspaper, we will do everything we can. We will use all our power to hurt you and your people politically and economically.30

Evidently, some strong anti-Italian sentiment still exists. At the end of his interview early in the process, one man gave me a stern warning: “Don’t get into certain areas when dealing with non-Italians.”31 I was not certain what to make of this statement, but nevertheless, I conversed mainly with those of Italian descent.

NEGOTIATION AND ADAPTATION

Any discussion of discrimination would be one-sided if the reactions and adaptations of the people being discriminated against were not addressed. In Oklahoma, Italians were criticized for adapting to the discrimination directed at them rather than attempting to assimilate into American society.32 Because transportation was seldom available, miners typically lived close to the mines in which they worked. Italians and Italian miners usually circulated in sufficient numbers to allow them to establish small communities called colonies.33 These colonies became microcosms of their villages in Italy.

This set into motion several dynamics of adjustment to the discrimination from the larger community. First, by living in colonies they could maintain various customs specific to their home culture. For example, they could continue to speak the language of their home country. Because they rarely came into contact with non-Italians, several immigrant women never learned English. Second, they used nicknames for self-identification, which is a typical practice in rural Italy even to this day.34 Nicknames were also used as an informal means of social control. Names such as Cacci, Cucci, Shoe-Peg, Pudgy, and Gummy were known mainly by those close to the colonies. This practice represents an aspect of the dynamic of insider-outsider knowledge.35 The outside group could establish knowledge kept from the more dominant, larger community. In doing
this, Italians maintained closed communities to which outsiders would have difficulties gaining access. This translated into Italians marrying within their communities or in Italy, setting up separate organizations, having separate festivals, and early on establishing businesses that catered to other Italians.

Marriage. In Oklahoma, marital patterns were similar to those in Italy. There were certain traditional preferences for a spouse, which were: (1) someone from one’s village in Italy; (2) someone from one’s region in Italy; (3) someone Italian; and (4) someone Catholic. Many stories abound of miners traveling to Italy to court a woman. Others tell of correspondence between males and females between Italy and America. Often, prospective brides would travel to America and stay in Oklahoma with family or friends from their village in Italy in order to be courted by the Italian miner.36 Because Italian Americans usually married others of Italian descent, isolation continued to manifest itself in the Italian community, and the proliferation of Italian identity in Oklahoma continued.

Once married, the new couple would typically stay with family or friends until enough money could be saved to buy a home. For the Italian immigrant, coming from a time and place of extreme poverty, owning land was imperative. There was a saying that “the land is gold.” Italians bought land to avoid any possibility of the absentee landlordism they experienced or heard of in Italy. One respondent stated that he still pays property taxes on land no bigger than his dining table.37

Organizations. The practices and traditions mentioned above were facilitated through the
many organizations that developed in the coal counties. Different fraternal organizations such as the Societa di Cristoforo Colombo, Stella D'Italia, Dante Alighieri, and many others were organized to help Italians adjust, adapt, and negotiate their way through their new life in America. Analysis of minutes from these organizations suggests that they mostly discussed collecting dues to help Italians in times of need and to help their fellow immigrants be successful in America. Religion, or more aptly, the Catholic church, was an avenue for organization and solidarity as a group. The Catholic church was a tie to the historical influences on the Italian people in the form of baptism, marriage, and last rites. For folk believers, as these immigrants were, the church provided the invaluable service of warding off evil spirits.

Festas. In the late 1800s various celebrations took place, such as the Feast of the Visitation and the Celebrations of Saint Anne and Our Lady of Mount Carmel, that were carried over from Italy. These festas were huge events—for example, the Our Lady of Mount Carmel festa lasted two days and featured a parade. In this festa an Italian band played, and a circus atmosphere ended the evening with dynamite exploding in the evening sky. This festa continues to this day. Although the other festas have stopped, including the Celebration of Saint Anne. A new Italian festival takes place every year that attracts more than 20,000 people. The early festas acted as a means of unifying the Italian people, as both southern and northern Italians would join together. Although the current Italian festival attracts few native Oklahoman Italians, it does renew interest in the various businesses in the area that specialize in Italian items.

Businesses. Not all those who lived in the mining counties were miners. The miners needed food, clothing, and the other necessities of living. Towns such as Hartshorne, Haileyville, Krebs, and McAlester developed to meet these needs. Italians, especially in Krebs, began to assert themselves in other lines of business. Nick Barone and Barney Tarochione bought a meat market; S. Domenico Giacomo and Vito Barzellone were founders of the Giacomo Wholesale Company. Paul Saffa was a promoter of general merchandise and delivered groceries and feed to the mining towns. Other notable Italians who engaged in the grocery business were Frank Duca, Dee Rich (Ricci), Joe Michael, and Steve Testa. The DeFrange (Di Frangia) brothers had a machine shop and the Loveras opened up a bottling plant that sold “soda pop.”
In some of the other towns Italians did well outside of mining. In Coalgate, in the first ten years of the twentieth century, the International State Bank had as their directors Italians Louis Bonino, Joe Flor, and John Gentilini. In McAlester, L. Pistocco opened a grocery store in 1897, and the Fassino brothers opened the McAlester Macaroni Factory. In Wilburton there was A. Maggi Grocery; Carignano Grocery, owned by Constantino Carignano; Fioretti Grocery, owned by Joe Fioretti; and the Big S Gas House owned by Dominic Giacomo. In several of the towns in the coal counties the Antonellis were opening markets and bakeries. They were one of the few Italian families who came to the coal counties not to mine. The Antonellis continued a tradition of grocery stores and bakeries that dates back centuries in Italy.41

As we have seen, in the early years (1874-1925) Italian immigrants and their families were adapting, adjusting, and negotiating their way into a successful way of life in America. However, their adaptations were seen as suspect by Americans because Italians did not become “American” enough. By keeping to themselves, Italians facilitated more animosity against them from the larger milieu. This divide helped facilitate the animosity that occurred during World War II and afterward.

Over the years some important changes occurred in the Italian community. Economic forces, including more than 90 percent unemployment in the 1930s, pushed many residents, Italian and non-Italian alike, from the area. To survive the economic depression that came in 1921 to the coal counties, everyone had to become more creative to make a living. For Italians, this came in the food industry. Interstate 69 runs through the area, connecting the Northern Plains with Oklahoma and, farther south, Dallas. Along the interstate in this area are four major Italian restaurants, an Italian deli, Italian market, and Italian bakery, which
provide comfortable and enjoyable rest stops for weary travelers. In addition, most businesses in Krebs use the colors of the Italian flag, and a new apartment complex is named Carovilli after the town from which many Italian immigrants had emigrated. When a third-generation Italian American and business owner was asked why the emphasis on Italian ethnicity for business was so prominent, he responded, “What else is there?” His message was clear; to succeed in an economically depressed area, one has to find the best means toward success. With “Italian” food being the number one ethnic food in the United States, the sale of Italian foodstuffs to travelers and locals has created a sustainable market, with some foodstuffs now being shipped throughout eastern Oklahoma.

The food industry and the Italian festival serve as beacons for people of Italian descent throughout the state of Oklahoma. With most of the other traditions now gone, several respondents were happy knowing that the restaurants and festival were there. Krebs markets itself as “Oklahoma’s Lil’ Italy.” This small token of Italianism has served to continue the communities’ ties to their Italian roots. With the success of the restaurants and the festival, more people that are not of Italian descent have gotten involved. This has continued the emphasis from the larger community to push the identity of “Italian” as a means of economic stability.

CONCLUSION

Over the last 125 years, Italians and Italian Americans have made a home for themselves in Oklahoma. They have faced pressures from the larger community to acculturate. This is a kind of discrimination that many ethnic groups have endured throughout the Midwest. In a struggle to survive both socially and economically, Italians in Oklahoma lived together in colonies. This provided stability. It also served to facilitate animosity toward them. Their adaptations, while suggesting that Italians were making an effort to make Oklahoma their home, only created greater struggles for them.
in their relations within the larger community, as it appeared they were resisting pressures to become Americans. Their insistence on dealing with their own, and on maintaining a foreign language, only made them bigger targets.

Yet, as the years passed, discrimination waned, becoming more subtle perhaps, and Italians became more industrious within the minimal economy that exists in southeastern Oklahoma. Gradually the existence of Italian foods and products became more and more appreciated by the larger community. The availability of travel not only allowed for Italians to travel outside of their communities, but allowed others to frequent businesses of Italians. However, these businesses serve another purpose for Italians both in and out of southeastern Oklahoma. Those of Italian descent look to these businesses run by Italians, such as Lovera’s Market, Krebs Corner, Pete’s Place, Rosenanna’s, GiaComo’s, the Isle of Capri, and many others, as maintaining some continuity with the past. This is a past of struggle and turmoil, but also excitement and beginnings. Italians in southeastern Oklahoma have adapted, adjusted, and negotiated against discrimination, and made their way into being Americans ... Italian Americans.

NOTES


4. These newspapers were identified through reading Ryan, Rehabilitation of the Oklahoma Coal Mining Communities, and Brown, Italians in Oklahoma.

5. Ryan, Rehabilitation of the Oklahoma Coal Mining Communities.


8. Anonymous, interview by author, Krebs, OK, July 1998. All remarks that are quoted but not documented in this article were asked to be kept confidential.


15. Choc beer, or “choc,” as it is known, was a recipe for beer that the Italians took from the Choctaw Indians. When Italians first came to the coal counties, they settled in what was the Choctaw Nation of Indian Territory, prior to Oklahoma’s statehood. With difficulties growing enough grapes or buying enough grapes to make wine, Italians began making choc. This tradition continues to this day.


20. Frank Cuzalina, interview by author, McAlester, OK, June 1998. Many others did say they knew about the incident; however, only Frank and his cousin Anthony Yohe volunteered the information.


25. This last statement came from Emily Prichard, interview by author, Krebs, OK, September 1998.


27. All remarks quoted here were asked to be kept confidential. The author conducted these interviews in McAlester, OK, June 1998.

28. Ibid.


31. Ibid.

32. US Congress, Sixty-first Congress on Bituminous Coal Mining.

33. Ibid.


40. Several people interviewed mentioned these professions that Italians were involved with. A document that proved useful was Pittsburg County, Oklahoma (Pittsburg County Historical and Genealogical Society, Inc., published by Henington Industries, Inc., 1997).