

Italian Farming in the Central Valley

Laura E. Ruberto (April 28, 2008)



Weaving together oral stories from California's Italian American farmers in the Central Valley.

The connection between Italian immigrant farming and the development of some of California's most important agricultural areas is one of many under-studied sites.

The Western Regional Chapter of the American Italian Historical Association and Las Positas College in Livermore held the first of a series of programs on Italians' relationship to the land and farming



here in the Golden State. The one-day conference, held on April 19, focused on the Central Valley areas of Modesto, Madera, Stockton, and Fresno. It presented an opportunity to gather (listen and video record) first-person testimonial accounts of Italian American families' histories.

The details of the stories are far too vast to begin to document here (some of the information may some day become part of the CIAP, the California Italian American Project). It was a validating experience for those who were given an opportunity to share their families' stories of emigration from Italy and settlement in California.

At the same time, if woven together, the stories presented create a narrative history that is much broader and revealing than any one isolated account. A proper collection of these oral stories would reveal not only a specific history of Italian Americans in California, but also the history of

- the farming industry itself, its development in relation to mechanization and the effect that had on labor practices and community development. The role of the American Farmland Trust in relation to urban encroachment and the incorporation of eco-friendly farming techniques are some related issues.

- ancillary industries (especially those that particularly involved women) that developed because of farming. These include industrial canning and drying, but also more informal yard drying processes (that likewise translated in increased socio-economic mobility for families).

- the changing roles for Italian American men and women, in relation to their position in their families, their communities, and their jobs.

- immigration patterns. A mapping of the trans- and intra- national immigration histories of Italian farmers in California would demonstrate movement back and forth across the Atlantic, movement within the U.S., as well as to/from South America, including from spots that are less-talked about, like Cuba.

- how Italian Americans interacted with (in relation both to work and "private lives") other immigrant groups. Quite rapidly, in most cases, Italian immigrants moved from sharecropping and day labor jobs, to being the bosses, and hiring other farm workers. It was rare that other Italians (beyond family) worked as farm hands. Migration from the American Southwest is important to consider here, as well as the Bracero Program.

- Italian American assimilation and social mobility: the role farming and rural culture play in greater issues of race and class (very much tied to other issues, like who Italians hired).

There were so many perspectives it's hard for me not to try and paraphrase a few here:

* Dan Bava described how for ten years his family drove two buses from Modesto to Oakland (about 2 hours away) to gather African American workers outside of bars and drive them back to Modesto to pick peaches: "It's not a good story, but we had to survive." I appreciated this frank honesty.

* Ninette Bavaro-Latronica compared her farming father's relationship with the land to an artist's with a canvas—detailing the pruning, the care taken in planting, etc.—she described



his work as “performing art on land”. What would it be like to theorize the land through the lens of vernacular theories of art and culture?

* Denis Prospero, a fourth generation farmer, reminded us that farming is a job, and indeed, today, a business. There was something refreshing in this perspective. Farming is not merely a way of life, it is not some particularly romantic or nostalgic emotional tie Italians have to the land and hard work, it is a business.

Daniel Cornford in his introduction to [Working People of California](#) [2] (a fabulous book even with little evidence of Italian Americans’ involvement in the state’s development), reminds us of some of the trends of California social historians, who are “wary of the celebrationist and consensual framework of their predecessors,” and instead emphasize creating a social history by “unravell[ing] and explor[ing] the experience of California working people . . . [by] examin[ing] the lives of these people from a much more microrcosmic perspective” (10).

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[2] <http://www.amazon.com/Working-People-California-Daniel-Cornford/dp/0520088654>

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