

A HISTORY OF THE ITALIANS IN
PITTSBURG COUNTY,
OKLAHOMA

By

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PREFACE

This study is a general survey of the Italian immigrants of Pittsburg County, Oklahoma. Factors responsible for their immigration, their lives as coal miners, and their cultural traits and institutions are given, and appropriate information is also provided to describe and contrast their lifestyles in Italy. The primary objective is to show that the process of assimilation was very strong and became virtually complete. The time period covered lies largely between 1872 and 1930, which roughly coincides with the coal mining era in Oklahoma; however, subsequent events and descriptions are given to illustrate better the process of assimilation. Pittsburg County was chosen because it had the largest Italian population and represented a cross section of the Italians who came to the state. The author hopes that this study will help to understand more fully the forces and people who shaped Oklahoma history, to provide background information on Italian immigration into Oklahoma, and to determine if Oklahoma was a true melting pot for the Italians.

The author wishes to express his appreciation to his major adviser, Dr. Norbert Mahnken, for his patience and guidance throughout this study. Gratitude is extended also to Dr. LeRoy Fischer for his critical comments on both content and style. Also a note of thanks is given to Dr. Douglas Hale for leading me to this topic in his seminar on immigrants and for showing interest and providing help afterward.

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CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND AND EMIGRATION FROM ITALY

Introduction

The Italians were the largest and one of the most colorful groups of immigrants who came to the coal mines of Oklahoma between the 1870s and 1920s. Located in what was originally the Choctaw Nation of Indian Territory, the rich bituminous coal fields of Pittsburg County attracted more Italians than any other area of the state. However, in comparison to those days when the coal mines were thriving, few traces of Italian influence now exist in these old communities. Probably the most conspicuous evidence is found in the bakeries and restaurants with Italian names located in McAlester and Krebs. In many towns, phone directories are dotted with names that are obviously Italian. In Krebs, a cluster of houses in the area of an old mine are largely inhabited by Italians of the second and third generations. However, the people otherwise are almost totally assimilated; they wear cowboy hats and drive pickup trucks; they wear fashionable suits and sell insurance, and they wear blue jeans and attend high school. They are generally recognized as Italian only by their names.

In the days of extensive coal mining in Oklahoma, the situation was different. The Italians immigrated to the area in a period marked by a mass exodus from their native land, occurring in the late

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They came from a region that was underdeveloped and chaotic. Although Italy had experienced a glorious past, it was one of the last countries in Europe to emerge as a united and centralized nation. As a result, the country that was formed was backward both economically and socially in comparison with adjacent areas. This unfortunate situation led to a large emigration from Italy to various countries of Europe and the Western Hemisphere. From 1875 to 1920, the promise of good wages drew several thousand of these immigrants to present-day Pittsburg County, where they faced new conditions and situations that forced them to lose some of their unique characteristics. Nevertheless, they also retained many of their social institutions and cultural traits throughout the years of prosperity in the coal mining district, and they developed a disposition that was half-Italian and half-American. Eventually even this situation changed and the Italians of Pittsburg County became virtually totally assimilated.

The Unification of Italian States

These Italians immigrated to their new homes in Pittsburg County and elsewhere because of the unfortunate economic situation in Italy. These poor conditions were largely caused by Italy's delay in unifying into a single national unit, a situation with roots deep in history. Beginning in the fifth century when Rome fell to the barbarians from the north, present-day Italy was reduced to a collection of several city-states and small political units. This was vastly different from the days of the Roman Empire when the Italian peninsula had been the center of the civilized world. Throughout the Middle Ages these small

areas were incorporated into a number of principalities that constantly bickered with each other and continually fought with foreign invaders. However, because of the strategic location on the Mediterranean, Italy remained virtually the only link between Europe and Asia, and by the late Middle Ages and throughout the Renaissance, its city-states regained the leadership in the arts, industry, agriculture, and banking.¹

The resurgence of Italy as the dominating cultural and financial center of the world did not last long. By 1500 the focus of such activities switched to England, Spain, France, and other countries on the Atlantic. These Western European countries surpassed Italy because of the discovery of North America which made their position more favorable for world trade. Also these nations had become unified under strong central governments, a situation advantageous to and necessary for economic growth. Italy remained only a geographic expression composed of several competitive small kingdoms; also Spain, Austria, and France invaded and controlled much of the peninsula throughout the decades that followed. The retarded development during this period caused Italy to fall far behind other nations and became a burden that would lead to economic stagnation.²

Ironically, the Napoleonic invasion and occupation helped to create the nationalistic desire and economic drive that led to the belated formation of the Italian state. Between 1796 and 1814, Napoleon unified much of the peninsula, and it was considered one political unit for the first time in centuries. The French imposed a strong centralized government which led to economic improvements primarily in northern Italy but through much of the South as well. A limited

industrial revolution followed which provided the technology and capital that later became important in the unification process. After the defeat of Napoleon in 1814, the region lapsed into the previous state of fragmentation and disorganization, nevertheless, many Italians retained the new nationalistic ideas. The northern kingdoms that had expanded economically and the sons of Italians who had grown wealthy under Napoleonic rule led in the battle to form the nation.³

The period between 1814 and the unification of Italy in 1860 was known as the risorgimento, and involved the complex formation of the country. The Italians from the new commercial class began to realize that unification would be very advantageous economically. If the small countries located on or near the peninsula were combined into one nation, tariffs and undue taxes would be eliminated or reduced, and a centralized government would also be able to provide roads and railroads for transportation of goods. Many future-oriented Italians also became excited about the possibility of a new Suez Canal and believed that Italy could become the center of world trade again if the country were unified politically and economically.

Writers and philosophers added to this new spirit by giving to Italians a consciousness of nationalism and romanticism similar to the ideas that were sweeping Europe during the early nineteenth century. As a result, idealistic students, disgruntled soldiers, radical republicans, starving peasants, and others began opposing the established leaders in the various provinces. Many of these people joined secret societies and were involved in attempts to overthrow their despotic rulers. This culminated in the Revolution of 1848-1849, which brought together various revolutionaries in an unsuccessful attempt to unite

Italy. However, more realistic methods and leaders were necessary to unite Italy.⁴

A major obstacle to the formation of the Italian nation was the failure of any one of the small kingdoms to become powerful enough to lead the others. The idealistic philosophy necessary for this endeavor came from Giuseppe Mazzini. As a revolutionary democrat with utopian ideas, he tried to instigate a general insurrection that would have unified Italy and would have given the suppressed peasants a position of equality with the ruling classes. Although many Italians accepted Mazzini's goals, the actual unification was accomplished by Piedmont's Prime Minister Camillo Benso di Cavour and the guerrilla general Giuseppe Garibaldi. Cavour used an alliance with French emperor Napoleon III to oust the Austrians and to support the assimilation of much of Italy into one country. At the same time, he took advantage of Garibaldi's exploits in southern Italy by sending the Piedmontese Army to take possession of the lands that Garibaldi had liberated. In 1860, only Venetia and Rome remained outside the new country, but by 1870 these areas were also incorporated as part of the nation.⁵

Problems Leading to Emigration

The unified Italy that resulted from the leadership of Cavour was not the utopia that many of the revolutionaries had hoped for. Cavour had supported change but was moderate or even conservative in his approach, and feared that a complete break with tradition would be disastrous. As a result, the new government was a monarchy, and Victor Emmanuel II, originally the ruler of Piedmont, became the King of Italy. His control over the ministers and parliament was

ITALY



Figure 1. Map of Italy

overwhelming and continued to be substantial until his death. Thus in the years that followed unification, the conservatism of the government persisted, and the country changed only gradually. Already far behind many western European countries politically, socially and economically, Italy continued to develop slowly. The result was a stagnating economic situation that led to a mass exodus from the country.⁶

Inequitable land ownership was a major socio-economic problem that had developed centuries before unification and persisted afterward. The control of land by a select few had been established under the feudal system in medieval times when only nobility could own land. As in many other areas of progress, Italians were slow to change this situation and actually never fully outgrew the practice. In the eighteenth century in Tuscany and Sardinia, some reforms were attempted when a few of the large estates were broken up and sold to some of the peasants, but most of this land eventually reverted to the large holdings. Following the invasion of Napoleon, feudalism generally was abolished; unfortunately the obligations and responsibilities of the landlords also vanished. Peasants were allowed to buy land, but, as with the earlier attempts, the land returned to large land owners due to the peasants' financial inability to run the farms.⁷

Following unification, a new middle class of landed gentry and merchants successfully challenged the old nobility for a prominent position in society. These new leaders, however, were only a small part of the population, and the masses continued to consist of poor peasants. In the early years of nationhood reform again was

attempted as church lands and communally-owned plots were auctioned off with the hope of providing better distribution of the lands. In addition, many peasants bought other private lands, yet the old pattern repeated and large land owners eventually regained their holdings. The poor quality of the land and the harsh taxation of the new government overburdened the small farmers to the point that they had to sell. As a result, the number of persons owning property actually declined between 1861 and 1901, and the control by the large proprietors continued. In southern Italy the latifundi, or large plantation-like farms, predominated, and most farmers were simply day laborers. The mezzadria system, or sharecropping, became the usual mode of agriculture in central Italy. Farming in northern Italy also involved large holdings, but there the plight of the peasant was lessened somewhat by the growth of industry.⁸

A related socioeconomic problem in Italy was the southern question which involved economic conditions in six provinces: Abruzzi, Campania, Apulia, Basilicata, Calabria, and Sicily. At the time the nation was formed, these areas were much less developed than those in northern Italy, and in subsequent years the situation worsened as the economy of the South fell far behind that of the areas to the north. In southern Italy this largely was due to the strong dependency on agriculture which progressed very slowly. The area had a scarcity of water and mineral resources, as well as transportation problems which retarded development of industry. On the other hand, conditions in northern Italy, although not ideal, allowed that region to prosper to a much larger degree. The North had a better supply of raw materials, fairly adequate transportation, and a location near the

more industrialized countries.⁹

The social and political disparities were probably the most distressing aspects of the southern question. From the beginning, the people in the South became so troublesome that troops were sent from the North to occupy the area and prevent revolt. The southerners resisted the intrusion of northern control. Nevertheless, because many of the leaders of unification came from the North, representatives of that region continued to exert dominant governmental influence. These politicians often supported legislation which aided the industrial North at the expense of the agricultural South. For instance, in the 1880s Italy passed tariffs designed to protect industry; however, this provoked a retaliatory trade war with France, and agriculture, particularly in the South, suffered. Even more unfair were the disproportionate tax rates that were charged in the South. In 1891 an economist estimated that northern Italy contained 48 percent of the nation's wealth and paid only 40 percent of the taxes; on the other hand, the central and southern portions of the country contained 52 percent of the wealth and paid 60 percent of the revenue to the government. Furthermore, the literacy rate was lower and the poverty rate higher in the South. Crime and corruption also became famous in this area with the formation of extralegal groups such as the mafia in Sicily and the camorra in Naples.¹⁰

Citizens in the North sometimes explained these differences by declaring or implying that southern Italians were racially degenerate—an attitude which continued into the twentieth century. Even when these prejudices changed, northerners continued to regard the southerners as idle and an impediment to progress. On the other hand,

southerners often claimed that self-seeking groups in the North had caused the problems by squeezing high profits and blocking progress in the South. These social attitudes, the political imbalance, and, most important of all, the poor economic conditions led to a mass emigration from the South between 1905 and 1913. In this period, approximately one half of Italy's emigrants came from that region.¹¹

Another problem strongly affecting Italy was the continuing stagnation of the economy. Both agricultural and industrial pursuits failed to prosper and caused hundreds of Italians to seek better conditions in foreign countries. Initially, farming techniques and equipment improved as new crops, fertilizers, plows, reapers, and mowers increased in numbers. However, most of Italy's agricultural population remained at the subsistence level throughout the 1800s. The most basic problem was the scarcity of good farm land in this largely mountainous country that was only half arable. Conditions were particularly dismal from 1874 to 1896 during the prolonged national depression which caused many people to lose their farms. In Sardinia, for example, so much land was lost by small owners that one half the active population was involved. Between 1888 and 1898, the tariff war with France particularly damaged several agricultural pursuits; notably, the producers of wine, olive oil, and fruit suffered. Even though limited prosperity eventually developed, after 1900 certain types of farmers periodically suffered disasters. In 1903 phylloxera destroyed many of the vineyards, while crop failures and falling prices also caused an intolerable situation which led to emigration. The poor peasant farmers who constituted one half the population were barely able to produce sufficient food for their

families. Bread, wine, minestrone, and a little meat made up the average diet, and farm dwellings were so inadequate that peasant families often slept with animals for warmth in the winter.¹²

As in agriculture, progress in industry came very slowly and incompletely to Italy, which also helped lead to a mass migration from the country. Local industrial expansion occurred between 1896 and 1908 in the northern areas of Lombardy, Tuscany, Liguria, and Piedmont; however, the growth was not sufficient to support the unemployed who were flooding the cities from the agricultural regions. Generally, industry did not develop rapidly due to the absence of many of the important natural resources in Italy; also little capital was available to invest in expansion. In 1912 Italy had not equalled even Austria-Hungary in industrial progress, and the agricultural segment of the economy continued to be larger until the 1930s. Furthermore, urban living conditions were only slightly better than those on the land. The industrial worker labored twelve to fourteen hours a day and went home to a dwelling that by American standards would have been called a shack.¹³

Emigration

While social inequities and the economic retardation in Italy discouraged many of its citizens, overpopulation further increased pressure on the people. Between 1871 and 1905, the number of Italians increased by 25 percent in spite of a large emigration, and the population density increased from 257 per square mile to 294. Large scale emigration was understandable. More than twenty-five million left Italy in its first hundred years of existence as a nation.¹⁴

Initially, the migration of Italians was internal with large numbers leaving the agricultural areas and settling in the cities. The first emigration consisted of northern Italians going to neighboring European countries, and most of these returned after a short stay. This pattern of migration changed in the 1880s and 1890s with the exodus of southern Italians from Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Abruzzi, and Sicily. The initial flow of trans-oceanic emigration went first to Brazil and Argentina, but by the late 1890s a much larger number of Italians, mostly from the South, were going to the United States. Although the majority of these returned home, they tended to stay abroad more permanently than their northern compatriots who went to European countries. The exodus from Italy which started as a trickle, developed into a flood of people by 1900. The annual out-migration between 1861 and 1870 was 121,040; however, between 1901 and 1910, the average was 602,669. Thereafter, the number dropped significantly.¹⁵

Migration from Italy tended to follow clearly discernable patterns. Approximately four fifths of the emigrants were males between twenty and fifty years of age. Many of these men would go first, then send for their wives or women they wanted to marry. Only after 1887 did whole families go abroad together, though the tendency for men to go alone still predominated. Occasionally virtually entire populations of some villages travelled to America; a few of the hamlets in the more remote districts of Italy retained a population of only old men, women and children. In 1902, Prime Minister Giuseppe Zanardelli made a trip through South Italy and was shocked by the mayor of Moliterno who greeted him "on behalf of the eight thousand people in

this commune, three thousand of whom are in America and the other five thousand preparing to follow them."¹⁶

The Italians who came to the United States were part of the great historical epic of immigration. During the early and middle nineteenth century thousands of foreigners entered the country, the large majority of these coming from the British Isles and western and northern Europe. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the trend changed as millions of southern and eastern Europeans entered the country, coming from Russia, Austria-Hungary, and Italy. These people were generally uneducated and had strange languages and customs, yet they came in large numbers and were gradually assimilated into American society.

By 1920 the total migration from Italy to the United States was 4,195,880. This influx into the United States started very slowly; for example, only 12,354 entered in 1880. The amount increased significantly after 1900, the top years being 1907 with 285,731 and 1914 with 283,738. Although the number of newcomers was great, over half did not become permanent residents of the United States but returned to their homeland. Those who remained congregated primarily in the cities of New York and neighboring states; for example, the 1900 census indicated that a majority of the Italians lived in cities with more than 25,000 inhabitants. In 1910, the average Italian entering the United States had only about seventeen dollars in his pocket; therefore it was necessary for him to accept the first employment available in the metropolitan areas of the northeast coast. Yet, whenever possible, Italians sought the highest paying jobs. Thus hundreds went to different areas in the United

States where they found employment on construction projects, in industries, on railroads, as ditch diggers, and in mines—including those in Pittsburg County, Oklahoma.¹⁷

TABLE I
 IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES
 FROM ITALY, BY YEAR, 1880-1920

1880 = 12,354	1894 = 42,977	1908 = 128,503
1881 = 15,401	1895 = 35,427	1909 = 183,218
1882 = 32,159	1896 = 68,060	1910 = 215,537
1883 = 31,792	1897 = 59,431	1911 = 182,882
1884 = 16,510	1898 = 58,613	1912 = 157,134
1885 = 13,642	1899 = 77,419	1913 = 265,542
1886 = 21,315	1900 = 100,135	1914 = 283,738
1887 = 47,622	1901 = 135,996	1915 = 49,688
1888 = 51,558	1902 = 178,375	1916 = 33,665
1889 = 25,307	1903 = 230,622	1917 = 34,596
1890 = 52,003	1904 = 193,296	1918 = 5,250
1891 = 76,055	1905 = 221,479	1919 = 1,884
1892 = 61,631	1906 = 273,120	1920 = 95,145
1893 = 72,145	1907 = 285,731	

Source: U.S., Bureau of the Census, Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1957 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1957), pp. 56-57.

TABLE II
 NUMBER OF PERMANENT ITALIAN-BORN SETTLERS
 COMPARED WITH TOTAL NUMBER
 OF ITALIAN IMMIGRANTS

Permanent Settlers	Total Immigrants
1860 = 11,677	1860 = 13,793
1870 = 17,157	1870 = 25,518
1880 = 44,230	1880 = 81,277
1890 = 182,580	1890 = 388,586
1900 = 484,027	1900 = 1,040,479
1910 = 1,343,125	1910 = 3,086,356
1920 = 1,610,113	1920 = 4,195,880

Source: U.S., Bureau of the Census, Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1957 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1957), pp. 56-57, 66.

FOOTNOTES

¹Shepard B. Clough, The Economic History of Modern Italy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), p. 1; Denis Mack Smith, Italy: A Modern History (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1969), p. 6; Clough, The Economic History of Modern Italy, p. 1.

²Ibid., pp. 1-2; Mack Smith, Italy, pp. 6-7.

³Ibid., pp. 8-9.

⁴Ibid., pp. 9-12.

⁵Christopher Seton-Watson, Italy from Liberalism to Fascism, 1870-1925 (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1967), pp. 3-8.

⁶Mack Smith, Italy, p. 27; Seton-Watson, Italy from Liberalism to Fascism, p. 16.

⁷Clough, The Economic History of Modern Italy, pp. 13-14; Mack Smith, Italy, pp. 38-39.

⁸Ibid., p. 36; Clough, The Economic History of Modern Italy, pp. 48-49; Mack Smith, Italy, p. 49; Eliot Lord, John J. D. Trenor, and Samuel J. Barrows, The Italian in America (New York: B. F. Buck, 1905), p. 41; Mack Smith, Italy, p. 49; Clough, The Economic History of Modern Italy, pp. 100-103.

⁹Clough, The Economic History of Modern Italy, pp. 164-166.

¹⁰Mack Smith, Italy, pp. 69-70; Lord, The Italian in America, pp. 41-42; Clough, The Economic History of Modern Italy, p. 164; Mack Smith, Italy, p. 238.

¹¹Seton-Watson, Italy from Liberalism to Fascism, pp. 322, 314.

¹²Clough, The Economic History of Modern Italy, pp. 104, 100, 137-138, 121, 116-117; Lord, The Italian in America, p. 46; Clough, The Economic History of Modern Italy, p. 142.

¹³Seton-Watson, Italy from Liberalism to Fascism, p. 285; Lawrence Frank Pisani, The Italian in America: A Social Study and History (New York: Exposition Press, 1957), pp. 46-47; Seton-Watson, Italy from Liberalism to Facism, p. 297; Clough, The Economic History of Modern Italy, pp. 372, 143.

¹⁴Pisani, The Italian in America, p. 47; Lord, The Italian in America, p. 40; Clough, The Economic History of Modern Italy, p. 139.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 138; Mack Smith, Italy, pp. 240-241; Seton-Watson, Italy from Liberalism to Fascism, p. 312; Clough, The Economic History of Modern Italy, p. 381.

¹⁶Seton-Watson, Italy from Liberalism to Fascism, p. 315; Mack Smith, Italy, p. 242.

¹⁷United States Bureau of the Census, Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1957 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1957), pp. 56-57, 66; United States Senate, 61st Congress, 3rd Session, Senate Document 633: Reports of the Immigration Commission, Vol. III: Statistical Review of Immigration, 1818-1910—Distribution of Immigration, 1850-1900 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1911), p. 426; Pisani, The Italian in America, pp. 60-61, 87-88.

CHAPTER II

ITALIAN IMMIGRATION TO PITTSBURG COUNTY, OKLAHOMA

The Coal Mining Region

The immigration of Italians to Pittsburg County, Oklahoma, was closely tied to the development of the coal mines. Government officials had known of coal deposits in the area as early as the 1830s, when the Five Civilized Tribes were relocated in Indian Territory. The first white man to take advantage of these resources was J. J. McAlester, owner of a general store at the juncture of the Texas Road and the California Trail in the Choctaw Nation. McAlester came to the area because he had previously seen a geologist's notebook which indicated that the richest deposits of coal lay near the Cross Roads. In 1872, he took a wagonload of this top-grade bituminous coal to officials of the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas Railroad at Parsons, Kansas. The high quality of the coal and McAlester's persuasion induced the officials to develop an interest in the coal resources around the settlement that later became McAlester. The Missouri, Kansas, and Texas Railroad was the first customer for Oklahoma coal; eventually this railroad and others would come to own most of the mines in the area.¹

Although the first mines in Indian Territory opened near McAlester in 1873, the first major operation was established in Krebs in 1875.

With the building of new railroads throughout the coal mining district, other communities developed. In Pittsburg County the principal coal producing area included a number of towns that extended in a line running eastward from the McAlester-Krebs area; these included Alderson, Bache, Dow, Hartshorne, and Haileyville. Near this same area were Richville, Buck, Carbon, Adamson, and Pochohantas; also in other parts of the county were Savanna, Kiowa, Pittsburg, and Quinton. Pittsburg County produced more coal than any other, but three other counties also became important: Coal, Latimer, and Okmulgee.²

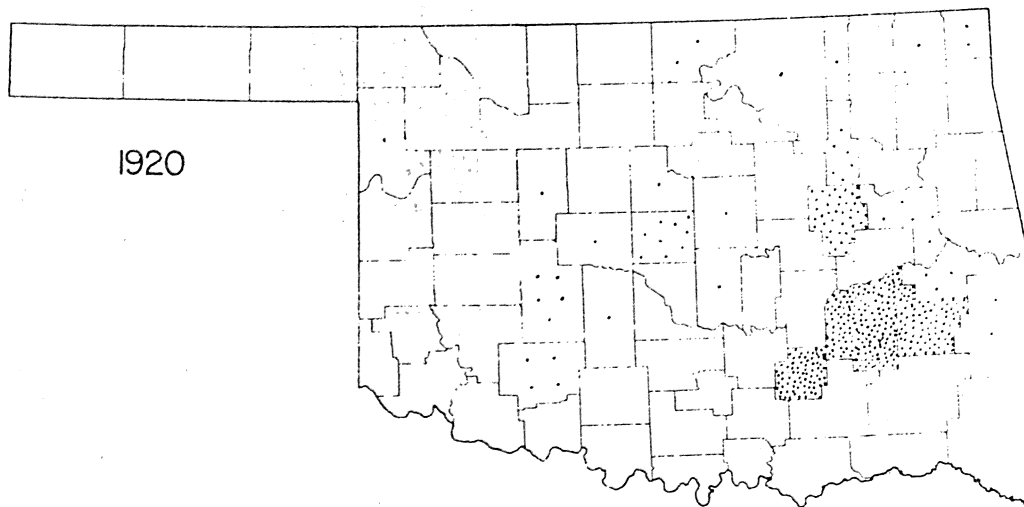
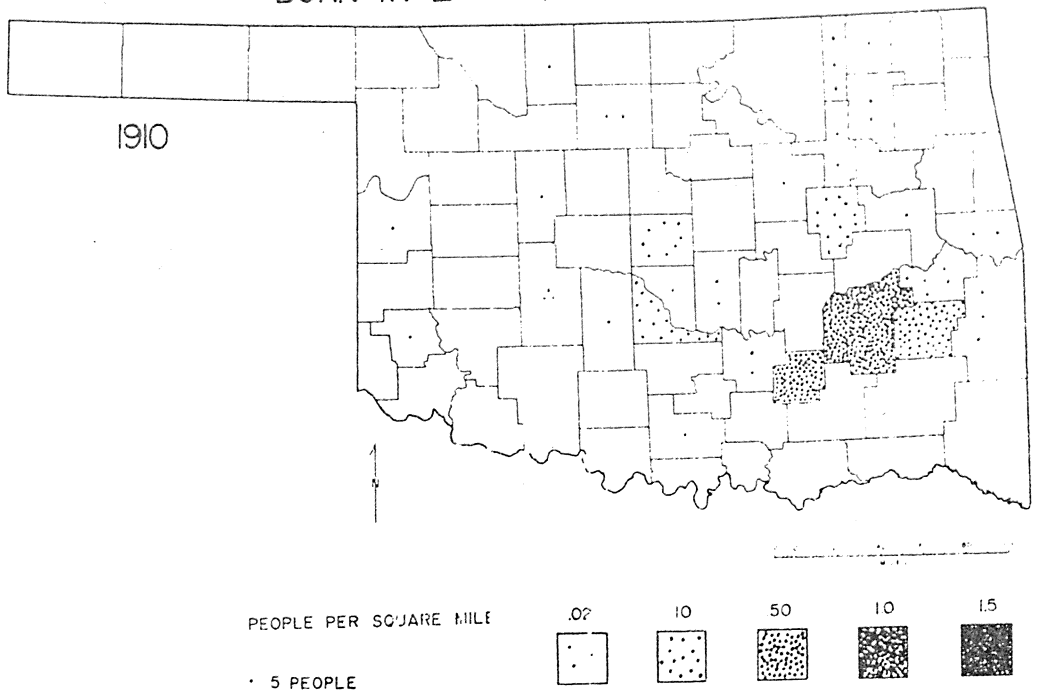
The labor supply was a problem in these areas from the beginning. Few white men lived in Indian Territory, and the Choctaw Indians were less than enthusiastic about mining. As a result, company agents were sent to other coal fields in the United States to recruit miners, most of whom were immigrants. In 1873 and 1874 the first workers were brought in, mostly from Pennsylvania, composed of Americans, English, Irish, Scots, and Welshmen. Some southern and eastern Europeans, including Italians, also arrived with these first groups; but they were few in number. The English-speaking miners became discouraged by the living conditions in this frontier area because there were no towns or cities. The operators of the mines also disliked the English-speaking miners due to their inclination to support the labor movement; therefore southern and eastern Europeans were brought into the area in increasing numbers as the mines developed. Though some of the early immigrants were paid to visit their homelands and persuade their friends to return with them under contract to work in the coal fields of Indian Territory; the majority

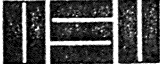
of the early foreigners came from the other mining areas of the United States.³

In general, Oklahoma had a small alien population during the height of immigration in the early twentieth century; however, in the mining region and a few other areas, foreigners made up a large portion of the population. In 1910, the three major coal producing counties had the largest percentages of foreign-born population in the state—Coal (10 percent), Latimer (7.8 percent), and Pittsburg (7.1 percent). Furthermore, the population of these three counties averaged 17 percent foreign stock (foreign born, native born with both parents born in a foreign country, and native born of mixed parentage). Okmulgee County, also important in coal mining, had only 2.1 percent in 1910, but by 1920 the numbers of foreign born increased in this county where coal mining developed late. The immigrants throughout the four areas totaled 6,270 in 1910, and primarily consisted of natives of the British Isles, Russia, Poland, Germany, Lithuania, Mexico and Italy. The largest single group were Italians. The first of these entered the region in 1875, and it was estimated that two or three hundred were in the vicinity in 1883. Thereafter they increased in number, and over 2,200 foreign-born Italians populated the four major coal producing counties in 1910 and composed about one third of the total foreign-born population in the area.⁴

Pittsburg County claimed the largest number of immigrants in the coal-producing area and the second highest in the state with 3,367 listed in 1910. Of the foreign-born residents, the Italians were by far the largest single nationality numbering 1,398. The principal Italian colony in the county, as well as in the state, was in Krebs.

NUMBER OF OKLAHOMA RESIDENTS BORN IN ITALY, BY COUNTY



CARTOGRAPHIC LABORATORY
 DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY

 OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY

SOURCE U.S. CENSUS

COMPILED KENNY L. BROWN

CARTOGRAPHER GERALD W. HARPER

Figure 2. Dot Map of Oklahoma Residents Born in Italy, By County, 1910

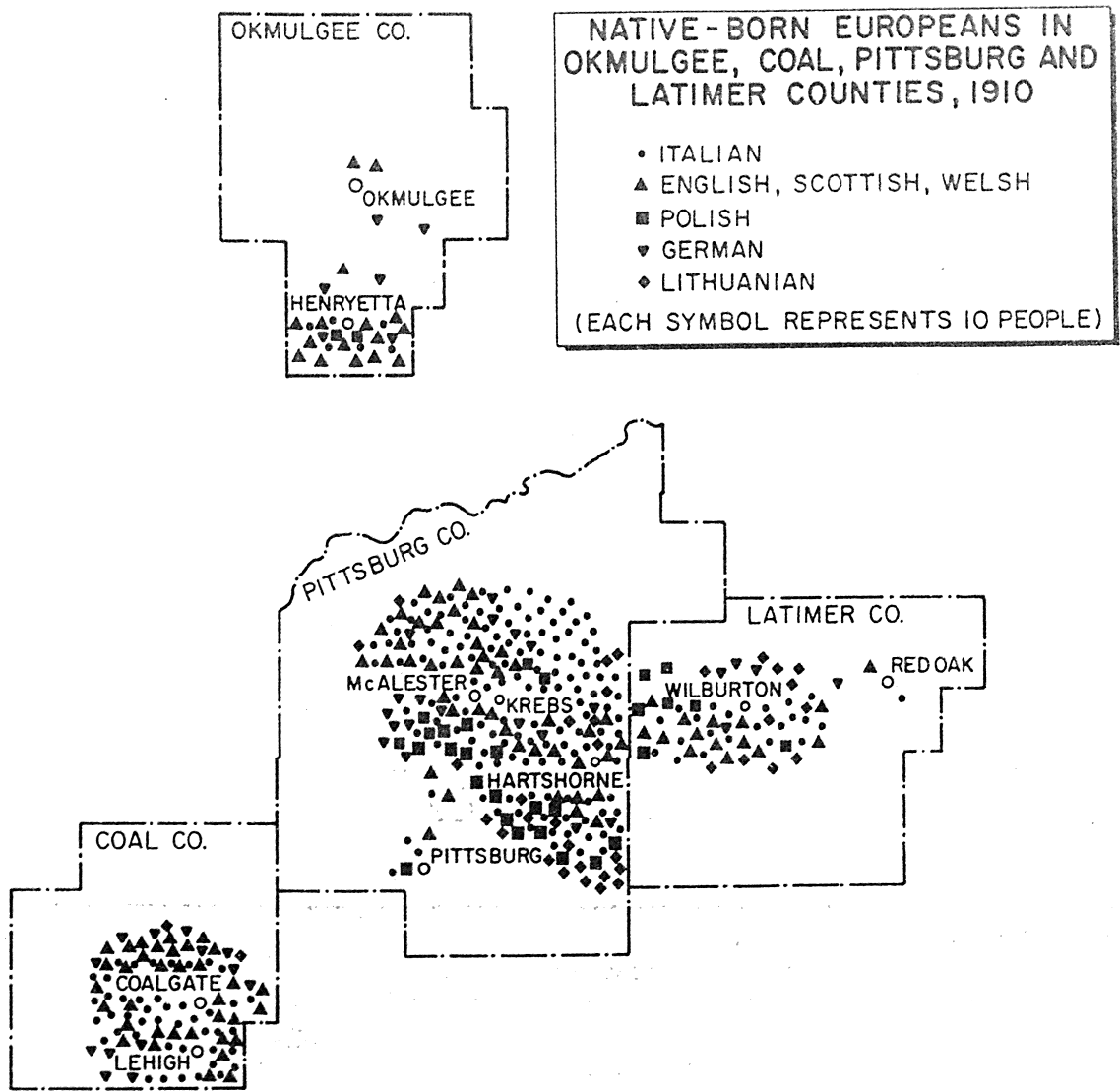


Figure 3. Dot Map of Native-Born Europeans in the Principal Coal Mining Counties, 1910

TABLE III

FOREIGN-BORN POPULATION IN PRINCIPAL
COAL MINING COUNTIES, 1910

	Total Population	Total Foreign Born	Percent Foreign Born	Native Born Foreign Or Mixed Parentage	Total Foreign Stock	Percent Foreign Stock
Coal	15,817	1,575	10.0	1,656	3,231	20.5
Latimer	11,321	879	7.8	843	1,722	15.2
Okmulgee	21,115	449	2.1	768	1,217	5.7
Pittsburg	47,650	3,367	7.1	3,877	7,244	15.2

Source: United States Bureau of the Census, Thirteenth Census of the United States taken in the year 1910, Vol. III: Population (11 Vols., Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), pp. 468, 472, 476.

TABLE IV

ITALIANS IN PRINCIPAL COAL
MINING COUNTIES, 1910

	Total Foreign Born	Foreign Born Italians	Percent Italian of Foreign Born	Native Born With Both Parents Italian	Total Foreign Born Italians & Native Born With Both Parents Italian
Coal	1,575	443	28.13	223	666
Latimer	879	321	36.52	997	418
Okmulgee	449	64	14.25	20	84
Pittsburg	3,367	1,398	41.52	840	2,238
Total	6,270	2,226	35.42	1,180	3,406

Source: United States Bureau of the Census, Thirteenth Census of the United States taken in the year 1910, Vol. III: Population (11 Vols., Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), pp. 468, 472, 476.

Originally a small mining camp inhabited by English and Irish, Krebs was founded about 1874. The first Italians arrived in 1875, and more continued to settle there as the mines prospered. As with other mining towns, the Italian population continually fluctuated in Krebs. In 1911, the Immigration Commission estimated that the population of the town and the adjacent area was about 3,000, of which 1,100 were foreign-born Italians or their children. A few Lithuanians, Poles, Syrians, and other immigrants also inhabited Krebs during the same time period. McAlester was another community which had an important Italian population, where small groups of Italians inhabited many of the company houses near the mines located in what was called "north" McAlester. However, many of these left the town when larger mines opened to the east. Other important communities with substantial numbers of Italians were Haileyville, Hartshorne, Alderson, Archibald, Richville, and Pittsburg. In addition, the continually mobile Italian population could be found in almost every mining town in the county.⁵

General Trends of Immigration

The Italians in Pittsburg County came from virtually every region of Italy, including Sardinia and Sicily, and the pattern of settlement differed little from the general trends elsewhere in the United States. Starting in 1875, a majority were northern Italians from Piedmont and Venetia. As immigration continued, the emphasis gradually changed to southern Italians until the distribution was about equal by 1910. This corresponded with the overall pattern of emigration from Italy. Although all regions of southern Italy were represented in the county, Sicily and Abruzzi-Molise provided more

immigrants than the other areas. The chief port of departure for southern Italians was Naples, while many of the northern and central Italians left from La Havre, France. The overwhelming majority of Italians who eventually came to the coal fields of Pittsburg County entered the country at New York City.⁶

The tendency for villages to transfer large parts of their population to the United States was evident in Oklahoma. A few families from Calascibetta, Sicily, came to Krebs; however, several dozen families that settled in Krebs had come from the village of Castiglione di Carovilli, which was located in the Abruzzi-Molise region near Campobasso. Other immigrants from Carovilli also located in the mining communities of Hubbard, Ohio, and Brookside, Colorado. These former residents of Carovilli often lived in one of those communities before coming to Krebs, and eventually some moved to Haileyville and other towns in the county. A few Italians from Pietrabbondante, located only a few miles from Carovilli, joined their neighbors and immigrated to Krebs. In some instances former citizens of these two villages were married. This apparent desire to relocate in this new and unfamiliar land in a town where friends and family had already settled was understandable.⁷

Dominic Rossi was a good example of the natives of Carovilli, as well as the average Italian immigrant, who came to Pittsburg County. He came to Krebs in 1903 when the small town was expanding due to the booming coal industry. Like many Italians who eventually settled in Krebs, Rossi was born in Castiglione di Carovilli on February 16, 1885. Until sixteen years of age he lived with his family, and grew up much like the average peasant farmer in southern

Italy. In 1901 an older brother returned from the United States where he had been a miner in Wyoming and induced Rossi to return to the New World with him. Tracing the same route that many of their countrymen followed, the two brothers left Carovilli, travelled to Naples, and caught a steamship which took them to New York City. Almost immediately they went to the Denver area and worked in the mines at Lafayette and Brookside. It was in Brookside that several other former residents of Carovilli sought employment, and many of these same people also moved to Pittsburg County after having first lived in Brookside. Rossi left Colorado in 1903, and moved to Krebs.

On April 1, 1903, the day after he arrived, Rossi encountered his first major social event in his new home—a large picnic sponsored by the local unit of the United Mine Workers. The first persons who approached him asked if he was going to join the union or if he was going to "scab." Rossi immediately answered that he would become a member, for he favored unions and had been involved in trying to form a local in Colorado. Also laborers in the coal fields generally disliked scabs, workers who refused to join the union, and Rossi probably would not have wanted to anger them. Further conforming to the lifestyle of his new home, he also soon joined the Italian musical band of the Christopher Columbus Mutual Aid Society. In 1909 Rossi married a girl from his home village in Italy, a customary inclination of the Italian immigrants. Eventually they had five children, one of whom died during childhood.⁹

After he had arrived in 1903, Rossi went to work in the mines of the area, laboring most of the time in Krebs at the Osage Coal and Mining Company's mines No. 5 and No. 8. Like other workers in

the county, Rossi also sought employment in other communities such as Haileyville and Carbon; but worked in the mines near Krebs more than any other place. In the late 1920s and 1930s, many of the Italian miners moved out of the area to seek employment in other areas such as Akron, Ohio, to which at least two hundred former residents of Krebs migrated. Rossi stayed in Krebs, however, working in the mines until his retirement in 1948. He died in that town on March 4, 1975, almost 72 years after he arrived. He was a typical Italian coal miner, who, at the price of back-breaking labor, experienced a relatively high standard of living in Pittsburg County; this was far different from the peasant's life he probably would have lived in Southern Italy.¹⁰

In general, the story of many of the Italians in Pittsburg County resembled that of Dominic Rossi. Although many families from the old country eventually came to the area, the Italians who were first attracted to the region were mostly single men or men with families still in Italy. Almost without exception, these men were miners, and they had visited or worked in other areas of the United States prior to coming to Oklahoma. About half of these Italian men returned home, but many of these came back to the area, bringing friends and families with them. Often a bachelor would send home for his childhood sweetheart, or a lonely married man would send travelling money to Italy so his wife and children could join him. By the turn of the century, whole families, including the husband, were immigrating to Oklahoma directly from Italy. This trend continued until the decline of immigration in the early 1920s and had a profound effect on the lifestyles of the Italian miners.¹¹

Living Conditions

Living in a coal mining community in Pittsburg County was not a totally pleasing experience, particularly during the days of Indian Territory. When the first Italians drifted to this area, few houses were available in this generally unsettled country of the Choctaw Indians. As a result, the miners almost totally depended on the "company." They were forced to live in company houses, and they were paid in scrip which could be used only to buy products at the company store. The houses usually were one story, one family dwellings, containing from three to five rooms. Poorly built with cheap lumber, these homes were in constant need of repair and were little more than shacks. Many of the Italians lived in colonies, refused to deal with American merchants, and kept their children out of the public schools. In addition, they faced a caste system imposed by American whites that placed them below Americans and immigrants from the British Isles. These restrictions that the Italians met caused discomfort in their new homes and slowed the process of assimilation.¹²

However, the situation gradually improved as permanent settlements grew up around the mines. The workers were given an option of living in company houses or in homes of their own choosing, and conditions in many of the company houses were ameliorated. Drawing scrip for pay also became voluntary and was used only when a miner became short-handed between paychecks. Italians proved to be frugal and seldom drew scrip for pay.¹³

Even with the restrictions of the old company system, the living conditions of the miners were tolerable and, in most instances, an improvement over those in Italy. Not only did the towns grow but also

water systems and other conveniences were added. More importantly, after the Curtis Act of 1898 opened town plots for sale to the white men in the Choctaw Nation, the Italians began to acquire their own property and homes. The frugality of the Italians and good wages of the coal mines also enabled them to save enough money to send back home or return with it. Whereas opportunities had been limited in Italy, they abounded in Indian Territory, and the Italians gained a real economic mobility that had been impossible in Italy.¹⁴

The quality and variety of their food probably offers the most vivid contrast between living conditions in the old country and in Oklahoma. In Italy, the peasant's diet was meager, consisting of dark bread, minestrone, mush, wine, and very little meat. In Oklahoma, small bakeries provided an ample amount of white bread, and meat was included with almost every meal. In addition, at least some of the Italians cultivated gardens which provided fresh vegetables. Thus the Italians of Pittsburg County were able to fulfill the simple necessity for nourishment. The meeting of this basic need, along with the newly attained mobility aided in providing an improved lifestyle, and eventually led to assimilation.¹⁵

This improved quality of life became a lure to the area, and the Italians tended to follow the typical pattern of immigration to the region. The northern Italians came first; then southern Italians followed in larger numbers. Mostly single men came to the mines in the early years, but gradually, after the turn of the century, families followed or accompanied the male miners to the United States. Often villagers from the same hamlet came in large numbers. These tendencies were all similar to the overall Italian immigration to the United

States; therefore Pittsburg County was no exception to the general nationwide trends. Furthermore, the strong economic motivation which caused Italians to leave their home country is well illustrated by the movement into the high-paying coal mining regions of Oklahoma—particularly Pittsburg County.

FOOTNOTES

¹United States Senate, 61st Congress, 3rd Session, Senate Document 633: Reports of the Immigration Commission, Vol. VII: Immigrants in Industries, Part 1: Bituminous Coal Mining (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1911), p. 14, (Hereafter referred to as Bituminous Coal Mining.)

²Frederick L. Ryan, The Rehabilitation of Oklahoma Coal Mining Communities (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1935), pp. 27,34.

³Bituminous Coal Mining, pp. 15-16, 61.

⁴United States Bureau of the Census, Thirteenth Census of the United States taken in the year 1910, Vol. III: Population (11 Vols., Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), pp. 468, 472, 476; Bituminous Coal Mining, pp. 16-17.

⁵United States Bureau of the Census, Thirteenth Census of the United States taken in the Year 1910, Vol. III: Population (11 Vols., Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), p. 476; Bituminous Coal Mining, pp. 19-21.

⁶Naturalization Records, 1907-1920, Office of the Court Clerk, Pittsburg County Courthouse, McAlester, Oklahoma (hereafter referred to as Naturalization Records); List of original members of the Christopher Columbus Society in the possession of Charles Fassino, McAlester, Oklahoma; Marriage Records, November 1887 to January 1924; St. Joseph's Catholic Church of Krebs (Oklahoma); Naturalization Records, 1907-1920; Bituminous Coal Mining, p. 17.

⁷Naturalization Records, 1907-1920; Lord, The Italian in America, p. 110; Naturalization Records, 1907-1920.

⁸Interview with Dominic Rossi, April 5, 1974, Krebs, Oklahoma; Naturalization Records, 1914.

⁹Interview with Dominic Rossi; McAlester News Capital, March 6, 1975, p. 2.

¹⁰Interview with Dominic Rossi; Ryan, The Rehabilitation of Oklahoma Coal Mining Communities, p. 73; McAlester News Capital, March 6, 1975, p. 2.

¹¹Bituminous Coal Mining, pp. 17, 20, 69; Interview with Charles Fassino, March 1, 1974, McAlester, Oklahoma; Interview with Albert Messina, March 10, 1975, McAlester, Oklahoma; Bituminous Coal Mining, p. 17.

¹²Ryan, The Rehabilitation of Oklahoma Coal Mining Communities; Bituminous Coal Mining, pp. 64-65, 106; Address of Carl Albert, Speaker, United States House of Representatives, at the Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, April 26, 1974, p. 3.

¹³Bituminous Coal Mining, pp. 64-65, 17.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 17; Lord, The Italian in America, pp. 108-110; Testimony of J. G. Puterbaugh, Record of the Oklahoma Coal Strike Commission of 1919, Oklahoma State Archives, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

¹⁵Interview with Charles Fassino; Lord, The Italian in America, p. 110.

CHAPTER III

ITALIANS IN COAL MINING, LABOR UNIONS, AND THE SOCIALIST PARTY

Coal Mining

Between 1875 and 1930, more Italians worked in coal mining than any other economic activity in Pittsburg County, where production ranked highest in the state from the beginning. Although the total coal production of the mines of Oklahoma continually constituted only about one percent of the nation's total, the industry in Oklahoma grew at an equal rate with the vast expansion of coal mining throughout the United States. Starting with the first small production in 1873, the state reached the commercial level in 1885 with 500,000 tons. By statehood over 3 million tons were being mined annually, and the peak production was over 4.8 million tons in 1920. Thereafter the tonnage, as well as the proportionate value, declined substantially during the 1920s and 1930s, revived somewhat during World War II, and ceased almost entirely in the 1960s. Generally, the railroads that operated the mines were the chief users of the coal in the early days, but domestic and industrial consumers later became important. The coal, mostly a high grade bituminous, was sold primarily in Oklahoma, which was the principal market region, and in secondary areas in adjacent states.¹

More important than the amount of production were the miners who came to the area, for they were instrumental in the settlement of Indian Territory and the subsequent development of Oklahoma. Drawn to the mining fields because of good wages, approximately 1,000 coal miners had entered Indian Territory at the end of the first decade in 1883. Between 1904 and 1920, around 8,000 men were employed by the coal industry. During the most productive years of the coal mining era, the wages were the highest income anyone could receive in the area, averaging \$2.40 per day between 1872 and 1912, and increasing to an average of \$6.05 per day between 1918 and 1925. Some mine owners paid by the tonnage, but this system usually approximated the same amount as payments by the day. The first Italians and the other early immigrants of the late 1880s found the earnings higher than those in the East. Even as late as 1903, the basic wage of \$2.45 per day was higher than many areas. The advantages of higher pay were balanced by certain local disadvantages. Employment was irregular, and the miners in Oklahoma were fortunate if they worked only two hundred days in a year. Furthermore, they often faced working conditions which were more hazardous than other areas.²

Coal mining was very tedious everywhere, and Indian Territory was no exception. Along with miners of other nationalities, the Italians of Pittsburg County suffered through the difficulties of the mines. The working days were long, strenuous, and hazardous. The coal veins in the area usually averaged only four feet in height, and often these narrowed to two feet or less. As a result, the miner stooped or actually worked on his knees most of the time; also laborers sometimes worked standing in water. If the miner was being paid by the ton, the

rocks he dug out of the mine were discarded and the coal he laboriously extracted was sifted over a screen with only the lump coal being weighed to compute his pay.³

With the usual hard work of the mines came the real danger of mining disasters. As machinery was introduced, as tasks became specialized, and as the mines grew deeper, accidents increased in frequency. However, the old dangers of roof cave-ins, falling coal, and explosions, were part of the potential hazards even during the early days. It is possible that the absence of adequate mining safety laws in Indian Territory increased the number of these accidents. The operators were generally free to follow their natural inclination to emphasize low cost production over safety, and this increased the danger and discomfort of the work. The conditions were so perilous that in 1906 it was reported that one man was killed for every 73,000 tons of coal mined in Indian Territory. This accident rate was much higher than neighboring coal producing states, and one of the worst in the nation. After statehood, accidents still were frequent despite safety legislation and close inspection. Chief mine inspector Pete Hanraty claimed that Oklahoma had the most dangerous mines in the United States. Italians died in many of the mining disasters, and in a single year, July 1, 1909, to June 30, 1910, seventeen Italians were involved in fifty-one fatal accidents in Oklahoma.⁴

Workers originally were classified as either "miners" or "helpers." In the 1870s and 1880s, almost all of the skilled miners were either British or Americans, but the helpers were from other ethnic groups. As a group, the Italians, when they arrived, were

particularly ignorant of proper mining techniques and were considered reckless miners; after four years of experience, however, the novices were considered skilled. By 1900, mechanization and specialization brought about several new classifications: weighmen, tophands, master mechanics, hoisting engineers, slope engineers, firemen, and others. Many Italians worked in almost every capacity in the mines; however, miners of English-speaking nationalities continued to remain in the supervisory positions. For instance, few Italians took the Oklahoma State Mining Board's examinations which were required for engineers, fire bosses, pit bosses, and superintendents. The board was formed in 1908 for the purpose of improving the safety standards of the mines by giving tests for those four important positions. Of the 969 tests that were first given between 1908 and 1911, approximately 24 Italians passed the examinations, only about two and one half percent of the total. Although this percentage increased in the 1920s, the proportionate number of Italians taking and passing the tests was still quite small. If the process of assimilation included rising to higher positions, this occurred only in isolated instances in the coal mining industry of Oklahoma and Pittsburg County.⁵

Regardless of what positions the Italians held, coal mining was the most important economic factor in their new life in Pittsburg County. An overwhelming majority of Italians that came to the county worked as miners, and this trend continued until the decline of the mines in the 1920s. Afterwards many Italians left the area and others changed to different occupations. Thus the strong dependency on coal mining greatly affected the lives of the Italians, even aiding in the process of assimilation. It brought the Italians together with other

nationalities in the mines; it offered wages sufficient to allow mobility, and it forced them to find other livelihoods during the years of its decline.⁶

Labor Unions

Closely related to the work of the Italians, the labor union was one of the organizations that aided in changing their lifestyles. It too brought them into contact with other nationalities as well as the American labor movement. Their peaceful participation in the union was far different than the violence occurring in similar labor organizations in Italy, indicating that any radical tendencies were moderated by the conditions in their new home. In Italy, both agricultural and industrial workers formed unions in response to their homeless poverty and social immobility. In 1864, a law had been passed which made all labor unions virtually illegal, a situation which was not changed until 1889. Nevertheless, workers joined mutual aid societies and other cooperative organizations in 1860. These groups gradually developed into trade unions. Trade organizations appeared among the industrial workers in the 1870s and then among the agricultural workers in the 1880s. Eventually the unions developed into the General Confederation of Labor, which was established in 1906. One of the most useful tools of the labor unions was the strike, and with more frequent strikes came increasing violence. Only 634 strikes occurred between 1870 and 1878, but after attitudes and laws became more lenient, the number of strikes increased substantially. There were 126 in 1895, 1,042 in 1901, and 1,891 in 1907. Violent disorders accompanied the strikes in Sicily in 1893 and 1894; Milan and other

cities experienced enormous bloodshed in 1897 and 1898. Similar instances of violence increased in number and intensity after 1900 when the government became even more permissive.⁷

The labor organizations and the Italians in Indian Territory developed far differently. The Noble Order of the Knights of Labor, the first important American labor union to affect the area, was organized nationally in 1869, and came to the coal fields of Indian Territory in 1883. Initially the organization made no effort to attract southern and eastern Europeans to join, since their presence in Oklahoma kept wages low. However, some Italians became involved in the strike of 1894, which the Knights of Labor had called to protest the operators' imposition of a twenty-five percent reduction in wages. The Choctaws who owned the rights to the coal and received royalty payments, were losing money from the strike and persuaded the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to send troops to expel the striking miners. Approximately 350 striking miners were forced from their homes at gunpoint and shipped to Arkansas by rail. There were Italians among them, and the Italian government protested their expulsion to the United States Department of State. Many of the miners who were deported immediately returned to their homes in Indian Territory, but were forced to accept a twenty percent reduction in their wages. Shortly thereafter the Knights of Labor ceased to exist in Indian Territory and the nation as well. Internal dissension and unfavorable public opinion forced laborers to turn elsewhere for their leadership.⁸

Soon the more efficient and better organized United Mine Workers of America replaced the Knights of Labor in the mining fields.

Founded nationally in 1890, the first local in Indian Territory was established at Krebs in 1898. As with the Knights of Labor, the English speaking miners became the leaders of the new union and were at the forefront of most of the labor disputes. The Italians showed much more interest in the union than the other southern and eastern Europeans, and many held minor offices or were on the pit committees which helped settle disputes at the mines. However, the general attitude of most Italians was one of indifference; they joined because it was necessary. Often a new miner in the area would be approached immediately and sternly asked if he was going to join the union; under such pressure to conform, the Italians generally chose to join the union. In 1909, 87 percent of the dues-paying members of Local #2327 in Krebs were Italians. Many other communities in the county had locals which undoubtedly included Italians; these consisted of McAlester, Adamson, Alderson, Bache, Buck, Carbon, Haileyville, and Hartshorne.⁷

In trying to gain concessions from the operators, the miners utilized collective bargaining through union representatives. Union officials, armed with provisions of contracts which had been signed by the operators, travelled extensively in representing the miners in many disputes. Sometimes the officials settled arguments between members within the various locals. For instance, one local called upon its representative to settle a dispute between those miners who wanted to be paid by the ton and those who wanted to be paid a daily wage. At other times, miners who were unjustly fired asked the sub-district representative to help them get reinstated. The most important task of the union official, however, was to investigate the

charges of the miners who complained of poor working conditions. For example, one miner at Local #2327 in Krebs was annoyed at having to drive a certain mule which was so "notorious for her stinking qualities" that the driver was unable to eat dinner after spending a day working with her. In this case the local representative was unable to find a provision in the contract which would disallow working with a stinking mule. Usually, however, the union official had to deal with more serious complaints.¹⁰

The United Mine Workers also used the strike weapon in their efforts to improve the working conditions of the workers. The prolonged strike that occurred between 1898 and 1903 brought several benefits for the miners, as did subsequent strikes in 1910, 1916, 1919, and 1920. There was little real violence during these strikes and particularly was this true among the Italians. Even the coal operators agreed that the Italians and other southern and eastern Europeans were less extravagant and insistent in their demands. In fact, if any radical action appeared in the mining area, it was usually instigated by the immigrants from the British Isles and Americans rather than the natives of Italy. Thus the violence which characterized the labor disputes of Italy was not to be found in the union movement of Oklahoma. The miners generally restricted themselves to collective bargaining and relatively peaceful strikes to gain benefits from the operators.¹¹

John Marino, Sr., of the second generation, became a local leader in the United Mine Workers in Pittsburg County. His inclination to work peacefully with the system differed from the violent attitude of the labor leaders in Italy. The son of Gregorio

and Katrina Marino, he was born on September 10, 1891, in Hartshorne, Oklahoma. His father, originally from Salerno, had migrated to the area in 1885 and labored in the coal mines for most of his working life. One of the early Italian immigrants, on January 4, 1892, his father narrowly escaped the explosion that killed 100 people in the Osage Coal and Mining Company mine No. 11. Also, he was one of the miners who were shipped out of Indian Territory during the strike of 1894. It was Marino's father who taught him to be a hard worker, requiring that he work in the family garden and tend to the chores of the small farm on which the family lived. Young Marino also attended the Catholic school in Krebs until he was fourteen. At that age he quit school and joined his father in the mines. Between 1905 and 1930 he worked primarily in the coal industry in Pittsburg County; however, he also found employment in the Goodyear Company in Akron, Ohio, and served in the army in France during World War I.

After the war, Marino returned to Krebs and resumed his life as a coal miner. His father often had emphasized the importance of the union and had told him never to "scab." Furthermore, Marino believed that he should personally try to improve his own status; therefore, he became recording secretary for Local #2327 in Krebs and continued in that position throughout the 1920s. He respected the system of arbitration that had developed between the union and the operators, and thought it worked well.

In his experience with the union, the local won almost every dispute that came up between the miners and the management. The proper method of voicing a complaint followed a well defined procedure during Marino's terms as secretary. The miner would tell the president

or some other officer about this grievance; in turn, the problem was referred to the special three-man pit committee that handled such affairs. They would take the complaint to the pit boss who represented the operator in the discussion. If the pit boss would not comply with the request of the pit committee, they went to the superintendent who managed the mine; while the committee talked to the superintendent, no miners would go to work until the question was settled in favor of the miner who had made the complaint. The representatives of the union board for the region often had become involved by this time in the procedure. Probably because the miners almost always won the arguments under this system, leaders like Marino had little cause to resort to radical methods. He continued to work as a coal miner and as secretary of the union until 1930, when he became a barber, an occupation he learned in the army during World War I.¹²

The Socialist Party

The Socialist Party of Oklahoma was another organization which contrasted sharply with the much more radical Italian movement. The Socialist Party of Italy instigated many of the labor disturbances, and Italian socialism had been very active and violent from the beginning. Many of the leaders of the unification movement had socialistic tendencies and developed philosophies which were prototypes of socialism. After unification, the shaky governmental structure and the social inequality provoked a violent anarchist movement—Bakuninism. Michael Bakunin was a Russian anarchist who sought to destroy existing political institutions in order that a new proletariat-dominant

society could emerge. Throughout the 1860s and 1870s he competed with the German socialist, Karl Marx, for control of the working classes. Bakunin travelled throughout Europe, spreading his gospel of anarchism. His support was strongest in Italy, and his brand of anarchism was particularly attractive to the peasants, who responded with several attempts to overthrow the government. For example, in 1874 a few peasants unsuccessfully attempted to capture Bologna and overthrow its government. A similar "revolution" occurred in 1878 in the agricultural towns around Naples. Two priests joined the cause, and their villages were occupied by the Bakuninists before the authorities brought them under control. By the 1880s, however, anarchism had become far less significant, because the revolts were invariably unsuccessful, and many Italians turned to more moderate socialism in response to their conditions.¹³

The Italian Workers Party was founded in 1882. It became the tool of both industrial and agricultural workers who sought change through labor unionism and reform through parliament. When the government tried to suppress this group, the agricultural unions of the Po Valley and Marxian intellectuals united to form the Socialist Party in 1892. The new party became a mosaic of differing opinions and methods. Until the turn of the century, the more radical elements of the party were in control. Since the living and working conditions were improving, however, many socialists turned away from the radicals and toward the reformists and syndicalists. These two factions exchanged control of the party throughout the first decade of the twentieth century. The strikes which the syndicalists promoted were often bloody and fierce, indicating the party had retained some

of the Bakuninism of the early days. Encouraged by the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, the socialists terrorized Italy during and after World War I. The turbulent tide of socialism was finally countered by Benito Mussolini's Blackshirts in 1922, when Fascism temporarily destroyed the socialist movement with the same violent tactics that had often been the trademark of the socialists themselves.¹⁴

The Socialist Party in Oklahoma, like the local labor union, displayed much less radicalism than its Italian counterpart. In territorial days, the Socialists were active in two regions: the tenant farming areas of central and western Oklahoma Territory and the coal mining district of Indian Territory. After statehood, those two sections became the sources of strength for a relatively strong Socialist Party. Socialists concentrated enormous effort in Oklahoma, and some of their most able and clever organizers gained large followings. Owing to their efforts, the party became one of the strongest in the nation. In 1910 the Socialist Party of Oklahoma had 5,842 paid-up members, more than any other state. Oklahoma subsequently recorded a higher percentage of Socialist votes than any other state, with 16.4 percent in 1912, 21 percent in 1914, and 15.6 percent in 1916.¹⁵

The strongest element of the party was that which consisted of tenant farmers. Most of these members had turned to socialism after the Populist Party failed to meet its goals. The farmers' influence distorted the party into an agency which crusaded primarily for agricultural reform in the old Populist tradition. The Socialist Party in Oklahoma was far more concerned with the local economic and political issues of the state rather than with philosophical or

distant conflicts between proletariat and bourgeoisie. Nevertheless, the Socialists of Oklahoma did not totally ignore the basic goals of socialism and pledged to seize the powers of the government for the immediate betterment of the workers in a classless society.¹⁶

Although of secondary importance, some planks in the Socialist platforms appealed to the Italian and other miners in eastern Oklahoma. One section of the Party platform of 1912 demanded that mine inspectors be elected by the organized miners rather than being elected by the general public or appointed by the governor. The platform also demanded state ownership of certain industries, including the coal mines. Finally, its provisions for the unemployed and its condemnation of the use of police power in strikes must have been attractive to the miners.¹⁷

Voicing such demands as these, Socialist leaders spoke at mining camps throughout Oklahoma and drew a large following. Socialist ideas were not new to the miners, who had been acquainted with these doctrines in other mining regions. In fact, several of the labor leaders became Socialist candidates and received substantial support from the mining regions. The Party had strong organization in the coal mining counties, with committeemen representing most of the precincts. In 1914, 26 percent of the votes were cast for the Socialist gubernatorial candidate in Pittsburg County. In nearby Coal County, candidates of the Socialist Party consistently placed second in the electoral contests of 1914.¹⁸

It is difficult to determine the precise extent of Italian involvement in the Socialist Party, but a substantial number seem to have become involved in the Party or at least voted for Socialists in

the elections. In 1914, the Socialist senatorial candidate, Patrick Nagle, received ninety-three votes in Krebs, just seven votes less than the Democratic front-runner, Thomas Gore, and well ahead of the Republican candidate. The proportion of votes for other offices was similar; indeed, the Socialist Party was the second strongest in Krebs during that election year. Taking into account that most Italians were not citizens, it is still safe to assume that a portion of these votes in Krebs were cast by Italians, since they made up more than one half the population of that city. Regardless of the extent of participation, the Italians involved with the Socialist Party, as with the labor union, were usually led by the Anglo-Saxon element. Furthermore, the history of the Socialist Party in Oklahoma reveals few instances of violence. The only important example of a resort to violent action was the farmers' revolt of 1917, known as the "Green Corn Rebellion." This disturbance was brought about by America's involvement in World War I, and there was no foreign element involved in the insurrection. Unlike its Italian counterpart, the Socialist Party of Oklahoma avoided extra-legal coercion and chose instead the electoral and legal alternatives that were open to them. If the Italians brought violent radicalism to Oklahoma, it did not appear in the Socialist Party.¹⁹

The career and activities of a prominent Italian Socialist leader, Emilio C. Marianelli, further illustrate this temperate and moderate attitude. He was born in Iron Mountain, Michigan, in 1888, the son of Nazzareno and Margherita Marianelli from Sigillo in Perugia. Although American born, he lived in Italy as a child and received some of his education there. After returning to the United States while still a

boy, he worked as a miner at night and attended Wyoming Seminary at Kingston, Pennsylvania, during the day. He was well acquainted with the hardships of a miner's life.²⁰

After graduating from Wyoming Seminary, Marianelli enrolled in the Dickinson School of Law in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. There he developed a friendship with Albert Exendine, a Delaware Indian from Oklahoma who had been an All-American end at the famed Carlisle Indian School. The two friends graduated from law school in 1912 and established a joint practice in Anadarko, Oklahoma, where Exendine's influence was expected to attract clients. However, the practice proved to be less than satisfactory, and the young lawyers began looking for a new and more advantageous area. Hearing that substantial numbers of Italians lived near Krebs, Marianelli visited the area, found it promising, and persuaded his friend to open their new office in nearby McAlester. Although they chose McAlester to open their new office, many of their clients lived in Krebs and other Italian communities. Whereas Exendine had not been able to attract a sufficient quantity of Indian patrons, Marianelli succeeded in drawing a number of Italian clients.²¹

Until his departure from McAlester in 1927, Marianelli was affiliated with the Socialist Party. Immediately before World War I, he and Exendine were instrumental in aiding the prominent socialist advocate, Oscar Ameringer, in establishing a statewide socialist newspaper, The Oklahoma Leader. Marianelli had planned to run for Attorney General on the Socialist ticket in 1918, but was drafted to serve in World War I. His description of army life shows him to be far from the stereotype of the socialist radical. Rather than denouncing the war as a product of capitalist imperialism or advocating

the use of wartime confusion to advance the socialist program, Marianelli reported that he was actually "enjoying" army life and making a success of it. He had been promoted to the rank of sergeant and was dealing with military insurance matters for soldiers in France. After returning home, Marianelli became a charter member of the American Legion in McAlester—an organization hardly sympathetic to radicalism—and a deacon in the First Baptist Church of McAlester. He remained active in both of these organizations for the rest of his life, further confounding the socialist stereotype. After unsuccessful bids for the position of Justice of the State Supreme Court on the Socialist Party ticket, Marianelli moved to Pennsylvania in 1927 where he carried on a vigorous law practice until his death in 1972.²²

Southern Baptist and Legionaire, Marianelli was a typical Oklahoma socialist. Like others in the mining region, he became interested in the Socialist Party because it promised reforms in the mining industry. His position as Chief Counsel of the United Mine Workers of Oklahoma in the 1920s and his subsequent assumption of a similar post in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, indicate that he was concerned and dedicated to the miner's cause. To be sure, he was a socialist, but to label Marianelli a "radical" would be a mistake.²³

In general, Marianelli's reasonable disposition was typical of the Italians in the coal mining communities of Pittsburg County. The working conditions in the coal mines were not ideal and could have easily precipitated a violent reaction. Nevertheless, the response in Pittsburg County was far different than that of the labor and socialist organizations in Italy. This can be attributed to the relatively moderate nature of the labor unions and Socialist Party

in the United States. The Italians who joined these groups found that they were in a minority in a new environment. Out of necessity or due to pressures, they accepted and adopted the methods of their neighbors in their new home. Therefore, they were absorbed into American organizations with American philosophies and American reactions.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹Ryan, The Rehabilitation of Oklahoma Coal Mining Communities.
- ²Ibid., pp. 28-29, 69, 107.
- ³Ibid., p. 29.
- ⁴Stanley Clark, "Immigrants to the Choctaw Coal Industry," Chronicles of Oklahoma, Vol. XXXIII, No. 4 (Winter, 1955-56), p. 448; United States Senate, 59th Congress, 2nd Session, Senate Report 5013: Report of the Select Committee to Investigate Matters Concerned with Affairs in Indian Territory (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1907), p. 1830; Pete Hanraty, "Paper read by Pete Hanraty, Chief Mine Inspector of Oklahoma, before the Mine Inspectors' Institute of the United States, at Scranton, Pennsylvania," Second and Third Report of the Chief Inspector of Mines (Oklahoma City: Chief Inspector of Mines, 1910), pp. 11-14; Second and Third Annual Report of the Chief Inspector of Mines, p. 149.
- ⁵Ibid., p. 37; Bituminous Coal Mining, p. 63; Ryan, The Rehabilitation of Oklahoma Coal Mining Communities; Third and Twelfth through Seventeenth Annual Reports of the Oklahoma State Mining Board.
- ⁶Naturalization Records, Ryan, p. 73.
- ⁷Clough, p. 151; Seton-Watson; Italy from Liberalism to Fascism, pp. 57-58; Clough, pp. 152-156.
- ⁸Ryan, The Rehabilitation of Oklahoma Coal Mining Communities; pp. 28-29; Clyde Hamm, ed., Labor History of Oklahoma (Oklahoma City: A. M. Van Horn, 1939), pp. 6-11.
- ⁹Bituminous Coal Mining, p. 67; Interview with Dominic Rossi; Records of Local #2327 of the United Mine Workers, Krebs, Oklahoma, in the Manuscript Collection, Oklahoma State University Library, Stillwater, Oklahoma; Correspondence records in the Samuel Boydston Collection, Western History Collection, Bizzell Memorial Library, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.
- ¹⁰Ibid.
- ¹¹Ryan, The Rehabilitation of Oklahoma Coal Mining Communities, p. 108; Bituminous Coal Mining, p. 67; Address of Carl Albert, p. 2.
- ¹²Interview with John Marino, Sr., May 19, 1975, Krebs, Oklahoma.

¹³Wayland Hilton-Young, The Italian Left: A Short History of Political Socialism in Italy (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1949), p. 5; Seton-Watson, Italy from Liberalism to Fascism, pp. 7-16.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 94-95, 158-160; Hilton-Young, The Italian Left, pp. 37-146.

¹⁵Howard L. Meredith, "A History of the Socialist Party in Oklahoma" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 1969, p. 47; Nathan Fine, Labor and Farmer Parties in the United States, 1828-1928 (New York: Russell and Russell, 1961), p. 232; David A. Shannon, The Socialist Party of America (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1955), p. 34; Fine, Labor and Farmer Parties in the United States, 1828-1928, p. 232.

¹⁶Meredith, "A History of the Socialist Party in Oklahoma," p. 20; Shannon, The Socialist Party of America, pp. 35-36.

¹⁷"Platform and Campaign Book of the Socialist Party of Oklahoma for 1912," Vertical files, Oklahoma Historical Society Library, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

¹⁸James R. Scales, "Political History of Oklahoma, 1907-1949" Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 1949), p. 150; "Platform and Campaign Book of the Socialist Party of Oklahoma for 1916;" General Election Returns, November 1914, Oklahoma State Archives, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

¹⁹Interview with Charles Fassino; General Election Returns, November 1912; Ryan, The Rehabilitation of Oklahoma Coal Mining Communities, p. 87.

²⁰Giovanni Schiavo, ed., Italian-American Who's Who, Vol. IX (New York: The Vigo Press, 1946), p. 266; Ibid.; Oscar Ameringer, If You Don't Weaken (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1940), p. 309; Schiavo, Italian-American Who's Who, p. 266.

²¹Interview with Charles Fassino; Ameringer, If You Don't Weaken, p. 309; Interview with Charles Fassino; Naturalization Records, 1915 and Probate Court Records for Pittsburg County, 1915-1920, Office of the Court Clerk, Pittsburg County Courthouse, McAlester, Oklahoma.

²²Ameringer, If You Don't Weaken, p. 309-310; The Oklahoma Leader (Oklahoma City), November 7, 1918, p. 5; Interview with Charles Fassino; Obituary of Emilio C. Marianelli from the Wyoming Historical and Geological Society, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. (Mimeographed).

²³Schiavo, Italian-American Who's Who, p. 266.

CHAPTER IV

SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS AND CULTURAL TRAITS IN PITTSBURG COUNTY

During the days of immigration into Pittsburg County, the Italians brought with them several customs and social institutions which they had experienced in the old country. Much of this transplanted culture changed immediately in the new environment of the coal mining communities and became mere images of similar social characteristics in Italy. Some of the institutions or customs altered gradually or simply slowly became defunct. However, throughout the coal mining era, all the cultural manifestations were significant in the lifestyle of the Italians in Pittsburg County.

The Catholic Church

One of the most important of these institutions was the Catholic Church. In Oklahoma the participation and reaction to the church resembled many of the habits of the Catholics in Italy. Although Catholicism was the religion of an overwhelming majority of the citizens of Italy during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the active participation of its believers was somewhat limited. Particularly in southern Italy, only the patron saints, holidays, and festas (festivals) were considered to be an important part of religious life. A number of women, children, and old men

frequently attended church, but the younger men seldom became involved. Part of the problem was the priest, who many times was revered by some but not respected by the majority of the people. The peasants tended to associate the priest with the institutionalized Church which, at one time, had been the largest land owner in Italy. Furthermore, the clergy often aligned themselves with the signorial or upper class; as a result, their spiritual influence was never great with the people in Italy.¹

Many of the Italian immigrants brought this anti-clerical attitude with them to America. The strong Irish influence in the American church further intensified the animosity of the Italians who resented the strange customs and ideas of the mainstream of Catholicism in the United States. However, they still were baptized, married, and buried by the church. Also, they continued to revere their patron saints and participate in their festivals such as the Mt. Carmel Day celebration held annually on July 16.²

In Indian Territory, Catholic churches were founded in the early days of the coal mining era. The establishment of the churches was due much more to dedicated priests than to the Italians and other Catholics in the area. Throughout the nineteenth century missionary priests from neighboring states had travelled through Indian Territory seeking converts among the Indians. In 1872, the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas Railroad brought many white workers and permanent settlers when it was built through Indian Territory. In response primarily to the needs of the Irish railroad workers, a church was built at Atoka on the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas Railroad, and in 1875 Father Isidore Robot, accompanied by Italian lay brother Dominic Lambert, became the first

permanent priest for the church. Father Robot soon gained the position of "Prefect Apostolic of Indian Territory," and expanded his work through the area.³

While Father Robot was extending his services, Father Paul M. Ferroar Ponziglione di Borgo 'Ales, an Italian, conducted missions to the mining camps near McAlester and Savanna. In the early 1880s he began preparations for the erection of chapels for Italians living in the vicinity. The efforts of the Italian priest were not in vain, for Father Robot also began trips to the area to administer to the spiritual needs of the immigrants. In October, 1885, Father Robot and Brother Dominic moved to North McAlester and built a small residence which contained a room for services. He soon erected a small church for the Catholic miners of Savanna, and at Krebs in 1886 he built a church, a two room schoolhouse, and living quarters for several nuns. In 1887, Krebs became the center of growth and activities of the church for the area.⁴

Subsequently Catholic churches were established in other parts of the county and served Italians as well as other immigrants. Churches were built at Hartshorne in 1895, at South McAlester in 1896, and at Pittsburg in 1914. Italian Catholics in these areas displayed characteristics similar to their countrymen in Italy. The men tended to regard the church as a place for women and children, and they attended church only on special holidays. In some areas Italians were distressed and were hesitant to become involved in the church because there were no priests who knew their language and customs, a situation that caused a minor conflict between a priest in Krebs and his parishioners. In Pittsburg, where a majority of the Catholics were

Mexicans, church officials classified many Italians as "fallen-away" Catholics. Nevertheless, the Italians used the church for religious services, baptisms, marriages, and funerals. Even with its weaknesses, the church remained the center of spiritual growth for many Italians who continued to consider themselves Catholics. For instance, the natives of Castigleone di Caroville who lived in Krebs joined their friends in Hubbard, Ohio, and Brookside, Colorado, in donating several thousand dollars to build a new church for their home town in Italy.⁵

The Italians in Krebs also held an annual church-related festival in honor of "Our Lady of Mt. Carmel." This holiday became the most popular celebration for the Italians in the United States; the activities often lasted as long as three days and included beautiful decorations, plentiful food, and sentimental souvenirs. During the activities, participants donated money to the local church in homage to their Blessed Virgin. Although the observances in Krebs were not as extravagant as those in urban areas, almost every Italian in the community took part in the celebration. Also in 1892 a social, fraternal, and benevolent order called "Congrea del Mt. Carmine" was organized chiefly to sponsor Mt. Carmel Day at Krebs.⁶

For many Italians of Pittsburg County, the most extensive contact with the church came through the parochial schools. This was similar to the situation in the cities throughout the United States where the church provided education for Italian immigrants who could not attend the public schools. In Pittsburg County, the church provided the only educational facilities available in some areas. Prior to statehood, some towns maintained schools by subscription, and coal operators provided some such services; however, the Choctaw government supported

no schools for the whites. Thus the only facilities available for many Italians in the territorial days were the Catholic schools, the first being established at Krebs on September 7, 1886. One year after its opening, 120 pupils attended St. Joseph's School. In Pittsburg County, other parochial schools later were established in McAlester and Hartshorne. As free public schools opened after statehood, the importance of the Catholic institutions declined; nevertheless, many Italians continued to send their children to parochial schools, continuing this closest tie with the church until they closed in the 1960's.⁷

Family, Women, and the Community

Probably one of the most important changes that took place in the Italians' lives was the inevitable transformation and Americanization of the family unit. In Italy the peasant family was patriarchal—a well defined unit with the father as head and with every member having a strong sense of responsibility for the other members of the family. The father not only assigned the chores and responsibilities to the children but also provided the family with the necessities. He was seldom disputed when a decision concerning the family was reached. However, the eldest son and mother often advised the father and had at least some power in the decision-making process.⁸

Even though the woman acknowledged her husband as family head, she carried out certain duties that were no less important. The mother took charge of raising the children, insuring their religious instruction, and preparing them for marriage. She also articulated

the social relations of the family. The children were particularly obedient largely because of the severe punishment that they received when they chose to defy their parents. They were taught to have a strong sense of responsibility toward the family and usually considered the effect on the whole family before making a personal decision.⁹

A vast majority of the Italians who came to the United States settled in large cities such as New York where the lifestyle of the family was greatly altered. The father, working in a factory, had less contact with and less control over the family. The Italian mother often added to the family income by working in a garment shop and likewise lost much authority over the children; however, she also gained a new sense of autonomy because of her new contacts outside the family. Further altering the family structure was the new independence of the children who became more rebellious as they made acquaintances with a large number of children in their neighborhood. If the family unit deteriorated, it largely was because of the distance between the parents and children.¹⁰

In Pittsburg County, Oklahoma, the situation differed substantially. The coal mining area was not heavily populated and did not present the same problems of the urban areas. The patriarchal family unit remained an accepted way of life by most of the immigrants and Americans in the rural and small town atmosphere of Pittsburg County; therefore, the conflict in lifestyles was less than in the cities where the family unit easily deteriorated. As a result, the father of the Italian family in Pittsburg County retained much of his authority and often ordered the children to perform certain daily tasks in the

family garden or in the home. During territorial days the children had little opportunity to go to school and some parents, particularly southern Italians sometimes deliberately kept the children from going to school. Many parents also insisted that the children speak only Italian at home; as a result, many children had little chance to learn English and assimilation was slowed in the early days.¹¹

If any member of the Italian family in Pittsburg County was slow to change, it was the immigrant woman. Because the Italians lived in colonies, the woman had little cause to associate with people other than those of her own nationalistic background. Unlike the large cities in other parts of the country, there were no factories in which Italian women could work and find a certain degree of autonomy from their husbands. Even domestic service was not available in the area for only a small number of people could afford maids or household servants. The only consequential economic activity involving about one fourth of the Italian women in Pittsburg County was providing rooms and service for boarders. However, since the family usually rented a room or two to Italian men, this did not bring many Italian women into contact with those outside their nationality.¹²

The immigrant Italian woman in Pittsburg County, virtually isolated from contact with the larger community, had a life that was centered around the home. Very few Italian women over twenty years of age were unmarried, and the daily routine and tasks were much like any woman in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Clothes were washed by hand or with a rubboard, and bread and sausage were homemade for the family. Because only about one fourth of the Italian women in the area could speak English and because most homes

were conveniently located in an Italian colony, the Italian immigrant woman relied on little that was not Italian. There was even an Italian grocer in most neighborhoods who provided the necessary foodstuffs. As a result, many Italian women of the area who had immigrated from the old country lived the remainder of their lives in small communities, traded with Italian merchants, and never learned to speak English.¹³

Although certain forces worked against the assimilation and Americanization of first generation Italian women, their husbands and children came into contact with other forces which caused them to change. For instance, the coal mines and labor union brought the men into contact with men of other nationalities and with methods which were characteristically American. Those Italian men who did not work in the mines often came into contact with American businessmen and were particularly changed because of it. Furthermore, with statehood and compulsory education, the children of the Italian immigrants were thrust into schools where they inevitably changed due to contact with American children and the English language.

The change in community atmosphere became another important factor which affected both entire families and individuals. Whether the town was strictly a company town or was open to everyone, the typical community in Pittsburg County seemed very different from the isolated villages that had been the homes of many of the Italian immigrants. Although the Italians in Pittsburg County segregated themselves more than any other immigrant group, it was impossible to escape the somewhat cosmopolitan atmosphere of the coal mining communities. Nevertheless, some of their culture and lifestyle was preserved when

they banded together in colonies. Italian bakeries and grocery stores flourished in such areas where the Italians congregated; shortly after 1900 there were six or seven of these markets in Krebs alone. Sometimes the stores would provide banking and other services to the Italians who were prone to distrust American banks in the area; thus the colonies gave a large degree of economic autonomy for the Italian immigrants.¹⁴

The Italian communities also provided social interaction and events which not only enhanced the quality of life in the coal mining towns but also preserved some of the customs and lifestyles of the old country. The socially minded visited other homes, often enjoying some homemade "Choc" beer and snacking on sausage or other foods. Travelling troupes of singers often visited McAlester and Krebs, and the Italians sometimes enjoyed a night of opera together. In Krebs the Christopher Columbus Society often sponsored picnics on Sunday, and Italians from the area would gather to eat, sing, and play games. Two of the favorite games that originated in the old country which the Italians played were morra and bocce. Morra is played by two persons at a time using the fingers. Both players throw out some of their fingers and say a number; the player that guesses the sum of the fingers is the winner. Bocce is a ball game played on a small dirt court and somewhat resembles shuffleboard. Bocce became so popular in the area that tournaments were often held between various communities in the coal mining district. Thus the colonies that were formed by the Italians provided a sense of social as well as economic autonomy and gave some semblance of the lifestyle they had enjoyed in Italy.¹⁵

No matter how isolated the colonies of Italians became, it was impossible to escape entirely from the other people in the area. The men worked side by side with Americans, Lithuanians, Irishmen, Poles, and members of other nationalities. The children likewise went to school with members of other races. Furthermore, a catastrophe or strike often forced all the nationalities to work together for a common goal. For instance, the mine explosion in Krebs in 1892 which took almost one hundred lives caused Italians and other nationalities to work together to save the survivors and to share in the financial and moral support of the families of the victims. The prolonged strike which occurred between 1898 and 1903 likewise welded Italians with other nationalities in bringing about the recognition of the union. Subsequent strikes and hardships brought the various groups together.¹⁶

Christopher Columbus Society

Of the non-religious organizations, the Christopher Columbus Society was one of the strongest examples of similarity between those institutions in Italy and those in Pittsburg County. In Italy, many of the mutual aid societies were formed prior to 1860 and were designed to provide nonpolitical assistance to members who needed help in some emergency. They originally had been established by conservative philanthropists who desired to teach the peasants thrift and self-reliance, thereby avoiding strikes and political upheaval. Ironically, the mutual aid organizations did not remain apolitical; instead, they gradually developed into trade unions.¹⁷

Italians in Pittsburg County formed at least three mutual aid

societies: the Dante Aligheri in Dow, and the Stella d' Italia and Christoforo Columbo in Krebs. By far the most active of these was the Christopher Columbus Society. Though any member of the club had the right to express himself on political or religious subjects as long as it was in the best interests of the society, it was a non-political and non-religious organization, much like the early mutual-aid societies in Italy. The group also served certain fraternal and social functions. Authors of the constitution proclaimed that the club should "facilitate the relation among Italians as members of but one family." A yearly dance and picnic was sponsored by the group. However, the society was primarily established as a mutual aid organization which was designed to provide economic benefits for its members.¹¹

The society was formed by a group of northern Italians on May 18, 1881, after the need for group benefits became apparent. The Italian community consisted primarily of a floating population of unmarried men or married men who did not have relatives in the area. When these men became ill, they usually had no one to provide for them, and the fact that they were missing work only added to their difficulties. Consequently, a number of these men formed the society which they designed to provide insurance and sick benefits for those in need.¹⁹

Those who applied for membership in the organization had to meet several qualifications. Only men born in Italy or sons of Italian fathers could join, provided they spoke the Italian language. Membership was open to men between eighteen and fifty years of age who had been residents of Krebs for at least three months. If an applicant met all the requirements and was invited to join, he was then required to give background information on his life and to present a medical

certificate to the members.²⁰

The society was financed by admission fees, monthly dues, contributions, and fines. Drawing from these revenues, the organization provided both sickness and death benefits. Five dollars per week was paid to those members who became ill. If the illness proved to be serious and involved a period of time longer than six months, the recipient was paid one-half of the weekly compensation. A permanent committee was assigned to visit sick members and to report on their condition to the society, and a doctor was designated for those members needing care. If a member died, his wife received forty dollars to pay expenses. If a member lost his wife—"only by death not otherwise"—he received twenty dollars, and if the funeral was in Krebs, the society accorded funeral honors. Since the organization's concern was to provide for the members who needed aid, expulsion or fines were imposed on those who made fraudulent claims for benefits. The Christopher Columbus Society became a useful agency to fulfill the needs of many of the Italians in the community. By no means a radical organization, its prototype was the mutual aid society which flourished in the early days of Italian nationhood. But while the organizations in Italy became strongly political, the one in Krebs did not. It confined itself instead to dealing constructively with the living conditions in the immigrants' new home. The society flourished until the 1930's when mining declined, many Italians moved away, and the members looked elsewhere for social insurance.²¹

An Italian Leader in Pittsburg County

The Italians brought to Pittsburg County another cultural

inclination—the dependency on one influential man in the community. The tendency for singular male authority was well rooted in Italians; for instance, the Italian family had a structure with male dominance; their religion had priests with absolute authority; the large plantation-like farms had landlords with unlimited power; and, in America, many communities had padroni with strong influence. Padroni were Italian men who had been particularly influential in the early days of immigration when there were no restrictions on contract labor. Often working as a foreman at a nearby industry, a padrone used his influence to find jobs for newcomers, charging a fee for his services and making large profits from the unsuspecting Italian immigrant. In cooperation with similar agents in Italy, these opportunists were instrumental in obtaining laborers who signed contracts before leaving Italy. As part of the agreement, the immigrant received steamship fare which he would have to repay with a large interest once he arrived. However, the Foran Act of 1885 and legislation in Italy outlawed the practice of contract labor, and the padroni decreased in power giving way to more respectable leaders who handled the affairs of the Italian immigrants. Often having been padroni themselves, they sometimes became consultants for the Italians on legal and social matters, charging fees for their services or benefitting indirectly for their leadership. Often these leaders were still called padroni, but they were much less corrupt and frequently helpful to the Italians.²²

Although Pittsburg County was relatively free of the unethical padroni influence, one outstanding individual, John B. Tua, became a guiding force for the Italians. He served the community for more than forty years in various capacities which marked him as a leader. Born

in Marseilles, France, on November 18, 1871, his parents had immigrated to France much like many other northern Italians in the early stages of emigration. He was educated in France and Italy and could speak fluently the languages of both countries, a skill which later aided him in his position as consular agent for the coal mining region of Oklahoma. In 1891, Tua left Italy to join two sisters in Osage City, Kansas, where he worked as a coal miner. After moving to Missouri and Texas, he migrated to Hartshorne on November 1, 1896. He labored for a year in a cement plant there, then moved to McAlester to work in the new macaroni factory owned by Joe and John Fassino. Again he soon changed employment, opening a confectionary and fruit business in McAlester. Later Tua established a restaurant where he enjoyed a good business until 1910 when he devoted his full time to his position as Royal Italian Consular Agent for Oklahoma. Joe Fassino had held the title for a number of years previously but quit because of his thriving partnership in the macaroni factory.²³

Tua did not receive official sanction as Royal Italian Consular Agent until 1910; nevertheless, he carried out many of the duties several years prior to gaining his title. In 1902 the Muskogee Phoenix, referring to him as a padrone, explained:

Interpreter, restaurateur, banker, immigration agent, steamship agent, foreign-exchange agent, Italian consul, this man is a power in the mining district. He is more powerful even than the president of the coal trust in the mining district because he could cause every one of the Italian miners to walk out of the mines indefinitely if he wanted to.²⁴

The newspaper also said that, as banker for the Italians, he had to carry large sums of cash with him and often would sit in his restaurant all night with \$20,000 on his person. Allegedly Tua had access

to \$250,000 which he had in his name at a local bank.²⁵

Although the Muskogee Phoenix exaggerated Tua's importance as well as his bankroll, he was the most influential Italian in the coal mining region. He was generally conservative in philosophy and used his influence to moderate any radical tendencies he saw in his fellow countrymen. In the role of Italian consular agent, his duties were varied. He attended to legal matters such as writing wills, recording land transactions, and exchanging foreign currency. Because he issued passports, he conveniently became steamship agent for the numerous Italians who travelled to and from their old country. These duties also brought him into contact with other nationalities for whom he transacted business as well. This position gave him enormous influence in the community; however, it did not go uncontested. In 1914 another Italian in the area had charges brought against Tua in an attempt to oust him as consular agent. The accuser, evidently wanting some of the power for himself, claimed that Tua had charged fees for testimony in certain court cases. The state department temporarily withdrew its recognition of Tua as consular agent when charges were brought against him claiming:

Tua is a professional witness in naturalization cases whose knowledge in practically all of the instances in which he has appeared had been so far from personal knowledge as to make his testimony not only unreliable, but in addition untruthful in some cases.²⁶

The indictments were soon dropped after a complete investigation. At the same time, numerous very prominent men in the community signed affidavits which were sent to the state department attesting to the good character of Tua. He quickly regained his title of consular agent and continued serving the Italian community in that capacity

until 1941 when the United States broke diplomatic relations with Italy.

From 1941 to 1959, Tua operated a world tourist and foreign exchange agency, along with a growing interest in real estate transactions. Furthermore, many first generation Italians still sought his services in legal matters even though the office was officially closed. He died on February 24, 1960. Tua had represented the American manifestation of an Italian characteristic, the tendency to depend on a strong male authority. He also had served as an aide to thousands of Italians in the area; yet when he was forced to retire from the consular service and in the years that followed, the Italian-Americans had been assimilated in the ways, languages, and customs of their new homes. He had continued to aid many first-generation Italians, but his influence had slowly decreased in comparison to his early leadership.²⁷

Frugality and Honor

The character traits attributed to many Italians, like the social institutions, helped identify and describe their culture. Americans in Pittsburg County as well as throughout the United States generally recognized the frugality of the Italian immigrants. Coming from a country where opportunity and money were scarce, the Italians lived as thriftily as possible and saved as much money as they could. Rather than trust an American banker, many of the Italians in Pittsburg County buried or hid their money, and families would often have hundreds of dollars in some unlikely spot. Around 1904 one resident of Krebs explained, "I will wager that here at Krebs there are at

least fifty thousand dollars buried under ground; the workmen are justly afraid of the so-called bankers and prefer to hide their money."²⁸ In later years the Italians began trusting their savings to John B. Tua, the Italian consular agent for the area; he in turn deposited much of the money in local banks.²⁹

The reputation of frugality continued and the prestige of Italians increased in the area; nevertheless, this frugal attitude was sometimes used against them. For example, coal operators, when they wanted to demonstrate that wages were adequate, would emphasize that the Italians lived quite well on their incomes from mining. J. G. Puterbaugh, President of the McAlester Fuel Company, explained this to the Oklahoma Coal Strike Commission of 1919 which investigated the conditions of the coal mining industry. He claimed that many of the more ambitious Italian miners earned from \$150 to \$190 a month, living on half and saving about half. He further stated, "By this I want to make it clear that the man who is thrifty and who wants to work and wants a home and wants to save has the opportunity to do that in working in the mines on the present wage scale."³⁰ Such testimony during strikes usually resulted in blocking the miners in their attempt to increase their wages.

Italians of Pittsburg County used their savings in two major ways: they sent it back to Italy or they bought homes in the area. Because almost one half of the Italian men were unmarried with families still living in Italy and because many returned home to visit each year, a large amount of the money went to relatives in the old country. As a result, the Italians sent more money abroad than any other immigrant group, the total from Krebs, McAlester, and Alderson in 1908 being

estimated at \$40,000. Native Italians also owned more land and homes than any other foreign group in the coal mining region. They enjoyed owning their own houses and liked to make gardens and improve their homes. If the Italian neither sent his sayings home nor bought land or a home in Pittsburg County, he usually invested it in his own grocery store or in stock of a local business. Thus, the thriftiness of the Italian immigrant aided in the development of the area as well as increasing his own prestige in the community.³¹

Another positive character trait of many Italians in the area was the strong sense of honor. Often an agreement was sealed only with a handshake with no formal contract being drawn up; yet anyone who broke such an agreement was scorned. In one instance an Italian who had been betrayed by a fellow countryman became so incensed that he trailed him for 4,000 miles to get revenge. The odyssey began in the fall of 1902 when authorities in Indian Territory arrested Angelo Scalfia for illegally selling whiskey. After spending a month in jail, he asked Antonio Seguo, a businessman in South McAlester, to furnish \$4,000 for bond. Seguo agreed to aid this fellow Italian and mortgaged his home to raise the money. After his release, Scalfia immediately disappeared which meant that Seguo's money would be forfeited.³²

When he realized Scalfia had left, Seguo pursued him. For three months Seguo followed the fugitive from place to place until the chase ended in Chicago on December 27, 1902. On that day, Scalfia, weary from the ordeal and fearing for his life, surrendered to two detectives of the Chicago police force. If Scalfia had returned to Indian Territory within five days after his capture, the bond would have been saved; however, Seguo was not interested in the money—

he wanted revenge. After the ordeal the dissatisfied Segugio explained, "I started to kill him, followed him for thousands of miles, and then at the last moment he escapes. It is hard. I would not have it so."³³ At least this one Italian in Pittsburg took seriously the keeping of a pledge.

The Black Hand

Undesirable social characteristics also appeared in Pittsburg County. Although the Italians in the area of Krebs rarely caused disturbances, one exceptional episode of violence erupted in 1909 which was associated with the activities of the "Black Hand." The Black Hand, as distinct from the Mafia, consisted of small unrelated criminal gangs, usually from the same province in Italy. They threatened other Italians and signed their extortionate demands with a small figure of a black hand.³⁴

At least three men were involved in an attempt to blackmail prominent citizens of Krebs in 1909. The conspirators had repeatedly threatened Joe Nellis, a store owner in the small town, warning that they would kill him if he did not pay them \$1,000. Nellis refused, and his store was dynamited at 1:00 a.m. on March 31, 1909. A few days later, Nellis received another note which ordered him to deposit \$1,000 in a coke oven at the Degnan and McConnel plant at nearby Alderson. Nellis notified the sheriff who sent two deputies to take care of the matter. Concealing themselves in a small shack, they pounced on a man when he attempted to retrieve Nellis' ransom from the coke oven. Three other Italians were later arrested, and it was discovered that they had ties with individuals near Chicago. An

interstate conspiracy was suspected. Three of these men, all Sicilians, later were indicted, but the fourth person arrested, a "northern Italian lad," was released after authorities had determined that he was not involved in the blackmailing scheme.³⁵ Evidently the desire to make easy money became contagious, for Joe Lardi of Hartshorne was arrested for attempting to extort \$1,000 from J. H. Baker, a merchant and vice-president of the First State Bank of Hartshorne. Perhaps Lardi had heard of the schemes of the Black Hand in Krebs and decided to try extortion for himself. He had resided in Hartshorne for several months where he had become acquainted with Baker and knew that the banker and merchant was relatively wealthy. His plan failed. Local authorities used the same tactics that the deputies had used in Krebs, catching Lardi in the act of picking up the money on April 8, 1909.³⁶

The episodes of the Black Hand in Krebs and Hartshorne were unique. They were striking exceptions to the usually peaceful atmosphere of the Italian communities. This was different than many areas of South Italy where the Mafia, which used similar tactics, grew into a political and social tool. Also the inability of the Black Hand to operate effectively contrasts greatly with several large American cities where the neighborhood black hand groups thrived and eventually consolidated as part of the American Mafia. Consequently, the indignation of the people in Oklahoma against the violent tactics of a handful of conspirators showed that criminal actions would not be tolerated in the area. The Black Hand could find no foothold in Pittsburg County.³⁷

The South Italian Problem in Pittsburg County

A socio-economic prejudice that the Italians of Pittsburg County brought from their home was the South Italian problem. In Italy, northern Italians generally had felt that their compatriots in the southern regions were inferior and uncultured. In Pittsburg County, the same attitude prevailed as the two groups of Italians segregated themselves from one another. Even some of the social organizations, such as the Christopher Columbus Society initially were open only to North Italians. In some coal mining communities, the two groups of Italians lived together if the total Italian population was small; however, they divided into separate colonies if a large number of both North and South Italians lived in the same town. In many instances, the northern Italians tolerated their southern countrymen, but a number of the hostilities of the old country were apparent between the two factions in Oklahoma.³⁸

Not only the prejudices but also the real inequities of the Southern problem likewise accompanied the Italians to the coal mining area of Oklahoma. The southern Italians, for example, had fewer educational opportunities in Italy; therefore, they were less able to deal with the language and customs of their new homes. A survey of a number of immigrants in Kansas and Oklahoma which was published in 1911 indicated that over 80 percent of the Italians could read and write while only about 60 percent of the South Italians were literate. As a result, many of the South Italians were slower to learn English, even those who had been in the country from fifteen to twenty years. The South Italians also had some of the same attitudes which had been

apparent in their isolated villages in Italy. In their old homes they distrusted anyone from outside the hamlet; in the coal fields they lived in colonies, associated little with natives, and showed little interest outside their own immediate neighborhood. Many of the South Italians also refused to encourage their children to attend school or to speak English. The North Italians, on the other hand, grasped American customs more quickly and learned English more easily. These abilities in turn resulted in a greater interest in affairs of the community and a stronger inclination to settle permanently in the region.³⁹

Many Americans held the same prejudices and recognized distinctions between the two groups of Italians living in the various coal mining communities of Pittsburg County. Residents considered the South Italians as backward, clannish, and inferior to the North Italians. Law enforcement officers felt that the South Italians were the most undesirable group of immigrants when considering proneness to criminality. Conversely, natives held the North Italians in higher esteem, largely because of the North Italian's inclination to become Americanized more quickly. Yet even the North Italians did not escape prejudicial attitudes as many people simply spoke of Italians as only one group. The Italians as a whole were subject also to a caste system which placed Americans and British immigrants above them but the other immigrant groups below them. If these opinions and discriminations were overcome in the coal mining communities, it was in the mines where all nationalities worked side by side and were generally treated as equals.⁴⁰

Prohibition and the Italians

One cultural tradition, the drinking of intoxicating beverages, became a constant source of conflict between the Italians and law enforcement officials in the coal mining communities. From the early days of mining, the Italians and other immigrants made illegal whiskey and beer for their own use as well as for sale. The favorite homemade brew of most miners was "Choctaw" or "Choc" beer which was made from barley, hops, tobacco, fishberries, and a small amount of alcohol. Many Italian women made the Choc beer and sold it to supplement the family income. Indian agent D. M. Wisdom complained of the situation, explaining that medical doctors often helped justify the illegal manufacture and use of the Choc beer and whiskey:

Many miners insist it is essential to their health, owing to the bad water usually found in mining camps, and they aver they use it rather as a tonic or medicine than as a beverage, and this idea, that it is a proper tonic is fostered and encouraged by some physicians. But it is somewhat remarkable as a fact in the scientific world that the water is always bad in the immediate mining centers, but good in the adjacent neighborhood.⁴¹

Prohibition remained in effect in the Choctaw Nation throughout the territorial days, and the Italians continued to violate the law. Shortly before statehood several miners in the area of McAlester and Krebs complained about the restrictions on drinking. They explained that the strenuous work in the mines caused great fatigue, also the air in the mines was often extremely hot and vitiated by the gas escaping from the coal seams. As a result, when they left their work in the evening, they "needed something to drink stronger than water in order to catch their breath."⁴² One Italian miner who had worked elsewhere in the world claimed:

I worked for years in Asia Minor; notwithstanding that the Koran strictly forbids to Mohammedans the use of spirituous drinks, the Turks allowed us Christians to drink wine, beer and other liquors at our pleasure."⁴³

Because the constitution and a prohibition law were passed simultaneously in 1907, statehood brought no relief to the Italians and other immigrants in the coal mining communities of Oklahoma. In 1908, about 30 percent of the indictments for illegal use of intoxicants were issued against foreigners in the three principal coal mining counties. Italians were charged on approximately 20 percent of the total charges. Between 1907 and 1930 a vast majority of the criminal charges against Italians involved the unlawful use or sale of alcoholic beverages. Most of these violations were minor since many of the Italians simply drank with family and friends or sold it to people in the community. Nevertheless, Krebs and other towns with large Italian populations gained a notoriety of lawlessness and bootlegging.⁴⁴

Those who wished to cast doubt on the character of Italians in the area often pointed to the manufacture of moonshine whiskey and Choc beer. For instance, Lieutenant J. H. Carey, regimental intelligence officer for the Oklahoma National Guard stationed in the area during the strike of 1919, issued secret exposes that went first to his commanding officer then to Governor J. D. A. Robertson. Governor Robertson, affected by the national hysteria known as the Red Scare and fearing that radicals and Bolsheviks might be in the coal mining districts, probably expected that Lieutenant Carey would find many such culprits in the area. Carey, straining to reveal evidence of radicalism to his superiors, reported that an Italian was involved in illicit activities. He wrote, "Tony Petitti is running a boot legging

joint wide open (practically) near Hartshorne, selling corn whiskey and Choc."⁴⁵ In the same paper he revealed that an Italian woman was making Choc beer for agitators who met secretly on a hill near Hartshorne. Thus when few clues of Bolshevism could be found, the officer grasped for any type of illegal activity he could find.⁴⁶

Although many people had negative opinions about the manufacture of liquor and beer in the coal mining villages, the Italians and others continued to produce their homemade brews throughout the 1920's. The bad reputation of many towns became widespread. For instance, because Krebs had a reputation of bootlegging and other illegal pursuits, some people in different areas of the state would smile when they heard the word "Krebs." This image of lawlessness led to an investigation of the town. Early in 1928 authorities revealed that John Oxford, a resident of Krebs who had been arrested for marder, owned a secret gambling house in the small town. Governor Henry S. Johnston, a man quickly appalled by such immorality, responded immediately by calling for a formal inquiry on Krebs. W. E. Gotcher, Pittsburg County Attorney, actually led the ensuing investigation, calling before him the city commission and law enforcement officials of Krebs. In his report to Oklahoma Attorney General Edwin Dabney, Gotcher admitted that the problem had existed for years and that it was caused partially by the estimated 1,500 Italians who lived in Krebs at the time. Gotcher explained, "We have had some trouble there due to the fact that some Italians and a few other foreigners and Americans persist in keeping Choctaw beer for their own use and selling it to the public in general."⁴⁷ Tom Caswell, the chief of police of Krebs, further conceded that the largest number of Italians kept Choctaw beer for

their own use and that some sold it for 25 cents a quart. Even with this damaging testimony, however, Attorney General Dabney reported favorably to the governor on the situation in Krebs, saying that the city officials of Krebs did not license any place to operate gambling dens or saloons and that the town did not have such establishments other than the one owned by Oxford. Dabney further added that the general moral condition of Krebs compared favorably with the other communities of Pittsburg County.⁴⁸

The special inquiry of 1928 did little to change the habits of the citizens of Krebs or other mining communities in Pittsburg County. In fact, the depression years that followed brought a flourish in the manufacture and sale of Choc beer and whiskey, and many Italians created their own form of welfare by turning to Choc beer as a livelihood. Even after the repeal of prohibition in 1959, a desiring customer could buy Choc beer in Krebs simply by asking some of the right people in the town.⁴⁹

The custom of social drinking and the other traits of the Italians were all strongly affected by the new environment. Many of these customs were unacceptable in the small-town and Protestant atmosphere of Pittsburg County. The Italians were pressured to conform. Furthermore, they could not avoid the interaction with their new ideas and customs. These conditions caused a deterioration of the Italian society and culture. The change was unavoidable, for the Italians became Americanized.

FOOTNOTES

¹Joseph Lopreato, Italian Americans (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 87; Pisani, The Italian in America, p. 164; Lopreato, Italian Americans, pp. 88-89.

²Ibid., pp. 89-91.

³Urban de Hasque, Early Catholic History of Oklahoma: Oklahoma under the Benedictine Prefects Apostolic from 1875 to 1891, (unpublished manuscript at the Library, St. Francis Center for Christian Renewal, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma), pp. 9-15, 28.

⁴Urban de Hasque, "Church Buildings That Were," St. Rose of Lima Parish Bulletin, Vol. IV, No. 11 (December, 1935), p. 1.

⁵Urban de Hasque, "Notes on Holy Rosary Parish, Hartshorne, Oklahoma," Hartshorne file, Archdiocese Archives, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Father Raymond Gomez to Rev. Urban de Hasque, February 9, 1938, Pittsburg file, Archdiocese Archives, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Interview with Albert Messina; Father Raymond Gomez to Rev. Urban de Hasque, February 9, 1938; Marriage and Baptismal Records, St. Joseph's Catholic Church, Krebs, Oklahoma; Lord, The Italian in America, p. 110.

⁶Lopreato, Italian Americans, pp. 90-91; Bert S. Tua, "Mt. Carmine Day in Southeast Oklahoma," Grant Foreman, ed., "Indian-Pioneer History" (113 vols., unpublished manuscript), Vol. XLVII, pp. 322-326.

⁷Pisani, The Italian in America, p. 170; Angie Debo, The Rise and Fall of the Choctaw Republic (Norman, Oklahoma: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1967), p. 243; De Hasque, "Church Buildings That Were," St. Rose of Lima Parish Bulletin, Vol. IV, p. 1; De Hasque, Early Catholic History of Oklahoma, p. 68.

⁸Lopreato, Italian Americans, pp. 58-60.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Interview with Bill Prichard, May 14, 1975, Krebs, Oklahoma; Interview with John Marino, Sr.; Bituminous Coal Mining, p. 106.

¹²Ibid., pp. 51-52; Interview with Bill Prichard; Interview with John Marino, Sr.; Bituminous Coal Mining, p. 53.

- ¹³ Ibid., p. 97; Interview with Bill Prichard; Bituminous Coal Mining, p. 121; Address of Carl Albert, p. 6.
- ¹⁴ Bituminous Coal Mining, p. 106; Interview with Charles Fassino; Lord, The Italian in America, p. 110; Interview with Charles Fassino.
- ¹⁵ Ryan, The Rehabilitation of Oklahoma Coal Mining Communities, p. 45; Interview with Charles Fassino; Interview with Pete Echelle, November 9, 1974, Kiowa, Oklahoma; Interview with Tony Ravaioli, March 20, 1975, Haileyville, Oklahoma.
- ¹⁶ Ryan, The Rehabilitation of Oklahoma Coal Mining Communities, pp. 44-45.
- ¹⁷ Hilton-Young, The Italian Left, p. 5; Seton-Watson, Italy from Liberalism to Fascism, p. 27.
- ¹⁸ List of mutual aid organizations, Papers of the Treasurer of National Columbian Federation, Charles Fassino, McAlester, Oklahoma; Constitution of the Society of Christofolo Colombo of Krebs, Indian Territory, Christopher Columbus Society Collection, Special Collection Division, Oklahoma State University Library, Stillwater, Oklahoma.
- ¹⁹ List of charter members of Christopher Columbus Society in the possession of Charles Fassino, McAlester, Oklahoma; Bituminous Coal Mining, p. 20; Interview with Charles Fassino.
- ²⁰ Constitution of the Society Christofolo Columbo of Krebs, Indian Territory, Christopher Columbus Society Collection, Special Collections Division, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Lopreato, Italian Americans, pp. 93-97.
- ²³ Undated newspaper clipping of The McAlester News-Capital from a scrapbook in the possession of Bert Tua, McAlester, Oklahoma.
- ²⁴ Muskogee Phoenix, October 31, 1902, p. 1.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Interview with Bert Tua, March 2, 1974, McAlester, Oklahoma, Affidavit, April 18, 1914, in the possession of Bert Tua.
- ²⁷ Ibid.; McAlester Democrat, March 3, 1960, p. 1.
- ²⁸ Lord, The Italian in America, p. 110.
- ²⁹ Muskogee Phoenix, October 31, 1902, p. 1.

³⁰Testimony of J. G. Puterbaugh, p. 61, Record of the Coal Strike Commission, J. B. A. Robertson Files, Oklahoma State Archives, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

³¹Bituminous Coal Mining, p. 93, 17, 111; United States Senate, 59th Congress, 2nd Session, Senate Report 5013: Report of the Select Committee to Investigate Matters Concerned with Affairs in Indian Territory (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1907), p. 750; Bituminous Coal Mining, p. 109.

³²The Cherokee Advocate (Tahlequah, Oklahoma), January 4, 1902, p. 2.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Joseph L. Albini, The American Mafia: Genesis of a Legend (New York: Appleton, Century, and Crofts, 1971), pp. 191-195.

³⁵The McAlester News-Capital, March 31, p. 1, April 5, p. 1, and June 17, p. 1, 1909.

³⁶The Weekly Chieftain, (Eufala, Oklahoma) April 9, 1909, p. 1.

³⁷Interview with Charles Fassino.

³⁸Ibid., Bituminous Coal Mining, p. 71; Interview with Charles Fassino.

³⁹Bituminous Coal Mining, pp. 90, 106.

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 106, 100; Address of Carl Albert, p. 3; Bituminous Coal Mining, p. 70.

⁴¹D. M. Wisdom, "Report of Union Agency, August 28, 1894," Annual Report of the Secretary of Interior, House Executive Document I, 53rd Congress, 3rd Session (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1894), p. 143.

⁴²Lord, The Italian in America, p. 109.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Bituminous Coal Mining, p. 100; Criminal Court Records, Office of the Court Clerk, Pittsburg County Courthouse, McAlester, Oklahoma; Interview with Bill Prichard.

⁴⁵Lieutenant J. H. Carey to Brigadier General Charles F. Barrett, November 9, 1919, Coal Strike Files in Governor J. B. A. Robertson Files, Oklahoma State Archives, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷W. E. Gotcher to Edwin Dabney, February 18, 1928, Krebs Inquiry File, Governor Henry S. Johnston Files, Oklahoma State Archives, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

⁴⁸Transcript of proceedings on inquiry of Krebs, Oklahoma, Krebs Inquiry File, Governor Henry S. Johnston Files, Oklahoma State Archives, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Edwin Dabney to Henry S. Johnston, February 21, 1928, Krebs Inquiry File, Governor Henry S. Johnston Files, Oklahoma State Archives, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

⁴⁹Interview with Bill Prichard; Address of Carl Albert, p. 6.

CHAPTER V

ASSIMILATION, BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES, AND CONCLUSION

Assimilation

The forces which worked toward assimilation of the Italians in Pittsburg County were overwhelming, and the social attitudes and customs of the general public forced a change in the institutions and culture that the Italians brought with them. The Italian men labored in the mines with workers of various nationalities and learned the systems and procedures of the American labor organizations. The children attended the schools where they learned the language and customs of their new homes and made contacts with friends outside their families. Even many of the women, who were least prone to assimilation, could not totally avoid contact with people of various nationalities in their communities. Furthermore, all people within all ethnic groups were forced together by common problems such as explosions, strikes, and economic depressions.

Economic conditions strongly affected the fluctuations in Italian population as Italians left the area during hard times. For instance, the number of foreign-born Italians in Pittsburg County dropped from 1,398 in 1910 to 912 in 1920. This was probably due to several factors in the coal mining industry in the county. Although the daily

wages increased throughout the decade, the work became increasingly unsteady as many operators would provide employment only six or seven months out of the year. Also the influx of miners had caused a surplus of workers; therefore, many left Oklahoma altogether. Other Italians from Pittsburg County moved to newer coal fields within the state, such as those in nearby Henryetta, where opportunities were greater for the experienced miner. In addition, death from old age and disease subtracted from the total Italian population.¹

Increased production during World War I resulted in better wages and more days of employment for the miners; however, during the 1920s the industry declined to the point of economic disaster for the workers and operators as well. Competition with fuel oil forced the owners to lower prices and wages which, in turn, caused the prolonged strike of 1924-1927. The union could not avoid a cut in wages, and violence resulted when operators brought in strike breakers. The union lost. This unfortunate situation of the 1920s destroyed the union, bankrupted many coal companies, and reduced the coal mining communities to decaying towns.²

The decade also became a turning point for the assimilation of Italians, causing an acceleration of the process. During the disastrous years between 1920 and 1930, many Italians left Pittsburg County for the same reason they had immigrated from Italy—because of economic turmoil. In that decade, the entire population of the county decreased by 1,792, and the Italians accounted for 423 of that number or about 23 percent. However, the Italians made up less than 2 percent of the population, indicating that they, more than any other group, responded to the economy by leaving the area. Over two hundred

Italians left Krebs and went to work in the rubber industries of Akron, Ohio; others sought employment in the automobile industries of Detroit, Michigan, or in the diversified economy of California. This unavoidably resulted in accelerating the process of assimilation. With fewer Italians in the region, those who remained undoubtedly had to seek more friendships outside their nationality. Also the more permanent Italians, out of necessity, found other occupations which increased the number of acquaintances and added to the knowledge of more diverse American business practices.³

The loss of the prestige of the British and American skilled miners further accelerated assimilation and brought about more tolerance of all groups in the area. This developed with the strike of 1924-1927 and continued afterward. Prior to that time, the British and Americans had held a position of superiority because of their favored status both in the union and with the operators. They received the best jobs with the best pay. However, because the owners of the mines brought in strikebreakers and because the union failed to function between 1924 and 1927, the more skilled miners were reduced to working side by side with the scabs. This equalizing circumstance took away the favored position and brought about a general acceptance of all groups in the coal fields, with the exception of blacks and the farmers who worked in the mines as strikebreakers. The southern and eastern Europeans, including the Italians, became a component part of the communities in the coal fields and were even socially acceptable to the British and American miners. The once-criticized differences in culture were accounted for with the reasoning that "he is an Italian, but a good fellow just the same."⁴

In the years that followed, the majority of Italian immigrants and certainly their offspring became amalgamated both in habits and biologically with the general public. In the 1930s and 1940s and afterward, the rapid decline in foreign-born Italians continued, caused both by deaths and by migration. In 1940, only 893 original immigrants remained in Oklahoma and only 359 in Pittsburg County. By 1950, the number had stabilized with 805 foreign-born Italians being recorded for the state, but the number for Pittsburg County was not listed in the general census information. Even with this small number of first generation Italians remaining, they and their children and grandchildren continued to be an important part of the old coal mining communities. A few worked in the coal mines which operated periodically until the 1960s; however, the majority learned new occupations. They became ranchers, storekeepers, mechanics, restaurateurs, and factory workers. In learning new ways of life, they became adept in American business practices and customs. As a result of this adaptation, the general populace has accepted the Italians of all generations with little prejudice remaining, and they are recognized as being Italian by name only.⁵

One of the only vestiges of the old Italian American culture in Pittsburg County that remains is the language. However, whereas the Italians used to speak broken English, they now speak broken Italian, and the language is hardly recognizable. Likewise, the Catholic Church is still part of the culture of many Italians; yet, it is even less Italian in nature than it was in the early coal mining era. Perhaps the strongest tie to the past for the Italians is food, for the families continue to serve the traditional dishes and several

famous restaurants offer their fine Italian meals to the public. Thus, few traces remain of the customs and institutions of the Italian immigrants in Pittsburg County.⁶

Biographical Sketches

After the strike of 1924-1927, the life of each Italian who remained in Pittsburg County was indeed a story of assimilation. Although the majority of the Italians left the area, the ones who stayed particularly illustrate the desire to settle in the region and to become a part of the society. Seeking new opportunities, these men left the depressed conditions of Italy, and the early immigrants during territorial days often lived elsewhere in the United States before coming to Pittsburg County. Almost without exception, these men originally worked as coal miners and changed their occupation when advantages were greater in other lines of work or when the closing of the mines forced them to find different jobs. Most significantly, they stayed and often became important citizens and businessmen. The following might be typical examples.

Joe Fassino

Joe (Guiseppe) Fassino became one of the first Italians of Pittsburg County to show a high degree of adaptability and success. Born in the Piedmont region in the small village of Camischio on September 9, 1863, he was the member of a poor farming family, the son of Carlo and Angela Fassino. As a boy, he helped with the family chores and duties and at age ten quit school and went to work as a shepherd. Like many Italians in the northern part of the country,

he migrated to Switzerland and France to work on various construction projects, including the St. Gotthard Tunnel in the Alps. He returned to Italy when he was drafted in 1883. Three years later he received his discharge and decided to leave Italy. Fassino particularly hated the economic hardships and virtual lack of opportunities and vowed not to raise a family if he had to remain in Italy; therefore, he left for the United States in 1886 when he was twenty-three years old.⁷

After arriving at New York City, Fassino immediately joined an older brother in Braidwood, Illinois, where he worked in the coal mines. He also lived in other neighboring coal mining communities including Norris, Illinois, the new town of many people from his old village. In 1887, John Fassino, a younger brother, joined the Fassinos already in Illinois. After a short period of time, the oldest brother returned to Italy, while Joe and John Fassino decided to use their savings and go into business. They heard that several Italians lived in Indian Territory and that no one had opened a grocery store there for the Italian population. Therefore, in 1891 the two Fassino brothers moved to Krebs and opened a small store that sold foods which their countrymen wanted. The Fassinos prospered and became the leaders of the colony.⁸

Joe Fassino attempted to meet the needs of his fellow countrymen. On several occasions he smuggled his food into a nearby company camp for sale to Italian families who desired special items such as cheese, figs, and chestnuts. These Italian miners were not allowed to buy products other than those that could be bought at the company store. The camps were fenced and guarded, but Fassino, implying that he wanted to visit friends, hid the food in his buggy and took it to

friends who wanted the imported goods. During strikes the Fassino brothers extended credit to the miners, often almost causing a bankruptcy for themselves. Because of this, many people in the area continued to buy from their store. They also allowed many Italians in the area to use their store as a bank, and Joe Fassino kept accounts of all savings and records of wills in case the depositors died. These activities expanded into taking care of certain business affairs and correspondence. Because of these activities, he became the Italian consular agent around the turn of the century and kept the position for a number of years, issuing passports, exchanging currency, and carrying out other duties for Italian immigrants.⁹

In 1897, the Fassino brothers decided to expand their enterprises by opening a macaroni factory in McAlester. The previous year they had experienced a setback when a bank in which they had deposits had closed. Nevertheless, they returned to their previous prosperity and continued with their plans to establish the factory. In May of 1897, they received word that the machinery was on its way to McAlester, a bit of news that soon became common knowledge. The South McAlester Capital reported the story, voicing support and pointing out the fine character of the Fassino Brothers:

It is hoped that they will start out with a good trade, and every indication points in that direction. They are two energetic men who have gone into the business with their own capital and who will add to the city an industry that will bring them and the city deserved reputation.¹⁰

By October, 1897, the factory produced large enough sales for Joe Fassino to go looking for outlets in Kansas, where he found a ready market. Eventually the sales area would include Oklahoma, Kansas, Texas, Missouri, Arkansas, and a surplus sales region in the

Carribbean. By 1902, the Fassino Brothers were so successful that they again expanded their business enterprises and began selling wagons and buggies. Also in that year they moved their residence from Krebs to McAlester, and the people in the area soon recognized them as leaders in the community. By 1905, the Fassinos had invested at least \$60,000 in land in the area, believing that to be a safe and profitable investment. One early description of the Italians in the area explained, "The richest and most intelligent Italians located here are said to be the Fassino Brothers, the Piedmontese proprietors of a macaroni factory and of a carriage and wagon warehouse."¹¹

The two brothers continued to assist in the development of the area throughout the remainder of their lives. Joe Fassino retired in 1928, leaving the businesses for his brother to run. He died on August 2, 1936. He and his brother had been the first Italians to gain a position of prominence in Pittsburg County. Together they built one of the largest manufacturing companies during that period of time, demonstrating a talent and adeptness in American business procedures. Joe Fassino became a leader among the Italians, being called the "dean" of the Italians in the region at the time of his death.¹²

Louis Messina

Louis (Luigi) Messina was a southern Italian who became an influential grocer, baker, and coal mine owner in the area of Haileyville. He was born on October 3, 1885 in Casa Lucci, Italy, a small village near Naples. Quitting school with only a sixth grade education, he left home at age twelve and went to Naples where he

became an apprentice baker and ice cream maker. Because he learned this trade, he was in a much better position than other South Italians who came to America without a skill. He left Naples in 1900 for the United States, landing in Boston where a cousin offered him a place to live. Dissatisfied with the city, he left after several months and eventually stopped in Chicapee, Kansas, to work in the coal mines. In 1903, trouble erupted in the union there and the miners became violent. During this feud, Messina attended a local union meeting in which a number of miners began fighting. Messina and a friend escaped the ensuing brawl and decided to leave the area. They had heard of coal mining in nearby Indian Territory; therefore, they moved to Krebs.¹³

Messina immediately obtained employment with the Osage Coal and Mining Company, and, being ambitious, also worked at the nearby coke ovens in Alderson, the two jobs totaling twenty hours a day. In 1905, he married Vita Duca, the daughter of a grocer from North McAlester, and moved to Haileyville, where he put his skill to work by opening a bakery. Between 1905 and 1919 he worked at various other livelihoods as well, thus showing a diversity of talents and interests. In addition to the bakery, these included the establishment of an ice cream factory and grocery store. After a few years in private business, a coal company bought his enterprises and hired him as the assistant manager of a company store, believing that he would aid in the relations with the Italian miners. He also worked as a top foreman in the mines for the same company and after a year went back into business for himself. He bought a drugstore where he added a confectionary and ice cream shop. In the winter of 1917-1918, when a

flu epidemic hit the area, he returned to the mines because of the extreme demand for workers while his wife continued to operate the drug store and confectionary. As the war continued, the inevitable happened and the government drafted Messina for military service. He sold his business and prepared to go, but never left because the warring parties signed the Armistice on November 11, 1918, a day before he was to depart.¹⁴

Deciding not to return to his old line of work, he bought a farm, and cleared the land, and produced a crop before he again changed occupations, purchasing a coal mine in late 1919. This mine, known as the Messina Coal Mine, was located at Pocahontas, five miles north of Hartshorne. From the beginning, this mine caused enormous trouble for the new operator because it was located near a creek and flooded quite easily. The first two years were spent battling quicksand until he solved the problem and began substantial production. In 1922, an unusually heavy snow caused the mine to flood, forcing his workers to spend several days pumping it out; then it became necessary to put in a concrete air shaft, and Messina had to take in stockholders to pay for the expense. Finally, in 1922, the jinxed operator solved all his problems by opening a successful mine which employed over two hundred people and produced over seven hundred tons of coal at its peak. With this mine a success, in 1927 Messina decided to expand, opening the Craig Valley Mine six miles east of Haileyville, which employed up to one hundred miners. By the time he had begun the second mine, Messina had gained the reputation of being wealthy. Although he prospered and made a good living, this opinion held by many people in the community was exaggerated. Because the costs of operating the mines were great,

his profits were marginal. Furthermore, he started in the industry when a general depression had begun in coal mining as well as other sectors of the economy. Only stubborn determination and hard work enabled him to succeed.¹⁵

After running the first two mines for a number of years, Messina closed them and opened a third near Dow. This mine employed about one hundred men, but was abandoned in 1938 because of the low quality of the coal. Messina then started another mine at Adamson, operating it until his retirement in 1944. He continued to live in Haileyville until his death on November 2, 1960. Probably the only Italian operator of coal mines in Pittsburg County, his life was a story of adaptation and success. With only a grade school education, he came to Oklahoma, learned the techniques of mining, and established one of the most important independent mining operations in the coal fields.¹⁶

Pete Echelle

Pete Echelle, an Italian who chose to give up coal mining in favor of ranching, was born in Guisto, Italy, on April 6, 1884. Echelle became an orphan at an early age, his parents having died by the time he was five. After their death he moved to his grandmother's home and lived off a very meager income. Conditions necessitated his leaving school by the time he was eight years old in 1892. In that year he went to work on a farm for, what he estimated to be, \$4.00 a year. Two years later he found a new job for \$10.00 a year, but only worked for five months before he quit. Thereafter, he worked for an older brother who had contracted work for various farmers, and, while in his teens, moved to France where he worked in a rubber factory

and on railroads. When he was twenty, he went into the army and stayed there two years, then returned to his home. In 1907, a brother who had settled in McAlester sent for young Echelle, explaining that substantial wages could be made in the coal fields. Other neighbors from the area of San Guisto had also moved to Oklahoma; therefore, the attractiveness to move was increased. He left from La Havre, France, on the vessel La Gascogne on September 30, 1907, and landed in New York City.¹⁷

Immediately after arriving in McAlester, Echelle went to work in a coal mine which closed after he was there only two weeks, and he was not paid. Misfortune continued, for the young Italian then worked for about a year in the Number 2 Samples mine near McAlester and was badly injured in a mine explosion in 1908. Seven other men who were working nearby were killed when they ran and breathed the super heated air. Echelle wisely dove into the dirt and covered his face, but his back and sides were badly burned. After about three months of recuperation, he moved to Pittsburg in the closing months of 1908. There he labored in a nearby coal mine and by 1910 added to his income by buying and butchering cattle. The industrious Echelle earned \$2.00 a day for the work in the mine, went home to rest, and then arose at three o'clock every morning to peddle his meat to neighbors in the community.¹⁸

In 1910, Echelle began buying cattle and land, eventually becoming one of the most prominent ranchers in Pittsburg County. In 1913, he bought seven hundred acres of pasture land where he raised cattle. After another accident in 1918, in which Echelle crushed and temporarily paralyzed his leg, he quit coal mining, sold his pasture land and

bought 200 acres of farm land near Kiowa. The price of cotton had risen tremendously due to World War I; therefore, he planted half his land in cotton and used the remaining 100 acres to raise hogs. Unfortunately, the new crop did not pay off as much as Echelle had expected, for the price of cotton declined from forty cents per pound in 1918 to nineteen cents per pound in 1920. Hoping the price would rise, he kept his cotton for a year; however, the gamble did not pay off, as the price tumbled to only five cents per pound. Echelle sold his cotton and hogs at a loss and managed to get an extension on the \$700.00 loan that he had obtained to buy his land.¹⁹

Slowly the persistent Italian regained his previous position, displaying a stubborn skill common to many Italians—the ability to improve himself under adverse conditions. He worked again as a butcher in Pittsburg, cultivated much of his land, and began ranching once again. Eventually he obtained more than 2,000 acres of land, leased up to 8,000 acres of pasture on the neighboring United States Naval Ammunition Depot, and owned as many as 1,000 head of cattle. As of 1975, Echelle lives at Kiowa in semi-retirement, raising about 300 head of cattle. His life in the coal mining area of Pittsburg County has been one of adaptation to the economic conditions.²⁰

Pete Prichard

Another southern Italian who came over as a child and learned a new livelihood out of necessity was Pete Prichard. When he was born on June 29, 1895, at San Gregario Magne, Italy, his name was Pietro Piegari and was changed to Prichard when he began working in the coal fields of Oklahoma. Prichard's father first came to the area about

1902 and sent for his wife and children in 1903, arriving at Krebs in that year. Receiving less than three years of education, he began working in the mines at eleven years of age. He also spent several months in Arkansas working with a railroad, then returned to the mines where he was injured when he was twenty-one years of age. His leg was crushed so badly that he could not return to mining; as a result, he worked at any job he could and began making and selling Choc beer in his home in Krebs.²¹

His customers often brought bread, sausages and cheese with them when they gathered to drink beer. Realizing the possibility of a legitimate and steady source of income, Prichard started providing foods for his patrons. Soon the business became a thriving restaurant. Prichard had enjoyed cooking as a child, often stealing out of the house with his mother's frying pan and cooking the quarry that he and some fellow young hunters had killed. Also while working on the railroad in Arkansas, some Greek immigrants instructed him on the art of preparing food. Thus, the young Italian used his interest and experience in developing a restaurant. The date of establishment was 1925, a few years after he had started supplementing his income with beer. In 1932, Prichard was arrested for illegally making and selling beer; therefore, he quit offering the illicit liquid refreshment and opened a completely legitimate restaurant in his home. During the depression "Pete's Place" thrived as the reputation of his expert Italian dishes spread throughout the region. In 1934, he made an addition to his cafe by building an additional room, and again expanded by boxing in his back porch in 1938. Other enlargements followed in similar fashion until he had completely converted his

home into an eating establishment. Throughout his years of operation, Prichard drew as customers every governor of the state since the 1930s, as well as consuls, ambassadors, actors, and persons in the entertainment field. He sold Pete's Place to his son Bill in 1961 and retired completely in 1966. Prichard died on May 1, 1970 in Krebs. An example of those Italians who were forced to find work outside of the mines, Prichard chose to make a hobby into an occupation and succeeded.²²

Prichard, like many Italians, managed to survive the downfall of the coal industry. The consequences of the mining decline were overwhelming and caused a deterioration of not only Italian culture but also the entire socio-economic structure of the county. Due to these conditions, many Italians left, yet many also remained permanently in Pittsburg County. Typical of these were Prichard, Echelle, Messina, and Fassino. Their lives were stories of assimilation and adaptation. Each was forced, at one time or another, to diversify and find a new means of livelihood. Whether before or after the decline of mining, each chose a different new occupation and became relatively successful. Undoubtedly, others who stayed were forced to adapt in a similar manner.

Conclusion

The Italian immigrants probably had a predisposition to change or they would not have left their country; therefore, they were at least more prone to accept new lifestyles than their countrymen who remained at home. The improvements in living conditions also gave them incentive to adapt to their new environment. Working in the coal mines and

attending union meetings further added to the process by bringing the immigrants into contact with Americans and American techniques of operation. The Italians also changed because their social institutions and culture could not survive in an alien place such as Pittsburg County. Catholicism in Oklahoma was not like the Church in Italy. No matter how much the Italians isolated themselves in their colonies, they could not escape interaction with others in the coal mining communities. Even the long-established custom of social drinking constantly conflicted with prohibition, and the infamous antics of the Black Hand met intolerance in the small-town atmosphere of the coal fields. Such deterioration of the Italian culture left a vacuum that could have been filled only by accepting new ways.

Because they were particularly sensitive to economic conditions, their attitudes, institutions, and customs were affected. The coal mines of Pittsburg County paid well in comparison to their incomes in Italy; therefore, their reactions in the labor union and Socialist Party were much less extreme than in the old country. Rather than being radical and violent, they became moderate in their labor quarrels and reacted more like Americans in their attitudes. Economic motivation, thus, was a characteristic of the Italian and was part of the assimilation process.

The desire to improve economically also caused Italians to adapt to American ways. Significantly, the Italians left their homes to escape the depressed conditions and inequalities of the economy. Once they arrived in Pittsburg County, the drive for improvement continued and they were willing to accept new challenges if they could improve their status. Indeed, the promise of substantial wages induced them

to come to the area in the first place and offered mobility once they arrived. The well-known frugality that they displayed was a result of the desire for economic betterment. They worked hard, saved, and changed occupations in order to achieve this goal. Because opportunities were good they generally prospered and became willing to take up new pursuits. When mining began to decline, many left, but those who stayed diversified their activities and learned American techniques and habits.

Motivated by their economic drive and assimilating with their new neighbors, the Italians contributed greatly to the growth of the area. Most obviously they were significant in the development of the coal mines, making up the largest portion of the work force in Pittsburg County. This, in turn, fostered the settlement and economic expansion of the coal mining communities. They either chose or eventually were forced to find new occupations, and several became leaders or businessmen, real estate owners, ranchers, grocers, coal mine operators, restaurateurs, and teachers. In addition, the Italians of Pittsburg County have left a colorful heritage for the people of the area.

FOOTNOTES

¹United States Bureau of the Census, Thirteenth Census of the United States taken in the year 1910, Vol. III: Population, p. 476; United States Bureau of the Census, Fourteenth Census of the United States taken in the year 1920, Vol. III: Population (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1922), p. 827; Ryan, The Rehabilitation of Oklahoma Coal Mining Communities, pp. 59-60.

²Ibid., pp. 61-64.

³United States Bureau of the Census, Fourteenth Census of the United States taken in the year 1920, Vol. III: Population, p. 827; United States Bureau of the Census, Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Vol. III. Population, Part 2: Reports by States—Montana-Wyoming (Washington Government Printing, 1932), p. 574; Ryan, The Rehabilitation of Oklahoma Coal Mining Communities, p. 73.

⁴Ibid., pp. 66, 88-89.

⁵United States Bureau of the Census, Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940, Vol. II: Population, Part 5: New York-Oregon (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1943), pp. 813, 858; United States Bureau of the Census, Census of Population: 1950, Vol. II: Characteristics of the Population, Part 36: Oklahoma (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1952), p. 38.

⁶Interview with Bill Prichard.

⁷McAlester News-Capital, August 3, 1936, p. 1; Interview with Charles Fassino.

⁸Ibid.; McAlester News-Capital, August 3, 1936, p. 1.

⁹Interview with Charles Fassino.

¹⁰South McAlester Capital, May 20, 1897, p. 1.

¹¹Ibid., October 21, 1897, p. 5; Interview with Charles Fassino; Lord, The Italian in America, p. 108.

¹²McAlester News-Capital, August 3, 1936, p. 1.

¹³Hartshorne Sun, November 8, 1962, p. 1; Interview with Albert Messina.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.; Hartshorne Sun, November 8, 1962, p. 1.

¹⁷Petition for citizenship #512 (for Pete Echelle), Naturalization Records, Office of the Court Clerk, Pittsburg County Courthouse, McAlester, Oklahoma; Interview with Pete Echelle.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Petition for citizenship #541 (for Pete Prichard), Naturalization Records, Office of the Court Clerk, Pittsburg County Courthouse, McAlester, Oklahoma; Interview with Bill Prichard.

²²Ibid.; McAlester News-Capital, May 3, 1970, p. 1.

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