

*Becoming American: The Journey of Italians in Genesee County, New York*

by

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*Introduction*

Although such Italian immigrants as Paolo Busti made their presence felt in Genesee County, New York as early as the late eighteenth century – in his case as the Holland Land Company’s Agent General orchestrating real estate transactions in Western New York on behalf of Dutch investors – it was not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that large numbers of Italian immigrants began to make their appearance in Genesee County. Their origins – and the initial reaction of the non-Italian community – were typical of who these more recent immigrants were and what they faced elsewhere in the United States by the closing decades of the nineteenth century. How those early reactions of many Americans eventually changed, and how the descendants of those immigrants ultimately became an integral part of Genesee County and the country at large, is a story still unfolding today.

The first Italian immigrants to arrive in large numbers were typically peasants from southern Italy. Intent upon building a life free from hunger, political tyranny, and rampant economic exploitation, they also tended to idealize what America was – until they disembarked at Ellis Island and soon confronted harsher realities than those they anticipated. Such harshness, as we shall see, took numerous forms – including that of organized violence directed against them by such groups as the Ku Klux Klan.

Nonetheless, for reasons that will be discussed, the early images of Italian immigrants that were largely negative subsequently yielded to far more flattering depictions that, over time, afforded opportunities to descendants that could not have been imagined by the immigrant generation. The Italian-American that appeared out of the hard work, patience, and suffering of those first arrivals eventually produced descendants who thought of themselves as Americans –

though Americans with an Italian ancestry. But that is getting ahead of ourselves. To understand what eventually came to be, one has to step back in time, and explore the lives of those earliest Italian immigrants to Genesee County and the world they were leaving behind in Italy.

### *The Immigrants*

The bulk of the immigrants came from a part of Italy that can be described as an impoverished agricultural area; one in which malnutrition, hunger, political corruption and tyranny, natural disasters and epidemics were the norm. Even by European standards the peasants of the *mezzogiorno*, or southern Italy, were exploited in an outrageous manner. For example, in 1902, common laborers in Sicily earned the equivalent of 25 cents for twelve hours of backbreaking labor. By contrast, in that same year, urban workers in the United States realized between \$1.50 and \$2.00 per day. An excerpt from a southern Italian folk song in this period captures the anger and resentment of many an immigrant:

Today, landlord, you will plow  
your own field  
Because we are leaving  
for America.

For many immigrants, then, the vision of America was of a promised land; an earthly paradise offering the possibility of dignity and security – parts of life not attainable in the towns, cities, and fields of Italy.

Conversely, Americans had their own impressions of Italy. In the nineteenth century there were essentially two views of Italy. The earlier perspective – evident prior to the mass migration of southern Italians in the late 1800s – was quite positive. Italy was as much an idea as a nation in this view, for it embodied the finest of Western traditions – political idealism, artistic sensitivity, intellectual creativity, and worldly experience. Elites, such as the critic Henry James, flocked to Italy in search of the rich experiences found there. So too did writers like James Fenimore Cooper and Nathaniel Hawthorne. In Genesee County, the beauty of Italian culture was celebrated in such newspapers as *Batavia's Spirit of the Times*.

For instance, in the May 13<sup>th</sup>, 1825 issue we discover an extended discussion of the collections in the Museum of Naples. The writer in this article spoke of the delicate intricacy of the jewelry from antiquity then on display. “I assure you,” he told his readers, “that our most skillful jewelers could make nothing more elegant, or of a better taste.”

But the admiration discernible in earlier depictions of Italy all but vanished by the early twentieth century with the entry of 2,045, 877 Italian immigrants by 1910 (although it should be remembered that 1,154,322 of these people eventually returned to Italy). Despite the fact of high remigration, the fact remains that this movement of mostly southern Italians was a dramatic shift in the history of Italian migration – because in the ten-year period of 1860 through 1870 a mere 12,000 Italians had left for the United States. As the sheer numbers of newcomers increased, so too did apprehension about the effects this would have on the United States. No longer was the Italian an abstraction – for most Americans had never encountered an Italian. If they thought of Italians at all, it was through the eyes of American writers – which included those I have mentioned and many more, such as the feminist and activist Margaret Fuller, who enthused about the political ideals of the revolutionary Giuseppe Mazzini, one of the architects of the modern Italian state.

Instead, the typical American by the close of the nineteenth century met – face-to-face – the southern Italian peasant who tended to be illiterate and unskilled. In addition, southern Italian immigrants had the misfortune of arriving at a moment of intense racial stereotyping; categories culminating in the placement of Anglo-Saxons at the top of a social hierarchy with Italians occupying the lower rungs of this racial pecking order. Combined with the poverty of peasants willing to work at low-paying occupations because of clear necessity, yet another factor worked to the Italian immigrant’s disadvantage – the alleged propensity to engage in a class conflict seen as inappropriate in America. In Genesee County nowhere was all of this more evident than in Oakfield in 1905 and 1906 at the United States Gypsum Company.

*The Confrontations at the United States Gypsum Company*

A farmer in Oakfield discovered what was called “land plaster,” or gypsum, in 1825. Not long afterwards, a mine commenced operations along with a grinding mill. The mine would become the largest thin-vein mine in the world. As demand for a material used to make plaster, blackboard chalk, and wallboard grew, so too did the use of power driven machines in the Oakfield mine. By 1902 the United States Gypsum Company had emerged.

The need for increased numbers of miners to meet the demand for gypsum translated into reliance upon Italian immigrants willing to endure the dangers of gypsum mining – an endeavor in which the roof of the gypsum mine could easily collapse despite efforts to support the limestone roof layer. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November, 1905, a collapse of this sort is exactly what happened.

Just before noon on that day a roof collapsed and killed two miners. One of them, Gaitano Valente, was a thirty-year old immigrant. On the following day, approximately two hundred fellow Italian immigrants, also employed in the gypsum mines, walked off the job and proclaimed their intention never to enter the gypsum mines again. Such labor restlessness was stressed a month later in another Batavia newspaper, *The Daily News*. On December 15<sup>th</sup>, 1905, readers were told that “several of the company’s miners” who boarded at the residence maintained by the company “were drunk and created a disturbance.” The following day *The Daily News* continued its coverage of developments at the boarding house, touching upon thefts that had taken place there. While the alleged thieves were not identified as Italian, subsequent depictions of Italians in Genesee County made explicit what was merely implied in the 1905 *Daily News* articles – that Italian immigrants tended to induce social chaos. For example, in the September 12<sup>th</sup>, 1906 issue of *The Daily News*, the front page featured two articles about “11 Italians (who were) arrested on Sunday night as ringleaders of the rioting discharged by Justice Ingalsbe at Oakfield today,” along with another article, just below, about a “row among Italians” regarding three families contesting the same well. *The Daily News* was replete with such stories, and the perceptions of Italian immigrants thus formed were in accordance with many similar images generated throughout the United States in this period.

Accordingly, despite the sacrifices of Italian immigrants and their children who served in the First World War, the earlier depictions of chaos associated with Italian immigrants – strikes, the purported propensity for crime, the supposed dangers of Roman Catholicism, and alcohol consumption – all came together in the momentary appeal of the Ku Klux Klan which, by 1924, had achieved national prominence. Its presence on the nation’s stage was evident in areas outside of the Deep South – such as Genesee County.

### *The Ku Klux Klan in Genesee County*

Throughout 1924 anti-Italian sentiments in the county reached a fever pitch, and these perspectives were clearly articulated in the area’s Klan activity. The Klan in Genesee County in the early 1920s was symptomatic of a larger national trend in the period after World War One. Historians have estimated that through 1924 Klan membership ranged between three and eight million people. The Klan argued for a “true Americanism” which excluded African-Americans, Roman Catholics, Jews, Mexicans, Asians, and immigrant groups from southern and Eastern Europe – which of course included Italians. By the time that 50,000 Klan members marched in front of the White House in Washington, D.C., they had helped to elect eleven governors and briefly controlled the state legislatures of Colorado, Oregon, Texas, and Oklahoma.

In Genesee County the Klan issued a public statement articulating their desire to march in the Labor Day Parade in Batavia in 1924. On August 15<sup>th</sup> *The Daily News*, in stories leading up to Labor Day, commented on their presence in such articles as:

### Ku Klux Klan Gatherings

Two open-air ceremonies have been staged by the Batavia realm of the Ku Klux Klan during the past week, one at Morganville on Monday evening and the other at South Alabama on Wednesday evening. Fiery crosses were burned and a class of candidates was initiated at each

meeting.

Three days later a front-page article spoke of a Klan rally in Point Pleasant, New Jersey, attended by four hundred Klan members “in full regalia” who “were listening to a patriotic address by Mrs. Leila Bell.” On the next day, August 19<sup>th</sup>, *The Daily News* featured a front-page article regarding the “Midnight Procession of Klansmen” which had “moved from Batavia to Indian Falls for Ku Klux Initiation Ceremonies.” All of this culminated in an August 21<sup>st</sup> headline in that same newspaper announcing that “Thousands of Klansmen Are To Hold a Picnic Labor Day in Batavia.”

As Labor Day approached opposition to the Klan’s plan became apparent. On August 23<sup>rd</sup> *The Daily News* told readers that the “Use of (the) Park (Exposition Park) by the Klan (was) Meeting with Opposition upon the Part of Some.” Subsequent articles through Labor Day stressed the intensity of the controversy surrounding the Klan’s call for a gathering in Batavia on Labor Day. Through the end of August *The Daily News* acknowledged receipt of letters signed with such phrases as “A Batavia Klanswoman” in which Roman Catholics were denounced, along with a description, on September 2<sup>nd</sup>, of the Klan gathering at Exposition Park. Public lectures to as many as 15,000 people featured talks regarding “100 percent Americanism” and “the supremacy of Protestant whites.” In Batavia, *The Daily News* reported that “someone with white chalk marked large Ks” on St. Joseph’s church. This article then continued:

The Rev. William C. Kirby, rector of St. Anthony’s church, on Sunday morning told his Italian parishioners that the klan had secured permission for using Exposition park for a picnic and the use of the streets for the parade and he urged his people to conduct themselves quietly and to avoid starting any disorder.

The anxiety expressed by Father Kirby is indicative of what was most likely the low point of the Italian experience in Genesee County. Fears for the sheer physical safety of Italian immigrants and their children were not unwarranted, for it was only thirty-four years earlier, in New Orleans, that the largest mass lynching in United States history took place. In this incident, eleven Italian immigrants were murdered. Given the intensity of hostility displayed against Italians and other groups lying outside of the Klan's "100 percent Americanism," the obvious question to be addressed is how – and when – portrayals of Italian immigrants and their descendants began to change. This brings us to the nature of a rural area such as Genesee County and the tremendous impact of the Second World War.

### *The Emergence of a New Italian Image*

By the late 1940s two factors worked to radically – and rapidly - alter the perception of Italian immigrants and their offspring in Genesee County. Not surprisingly, these were factors seen in the nation at large. The first of these is the simple fact that Genesee County is a rural area. The second is the impact of the Second World War. We will turn first to the rural factor.

Like Italian immigrants who made their way west to California in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Italian migrants to Genesee County found it easier over time to more quickly integrate themselves into the society already in place. This is not to say that they did not encounter discrimination, as I emphasized earlier in this essay. Instead, what I am suggesting is that as southern Italian peasants who for generations had lived close to the land in sparsely populated areas, they found it far easier to adapt and commingle with others whose lives had long been spent close to the soil. To put it another way, congested urban areas tended to perpetuate and exaggerate ethnic differences in ways not visible in a rural setting. There was a shared experience among farmers not discernible in a city. Rural areas stressed the necessity of cooperation; a group effort that transcended differences between people. The stigma attached to being a foreigner lasted for a shorter time in small farming towns than in a bustling, crowded area such as New York City.

The local media offers examples of just how quickly the image of Italian immigrants and their children had changed by the middle of the twentieth century. This conception was changing as that same press reported such developments as the “Klan is Outlawed in New York State,” as seen on the front-page of *The Daily News* on July 30<sup>th</sup>, 1946.

Numerous stories focusing on rural values – and Italian-American farmers who embodied those beliefs – abounded in *The Daily News* in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Editorials such as “Rural Resourcefulness,” which appeared on August 17<sup>th</sup>, 1946, celebrated the work ethic and innovative spirit of farmers – readers were told that “farmers of the Genesee County area still retain much of the resourcefulness of the early settlers when it comes to providing themselves with things they need . . .” Italian-American farmers in Elba were the subject of photographic essays in which their hard work and innovative techniques produced a “bumper onion harvest” on August 21<sup>st</sup>, 1946, led by Patsy Fiorentino and Michael Cropo, along with Mrs. Stella Bosco and her son, Frank. The rural values celebrated in such articles then combined with the place of the World War Two veteran to elevate the children and grandchildren of Italian immigrants to the heights of a social status unimaginable only a few decades before.

For example, an article appeared on August 26<sup>th</sup>, 1946, in *The Daily News*, entitled “Blind Veteran Operates Farm like Batavian Intends to do.” In this article the reader was told the story of Charlie Bishop, a soldier from Batavia who lost his sight as the result of a sniper attack at Yokohoma during the war. He nonetheless was undertaking the work of his chicken farm after being trained to “feel” his way with his face after spending time at the Army’s Old Farm Convalescent Hospital in Connecticut – just like Joe Baca, a fellow chicken farmer who also lost his sight during the war. Joe, like Charlie,

was taught to “feel” objects with his face as he approached them, or in the case of moving objects, as they approached him. By feeling the change in air pressure on his



face, Joe can, for example, “feel”  
the location of a car in the driveway.

Such a positive depiction of an Italian-American farmer – and veteran – appeared only two days after *The Daily News* described the ingenuity so prized in rural America on the part of a “Batavian (who) Builds (his own) Onion Topper.” Underneath a photograph of Gerald Condello we find this caption:

The dearth of good commercially made farm machinery made Gerald Condello of Batavia, operator of a large muckland farm, decide to fashion his own onion topping machine.

Be it Condello or Baca, such glaringly different depictions of Italian-Americans in the local media, in contrast to those of only a generation before, were expressions of both the impact of rural life, with its stress upon shared values not as evident in crowded, urban conditions, as they combined with the participation of so many Italian-Americans in the war effort to soften – indeed, to make socially unacceptable – the prejudices so much in evidence in the earlier part of the century.

This was in keeping with the national pattern. More than one million Italian-Americans served in the armed forces during World War Two – comprising approximately ten percent of the American military. This made Italian-Americans the largest ethnic group to wear a uniform in that conflict. Two people in particular embodied Italian-American participation in the war effort. One was Marine sergeant John Basilone, the only person in American history to be awarded the nation’s two highest honors – the Congressional Medal of Honor and the Navy Cross. Sergeant Basilone was killed at Iwo Jima in 1945.

The other Italian-American who embodied the service of so many was Rosie Bonavita, more commonly known as “Rosie the Riveter.” Realities such as these meant the end of the older, negative perceptions of Italian-Americans and the group’s seamless entry into the mainstream of American life by 1945. This shift in

public opinion was commented on in a variety of ways in local publications such as *The Daily News*. By the postwar period Italian-Americans in Genesee County had clearly fulfilled the aspirations to secure a foothold in the mainstream of county life. *The Daily News* was replete with examples of this. Take just one year – 1952. Articles about the inclusion of Italian food in the diet of soldiers fighting in Korea – “Back-Home Spaghetti Treat in Korean War” (May 3<sup>rd</sup>), along with numerous depictions of Italian-American war heroes – “B-29 Crewman Back From Korea Ten Days After Bombing Mill” (June 4<sup>th</sup>), were all found alongside Italian-Americans running for the New York State Assembly (June 13<sup>th</sup>) and receiving academic honors, such as “Batavian is Graduate of Fredonia College” (June 14<sup>th</sup>) and serving as a federal official – “New Social Security Officer is Assigned to Batavia Territory” (June 18<sup>th</sup>). A seemingly endless array of articles such as “Ex-Batavian Awarded Degree in Washington” is stark testimony to the arrival of the children and grandchildren of Italian immigrants into the middle-class.

#### *From Italians to Italian-Americans to Americans*

As we move closer to our own day the stigma that had been attached to Italian immigrants at the start of the twentieth century subsided as a result of service in World War Two and – in the case of Genesee County – as a consequence of the rural realities already spoken of. To be sure, by the 1970s, Italian immigrants were transformed into Italian-Americans who then eventually emerged as Americans – of Italian ancestry. While this alteration is typically apparent along generational lines, it is possible to discern it in the life of one person. This is precisely what was presented in a particularly long article in *The Daily News* on March 28<sup>th</sup>, 1973. Entitled “At 80 Years Old – Mr. Rosica is Busy Every Day as Shoe Cutter,” it is the story of Joseph Rosica, whose life embodies the transition from immigrant to American usually seen in developments between one generation and the next.

We are told that Joseph Rosica is eighty years of age, and arrived at Ellis Island from the farming village of Pollutri in southern Italy when he was twelve years old. After arrival in New York City he and his parents boarded a train for Batavia. Eventually going to work as a shoe cutter for the P.W. Minor and Son Company, Rosica remained there for sixty-four years as of the time of this *Daily News* article.

During his first seven years at the factory he taught himself to read and write despite having never attended school in either Italy or the United States.

By the time he was drafted into military service with the U.S. entry into World War One in 1917, he had managed to teach himself how to play the oboe, a woodwind instrument. Oboe players were few in number. As a result, an accomplished local musician and District Attorney in Genesee County, William H. Coon, recognized Rosica's talent and encouraged his interest in music. This led to Rosica joining the Batavia Civic Orchestra. When drafted into the Army, Coon gave him a letter of recommendation, which formed the basis of Rosica becoming a permanent member of the Depot Brigade Band at Camp Devens in Massachusetts with the rank of "musician second class."

Upon a return to civilian life and work at the P.W. Minor Company he became a member of the American Legion Band and also rejoined the Batavia Civic Orchestra. He became a proud homeowner and remained a devoted family man who was also involved as an usher at St. Anthony's Church in Batavia. The significance of his life is that it is representative of a wider reality in both Genesee County and the nation at large. Like so many others, though typically it developed beyond the immigrant generation, Rosica became indistinguishable from other Americans in terms of income, property ownership, and the pursuit of personal interests. In addition, he had overcome the discrimination evident early on against Italians so evident in the county. While in some ways maintaining values apparent in rural Italy (Rosica eventually purchased two acres of land to grow crops, thus maintaining the closeness to the land exhibited by Italian agricultural workers), he – like so many other Italian immigrants and their descendants – became ordinary members of mainstream society, both adopting the ways of Genesee County and America at large, while, simultaneously, influencing non-Italian America in a multitude of ways.

### *Conclusion*

Be it Genesee County or America at large, the perception of Italians underwent two stages. There was the earlier view of Italians as a people formed in a culture of artistic richness and intellectual vitality. The second image was that of violent

and illiterate peasants flooding into states such as New York by the late nineteenth century. A country – and a county – with such a pronounced Protestant theology and culture only served to exacerbate suspicions directed towards a largely Roman Catholic immigrant population.

But over time the Italian immigrant – and their kin – largely overcame these prejudices. Service in both world wars and in later conflicts, the rural realities of Genesee County that lent themselves to eventual acceptance, toleration, and respect for hard work, along with the post-World War Two disdain for the expressed hatreds of groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, all combined to create acceptance, indeed, admiration, for Italians in Genesee County. The movement in one generation of an immigrant such as Joseph Rosica into the mainstream of community life is symbolic of what so many Italian-Americans were experiencing both in and out of Genesee County by the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The journey started over a century ago had culminated in a virtual celebration of what it means to be an American of Italian ancestry in Genesee County. Nowhere is this more apparent than in an award given in the county every year, appropriately called “Italian-American of the Year.” The involvement of the individuals given this honor in the community – in activities ranging from Genesee Community College Trustee through cancer support groups to YMCA volunteers – is one that the immigrants working for the U.S. Gypsum Company in Oakfield in the opening decade of the twentieth century could hardly have foreseen.

But maybe that is unfair – quite possibly, in their quest for a better life, they were able to see beyond their own time – and generation – to an America which is always in the process of becoming. It could be that is the biggest lesson of the Italian journey in Genesee County – that their history, like the history of our individual lives, is never really over – it is only a continuous process of one being made.

