

Italian Sentiments, Reputations, and Discrimination in Southeastern Oklahoma

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Research has suggested that Italian immigrants, specifically those from southern Italy, were not loyal to the United States (1-3). Sentiment among the overall American population in the early half of the twentieth century also suggests that Italians were not particularly wanted in America (3-7). The Italians' swarthy appearance, small build, and their inability to speak English allowed them to be targets of discrimination throughout the United States (3,6,7). The belief that Italians were not loyal to the United States was also common in the state of Oklahoma (8-10).

This current research is an ongoing study of an Italian-American community in southeastern Oklahoma, namely Pittsburg, Coal, and Latimer Counties—counties where immigrants came to work the mines in search of a better way of life (8,11). This research used participant observation, in-depth interviews, unobtrusive observation, photos, and historical analyses to ascertain aspects of ethnic identity from which findings of the issues of loyalty to the American government were discovered. These findings should allow for the reopening of a discussion regarding loyalty of the Italians in Oklahoma. The chief sources regarding disloyalty of Italians in Oklahoma come from (a) Lord et al. (9), (b) an investigation on immigration by the United States government in 1908 (10), (c) a brief history citing primarily the above works (8,12); and (d) anecdotal data (8,12). Lord et al. state there was probably \$50,000 buried in the town of Krebs, in Pittsburg County, by Italians, suggesting that because Italians did not place their money in banks they distrusted the American government. In addition, the study by the United States Congress (1911) found:

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

The language and sentiments used above indicate a point of view that has become part of American ideology, that is, the Anglo Conformity model of assimilation (13). This model fosters a belief that for ethnic groups to assimilate, they would have to accept the society they have moved to and merge with it. While this view is still common, other views have become prominent, such as (a) the Melting Pot model, which states that both the larger society and the ethnic groups would

change through interaction, and (b) the Cultural Pluralistic model, which advocates that ethnic groups should be free to participate in every aspect of society, but also retain their own ethnic heritage. While all three models contain elements that are correct, clearly the Anglo Conformity model of assimilation is indicated by the statement of the United States Congress.

The congressional study also states that southern Italians came to America "with the idea of remaining a few years, and in that time expect to save enough money to return to Italy and carry into effect whatever plans they may have." In addition, Italians in general were more likely than other immigrants not to have their first or second papers for naturalization after living in Oklahoma for over 5 years. The contempt found in the writing of the congressional document, using terms like backward, adds credence to the fact that Italians, if not acting like typical Americans, whatever that might be, were looked down upon. This discrimination is further evident as efforts were made to keep large concentrations of Italians from forming (10) and the concern from Oklahomans that Italians were socialist and that unions and strikes would be prevalent (10, 11, 14). This is an interesting fear, as Italian history books state that those who emigrated were mainly socialist, and they left Italy because they did not agree with the policies of the Italian government (15). Finzi and Bartolotti's sentiments, however, are not reflected in Italian-American literature.

There are, however, a number of issues not being expanded upon nor highlighted by Lord et al., Brown, and others, even though the congressional document provides some of the information necessary. First of all, Italians were more likely to own homes and buy property than any other immigrant group. They were also investing money in businesses, such as grocery stores, which were abundant in the early part of the century (M. Appling and many others, personal communication, Feb. 7, 1998). They also owned restaurants; the president of the Citizens State Bank was Italian and so were many of the customers (10). The amount of money buried in Krebs mentioned by Lord et al. may indicate more ignorance of the banking system than disloyalty to the American government. Noah Rich, a second-generation Italian-American, stated what was common among many second-generation Italian-Americans' sentiments, that is "the reason a lot of the oldtimers didn't put their money into banks was because they didn't understand what banks were about. They didn't have any money in Italy, and they weren't very educated, so they never used a bank before." So many of the immigrants placed their money in the ground or in mattresses.

Regarding education, Italian children were pulled from schools for reasons shared with other ethnic groups: (a) poorer families needed the extra income, and in those days many children worked the mines and did other jobs to give money to their families, and (b) when it became apparent that families could not send their children to college, a high school education would not provide them with greater opportunities financially.

The fact that they were clannish, as the congressional study refers, suggests they were digging in to stay. Different fraternal organizations were set up to help immigrants adjust to their new life in America and ensure they had a fair say in what occurred (5). Italians, especially in southern Italy, were coming from a time and place in which they were taken advantage of by the Italian government. Failure by the Italian government to deliver on promises made to southern Italians after centuries of foreign rule forced them to emigrate and created a suspicion toward anyone not from their village (3). The many fraternal organizations in southeastern Oklahoma, such as Societa di Cristoforo Colombo, Fratellanza Indipendente, Fratellanza Minatori, Menotti Garibaldi, Fratellanza Lavortori, Dante Aligheri, and Stella d'Italia, provided an avenue for Italian immigrants to adjust to life in America (5,8).

One of the more honorable ways for immigrants to demonstrate their loyalty to their host country was to enlist in the military. When World War I broke out, there was a call for all Americans to fight for their country. Im-

migrants in southeastern Oklahoma were enthusiastic to show their loyalty to the United States and serve in the military. Of the 1,598 Italian immigrants working the mines in the three coal counties, only 27% were southern Italian, and most of these lived in Krebs. As southern Italians were the most clannish and showed little signs of assimilating, according to the congressional study, we would expect that few Italians or second-generation Italian-Americans would join the military. A content analysis of those who served in the military in World War I from Krebs was conducted, relying solely on names of individuals to see how many men from Krebs served in the military (16). The results revealed that 22% of those who served from Krebs had Italian last names. This is a high number considering that according to the United States Census in 1910 and 1920, Italians made-up approximately 3% of the overall population of Pittsburg County. Italy was also drafting or tried to draft their native sons who emigrated. The United States was an ally of Italy's during World War I, therefore Italy could extradite Italian-born Americans to serve in the military.

Of the 30 individuals interviewed who were second-generation Americans, all stated there was never any discussion of disloyalty to the United States amongst friends or family. In-depth interviews from those who were immigrants and second-generation Italian-Americans revealed that most Italians raised their children to be American, but to never forget from where and what circumstances they came. Nearly all the immigrants were faced, while in Italy, with the choice to starve or emigrate (3), so they passed this information on to their offspring. The moral was they needed to work hard so they could experience the American Dream (Giovanna Massaro, personal communication, October 7, 1996). The congressional document attests to the hard-working Italians.

However, even though Italians were making a life for themselves in Oklahoma, their continuing to speak Italian at home, to attend the many Italian fraternal organizations throughout the area, to practice the Catholic faith, to eat ethnic foods, and the alleged socialist ties provided the context from which non-Italians questioned their loyalty to the United States or the willingness of Italians to become Americans. When World War II began, which saw many second-generation Italian-Americans join the military, police were entering Italian immigrants' homes in Krebs, and taking their weapons and radios (Phyllis Testa Lambert and many others, personal communication, March 19, 1998).

However, now Italians, on the surface, are celebrated in southeastern Oklahoma. When entering McAlester in Pittsburg County one sees a sign that reads "Welcome to McAlester, Home of Cowboys and Italians." McAlester also has an Italian festival every Memorial Day weekend that draws over 20,000 people. This festival was designed to bring money into the area and celebrate Italian ethnicity (N. Finamore, N. Rich, & A. Scarpitti, personal communication, January, 17, 1998). In addition, Krebs, Oklahoma, is famous throughout the state as being "Oklahoma's Lil' Italy," with fine Italian dining from the descendants of those original Italian miners.

In all, what we found is that Italians in southeastern Oklahoma were not much different from other southern European immigrants. Italians came here under difficult circumstances and worked under difficult conditions. They came to the United States to live without having to struggle to survive (3). They encountered discrimination in isolated pockets because they were Italian, Catholic, or believed to be socialists or fascists. All they wanted was an opportunity to succeed. Some enjoyed that and stayed. Others moved to other places within the United States, but not back to Italy. While issues of loyalty may or may not be true of Italian immigrants or Italian-Americans in other areas within the United States, those Italian-Americans in southeastern Oklahoma have been, and continue to remain loyal to the country they live in, as did their immigrant ancestors, without forgetting from where they came.

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