

A LITTLE ITALY in Los Angeles

L.A.'s New Museum Uncovers a Largely Unknown Chapter of Italian American History

By Marianna Gallo

When people speak of Italian immigration to the United States, Los Angeles seldom comes to mind. The Italian immigrant experience typically is viewed as an Eastern-seaboard phenomenon, and yet the Italian presence in the American West precedes the nation's founding and Los Angeles today possesses the country's fifth largest Italian population.

The Los Angeles Italian experience proves remarkable in how it differs from that of Italian immigrants elsewhere in the country and reveals the complexity of the Italian American diaspora.

As early as the 16th century, accounts of Italian and Hispano Italian explorers, including the "Seven Cities of Cibola" report of Fray Marco da Niza in 1539, encouraged colonial interest in present-day California. Sicilian Jesuit Eusebio Chino explored early California and declared in 1702 that it was a peninsula, not an island, as previously believed. Until Spanish rule ended in California in 1821, the Italian population of Los Angeles remained small. Not until California became part of Mexico did Italian immigration to the region increase and a permanent Italian settlement took root.

While prejudice and discrimination punctuated the lives of Italian immigrants in many parts of the nation, this was not the case in Los Angeles. Until the late 1800s, Los Angeles remained a city profoundly influenced by its Spanish and Mexican heritage. Sharing a common "Latin" culture, Mexican Los Angeles embraced its Italian pioneers.

Los Angeles' first Italian enclave was located at the site of the city's original settlement where Italians lived side by side with the Mexican, French and Chinese communities. Arriving in 1827, Giovanni Leandri, a native of Sardinia, was the city's first Ital-

ian settler. Because Spanish remained the *lingua franca* of Los Angeles for much of the 19th century, Italian settlers often learned Spanish before they learned English. Some, including Leandri, assumed Spanish names.

Photos courtesy of the Italian American Museum of Los Angeles



The Italian Hall, today, home of the Italian American Museum of Los Angeles

The city's hospitable social climate provided considerable opportunities for upward mobility. By 1850, Italians had joined the ranks of the city's leaders and prominent business people. Other Italian immigrants, encouraged by Southern California's Mediterranean climate, pursued agriculture and viticulture, which formed the backbone for the state's early economy.

By 1869, Los Angeles was the wine capital of California and numerous Italian-owned wineries dotted the city's landscape. Secondo Guasti, an immigrant from Asti who would become one of the early 20th century's most prominent men, worked as a cook in little Italy before establishing the Italian Vineyard Company in 1883. Two decades later, his 5,000 contiguous acres constituted the world's largest vineyard. ▶

The Contessa Entellina Society was one of Los Angeles' many Italian regional clubs. Their members hailed from a town by the same name located in Corleone, Sicily.





A banquet, organized by Il Circolo Operaio Italiano (the Italian Worker's Club) that took place at the Italian Hall in 1919.



A 1917 footrace that began in front of the Italian Hall.

Los Angeles's Italian enclaves, like other Little Italys, functioned as an extension of the mother country and eased the immigrants' transition to the new land. In the most populous of the city's Italian enclaves—Lincoln Heights, just northeast of downtown, and North Broadway, once home to Frank Capra and now Chinatown—the melodic sound of Italian could be heard amidst bustling Italian grocery stores, bakeries, banks, pharmacies and cafes.

Meanwhile, scores of Sicilian and Ischitani fisherman lived south of downtown in San Pedro, the city's historic waterfront, where more than 40,000 Italian Americans reside today. By 1910, the Italian population of Los Angeles reached 3,800. Twenty years later, "La Colonia," as the Italian community came to be known, numbered 12,700. Its size supported several Italian language newspapers, of which *L'Italo Americano* remains, and was home to numerous socio-cultural and benevolent organizations, such as the Garibaldina Mutual Benefit Society, founded in 1888. For over 100 years, the community's ethnic churches, St. Peter's Italian Church and Mary Star of the Sea, have tended to the spiritual needs of Italo Angelenos while preserving cultural-religious traditions. Their celebrations for the feasts of St. Joseph, Santa Lucia, San Trifone and St. Peter are amongst the West Coast's largest.

In 1908, a community center was constructed in the heart of the enclave with the words "Italian Hall" emblazoned in gold lettering on its yellow brick façade. Listed today on the National Register of Historic Places, the Italian Hall served as the community's focal point, hosting countless social and cultural events. It held fundraisers for victims of natural disasters in Italy and the United States as well as other charitable causes. Over the years, it welcomed dignitaries, celebrities and historic figures, from early 20th century social and political activists Emma Goldman and the Flores Magon brothers, to Italian flying ace Francesco de Pinedo.

The building survived pivotal events in Italian American history, including the registration, relocation and arrests of so-called Italian "enemy aliens" during World War II. It saw the creation of Simon Rodia's artistic masterpiece, the Watts Towers, and the birth of industry empires such as Joseph Sartori's Security Trust and Savings Bank and Gaetano Uddo's canned food Uddo-Taormina Company (which became Progresso).

While remaining connected to their ethnic identity during the post-War years, neither nostalgia nor tradition bound Italians to the neighborhoods they first settled. In the 1950s, the community, numbering 30,000, ceased to use the Italian Hall and it fell into disrepair. Little by little, the city's Italian enclaves became masked by subsequent ethnic settlements or were erased entirely as a result of redevelopment.

In the late 1980s, a commercial development threatened to erase the Italian Hall's historic significance. The community then created a group, later known as the Historic Italian Hall Foundation, to restore the Italian Hall and create a museum. The late Joe Cerrell, public affairs legend and proud Italian American, advocated for the passage of legislation recognizing the building's importance and procured \$500,000 to fund the most critical repairs.

The Italian American Museum's reopening as an interactive museum and cultural center documenting the history and continuing contributions of Italian Americans and Italians to Southern California and the nation is slated for late 2012. A driving force for the preservation and promotion of Italian American culture in the region, the museum possesses a substantial photographic, archival and artifact collection and presents a variety of educational programming, including the landmark exhibition "Sunshine and Struggle: The Italian American Experience in Los Angeles." It hosts lectures on Italian American history and cultural events, including Italian Heritage Month, Taste of Italy and Vintage.

Earlier this year, the Los Angeles City Council introduced a motion to honor Joe Cerrell at the Italian American Museum. The Museum is currently working to memorialize Cerrell's contributions and those of other historic Italian Angelenos.

Should history prove as inextricably connected to memory as it is to place, the Italian American Museum promises to assist Italian Americans in their journey of self-discovery, and provide all visitors with a more meaningful understanding of the multi-layered history of Los Angeles and of the nation.

Marianna Gatto is the executive director of the Italian American Museum of Los Angeles and the author of "Los Angeles's Little Italy." ▲

For more information about the Italian American Museum of Los Angeles, please visit www.italianhall.org.