

“Italian Immigrants in Rural and Small Town America”: A Conference Report

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Most people usually associate Italian immigration to North America with large metropolitan centers such as New York, Chicago, or Montreal. This may be due partly to the fact that the industrial-urban regions of the East and Midwest did attract the great majority of Italian immigrants; and partly because most of the existing studies on the subject deal with that type of socio-economic environment. In recent years, some excellent studies by Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, Josef Barton, and John Briggs have contributed to correcting that image by focusing on middle-sized cities such as Buffalo, Cleveland, Rochester, or Kansas City. Yet, since the Dillingham Commission recorded the existence of Italian immigrants in agricultural colonies and small towns, no systematic study has ever been undertaken of this dimension of the Italian presence in North America.

It was with a view to filling this gap that the American Italian Historical Association devoted its 14th Annual Conference to the theme “Italian Immigrants in Rural and Small Towns America.” The conference was held in St. Paul, Minn., October 30 and 31, 1981, and was sponsored by the Minnesota Chapter of the AIHA in cooperation with the Immigration Research Center of the University of Minnesota.

The conference was essentially exploratory in nature. When the organizers issued the call for papers they took a big chance, not knowing what kind of response they would get. Their courage, however, was more than rewarded. Over 30 papers were included in the program, and parallel sections had to be organized in order to make room for all of them.

Most of the sections were organized around particular regions or states (i.e., the Lake Superior Region, the Midwest, the Deep South, Texas, West Virginia, etc.) At the same time, the conference had an important international dimension: one section was entirely devoted to Italians in Canada, three papers were presented by scholars who came for this purpose from Italy, and another one dealt with Italian agriculturalists in Brazil. In retrospect, one could hardly disagree with

Rudolph Vecoli, Conference Program Chairman, that "we did touch an area which was ready to be tapped."

The exploratory character of the conference was also reflected in the quality of the papers. With few exceptions, most papers seemed to be the result of recent research efforts by their respective authors. At the same time, the methodology employed varied considerably with some papers relying heavily on oral history and others based primarily on quantitative data.

Perhaps one area where this exploratory research may soon produce some tangible results is the mining industry. Some of the papers on the Lake Superior Region, on West Virginia, and on Iowa produced a keen awareness of the centrality of Italian immigrant workers in that industry. In Iowa, for instance, where after 1900 the Italians became the largest foreign-born group involved in the mining industry, class and ethnic relations cannot be properly understood without taking into account the role of Italian immigrants and their encounter with that industry.

Another theme which several of the papers helped concretize was that of the regional origins of Italian immigrants in North America. At least five papers dealt specifically with Italian regional groups. Given the remarkable socio-economic and cultural differences between the various regions that fed the emigration movement from Italy, one can no longer generalize when speaking of the Italian immigrants' background—not even in terms of the old 'North-versus-South' distinction. Studies that trace migration currents and networks from various localities of Italy will therefore enrich our knowledge of the emigration phenomenon, and will help us to be more sensitive to the interplay between cultural backgrounds and previous work experiences, on the one hand, and the mechanisms of the North American labor market, on the other hand. Here again, the conference provided an important occasion to assess some of the progress that is being made.

When the proceedings of the conference will appear in published form, interested readers will probably realize that the traditional perception of the Italian presence in North America is in the process of changing.