

ABSTRACT

The Americanization of Italians in Thurber, Texas, 1880-1920

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Italian families arrived in Thurber, Texas, at the beginning of the twentieth century, fleeing conditions of extreme poverty and high rates of unemployment in Italy. They responded to the American demand for low-cost manpower. Despite the first decades in which Italians suffered discrimination, their admirable work ethic and willingness to adapt to a new environment allowed them to become genuine Americans rather quickly. The town of Thurber was selected for this thesis because its community counted more Italians than Americans or people of other ethnicities. As a result of their hard work in the mines, oil drilling stations, and ultimately in the local brick factory, Italians proved wrong all those who doubted their ability to assimilate into American society. Ownership of property and gaining the right to vote as citizens allowed Italians to become full-fledged Americans. At the same time, they retained their picturesque traditional habits and customs.

The Americanization of Italians in Thurber, Texas, 1880-1920

by

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DEDICATION

To my family, Gianni, Rossella, Andrea, Laura, Federico, Martina, Ippolita, Carmelo, Caterina, the Bradley and Livingstone family, the community at Calvary Baptist church, and to the memory of Brenda Livingstone Bradley, who left us on Jan 1st 2020 after a nine month battle against pancreatic cancer.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

After having achieved independence in 1861, Italy was still a fragile country. Industries were concentrated in the rich northern regions, while the South still had a rural economy and the people suffered extreme starvation. These terrible conditions of poverty caused many southern Italians to leave their hometowns and settle in other parts of the world, looking for jobs and better lives for them and their children. Since it would be virtually impossible to summarize the entire Italian emigration experience of the early twentieth century, this thesis will focus on the community of Italians who settled in Thurber, Texas, during the period from approximately 1880 to 1920. The purpose of this research and writing is to analyze how Italians become accepted into the mainstream of American society (particular in Thurber), and how they managed to change their tarnished racialized reputation from “dago” and “wop” (derogatory terms deriving from the common name “Diego”) to “Italian-American,” or “Italian-Texan.”

Italians thrived in Thurber until the coal and oil resources were completely depleted, and after spending a few years working in a brick factory alongside African American, Mexican American, and Polish families, they slowly began to move away from Thurber, which eventually became a ghost town. Most of the first generations of Italian emigrants were later followed by fellow countrymen from all over Italy after they learned about opportunities that Thurber and the United States offered. Such people were attracted to the new world by the possibility of freely professing their religions, customs

and traditions. But this was a time when white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) Americans asserted themselves strongly as the dominant group over all others and set the rules according to which people had to live. Italians arrived in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century because employers, always in need of cheap labor, encouraged immigration. Paradoxically, although employers needed their labor, Italians often became victims of racism, discrimination, segregation, persecution, and violence. This paradox has been common among most immigrants throughout American history.

Fortunately for Italians, they were not black. But they were not exactly white. In the beginning, they could not speak English, and even worse, they were Catholics. However, over time, marriages to Anglo-American spouses, service in the American military, involvement in trade unions, success in business, and contributions to popular culture, theater, and music made Italians more acceptable. Most importantly, gaining the right to vote and claiming American citizenship allowed Italians to become full-fledged Italian-Americans. This long process, which took almost a century, was often hindered by those few who committed crimes and damaged the image of honest Italian-American citizens. Still today “Italian” is a sometimes a synonym for either criminal or Mafioso. But in time, with the help of the American government and the contribution of illustrious figures who fought for justice, such prejudice against the Italian community faded into a vague memory and a harmless stereotype.

In his book *The Immigrant Upraised: Italian Adventurers and Colonists in an Expanding America*,¹ Andrew Rolle focused on the Italian immigrants in the West of the United States and how the West shaped this group of people. Beginning with debunking

¹ Andrew Rolle, *The Immigrant Upraised: Italian Adventurers and Colonists in Expanding America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), 34.

the misconception that Western settlers were all Anglo-American, Rolle presented a constellation of stories about Italian immigrants who tried to make their way through life in the West. Contrary to several previous studies, the author concentrated on introducing the actions of Italian missionaries and explorers who were among the earliest pioneers of the West and describing the livelihoods of Italian immigrants in small towns and rural areas, ranging from farmers in Texas to miners in Kansas. The author lamented a lack of primary sources and official documentation that would have allowed him to offer the stories he intended to tell from start to finish. As a result, he was able to offer the reader only glimpses of what life was like for these Italian immigrants and their families.

One of the main arguments of Rolle's work was that generally the living conditions and overall integration of Italian immigrants in the West were much better than those in the East, allowing western Italians to be “upraised” during their immigrant experience. The portrait Rolle presented of the experience of these immigrants was that the many opportunities of the West, together with the strong will of Italians to rise above their difficulties, made their integration process faster and easier, in contrast with Italian immigrants in the East, where they were often marginalized and targeted for persecution by Anglo-Americans.

In his book *The Italians in Chicago, 1880-1930*, Humbert S. Nelli provided an in-depth analysis of the immigrant experience of Italian nationals in the city of Chicago over the course of fifty years. The book considered several aspects of their experiences, ranging from a description of the immigrants’ geographical origins, where they settled and their life experiences in Chicago, how they interacted with local politics and

subsequent involvement in local organized crime, to the changes that occurred during the first decades of the twentieth century.²

Nelli's book also emphasized that much research has been done to provide data for his study, resulting in a very descriptive work rather than a theoretical one. Therefore, Nelli did not provide theories or assumptions that can be generalized and used for more general studies on immigration and integration concerning other nationalities. He also sometimes failed to provide solid evidence for his statements. For example, while describing the origins of Italian immigrants and the difficulties they faced when first moving to Chicago, Nelli stated that the main challenge was the transition from rural to urban environments. Such a thesis, while quite plausible for immigrants coming from rural areas, ignored Italians originating from cities.

Nevertheless, Nelli provided interesting data on living trends of Italian immigrants in Chicago. When describing the main patterns of settlement, he underscored how Italians initially settled in rundown ghettos, but then later moved to more pleasant neighborhoods as soon as their economic situations improved, although they still preferred areas with a large Italian population. The study focused on Italians who followed such a pattern, while failing to track the behavior of those other immigrants who decided, for example, to settle later in Anglo neighborhoods.

Nelli's book also showed how Italians often kept on voting for fellow Italians in local elections, sometimes in hopes of receiving political patronage jobs. An interesting phenomenon was a sort of competition between Italian politicians – and also criminals – and their Irish counterparts, who at the time had tighter control of the city of Chicago.

² Humbert S. Nelli, *The Italians in Chicago, 1880-1930: A Study in Ethnic Mobility* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 75.

And while Italian politicians ultimately failed to rise to a higher level, Italians would eventually take over Chicago's organized crime. On such matter, Nelli also asserted that a significant number of Italians were involved in criminal activities, which "even facilitated immigrant adjustment,"³ although he provided no figures that showed the exact extent of the Italian immigrant community's involvement in crimes. In general, Nelli provided many individual stories to support his arguments, but sometimes failed to provide enough relevant macro data to support his thesis more effectively.

In his work analyzing the characteristics of Italian immigrants in the cities of Rochester and Utica, New York, and Kansas City, Missouri, John W. Briggs adhered to a wave of revisionist studies characterizing the last two decades, presenting immigration as a positive and purposeful human act, in contrast to the negative light of previous works. However, Briggs sometimes fell short in his analysis, even showing clear contradictions in his statements. Briggs assumed that the social phenomenon known as localism had only a minimal influence on the Italian immigrant communities in the cities included in his studies, although he acknowledged that it was an important factor that shaped Italians' choices in terms of residence and marriage. At the same time, Briggs pointed out that such a phenomenon was a clear indicator of a lack of united Italian nationalistic sentiment.⁴

Another example of contradictions in Briggs's arguments is clear when discussing the issue of Italian ghettos. According to the author, Italians in his study were not ghettoized, unlike what had been stated in previous research. However, the cities of his

³ Nelli, *The Italians in Chicago*, 115.

⁴ John W. Briggs, *An Italian Passage: Immigrants to Three American Cities, 1890-1930* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978), 68.

study (Rochester, Utica, and Kansas City) did not have Italian immigrant communities comparable in size to the largest communities in Chicago and New York City. Therefore, it would have been hard to form traditional ghetto areas. Moreover, Italian immigrants in the three cities examined in Briggs's book still tended to be residentially concentrated, in most cases more than were other immigrant groups in the cities.

Being Italian in Thurber in 1880 meant in most cases being unskilled, non-white, and thus disrespected by Anglos, much like immigrants of color before and since who have been highly stigmatized and not well received by most of American society. Nevertheless one of the reasons that encouraged American society to accept Italians more willingly was the rate of repatriation to Italy, which decreased in time; those who were so-called "birds of passage" diminished in favor of those who decided to settle permanently in the United States, acquiring citizenship and becoming fully Americans, and in the specific case of Thurber, Italians became Texans by around 1910 thanks to their participations in the American military, mixed marriages, land ownership, and most importantly, the right to vote and citizenship. Today Italian-Americans are perfectly "disguised" as white Americans, but many bear witness to the past and still pass on to new generations many of the traditions of Italy, a country of energetic, creative, and resilient people.

CHAPTER TWO

A Reflection Upon the Literature of Italian Immigration in the United States, Between 1880 to 1910

Herbert Gutman, in his book *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class*,¹ reflected on the condition of the nineteenth century working class men, particularly those who identified as racially diverse, and who relied on personal culture, heritage and background, to face the daily hardships, rules, challenges and difficulties of the United States. Gutman did not simply agree with Oscar Handlin, who argued that immigrants during the nineteenth century had to overcome a country that, rather than welcoming them, was hostile and forced them to relinquish their old habits in favor of new ones (in other words, to assimilate). Gutman added a further point, mentioning the culture of slavery (African Americans in the South), which in addition to attempting to divest black people of their African heritage, inflicted many breakups of families, enshrining the end of an old generation, with all of its colors, facets and particularities. In addition, Gutman highlighted the inability of the working class to resist such phenomenon on the one hand, and the need for a unified and homologated society on the other. In the case of Italians for example, they were able to survive and succeed not only because of the support of their families but also because of the support of many other immigrants who, like them, were also victims of a dominant white society that pushed them to conform and integrate as fast as possible.

¹ Herbert G. Gutman, *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class* (Berlin: Ira, 1987), 255-59.

In another book, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919*,² Gutman reflected on the evolution of American society from its early stages to a post-modern industrial phase, completely dominated by a Protestant work ethic. According to Gutman, the need for a structured, ordered and defined society, arose as soon as immigrants flocked from other countries and faced difficulties adapting to a foreign country with a different language, rules and standards, and long working hours separated from their families. They also had to adapt to an economy that was transitioning from being agriculturally based to becoming an industrial powerhouse. In other words, immigrants had to focus on working under harsh conditions, respecting their schedules, and very little leisure time. This phase of transition however did not occur without tensions, because even though employers warned workers to stay out of trouble, workers often united to protest low wages and poor working conditions. According to Gutman, the changing composition of the working population, the continued entry into the United States of nonindustrial people with distinctive cultures, and the changing structure of American society combined to produce common modes of thought and patterns of behavior.³

Edwin Fenton was also interested in the dichotomy between “immigrants and trade unions,” with the purpose of understanding how pervasive the unions were to immigrants’ experiences, and if they favored or discouraged newcomers. Fenton described southern Italians as follows:

South Italian peasants had three major characteristics: they were provincial, trusting no one from outside the bounds of their village or at most their section of the

² Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 3-78.

³ Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society*, 44.

peninsula; they were fatalistic, the result partly of centuries of oppression; and they were self-reliant, preferring to depend on their own strong backs and on their families rather than on group action. Southern Italian peasants knew neither industrialism nor unions.⁴

This quote sums up perfectly the reasons many poor and homesick Italian immigrants had trouble adapting right away to the American system. Northern Italians had an easier time acclimating to the life in the United States because they were more educated and were able to escape the manipulative efforts of a government and employers whose goal was to create a labor market in which diversity was impossible. Nevertheless, even though Italians had a diversified community, with different dialects and cultures, they were able to organize into unions and fight for better rights and working conditions. Some groups succeeded more than others, but that was due to a specific factor: the bargaining power of unions. Fenton offered an example:⁵

The story of the coal miners, where the Italians were led by socialists and syndicalists, is particularly interesting. But even here, where they proved to be excellent strikers, the Italians did not long remain organized between major strikes, primarily because their union lacked bargaining power, in the highly competitive national coal market.⁶

In conclusion, Fenton implied that Italians became full-fledged Americans because of their active participation in meeting the unions' standards, empowering them to take part in the political sphere of American labor.

⁴ Edwin Fenton, *Immigrants and Unions, A Case Study: Italians and American Labor, 1870-1920* (New York: Arno Press, 1975), 55.

⁵ Fenton, *Immigrants and Unions*, 140.

⁶ Fenton, *Immigrants and Unions*, 142.

Finally, Alan M. Kraut and his book *The Huddled Masses: The Immigrant in American Society*, begins by defining the United States as a “nation of nations.” Kraut’s integrative approach examined Handlin’s book *The Uprooted*,⁷ and Rudolph Vecoli’s article “Contadini in Chicago,”⁸ in which Vecoli criticized Handlin for not making the distinction between the various types of immigrants, then continued by quoting Gutman and his approach of studying immigrants individually, on what today we would sociologically define as “a microsocial level,” but also on a macrosocial level, because of their interaction with other similar social forces. Yans McLaughlin⁹ was also mentioned, because of his analysis of immigration in terms of family and community relationships, and Andrew Rolle, whose study of non-urban centers showed that not all immigrants lived in big cities. In sum, the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant core was not so homogenous throughout rural America.¹⁰

Furthermore, immigration must be examined in terms of occupational mobility, and it is necessary to understand the many roles Italians had in the United States and how they ascended the social ladder. For this reason, Humbert Nelli’s *Italians in Chicago* is mentioned. Equally important, in some instances of the late nineteenth century, immigrants and their votes were cogs in urban political machines, as Arthur Mann shows

⁷ Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1951), 24.

⁸ Rudolph Vecoli, “Contadini in Chicago: A Critique of *The Uprooted*,” *Journal of American History* 51 (December 1964), 151.

⁹ Yans McLaughlin, Virginia, *Family and Community: Italian Immigrants in Buffalo, 1880-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 12.

¹⁰ Alan M. Kraut, *The Huddled Masses; The Immigrant in American Society* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1982), 58.

in *Plunkitt in Tammany Hall*¹¹ (a perfect example for a future study), addressing the question: Did local party machinery actually foster assimilation or preserve ethnic insularity? Ultimately, Kraut's overview of Italian immigration can be summarized as follows:

The ascension of a new ethnic awareness has stimulated an abundance of work that places the new immigrants into a larger ethnic mosaic of America, alongside Native Americans (Indians), blacks, and "old" immigrant groups...the distinctiveness of specific groups gets lost in the shuffle as the authors rush on from one to the next.¹²

In contrast, Marcus Hansen's conclusion on immigration is that Europeans migrated to the United States for economic reasons, rather than seeking political refuge or religious freedom, and such people should be regarded as pioneers and trailblazers who contributed their hard work and spirit of sacrifice. In other words, the author regards immigration positively and integral part of the American story, for the nation was forged by the hands of unskilled immigrants from Europe who built the railroads and worked in the mines to secure a better future for themselves and their families.¹³

Vecoli offers another interesting point about immigration a critique of Handlin's work, saying that Italian immigrants in Chicago eventually accepted American culture, but in their own unique way, preserving Catholic rituals and regional sacred holidays.

¹¹ William L. Riordon, *Plunkitt in Tammany Hall* (New York: McClure, Phillips, 1905), 10.

¹² Alan M. Kraut, *The Huddled Masses*, 181.

¹³ Marcus Hansen, "The History of American Immigration as a Field for Research," *American Historical Review* 32 (April 1926): 500-18.

The social character of the South Italian peasant did not undergo a sea change, and the very nature of their adjustments to American society was dictated by their “Old World Traits,” which were not merely ballast to be jettisoned once they set foot on American soil. These traits and customs were the very bone and sinew of the South Italian character which proved very resistant to change even under the stress of immigration.¹⁴

Italians’ Arrival in Thurber and Birth of the Coal Town

Thurber was established by the railway engineer William Whipple Johnson in the 1880s, who acquired the land and sold it in 1888 to the Texas & Pacific Coal Company.¹⁵ The presence of Italians in Thurber was essential, not just because of their hard work in the coal mines, railroads and brick factories, but also for the development of trade unions. Together with other working-class ethnic minorities, Italians fought for better working conditions, wages, and job regulations, guaranteeing lives for their families and also for the humble laborers of Texas. When small numbers of Italians first came to Texas, they were mostly accepted and tolerated, but as soon as they started to become more numerous, they aroused suspicion among Anglo-Americans, who were not eager to share their land with Catholic non-whites who spoke little English. Paradoxically however, despite discrimination, persecution and violence against the Italian community, they slowly managed to integrate and assimilate, overcoming the prejudices that separated them from Anglo Americans. Working hard, mostly relinquishing their old cultural identities, siding with Americans in wartime, and claiming citizenship despite racial

¹⁴ Rudolph Vecoli, “Contadini in Chicago,” 405.

¹⁵ T. Lindsay Baker, *Ghost Towns of Texas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986), 168.

discrimination,¹⁶ Italians became “white” and acceptable in the United States mainstream.

This introductory chapter will provide an overview of Italian immigrants in the United States, especially in Texas, describing the reasons they left their homeland, why they settled in Texas, particularly in Thurber, their contributions to Texas in socio-economic and military terms, how they related to other ethnic groups such as Anglo-Americans, Hispanics, African Americans, Polish, and Irish. This chapter also explains the challenges they faced in gaining assimilation, their cultural background, their religion, and their establishing clubs and mutual support societies. Further developing such topics in future chapters will ultimately answer the question: How did Italians become Texans, despite their religion, language, cultural heritage, and often dark skin color?

First Settlers and First Wave of Immigration

According to the historical statistics gathered by Susan B. Carter, Scott Sigmund Gartner, Michael R. Haines, Alan L. Olmstead, Richard Sutch and Gavin Wright, in the first volume of their book *Historical Statistics of the United States, Earliest Time to the Present*, Italian immigrants began settling in the United States about 1820.¹⁷ The main source behind the first settlements can be traced to the 1790 Naturalization Act, which allowed free white people to naturalize as United States citizens after two years of residence. From 1820 to 1859, the total number of Italian immigrants amounted to fewer than 13,000 persons, with an average annual number of 323 persons. The reasons for this

¹⁶ Cynthia Skove Nevels, *Lynching to Belong: Claiming Whiteness through Racial Violence* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), 64-65.

¹⁷ Susan Carter et al., *Historical Statistics of the United States, Earliest Time to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 560.

first wave of Italians were mainly political. At first, they were Garibaldini, Mazziniani, then Anarchists and Socialists from Northern Italy. During the 1850s, immigration became a controversial political topic with the rise of the American Party, or Know-Nothings, an anti-Catholic political party that sought to decrease the numbers and influence of new immigrants by extending the legal naturalization waiting period to twenty-one years. But immigrant labor had become vital to the nation's industries, and the Know-Nothings could not prevent immigrants from entering the United States. On the contrary, industries needed manpower and welcomed European immigrants who provided cheap labor. The numbers of newcomers increased considerably after 1880 and maintained high rates until 1914, amounting to a total of almost four million, at an annual average of more than 100,000 persons.¹⁸

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the average number of Italian immigrants increased by eight times to about 2,800 persons per year. This growth resulted from conditions in Italy. Italians started their diaspora after 1861, when Italy's unification caused enormous political and social turmoil, compelling people to flee and search for safer environments for their families. The situation in Italy in 1861 was so tumultuous that major industries moved from the South to the North, specifically Piedmont, Lombardy and Liguria, leaving the South in misery and discontent. There people struggled to live and almost starved to death because of the failing economy in the area of the so-called Mezzogiorno, the southern part of Italy. Many immigrated to the United States. In addition, politically, socially and economically, southern Italy was still ruled by a feudal-like system. Italians chose the United States over other countries in part

¹⁸ Carter et al., *Historical Statistics*, 561.

because the very first Italian settlers who had ventured to America had kept in touch with their fellow countrymen through letters recounting how they had overcome poverty and were either deciding to stay permanently or return to their homeland with enough money to ensure a decent future for their families. Stories of success in America stimulated Italians' curiosity and encouraged them to leave their homeland.¹⁹

During this period, the rate of immigration reached its peak with a total of nearly four million of immigrants over thirty-five years, at an average of more than 100,000 people per year. The specific reasons behind this stunning upsurge were the 1888 agricultural recession in Italy, the increase of taxation on southern farmland after the unification of Italy, and the decline of craftsmanship and small landholders. Moreover, an earthquake in 1908 killed more than 100,000 people in the Strait of Messina. Mass immigration often relied on regional networks through which people exchanged information and helped each other, even to the point that if someone did not have enough money to afford a ticket to leave the country, everyone in that village contributed economically to help that person immigrate to America.

Census of 1900

In order to classify the Italian people by occupation, settlement, social status, gender and level of instruction, the United States Census of 1900 provides useful data. At first glance, the estimated population born in Italy amounted to 484,207, of which 353,065 settled in the North Atlantic Division, with the highest concentrations in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania. The other areas in which Italians

¹⁹ Carter et al., *Historical Statistics*, 561-562.

settled, looking for employment and weather that was more suitable for them, were the states of the Western and Southern divisions, in particular, California, Colorado, Texas and Louisiana.²⁰ The annual report of the United States Commissioner-General of Immigration for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1903, described the occupations Italians declared upon arrival in America. Most performed humble labor, and they were usually males from 14 to 34 years old, with equal proportions of barbers from Italy's North and South, a bigger proportion of miners from the North, and huge numbers of unskilled laborers from the South.²¹

Most Italians clustered in New York and other big cities, preferably close to their fellow countrymen, but many looked for employment outside of cities. Some participated in the construction of railroads and provided tireless manpower to mines and plantations. Those were the males employed in the main industries.²² Comparing Italians to other nationalities, they were the population with the highest rates of unskilled labor. Unfortunately, along with laborers willing to do their best, there were also a few Italian criminals and unemployed who contributed to a negative image of Italians and harmed their reputation. This data appear in the census of 1900 as well.²³ It was not a coincidence for Italian people from the same part of Italy to settle in a specific city in the United States, because this close-knit community preferred to maintain strong ties with their compatriots, facilitating their arrival and settlement in America.

²⁰ Samuel J. Barrows et al., *The Italian in America* (New York: B.F. Buck & Company, 1906), 5-8.

²¹ Barrows et al., *The Italian in America*, 62-64.

²² Barrows et al., *The Italian in America*, 65.

²³ Barrows et al., *The Italian in America*, 210.

World War I

During the years prior to 1920, immigration restriction became a political and legal reality in the United States. Large-scale changes in the racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural composition of the population triggered an explosion of xenophobic reaction by Anglo-Americans because of their racial and religious prejudices, fears of radicalism, and frictions of class conflict. Consequently, immigration to the United States began decreasing in conjunction with the outbreak of World War I. This was clear in statistics showing a fifty percent decline during the period from 1915 to 1931. The total number of immigrants who came to the United States amounted to fewer than 700,000, with annual arrivals of less than 50,000 people.

The events that led to a prominent decrease in the immigration influx were stark. The Immigration Act of 1917, also known as the Literacy Act, required a literacy test for all adult immigrants, tightening restrictions on suspected radicals. This was America's first restrictive law targeting immigrants. It was an act promoted by the Immigration Restriction League, which dramatized a turn toward white nativism and xenophobia in reaction to the "Red Scare," a widespread fear of the potential growth of Communism, Anarchism, and Radical Leftism in America immediately after World War I.

The most notorious victims of this climate of paranoia were the Italian anarchists Bartolomeo Vanzetti and Nicola Sacco, who were convicted and sentenced to death because of a jurisdictional error. In addition, widespread racial hatred led to the lynching of more than 3,000 people, including African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and other Americans of color, along with immigrants, between 1888 and 1918. The prevailing negative perceptions toward foreign groups were deeply rooted in racist

stereotypical images of their allegedly offensive values and dangerous behaviors. The most unfortunate event concerning Italians occurred in New Orleans in 1891 when ten Sicilians were arrested and prosecuted for the murder of the Police Chief David Hennessy. Although the Sicilians were declared innocent, whites in New Orleans stormed the prison and assassinated the Sicilians along with an eleventh prisoner, who had been incarcerated for a different crime.

The Emergency Quota Act of 1921, passed by Congress and signed into law by President Warren G. Harding, limited annual admissions to 355,000 and restricted the number of aliens admitted annually to three percent of the foreign-born population of each nationality already in the United States in 1910. The act was designed to limit the immigration of southern and eastern European immigrants, whose numbers had grown significantly since 1910. The act was designed to favor the immigration of northern and western European immigrants. Although the numbers of southern and eastern European immigrants decreased greatly after 1921, nativists pushed for even greater restrictions. The Immigration Act of 1924 reduced the total numbers of admissions to 165,000 annually and greatly prevented Italian people from entering the United States. This act allowed Congress to regulate and control immigration even more tightly. Italians, together with other groups, were generally not considered worthy to become American citizens and were not considered capable of integrating and assimilating into American society. World War I had clearly influenced immigration²⁴ both for the call to arms and

²⁴ Commissariato Dell'Emigrazione, *Annuario Statistico dell'Emigrazione Italiana, dal 1876 al 1925*, (Roma: L'Universale Tipografia Poliglotta, 1926), 74.

the demand for manpower in the arms industry and agricultural sector.²⁵ As a consequence, during the period from 1932 to 1945, numbers of Italians dropped to around one tenth, amounting to a total of less than 600,000 with an average of only about 4,000 people annually.

Fascism

This period was characterized by a further reduction in the influx of immigrants. The reasons behind this phenomenon were rooted in historical events during the twenty years from the mid-1920s to the mid-1940s. The eruption of radical politics and war in Europe, including Italy, decisively influenced the ongoing immigration fluctuations. Nevertheless, there was clearly an ambivalent attitude displayed toward immigrants by the Italian Fascist party. In fact, during the period from 1922 to 1926, the Fascist party denounced the loss of nationality among Italian immigrants overseas, blaming Italian institutions at home for non-interventionism toward the injustices experienced by immigrants. Italian Fascists meant to make Italy and Italians respectable in the world. Interventions by Fascists began with the establishment of Fascist parties overseas.²⁶

On May 2, 1921, in a proclamation issued by the Fascist party of New York, Benito Mussolini declared that the Fascist influence overseas was needed to "raise, preserve and exalt Italianness among millions of compatriots scattered around the world," to "lead them to live more and more intimately the life of the metropolis," developing and

²⁵ Domenico De Marco, *La Formazione Dell'Italia Economica Contemporanea e i Suoi Problemi, Finanza Pubblica, Società Rurale, Emigrazione, Tenore di Vita* (Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 2003), 185.

²⁶ Claudia Baldoli, "Italian Fascism in Britain: the Fasci Italiani all'Estero, the Italian Communities, and Fascist Sympathisers During Grandi Era (1932-1939)" (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 1999), 52.

intensifying "relationships of any kind between colonies and motherland." The Fascist parties overseas would become real "fascist consulates" for the "legal and extralegal protection" of all the Italians, especially those who were "salaried employees from foreign entrepreneurs," with the purpose of "holding high, always and everywhere, the name of Italian homeland."²⁷ Mussolini was also concerned about the modest growth of Italy's population from 26 million to 36.6 million between 1871 to 1914 (a rate of only 500,000 per year).²⁸ In the light of these data, immigration from Italy throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was clearly the result of a growing but desperate population trying to overcome Italy's dire economic conditions by immigrating to countries that needed labor.²⁹

Driven by the nationalist origins and purposes of his party, Mussolini was trying to give to the immigrants more and more recognition, underscoring their technical and professional qualities, in order "to cancel from the public international opinion the prejudices and the prevention towards the Italian laborer."³⁰ World War II also played an important role in the decrease of Italian immigrants, because it discouraged Italian people from leaving their homeland. Moreover, because Italy was allied with Germany and Japan, it was virtually impossible for Italians to travel to the United States. In order to repair the situation, some itinerant institutions were created to prepare professionally

²⁷ Stefano Pelaggi, *L'altra Italia, Emigrazione storica e Mobilità Giovanile a Confronto* (Rome: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2015), 37.

²⁸ Pierre Milza, *Français et Italiens à la Fin du XIX Siècle* (Rome: Ecole Française de Rome, 1981), 174 -175.

²⁹ Paolo Emilio De Luca, "Della Emigrazione Europea ed in Particolare di Quella Italiana. Cause ed Effetti del Fenomeno Migratorio," *Rivista Internazionale di Scienze Sociali e Discipline Ausiliarie* 52, (1910): 2-3.

³⁰ Giuseppe Parlato, *La Politica Sociale e Sindacale* (Milano: Edizioni Istituto Ipsoa, 1982), 55.

aspiring immigrants, as well as the institution of the General Committee of Emigration with its provincial representatives. The "valorization" of immigrants thus became the formula that Mussolini adopted to support expatriation. But despite the attempts of the Italian Government to challenge and overcome American ant-immigration policies, the United States Congress firmly enforced the promulgation of the Immigration Act of 1921 and the Quota Act of 1924, which underscored dramatically the crisis of Italian expatriation. In light of such events, in 1926, a point of no return by the Italian Fascist Government was reached, anticipated by the first series of laws on the subject of immigration, specifically: the Law n. 473, the Consolidated Law on Emigration, and the Judicial Protection of the Emigrants in 1925.

Article 9 of the Consolidated Law, while reaffirming that immigration was free within the limits of the government, stated that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in agreement with the Ministry of the Interior, could suspend expatriation for "reasons of public order," or when "emigrants' life, freedom and possessions could be in jeopardy, or whenever the emigrants could have asked for it." In effect, beginning in 1926, Mussolini's Fascist regime totally changed its approach to the management of the phenomenon of demographic fluctuation, converting it from a problem to a resource at risk. According to Mussolini, emigration represented a serious loss of useful manpower for the nation, "a dispersion" that must be stemmed to the core. At the same time, the Fascists focused on increasing numbers of Italian births, with a goal of growing the population to sixty million Italians by the 1950s. The appropriate measures were thus taken on June 3, 1927, with the Circular n.63. This circular represented the new policy of the regime, in which the Italian Prefects were given the task of reaching out to whoever

wanted to leave the country because the permanent emigration, according to the Government, had to be hindered because it led to weakening the nation.

The Fascists were clearly alarmed that the exodus of the most productive workers entailed a considerable loss for the government, which had provided an education for Italians but was not compensated by the "few gold" resources coming from overseas. As a result, the release of the documents necessary for expatriation became more difficult, and Prefects exercised the maximum degree of "strictness and parsimony," distrusting whoever was "exploiting or inciting" expatriation and punishing whoever had taken too much interest, "licit or illicit" in emigration. The only exceptions were temporary emigrants and those at a high intellectual or professional level, because they were not motivated to leave the country because of a lack of employment, and because they represented prestige for Italy. Moreover, in 1927, with the Royal Decree-Law n.62 of April 28th, the General Committee of Emigration, which had been established in 1926 by the Foreign Ministry, was suppressed,³¹ and it was replaced by the General Directorate for Italian Citizens Abroad.

The severe reform was reflected in the choice of words. No longer was the term "emigration" evident; now it was "Italians abroad." Once again, the Fascist party was trying through a linguistic change to underscore a change of approach. The emigrant was finally acknowledged in his personality and his laborer's rights. Yet, the replacement of the Committee by the Directorate also answered the previously expressed preoccupation of organizing in Fascist parties the already settled communities abroad more than

³¹ Italy, Foreign Ministry, *Ministerial Decree, March 1, 1926* (Rome: Italian Foreign Ministry, 1926).

regulating the destination of the fluxes of departure, which quickly slowed. In sum, the basic principles of the new Italian migratory policy, developed in 1927, were described in the following points: prohibition of stable emigration; tolerance of sole temporary migration because it was convenient for the national economy of the private citizen; economic, cultural and commercial expansion of Italy abroad through emigration of skilled professionals, technicians and students; and a spiritual recovery of all Italian communities outside the home country.

The new limits on emigration were further specified in three circulars. In the one issued 20th June 1927, Mussolini addressed the inspectors in the ports of embarkation for the controls of "insured embark," to the Prefects for the release of the passports, and lastly to the diplomatic authority.³² All subsequent legislation, from the Law n. 1782 of 6th January 1928 to the Royal Decree n. 358 of 11th February 1929, from the Royal Decree n. 1278 of 24th July 1930 to the n. 1157 of 12th July 1940, represented an attempt to prevent the exodus for professional reasons and to favor instead the transfer of the Italian colonial possessions, so as to intensify internal production in view of a bigger professional demand for military ends. The Law n. 965 of 15th May 1939 had in the meantime, established the "Standing Committee for the Repatriation of the Italians abroad," with the relative "Standing Advisory Committee" presided over by the General Director of the Italians Abroad, in order to ease with various benefits the reentry of the emigrants. As a matter of fact, during the years between 1921 and 1924, of a total of 196,242 Italians expatriated in the United States, 177,107 came back to Italy, and the

³² Italia, Commissariato dell'emigrazione, Bollettino dell'emigrazione, No. 7, July 1927 (Roma: Tipografia Nazionale di G. Bertero, 1927).

trend grew year after year, passing from 122,678 in the two-year period 1925-1927 to 166,988 in the period 1928-1940.³³

First Italians in Texas

After the unification of Italy in 1861, poverty ran rampant in the peninsula, with an alarming social gap between the South and the North. The main industries were located in the northern regions such as Piedmont and Lombardy, whereas the Italians in the other regions (mainly southern Italy), barely survived and were often targets of unjust and ruthless landowners, governmental indifference, corruption, violence and theft. Because of such dire and deplorable living conditions, Italians increasingly considered leaving their homeland in order to seek their fortunes in America, where manpower and cheap labor were in high demand. Most of the immigrants who settled in the United States from 1880 to 1920 were unskilled laborers, who coped with the harshness of the new environment by depending on the mutual support of their families and tightly knit communities. Sicilian immigrants in particular abided by a strong set of values that included seriousness, respect, a rigorous code of honor, chastity, family loyalty, patience, hierarchy, a division of gender roles and brotherhood, all stemming from the rules and traditions of their Catholic heritage. The arrival of Italians in the United States coincided with a period of rapid change in Texas. The cattle industry was becoming more prominent, railroads were being built, manufacturing plants were developing, and consequently, migrants found employment in a land rich in resources and growth.³⁴

³³ Carter et al., *Historical Statistics*, 563.

³⁴ Valentine J. Belfiglio, "Italian and Irish Contributions to the Texas War for Independence," *East Texas Historical Journal* 23 (1985): 21-30.

Many years earlier, the first Italians who came to Texas were Vicente Micheli and Giuseppe Cassini, who settled in Texas after King Charles III of Spain granted the admission of Spaniards, Italians and Germans to cultivate land in Louisiana in 1777. When France obtained Louisiana Territory and sold it to the United States in 1803, some Italians moved to Texas. Other Italians came to Texas because of the establishment of a colony by General Lallemand, Napoleon's subordinate, and stayed even after the dismantling of the settlement. From 1817 to 1820, the pirate Jean Lafitte ruled Galveston. Italian seamen such as Louis Chighizola and Vincent Gambio, who served with Lafitte, settled in Texas after the Battle of New Orleans at the end of the War of 1812. Other important figures such as the Count Annibale Ranuzzi and the Reverend Bartholomew encouraged Italians to migrate to Texas. Italians acclimated to Texas very quickly, becoming proficient in English and acquiring necessary skills. Fortunately, parts of Texas resembled Italy in terms of weather and landscape.

Italians also served in both the American and Mexican armies during the Texas Revolution. Vicente Filisola, who came to Mexico in 1811, became a general along with General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna on the Mexican side, whereas Prospero Bernardi who settled in Texas in 1836, enlisted in the Texan army under Captain Amasa Turner's command, joining the ranks of the New Orleans volunteers. General Filisola took command of the Mexican army when Santa Anna was defeated at San Jacinto, but he was later criticized by Santa Anna after retreating with his soldiers to Mexico, although Filisola had followed Santa Anna's orders to do so. Bernardi showed great heroism at San Jacinto and earned a first-class grant and a bounty grant. Other noteworthy Italians who fiercely supported the independence of Texas were Marquis Orazio de Attelis, and

the previously mentioned Giuseppe Cassini. The Marquis explicitly showed support to the cause in the newspaper *El Correo Atlantico*, and even after his expulsion from Mexico, he continued to advocate for the cause, trying to raise funds and encouraging volunteers to enlist.³⁵

Cassini's role became instrumental in the Texas Revolution when he loaned a large sum of money to Sam Houston, as well as providing the Texas soldiers with shelter, food, weapons, and other supplies when they marched to San Antonio.³⁶ There was also a famous Italian criminal lawyer who studied at Baylor University in Independence, Decimus et Ultimus Barziza. The Franciscan Father Augustine d'Asti became pastor of the Church of St. Vincent's, in Houston. He is remembered for being a beacon of Christianity, charity and benevolence. Along with helping the needy with food, money and clothing, he also blessed the flag that was carried at Galveston and Sabine Pass by the Confederate commander Richard W. Dowling and his soldiers. Antonio Bruni and his nephew Antonio Matteo, businessmen, benefactors and politicians, had much success in Texas, spurring the immigration of those Italians who were in search of better opportunities for themselves and their families.³⁷ Generally, Italians from Northern Italy reached Texas from Mexico (or stayed in New York), whereas Southerners came through the ports of Galveston and New Orleans. On rare occasions, Italian migrants entered Texas via the ports of Boston, Baltimore or Philadelphia, or they settled in Texas after having spent earlier years in other states.³⁸

³⁵ Belfiglio, "Italian and Irish Contributions to the Texas War," 5-13.

³⁶ Belfiglio, "Italian and Irish Contributions to the Texas War," 33.

³⁷ Valentine J. Belfiglio, *The Italian Experience in Texas* (Austin, TX: Eakin Press, 1995), 18-19.

³⁸ Belfiglio, *The Italian Experience*, 37-39.

In 1881, Mingus, Texas (about 75 miles west of Fort Worth) was a growing community strategically located on the new Texas and Pacific Road Railroad. The nearby town of Thurber was expanding even more rapidly, reaching a population of 8,000 to 10,000 people during the 1880s and 1890s.³⁹ Thurber became prominent because of the large quantities of coal that thousands of workers extracted from mines as well as producing bricks that were manufactured beginning in 1897.⁴⁰ Texas and its economy were flourishing at the beginning of 20th century, in part because coal was extremely valuable as fuel for steam locomotives.⁴¹ With railroad construction booming throughout Texas, the New York, Mexican and Texas Railway Companies brought to Texas nearly 1,200 Italians to work on the railroad line from Victoria to Rosenberg. Thousands of others were encouraged to immigrate to Texas by businessmen in need of laborers on cotton plantations, sugar fields, farms, mines and garment industries. The first coal mine to attract workers was in Gordon (near Thurber), but after the Knights of Labor called a strike and mine owners ignored their demands, they began to move elsewhere, looking for work. As a result, the need was great for more mineworkers at Thurber, and immigrants filled the need.⁴²

³⁹ Gordon Gooch, "Mingus, The Pittsburgh of Texas," *The Junior Historian* 13 (May 1953): 9-10.

⁴⁰ Belfiglio, *The Italian Experience*, 2.

⁴¹ Belfiglio, *The Italian Experience*, 3.

⁴² Belfiglio, *The Italian Experience*, 5.

The town of Thurber was named after a stakeholder of the Texas Pacific Coal Company (TP),⁴³ and its population was very diverse.⁴⁴ Thurber was the only town in Texas to be completely electrified, an extraordinary phenomenon by the standards of that time.⁴⁵ Electricity ran in the mines as well. Thurber was a large company town, a town constructed, operated, and controlled by the TP Company. Because the population at Thurber was mainly Catholic, the TP Company allowed the church to establish a parochial school and even provided it with adequate financial support. The company took care of everything, hiring good teachers and paying its employees regularly. The inhabitants of Thurber did not pay taxes since they did not really own property, and they were not allowed to vote because they were not citizens. But they had all the commodities that a town in Texas needed. People in Mingus owned land and property but they did not enjoy all the material advantages the TP Company offered in Thurber.⁴⁶

With a large Catholic population (Italian, Polish, Irish, and Mexican), Thurber and Mingus were famous as wine producers. The era of legal prohibition did not scare the inhabitants. They circumvented the laws and produced beverages that satisfied alcohol drinkers. When Texans learned about the commerce of wine in North Texas, the towns attracted more and more customers for the prolific business.⁴⁷

⁴³ Belfiglio, *The Italian Experience*, 7.

⁴⁴ Belfiglio, *The Italian Experience*, 9.

⁴⁵ Belfiglio, *The Italian Experience*, 12.

⁴⁶ Belfiglio, *The Italian Experience*, 13.

⁴⁷ Belfiglio, *The Italian Experience*, 15.

Despite the richness of coal resources Mingus and Thurber supplied to railroads and industries across North America, during the early twentieth century railroad locomotives relied less on coal powered steam engines powered and more on internal combustion engines powered by petroleum diesel fuel. Likewise, industrial facilities converted to diesel engines, jeopardizing the coal industry.⁴⁸ At the same time, the TP Company often neglected safety regulations in the coal mines, so work-related accidents, premature deaths and “black lung” diseases were extremely common among workers. But thanks to Italians who later unionized and started to advocate for better working conditions, miners across the state acquired the rights and recognition they deserved.⁴⁹

Miners and their families in Thurber harbored distrust against the Texas Pacific Mercantile and Manufacturing Company (the management entity of TP Company) well before the strike in 1903, believing that the company was making profits to their detriment and despite its efforts to attract more workers for the company. The people of Thurber soon recognized sizable disparities between white collar and blue collar workers, and that they were being exploited and not adequately rewarded for their efforts. An especially noticeable differentiation existed in the ethnicities of miners and the mercantile company employees. Clearly, miners tended to have a diversified population mostly composed by African Americans, Mexicans and foreign-born people, whereas the mercantile company employees were mostly American-born white people.

The company did not have formal segregation policies, but according to the way the immigrant communities grouped together and occupied distinct parts of the town,

⁴⁸ Belfiglio, *The Italian Experience*, 17.

⁴⁹ Belfiglio, *The Italian Experience*, 30.

workers and their families obviously decided where to live. Italians lived in the northern area of the railroad tracks, the so-called Italian Hill; Polish people lived on the southern end of the tracks; Mexicans lived just below the Polish; and the Irish lived below the Mexicans. Blacks inhabited the area that surrounded Little Lake. Whites lived downtown. The neighborhoods were not strictly divided by race; in fact, they were rather mixed and inclusive. Yet African Americans and Mexicans clearly suffered the highest degree of discrimination in Thurber. Blacks had a separate church and their own seats at the opera house.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the highest disparity between coal miners and mercantile employees was earnings. Blue collar workers had far lower wages than white collar workers did, not counting the fact that they were paid according to the quantity of coal they were able to extract from the mines. In cases of illness or work-related accidents, they were not insured, and they risked losing their jobs.⁵¹

The role of Italians in the fight for miners' rights was quintessential, but this topic will be discussed in depth in the next chapters. Thurber and its flourishing economy did not last many years. In fact, the decline and demise of the TP Company town started on May 1, 1921, when the United Mine Workers local chapters went on strike and the mines were shut down by the TP Company, which began to acquire thousands of acres of land, launching itself into the new and definitely more lucrative business of oil exploration and production.⁵² After the miners' first strike, another followed on July 1, 1922, because of

⁵⁰ C. Richard. King, "Opera Houses in West Texas," *West Texas Historical Association Yearbook* 38 (1962): 102.

⁵¹ Gene Rhea Tucker, *Oysters, Macaroni, & Beer: Thurber, Texas, and the Company Store* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2012), 72-74.

⁵² John S. Spratt, Harwood P. Hinton, and Lindsay T. Baker, *Thurber Texas: The Life and Death of a Company Coal Town* (Abilene, TX: State House Press, 2005), 115.

the federal government's decision to privatize the railroads, a policy that was strongly resisted by the railroad employees and the shop craftsmen's union.⁵³ Violence erupted soon after the railroad employees ignored the TP Company edict to return to work. Such riots quickly spread to other railroad centers of Texas. The TP Company requested support from the National Guard from Governor Pat Neff, but he refused to act because his involvement would have jeopardized his re-nomination in the Democratic election primaries. The TP Company then sought help from federal authorities, who responded by sending twenty-five deputy U.S. marshals.⁵⁴

In addition, the TP Company responded to the crisis in the declining coal market by lowering wages, a decision that clashed with the workers' interests. The miners' cause was supported by the president of the United Mine Workers (UMW), John L. Lewis, and his agent Mr. Paggini, whose first name was unknown. Mr. Paggini however was aware that the mines would not have reopened because oil was a far cheaper resource compared to coal. As a result, as the strike went on month after month, Italians began to move out of Thurber and look for other types of employment, leaving the UMW no choice but to suspend funds to the miners. Although activities other than coal mining were available in Thurber, the town eventually lost almost every inhabitant following World War I.⁵⁵

With the closure of the coal mine, the Italians labelled as birds of passage—immigrants who made money in America and then returned to their countries of origin with their savings—went back to Italy and restarted their careers. What remained during

⁵³ Spratt, Hinton, and Baker, *Thurber Texas: The Life and Death of a Company Coal Town*, 121.

⁵⁴ Spratt, Hinton, and Baker, *Thurber Texas: The Life and Death of a Company Coal Town*, 121.

⁵⁵ Spratt, Hinton, and Baker, *Thurber Texas: The Life and Death of a Company Coal Town*, 116-120.

the 1920s in Thurber was the brick plant, kept alive by the Texas & Pacific Coal and Oil Company, because of the increasing demands of materials for the construction of buildings and highways. However, with economic collapse and the Great Depression beginning in 1929, demand for fell and in 1930 the brick factory shut down, leaving hundreds of men unemployed.⁵⁶

1946 – 1997

In the years after the end of World War II in 1945, after more than twenty years of suppressing emigrations, Italy saw an exodus of people amounting to a fivefold increase compared to the earlier wave from 1880 to 1920. In most other European countries, the postwar era was historically known as "Reconstruction" and was characterized by economic growth resulting from rebuilding the industrial base, which had been devastated by the war. The labor of the working class, especially low-cost labor, was in high demand, just like the labor that Italian emigrants offered. Italian emigration after World War II was therefore an answer to this demand. Unfortunately for Italy during this period, industries rebuilt with great difficulty. The war had increased poverty, especially in the South. In the *Mezzogiorno* misery was rampant. A whole generation of young people was looking for economic stability outside of the Italian context. The government attempted to make the Italian economy bounce back through policies of liberalization, opening the country to trading with the richer European countries and the United States. Albeit with some disagreements, such a choice was supported by the United States,

⁵⁶ Spratt, Hinton, and Baker, Thurber Texas: The Life and Death of a Company Coal Town, 124-125.

which was aware of the difficulties of postwar European industry. As a result, it gradually dismantled the existing trade and immigration barriers.

One of these American initiatives is represented by the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965 which abolished the quota system based on national origins that had defined American immigration policy since the 1920s. The Hart-Cellar Act marked a dramatic change from past U.S. policy which had discriminated against non-northern Europeans. In removing racial and national barriers, the Act would significantly, and unintentionally, alter the demographic mix in the United States. Nonetheless, in the immediate postwar period, the destinations of Italians were typically Canada, Argentina, Venezuela, and Australia, since American policies were still strictly selective. In fact, the day after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt had suspended naturalization proceedings for Italian, German, and Japanese immigrants, required them to register, restricted their mobility, and prohibited them from owning items that might be used for sabotage, such as cameras and shortwave radios. Approximately 600,000 Italian aliens were living in the United States in 1940. In these twenty years there was a considerable reduction in emigrations to the United States. The motivations resulted from the improvement of Italian socio-economic conditions whose foundations were laid in Italy starting in the 1950s and that are remembered as the "Italian economic miracle." This period saw the effect of the positive stream that accompanied the economic growth and technological development, both products of the Italian "economic boom," which allowed the lower classes to find an employment in the country and enjoy the benefit that followed until the 1990s.

Americanization through Mutual Support Societies and Clubs

Kinship was not the only method through which Italians stayed united and found employment in America and elsewhere,⁵⁷ since those who were not directly related by family ties had opportunities for social interactions in mutual support societies. Such organizations operated as formal institutions of brotherhood in which every member felt part of a larger community. Membership enhanced members' sense of self-respect and communal identity, as if they were all part of a large extended family. Belonging to a mutual support society was a claim of great fame, especially for those who distinguished themselves and held leadership roles, allowing greater recognition and higher social status in their communities. Some of these organizations often assumed the form of social clubs, in which membership was encouraged by common interests and benefits, not just for the individual but also for their families.⁵⁸

However, not all southern Italian peasants enjoyed a sense of solidarity either as a community or as a social class. Rather, it was the family that provided the basis of peasant solidarity. Indeed, so exclusive was the demand of the family for the loyalty of its members that it precluded allegiance to other social institutions. This explains the paucity of voluntary associations among the peasantry. Each member of the family was expected to advance its welfare and to defend its honor, regardless of the consequences for outsiders.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 71.

⁵⁸ Belfiglio, *The Italian Experience*, 59-61.

⁵⁹ Rudolph Vecoli, "Contadini in Chicago," 405.

Among the oldest mutual support organizations was the “Margherita di Savoia Benefit Society” in Montague County, which was eventually reorganized in Houston in 1905 as the “Società B.A. Margherita di Savoia e Cristoforo Colombo.” The “Società Italiana Meridionale di Mutuo Soccorso” in Galveston was a remarkably large farmers’ association in the Brazos County. The “Società di Colonizzazione Italiana del Texas” was a society that acquired more than 25,000 acres of land, building material and farm machinery valued at nearly a million dollars. The “Società Italian di Mutuo Soccorso” flourished in San Antonio. Finally, the “Società di Mutuo Soccorso Stella d’Italia,” which operated in Thurber, was responsible for charitable work and organizing social functions. Unlike all of these cities in which mutual support societies were founded, McLennan County did not have one, since the Italians residing there had spent time in other parts of the state before moving to Waco, had already acquired American customs and habits, and enjoyed an overall more stable social and financial situation.

Such societies sometimes differed from one another in several aspects, but all of them abided by certain principles and standards that could not be neglected, including the following: creating and keeping a strong network of members through mutual aid and assistance; being independent from any government, either Italian or American; and writing their laws and regulations in English, with the purpose of developing and fostering a sense of patriotism among Italian immigrants. A similar sense of loyalty for their own home country was also promoted by the fascist regime through media and diplomatic channels, with the purpose gaining consensus from those who emigrated. To a certain extent, it succeeded, in part because the 1924 and 1929 acts that restricted immigration to the United States from Italy produced resentment among Italians.

Although Italians felt more patriotic and closer to the fascist regime, the societies of mutual support did not approve such sentiment and were disbanded soon after Italy declared war against the United States in 1941.⁶⁰

Among the various clubs, the best known were the following: the Italian Club of Dallas; the Federation of the Italian-American Organizations of Houston; the San Giovanni Italian-American Association of Galveston; the Lodge of the Order of the Sons of Italy in America of Arlington; the Christopher Columbus Italian Society of San Antonio; and the American Italian Cultural Club of Port Arthur. All of them offered the option of English language lessons for those Italians who did not speak it or wanted to improve their English skills. One of the main reasons for promoting such classes was the fact that Italian language newspapers were losing their relevance and were being replaced by American English language ones. The only Italian language newspaper that made survived for a few months in 1925 was “L’America di Houston,” and unfortunately, copies are nonexistent.

In 1989, Nicoletta Pisano in Houston published a fourteen-page bilingual newspaper called “Domani,” *The Tomorrow*, thanks to support from the Federation of American-Italian Organizations. The bimonthly periodical features national, local, and international events involving Italians and Italian-Americans, as well as describing the activities in which the Houston Italian community is involved. Today, other than Italian newspapers reporting interviews, articles and events that interest the Italian-Texan community, there are also monthly newsletters and bulletins such as “Ieri, Oggi, Domani” (in Galveston) promoted by the San Giovanni Italian-American Association, the “Italian

⁶⁰ Belfiglio, *The Italian Experience*, 59-67.

House Lodge” by the Order of the Sons of Italy in America, and “II Cicerone” by the Italian Club of Dallas. After the mutual support associations declined because of their dissent from Fascism, some re-invented themselves as clubs, notably, the Italian Club of Dallas.

Likewise, the Federation of American-Italian Organizations of Houston, which was incorporated much later in 1982, includes twenty-three clubs and approximately 2,000 to 2,500 members. The Federation’s objectives are as follows: to furnish members with a library of works in both English and Italian, help them learn Italian and translate the books, organize Italian-related festivals and events, and maintain solid and lasting ties with Italian government officials. Despite its origin in 1976, the Italian Club of Dallas does not have as many members as the Federation of American-Italian Organizations of Houston, but it has an equally noble purpose: to increase public awareness of the accomplishments made by the Italian community as a whole. The Italian Club of Dallas seeks to participate in sports events, promote social events, study and highlight all the accomplishments the Italian community has achieved socially and culturally (both on an individual and collective level), and assist the community in its development in Texas.

Generally, clubs do not require members to show proof of Catholic faith, Italian descent or fluency in the language (the only exception being of the Arlington Lodge of the Order of the Sons of Italy in America). However, being of Italian descent guarantees the right to vote in the Sons of Italy. Large and highly organized associations such as the Federation of Italian American Organizations of Houston, the St. Joseph's Society, and local publishing ventures such as Doniani and L’aurora, reinforce strong ties between Italian-Americans.

Italians in Texas and across America have succeeded by working together. One of the most effective efforts emerged as a model in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, thanks to Domenico Madonna, leader of the Italian Masons' Local labor union, who led a campaign in 1903 advocating for reduced working hours and higher wages.⁶¹ The campaign was a success, because it helped Italians to protect themselves from exploitation and oppressive work schedules, as well as winning concessions from contractors because of the great bargaining power of the union. Much like the Italian Bricklayers and Masons, the Italian Tailors of Philadelphia organized a mutual benefit society in 1884,⁶² providing aid for its members and easing their transition into an unfamiliar industrial world.⁶³

All the of these organizations ultimately accomplish two important functions: to provide Italian-Americans with a way to build their identity and retain their Italianness while also embracing Americanization; and to help all other Americans understand that being Italian-American means being part of a large and well distinctive community in which people share common cultural, political, social and organizational attitudes, and whose endeavors have propelled them to outstanding accomplishments and strong commitment as proud citizens of the United States.⁶⁴

⁶¹ U.S. Interstate Commerce Commission, *Thirty-ninth Annual Report of the Interstate Commerce Commission* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1925), 256-257.

⁶² *L'Eco d'Italia*, February 12, April 10, 17, 1884.

⁶³ Edwin Fenton, "Immigrants and Unions, A Case Study: Italians and American Labor," *Forum Italicum* 46 (Spring 2012): 140-142.

⁶⁴ Belfiglio, *The Italian Experience*, 72-78.

Food and Culture

Obviously, Italian communities considered food not just as a mere source of nutrition and fellowship, but more importantly as an essential manifestation of abundance, life and respect of traditions. Although Italian-Americans were not able to reproduce their recipes in exactly the same ways as they did back home, Texas provided them with enough resources to produce food not just for single families but also often for entire villages and communities. Other than feeding conspicuous numbers of people, such a practice allowed families to earn the trust and respect of the whole Italian community. In addition, they enhanced their prospects of being considered “galantuomini,” respectable and honorable gentlemen.⁶⁵ Equally important to the act of preparation and enjoyment of the meals were the vibrant social contexts in which food was prepared, because it served as a vehicle of communication between older and younger generations, including passing down recipes, developing techniques of cooking, and appreciating family heritage.

Preparing, serving and eating food was a social ritual among Italian immigrants who cooked for their extended families, friends and communities for social festivals and religious celebrations. It was a common custom that wives and daughters were in charge of preparing the meals. If only one spouse was of Italian descent, he or she was in charge of cooking, with the difference that women made every kind of dish, whereas men usually focused on few specialties. Italian food remained an integral part of the social events of Italian clubs throughout Texas. Communal meals were meticulously structured

⁶⁵ Edward C. Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1958), 70.

and organized. Daughters assisted their mothers, grandmothers and aunts, learning every secret and honoring the responsibility as a rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood.

Women of a family typically worked closely with women of other families, sharing recipes, helping one another and most importantly, passing the torch of food and cooking to younger generations. Meals were events of almost religious importance, and since the women put so much effort, time and love into every dish, being late or absent to these gatherings was unacceptable and regarded as extremely disrespectful, not just for the women but for the entire family. Seating patterns were also respected. A family's patriarch would sit at the head of the table, with his spouse on his right, the eldest daughter at his left, the youngest at the right of the mother, and the oldest son at the other end of the table. The oldest son gave his spot if the grandparents were present.

Feasts were always preceded by prayers, rosaries and a special hymn that could be translated as "Hail to the Cross." In addition, children presented a theatrical play in which they impersonated Jesus, Mother Mary, St. Joseph, a guardian angel and several other saints. After the play, children started to eat, and after a while, everybody participated. Such meals not only helped families stay united, but they also provided a place to discuss family matters privately without being interfered by anyone. With food and cooking at the center of family life, it was no wonder that the majority of businesses owned by Italians in Texas were grocery stores, restaurants, fruit establishments or confectioneries.⁶⁶

Despite the failure of the Chautauqua movement to reach both Thurber and Mingus, educational and cultural events of all kinds (in particular concerts and theater

⁶⁶ Belfiglio, *The Italian Experience*, 67-69.

plays) were regular features in the coal towns, mainly because of the deep appreciation for arts and music among Italians, who comprised the most extensive non-Anglo group in Thurber. Interestingly, the beautiful paintings of Christ in Thurber's Catholic church were created by an Italian miner from Rome, whose works later became part of the Vatican collection and whose fame reached Universal Pictures in Hollywood, where he became a scenery artist.⁶⁷

Racism and Integration

Italians were accepted only slowly and gradually by white Americans. However, when their numbers exceeded the expectations of the American government, a restrictive law was issued in the 1920s to limit the arrival of criminals, anarchists, and the physically and mentally ill, putting pressure on job markets and causing assimilation problems that in some cases escalated rapidly and gave rise to violent riots and acts against Italians. In the 1890s a notorious lynching occurred in New Orleans, in which eleven Italians became victims of violence. Fortunately, diplomatic relations were restored by President Benjamin Harrison, who took responsibility for the act and paid an indemnity of \$25,000 to every family affected by the tragedy.⁶⁸ Suffering exploitation of a peonage system, discrimination, yellow fever, and economic distress, Italians had multiple reasons to leave Louisiana, and they seized the chance as soon as they read of employment opportunities in Texas newspaper advertisements.⁶⁹ Taking into account sheer numbers, out of a total of 2,231,961 Italians who emigrated from Italy to the United States, only 56.4% of them

⁶⁷ Spratt, Hinton, and Baker, *Thurber Texas: The Life and Death of a Company Coal Town*, 45-46.

⁶⁸ Belfiglio, *The Italian Experience*, 33.

⁶⁹ Belfiglio, *The Italian Experience*, 46.

stayed permanently. Occasionally, such people sometimes returned home just to visit their families, but others returned because of marriages, family matters or illnesses (for example, yellow fever).

Those who returned to Italy often led prosperous lives thanks to the earnings they accumulated working in America. The fruits of their hard work allowed them to open businesses, buy farms, move to big cities, or help their poverty-stricken communities.⁷⁰ Those who chose to remain in the United States kept their religious and cultural traditions alive. An example was the annual Feast of St. Joseph on March 19. Meat was not consumed at this banquet because of the Lenten season, and the event was not always exclusive to Italian immigrants. On the contrary, white Americans, Mexicans, or African Americans, were also invited, with the utmost degree of hospitality, respect and care for those who were in dire conditions, such as orphans, widows, unwed mothers and homeless persons.

Although Southern and Northern Italians had different characteristics and backgrounds, the arrival in the new world smoothed such differences, uniting them by common principles such as communal food preparation, Catholicism, the Italian language and press, and eventually extended families. These commonalities resulted in the Italian-American societies of mutual support, organizations in which Italians helped one another in times of distress, taught newcomers to speak English, helped newcomers to settle and find a job. Ultimately, the societies facilitated the process of immigration, integration and assimilation into American life. Italian immigrants' Catholicism, however, had some differences compared to the pre-existing Irish Catholicism in Texas. In fact, Italians had a

⁷⁰ Belfiglio, *The Italian Experience*, 48.

more pragmatic approach with regard to hierarchy, rituals and the seven sacraments. Surprisingly, there were also a few Protestants among Italians who attended Presbyterian churches. Some others were Waldensians from Tuscany who concentrated in the city of Galveston and even became preachers and missionaries offering bilingual services in the churches.⁷¹

In Thurber, Italians attended mass at the St. James Catholic church, which included a parochial school financed by the TP Coal and Oil Company because of its substantial affluency and participation. Before churches were built, however, services, baptisms, marriages and other rituals were held in some homes, which allowed families to grow even more united. Family in fact was not just a means to claim identity; it also served as a social institution among Italians. Divorce was virtually nonexistent, as were contraceptive measures. Italian couples married in their early twenties and had an average of six children. Despite the Italian tendency to endogamy and to keeping their communities tightly knit, they never showed prejudice against Mexican or Black people. After the end of Civil War, because the United States had encouraged immigration from Europe to replace Black laborers, Italians often worked willingly alongside Blacks and Mexicans as farmers or tenants.⁷²

Although Italians preferred to befriend people of their own communities and have endogamous marriages to keep their communities homogeneous, they maintained generally good relationships with other ethnic groups, especially in contexts such as

⁷¹ Belfiglio, *The Italian Experience*, 54-56.

⁷² Andrew Graybill, "Texas Rangers, Canadian Mounties, and the Policing of the Transnational Industrial Frontier, 1885-1910," *Western Historical Quarterly* 35 (Summer 2004): 183.

workplaces, schools, businesses, and during celebrations. The only Italians who developed anti-Black feelings were those interested in climbing the social ladder, which led them to adopt Anglo-American behaviors, practices and unfortunately, prejudices, including narrow-minded and discriminatory attitudes toward African American and Mexican people. Otherwise, they would have been frowned upon by many whites themselves. Italians faced their fair share of discrimination, mainly because of their Catholicism and appearance and because of overall distrust against the immigrant community, which many white Americans feared as spreading diseases. Discrimination came in forms of harassment, insults, vandalism, and violence, even lynching (as in New Orleans). Slavery had ended, but racism persisted strongly, especially from groups of Anglo-Americans who were not happy to share the land with immigrants, Catholics and “not-so-white” working class people. Such bigots acted on their grudges and resentments in an unkindly and violently manner, provoking Blacks, Mexicans, Italians and other foreigners with insults, derogatory terms and racial slurs, often merely as excuses to begin fights and blame their “enemies” as culprits and instigators.⁷³

A notable accident occurred between Italian quarrymen and white American laborers along the railroad that connected Greenville and Paris, Texas. Italians were taunted severely by a certain Mr. Clark, who accused them of being loutish and reckless in loading stone onto wagons. Italians responded to Mr. Clark by cursing and chasing him, brandishing a shovel and drawing the attention of white Americans. A brawl erupted and it resulted in a stab-wounded Italian man. The sheriff of Lamar County intervened promptly to stop the fight but did not arrest anyone. Another reason why Italians

⁷³ Andrew Graybill, “Texas Rangers, Canadian Mounties,” 183.

befriended and worked alongside Mexicans derived from the fact that some Italians spent a period of time living and working in Mexico before settling in the United States, and so they were familiar with and had even assimilated somewhat Mexicans' habits and customs. Given the multitude of experiences the two ethnic groups had in common, in fact, friendships were common. Both came mainly from very humble backgrounds and they were working class people. Their languages were similar so that they understood each other better than they did English speakers. Moreover, they shared the Catholic faith, worshipping Jesus, Mother Mary and the saints. In addition to this, attendance to the church was also similar, for both Italian and Mexican women were more likely to go to church compared to men.⁷⁴

Italian "contadini" (rural peasants) and Mexican "campesinos" (farmers) shared a strong work ethic, as well as being warm, welcoming and family-oriented. This cultural trait particularly encouraged the two communities to socialize and intermix through marriages. Generally, even when Italians and Mexicans were not related through marriage, they were still cohesive and helped each other by fostering children and exchanging favors of all kinds, thereby creating extended families. Friendship, mutual respect, and personal and family honor were fundamental values for these ethnic groups. They shared a set of unwritten rules that guaranteed long lasting relationships and deep trust. Both Italian and Mexican families had patriarchal family structures with defined rules, roles and responsibilities, and children were plentiful in the households, with an average of five or six in each family. Nevertheless, each community had its own defined cultural identity, and despite their intermarriages, they perceived themselves as either

⁷⁴ Andrew Graybill, "Texas Rangers, Canadian Mounties," 184.

Mexican or Italian. Therefore, when Italians came to the United States from Mexico, their cultural identity and family heritage was intact and distinct. Italians preferred their own food and wines, wrote letters to relatives in their homeland, and usually dreamed of returning to Italy. They spoke Italian among themselves, enjoyed their own music, and had their own newspapers and literature. Although Italians were gradually able to integrate into American society, learn English, and relinquish some of their old beliefs, when asked about their identity, they would answer Italian-American, Italian-Texan or simply American or Texan.

Those who became the strongest Americans and Texans remained in Texas, paving the future for generations of offspring, whereas the ones who struggled to find a new identity and assimilate returned to Italy with their savings. Italians were extremely proud of their food, family cohesiveness and Catholic identity, but in time, generation after generation, they became more American and relinquished some or even most of their "Italianness," modifying their cultural values. Notably, they became more tolerant and less restrictive toward their children, allowing them to decide where to live and giving blessings for intermarrying with Anglo-Americans. Men eventually became less patriarchal and contributed to childcare and household chores. Italian-American families modified marriage and familial roles. Many even allowed for contraceptive methods and no longer had a high number of children. Men became more willing to help their wives, although women still assumed major responsibilities for young children and domestic chores. Marriages to non-Italians were increasingly common, and divorce rates eventually approached societal norms. However, family bonds remain quite strong and annual reunions are frequent and widespread. Polish people were not as active as Italians,

and even though their weddings were celebrated with the utmost excitement and attention, Italians were the one who gave the true color to the community in Thurber.⁷⁵

However, all the of these organizations cannot provide Italian-Americans with ways to build their Italian identity and find their Italianness. On the contrary, they stress concepts such as community solidarity and feelings of belonging. The concept of Italian identity can be highly subjective, inclined to change over time, and independent or transcendent to most of the labels and categories that clubs try to promote. In other words, clubs can advertise and reinforce Italianness but cannot create it. The first generation of Italian immigrants was highly diversified and unique at the same time. For example, a typical Sicilian differed from a Neapolitan or another Sicilian. Therefore, finding a rigidly common pattern to define the concept of Italian identity would be virtually impossible, especially considering that the pressure to integrate and assimilate into American life added another variable in the already complicated equation of “Italiannes” or “Italian Americanness.”⁷⁶

⁷⁵ C. Richard King, “Old Thurber,” in *Singers and Storytellers: Publications of the Texas Folklore Society*, ed. Mody C. Boatright (Dallas, TX: Southern Methodist University Press, 1961), 108.

⁷⁶ Belfiglio, *The Italian Experience*, 72-78.

CHAPTER THREE

Thurber Through Primary Sources

The first news about Thurber date back to the end of the nineteenth century. The primary sources that will be examined in this thesis range from about 1894 to 1921. Specifically, local newspapers discussed Thurber very positively in the very beginning, but slowly, the positive trend was reversed, with people leaving their jobs and moving away from the coal town. Italians' experiences in Thurber reflected broader trends among immigrants and their families. Here is an interesting poem found in a Thurber newspaper, *The Texas Miner*, that summed up the lives of many Italians as immigrants in the United States during the early twentieth century.¹

L'emigrante Italiano in America

Perdonatemi amici
Se troppo è il mio ardire
Perché dell'emigrante
Anch'io voglio dire.
Miseria radicale
Dell'Italia nazione,
da costretti emmigrano
In grande confusione.
Padri e figli uniti
Si vedono sboccare
Emmigranti docili

¹ A. G. Pistot, "L'emigrante Italiano in America," *The Texas Miner*, August 4, 1894.

Che vengono d'oltremare.

Metropoli superba

Troverà il meschino

Ignoto del linguaggio

Deve far inchino.

Ramingo ed incerto

Percorre il nuovo mondo

In abbandono trovasi

Deluso e metabondo.

All'Italia volge sguardo

Per i passati giorni.

Ma il mare da codardo

Più permette ch'ei ritorni

Anni, anni passano

De' figli emmigrati

Scorderan parenti

Chi li aveva allevati

Con stento vivono

I genitor lasciati

Per libertà dei figli

Che furon emmigrati.

Parte l'emmigrante

Per trovar fortuna

Ma i più si trovano

Nella stessa luna.

Passano i mesi

Ed ancora gli anni

L'emmigrante invecchia

Sempre negli affanni.

Spera nell'avvenire
Che muti posizione
Ma nel fin si trova
 In desolazione
Parte da un luogo
Che non fa affari
Corre per un altro
Che lo trova pari
L'uomo fortunato
Trova dappertutto
Che sua occupazione
Sempre gli dà frutto.
In conclusione dico
 O cari miei amici
Che l'esser immigrati
 Non è da infelici.

Here is a translation: Friends, forgive me for my boldness, but I want to talk of the immigrant as well. They migrate forcefully in a big confusion, because of the extreme misery of the Italian nation. Fathers and sons united, docile migrants, who come from overseas, can be seen flocking from everywhere. The wretched one, unaware of the language, will find a super metropolis that he cannot but bow down to. Wandering and uncertain, he walks the new world finding himself in relinquishment, brooding and disappointed. He turns his gaze to Italy for the following days, but the sea is vile and does not allow him to return. Years will pass, and the immigrant children will forget about their parents who raised them. Those parents, who were left behind by their children who

made a fortune, are now living with difficulties. The migrants leave, eager to seek fortune, but most of them end up being in the same tough situation as anybody else's. Months, years pass, the migrant gets old, with constant aches and pains. He hopes in the future, that it might change for good, but in the end, he always finds himself in desolation. He leaves a place with no business (Italy), running to one where they can settle (the United States). The lucky man finds a job everywhere, being busy always bears good fruit. In conclusion I say, my dear friends, that being a migrant does not solely yield unhappiness (meaning that migrating might be sad and overwhelming, but it also a great opportunity to seize and capitalize on).²

The article continues, mentioning three accidents in the coal mines, as well as listing some data about total Italian immigration in the United States from 1820 to 1895: a total of 599,665 people, often males without wives (except in the case of Irishmen, who nearly always came with their spouses). Such statistics came from the monthly *Farm, Field and Fireside*, published by Charles Henry Howard in Chicago, Illinois. Later articles mentioned news from Italy, such as the intervention by Italian forces in Africa, more precisely in Kassala (on the border with Eritrea), where a military operation of occupation was accomplished successfully.³

Another article pointed out a fortunate aspect of immigrant life in Thurber: the lack of the "Boss System." Such a system was very common in big cities such as New York or Chicago, often involving groups of Italian criminals who exploited other Italian immigrants by extorting money, giving false promises of employment and compensation,

² A. G. Pistot, "L'emigrante Italiano in America."

³ A.N. Ivancich, "Vittoria Italiana in Africa," *The Texas Miner*, August 11, 1894.

and blackmailing. The “Boss System” was not present in Thurber, mainly because Thurber was a company town in which the company had control, the economy flourished and miners had everything they needed in terms of housing, jobs and necessities. Very often, in big cities in which the government and the police had a very tight grip on their citizens, people felt more discontent, because they were not allowed to open new businesses as they pleased and the incentive to engage in entrepreneurship was very low. As a result, many people went against the law, looking for other ways to prosper. Italians in Thurber worked very hard and in dangerous conditions, but the mining company gave them benefits for their labor, something that many people in large cities could not imagine.

However, workers in Thurber were not always satisfied. The first documented strikes there occurred in June 1894 when seven hundred men stopped working in the mines. Among the strikers were Italians, Blacks and white Americans, all of whom wanted higher wages and better working conditions. Fortunately, the company’s executives, H. K. Thurber and Colonel Robert D. Hunter, were eager to cooperate, guaranteeing protection for all the miners who still wished to work in Thurber.⁴ The newspapers, however, did not exclusively discuss Italian politics and strikes. News of local interest was also published, such as the opening of saloons, restaurants, and theatres, as well as arrivals of newcomers and correspondence from Italy.⁵ For the people of Thurber, news about events in Italy was as important as American politics, especially among the first generation of immigrants, who had a strong bond with the motherland.

⁴ “The Men Are Out,” *Fort Worth Gazette*, June 4, 1894.

⁵ “Per Italiani,” *The Texas Miner*, March 10, 1894.

An article in the *The Texas Miner* mentioned on the issue of March 17, 1894, that the stock market was declining in Italy, producing high inflation and discontent among the people, who felt betrayed by their government, and unhappy about the Triple Alliance. Apparently, Italians did not believe that the alliance with Austria and Germany was benefitting Italy, especially because of the stance Italy had taken during that period fighting against France.

Dissatisfaction with the government was a recurring theme in the history of Italy, and such a motif often appeared in the pages of local Texas newspapers. But this theme changed among immigrants after a few decades living away from their homeland. Italian migrants began to care less about their own government at home and paid more attention to what was happening in the United States, especially with the second and third generations.⁶ The dissatisfaction with the Triple Alliance was mentioned again in *The Texas Miner* issue of March 31, 1894. Austria had sent some rifles to Italy to take part in war, but according to the article, Italians would have rather manufactured their own weapons (staying busy and employed), instead of receiving them from Austria.⁷ In the meanwhile, life went on peacefully in Thurber, especially after the coal company, in order to keep their workers happy and working, built some beer gardens in April 1894 and lowered the prices for primary goods, allowing people of all social standings to take part not only in working but also in leisure activities.⁸

⁶ "Cronaca d'Italia," *The Texas Miner*, March 17, 1894.

⁷ "Cronaca d'Italia," *The Texas Miner*, March 31, 1894.

⁸ A.N. Ivancich, "Cronaca d'Italia," *The Texas Miner*, April 28, 1894.

Italians and other immigrant workers and their families enjoyed a good life in Thurber in 1894, and they were willing to comply with the law, even with regard to the consumption of beer and liquors. An article of *The Texas Miner* of May 12, 1894, for example, announced that a group of Italians were fired from the mine for having consumed liquor outside of the premises of the town. The author of the article reported that there was no reason not to buy the cheap alcohol that the company already provided for workers, and that committing such crimes shamed the entire Italian community. Hence, because such behavior was frowned upon and highly discouraged, Italians tended to focus on working and respecting the policies that the company established.⁹ The company also organized a barbecue to celebrate the Fourth of July in 1894, an event that was documented in *The Texas Miner*. The editors continued to encourage compliance with the law, thanked Colonel Hunter for his service, exhorted the people to contribute to the general wealth and not to be influenced by the so-called “ignorant class” of Slavs, Poles, and Scandinavians, who were striking in Pennsylvania during that period.¹⁰

Along with reporting on strikes across the United States, *The Texas Miner* described another victory for Italy in Africa (in Kossala on March 27 1894).¹¹ According to the issue of June 2, 1894, about 485,000 idle employees were striking throughout the country, resulting in an increase in the demand of coal. Such demand was met in Thurber where people led a healthy lifestyle in a pleasant and affordable town where the coal

⁹ A.N. Ivancich, “Cronaca d’Italia,” *The Texas Miner*, May 12, 1894.

¹⁰ A.N. Ivancich, “Cronaca d’Italia,” *The Texas Miner*, May 19, 1894.

¹¹ A.N. Ivancich, “Un’altro Scontro fra Dervisci e Truppe Italiane,” *The Texas Miner*, May 26, 1894.

company made recreational activities affordable for everybody and treated workers with justice and fairness, casting out public agitators. According to *The Texas Miner*, workers seemed satisfied, not only because of their jobs but also because of an efficient school system and an overall safe environment where families raised their children away from trouble.¹²

In several articles published during June of 1894, A. N. Ivancich described a large strike in Colorado, while also praising Thurber as a town without major strikes. Apparently, Italians and other workers in Colorado were not given adequate protection from their bosses. But rather than jeopardizing their lives by going against their bosses' will, workers chose to be unemployed. At the same time, articles highlighted Italian congressman Francesco Crispi, who summoned the attention of all Italians in the world, encouraging patriotism and seeking support in the upcoming war. But such an attitude was met by Italians with criticism, because rather than going to war, they demanded the approval of financial measures to restore the disastrous economy of their country.¹³

Another issue that contributed to the tarnished image of Italian people was the fear of violent disruptions by Italian anarchists. The July 14, 1894, issue of *The Texan Miner* described the attempt of an Italian anarchist to take the life of Italian congressman Crispi. Although Crispi survived, the event contributed to the persistent stereotype that Italians were anarchists and the assumption among white Americans that Italians should not have been allowed to immigrate to America. This stereotype was strong and often bitter. It was

¹² "Labor Troubles," *The Texas Miner*, June 2, 1894.

¹³ A.N. Ivancich, "Cronaca d'Italia," *The Texas Miner*, June 16, 1894.

no coincidence that anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were convicted and executed without due process in Massachusetts in 1927.¹⁴

The integration, assimilation, and Americanization of Italian immigrants was a long process. An early example occurred in July 1895 in Fort Worth, Texas, when a train from the Thurber coal mines welcomed five hundred foreigners, including Italians, Turks, Mexicans, Scotchmen, and Englishmen. Out of these five hundred, three hundred and seven were offered full American citizenship. The rights of citizenship, including the right to vote, were essential characteristics that Americanized immigrants in the United States and that began the slow process of relinquishment of old identities.¹⁵ Resistance among whites, however, was common. *The Dublin Progress* in nearby Dublin, Texas, in May 1896 did not seem very enthusiastic about the Texas & Pacific Coal Mining Company in Thurber. In fact, the article discussed how the company barely escaped an official investigation from Dallas concerning methods of business and general working and living conditions of the employees. The article asserted that the company was not fair and transparent, and that miners had reasons to call a strike and fight for better rights.¹⁶

One more strike occurred on July 8, 1899, in Thurber, when 360 Italians not only stopped working but also engaged in a fight with Captain William Lightfoot and the local police, after the Captain fired a shot in an attempt to disperse an unruly crowd and keep the situation under control.¹⁷ Despite strikes and upheavals that occurred at the end of the

¹⁴ A.N. Ivancich, "Cronaca d'Italia," *The Texas Miner*, July 14, 1894.

¹⁵ "Making Voters," *Galveston Daily News*, July 27, 1895.

¹⁶ "That 'Story of Thurber,'" *The Dublin Progress*, May 29, 1896.

¹⁷ "Trouble at Thurber," *El Paso Daily Herald*, July 8, 1899.

nineteenth century, Italian immigrants in Thurber found a way to celebrate “Italian Day” on February 10, 1900, one of the first galas in the history of the coal town. The event featured a big feast, performances by an Italian band, a grand ball, and an Opera House show.¹⁸ But only three years later in 1903, people in Thurber lacked occasions to celebrate, because of the financial crisis that the company experienced that year.

According to James Hayes Quarles of the local newspaper *Southern Mercury* published on September 17, 1903, the company owned 56,000 acres of land in Eastland, Palo Pinto, Erath and Parker. In addition, the author described the poor conditions that miners were forced to accept, and of course their unbalanced wages. He also mentioned the attempt by the United Mine Workers of America (UMW) to convince the employees to join the UMW ranks in favor of unionism, higher wages, and better overall working conditions, demands that later prompted Italians to take action and form their own organizations and contribute to the birth of the trade unions.¹⁹ The year 1903 was a pivotal time for Italians in Thurber. On September 11, six hundred Italians went on a strike, demanding higher wages and in some cases, joining the union.²⁰ On September 17 the same miners celebrated Labor Day by refusing to work and continuing to push for higher pays, a request that was promptly rejected by the company.²¹

¹⁸ “February 10, Italian Day,” *Texas Mining and Trade Journal*, February 3, 1900.

¹⁹ James Hayes Quarles, “Conditions at Thurber,” *The Southern Mercury*, September 17, 1903.

²⁰ “Miners Strike,” *Bryan Morning Eagle*, September 11, 1903.

²¹ “Six Hundred Italians Strike,” *Denton County News*, September 17, 1903.

Despite the tendency of Italian laborers to strike in the early years of the twentieth century, they began to redeem their tarnished reputation, especially because of the reluctance of American employers to offer a contract of employment to African Americans. The United States labor market needed roughly two million laborers in the cotton fields and factories of the South, and such a need prompted employers to revise their policies of denying citizenship to Italians. Although many Italians were still perceived to be a threat, they were also recognized as hard workers, easily adapting to weather in the South. They also tended to migrate in large numbers, keeping their families united. According to an article issued in the *Thurber Journal* on October 8, 1904, Italians were able to dissipate the prejudice that cast on their community because of the mafiosi's illegal activities. Such criminals were only a minority in comparison to all the honest and hard-working Italian-Americans who populated the United States during those years.²² Racism was a major issue in the United States in the early twentieth century, tension was constant and race riots were feared. Widespread fear of such riots reached the town of Thurber as well. In fact, in the issue June 6, 1908, issue of the *Palestine Daily Herald*, the editor discussed a possible race riot between Poles, Italians, and white Americans. An outbreak was prevented by local Texas Rangers.²³ A less relevant but still interesting article in the January 28, 1910, issue of the *Dublin Progress* in which a young man by the name of Barney Calso, an Italian-American miner from Thurber took his own life. According to the sources, the young man ran away from the Italian government to avoid serving in the military and emigrated to the United States,

²² "Prefer Italians to Negroes," *The Thurber Journal*, October 1904.

²³ "Race Riot is Feared," *Palestine Daily Herald*, June 6, 1908.

where he had a relative in Thurber. A few months after his arrival, the fugitive received a letter from his parents asking him to return, but instead of facing a charge from the Italian government for running away from military service, he killed himself. It was unclear whether the young man had become accustomed to his new life in America, but such a suicide might not have been an isolated case in the community of Italian immigrants of the early twentieth century. Regardless, the article confirmed that Italians left their hometowns in search of freedom, and for some of them, unfortunately, that process became a tragedy instead of a blessing.²⁴

According to the August 19, 1910, issue of the *Teague Chronicle*, Texas was the state with more foreigners than any other state in the South or West. Three quarters of a million resided in the South, and nearly all of them were Roman Catholics. However, the most important part of the article was that such people took part in elections, since many of them were already naturalized citizens who were willing to learn English and assimilate into American society.²⁵

Complete Americanization and assimilation, however, arrived for Italian-Americans at different times, in part because of a form of institutional racism. According to reports issued by the Immigration Commission of the United States Senate during the 61st Congress (1910-1911), a committee of three senators (appointed by the president of the Senate) and three members of the House of Representatives (appointed by the president of the United States himself), investigated immigrants in the United States. According to the data they gathered, the Bureau of Immigration divided Italians into two

²⁴ "Foreign Shore," *The Dublin Progress*, January 28, 1900.

²⁵ "Methodist Home Mission Work," *The Teague Chronicle*, August 19, 1910.

big racial groups, northern and southern Italians, because they differed in language, physique, and allegedly in character.

At least three Italian language dialects were identified: the upper, central, and lower. These dialects diverged so much from one another that it was extremely hard to classify each of them adequately. Moreover, Italian people did not appear to be a homogeneous race and were divided by the Apennine chain of mountains into two distinct ethnic groups: those in the North who were broad headed and tallish, and the Southerners, who were long-headed, dark skinned, and of short stature. Southern Italians were apparently descendants from Iberians of Spain and Berbers of northern Africa. The Italian sociologist Alfredo Niceforo was mentioned, and according to him, the two groups differed not only physically but also psychically, because southern Italians were deemed impulsive, excitable, imaginative, unpredictable, impractical, and generally not very adaptable to a highly organized society. In contrast, northern Italians were considered patient, methodical, practical, deliberate, and fully capable of living in a modern civilized society. Both groups were Catholic, and most who migrated to the United States were uneducated lower-class workers. In addition, the Italian statistician Augusto Bosco di Ruffino was also mentioned. According to him, Italy ranked first in numbers of crimes committed against persons. Violent crimes were especially frequent in the South rather than the North. Banditry and robbery were widespread in the South, along with secret criminal organizations such as the mafia.

Moreover, Italy was one of the most illiterate European countries in 1901. More than 48 percent of the population six years of age and over was illiterate. Lombards and Piedmontes in the North were the best educated among all Italians, and since the

government made education free and compulsory between the ages of six and nine, literacy was gradually improving. But lower class people living in conditions of extreme poverty with scarce food and poor conditions were especially prone to chronic illiteracy. As a direct result, more than two million Italians migrated to the United States and South America from 1899 to 1910. The large portion of those who left Italy eventually returned home. Italian immigration seemed especially significant at that time because it was most prolific, exceeding all other foreign immigration. Moreover, more than any others who came to the United States, were temporary migrants, spending an average of eight years in the United States. Most importantly, the heaviest transatlantic immigration were from southern Italy. A clear majority of migrants were either Sicilian or Calabrian, coming from the least developed portions of the country. Southern Italians headed the list of immigrants with roughly two million from 1899 to 1910, whereas northern Italians ranked tenth barely a million.²⁶

Many Italians were highly respectable people such as Mr. E. Pontremoli, a Thurber coal miner featured in an article of the *Dublin Progress* published on September 6, 1912. In the article, the editor highlighted an incredibly large amount of coal that Mr. Pontremoli was able to dig, breaking all previous records.²⁷ Other Italians, however, were not so respectable. The May 11, 1920, issue of the *Abilene Daily Reporter* of May 11, 1920, reported that revenue officers arrested a group of Italian distillers, who had

²⁶ William P. Dillingham, *U.S. Congress, Senate, Reports of the Immigration Commission: Dictionary of Races of Peoples* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1911), 84.

²⁷ "Some Thurber Coal Miners Who Make Good Record," *The Dublin Progress*, September 6, 1912.

illegally produced thirty gallons of whiskey and five hundred gallons of mash that would have sold for about \$8.00 a gallon.²⁸

Thurber remained active for a few more years thanks to the brick factory, but people gradually moved away, leaving like it is today: a ghost town. An article published in the September 8, 1939 issue of the *Stephenville Empire-Tribune* described a “Ghost City” reunion held on September 5. The article praised the efforts of the Italian community in Thurber, defining them as “All Americans” who integrated into society. Racial prejudice seemed to be formally ended, once and for all. Italian immigrants had gradually become Italian-Americans, and finally Americans. In effect Italians had finally become white.²⁹

²⁸ “Revenue Officers Capture a Still,” *The Abilene Day Reporter*, May 11, 1920.

²⁹ “Ghost City Reunion Was Held Monday at Thurber,” *Stephenville Empire-Tribune*, September 8, 1939.

CHAPTER FOUR

Racism, Segregation, Discrimination and the Demise of Thurber

The progressive era in the United States began in 1901 with President Theodore Roosevelt, who inaugurated serious reforms, including reforms strengthening unions and laborers. It was often difficult for businesses to adapt to such reforms in a period when America was shifting rapidly from a rural to an industrial economy. Families and individuals increasingly moved from farms and small towns to urban and industrial centers. Despite frequent friction between labor and management, Thurber became famous as the first completely unionized company town in the United States at that time.¹ Between 1903 and 1907 the United Mine Workers of America (UMW) gained new rights for miners in Texas, allowing people of every race and color the right to work in the northern Texas mine fields. As a result, Mexicans and their families began to move to Texas seeking employment opportunities, and although other foreign-born ethnic groups welcomed Mexicans, Anglo Americans often resisted them. Such racial animosity stemmed from the Texas Revolution and the Mexican American War.

Union activism by laborers was necessary because business owners and managers of companies such as the Texas & Pacific Coal Company, while not really caring about the origin and race of immigrants, considered themselves superior and usually patronized the so-called lower classes. Despite the advantages offered by the company town of

¹ Richard V. Francaviglia, "Black Diamonds and Vanishing Ruins: Reconstructing the Historic Landscape of Thurber, Texas," *The Mining History Association's 1994 Annual* (1994): 53.

Thurber, workers were viewed as replaceable commodities, unworthy of respect by their bosses. Working in such an environment led the miners to develop a strong sense of brotherhood and solidarity, united against the company's abuse and oppression. Workers and their families worked together and lived together, all united by the same precarious destiny: the fragile, dangerous, and low-paying life of a miner. Mines were notoriously unsafe workplaces. Prior to reforms achieved by the UMW, miners were not protected by safety regulations or any kind of laws. In fact, miners worked every day in constant fear of being crushed by falling rocks, trampled in a mineshaft, or slammed by runaway coal wagons. Many who were unable to cope with the stress, physical wear and constant fear, either intoxicated themselves with alcohol, committed suicide or quit their jobs.

Miners and their families were not only united by difficult circumstances but also by merry ones such as festivities, which helped relieve the strain of work in the mines. People in Thurber enjoyed a variety of festivities. Along with celebrating Independence Day, each ethnic group had its own celebrations, and they all coexisted harmoniously in their diversity. Other kinds of entertainment, however, especially clandestine cockfights, were markers of social class. Cockfighting not only indicated working class status but also contributed to violence and disruptions. Opinions on social classes were inconsistent among the company's directors and managers,² who either favored segregation of each group or trying to unite them under the same patriotic identity. Company president Edgar

² Richard V. Francaviglia, "Black Diamonds to Black Gold: The Legacy of the Texas Pacific Coal and Oil Company," *West Texas Historical Association Yearbook* 71 (1995): 10.

L. Marston opposed encouraging ethnic diversity. He viewed foreign laborers as a potential threat and nuisance. But J. G. Britton had a rather modern and innovative view about the community in Thurber. He viewed workers as people who should not be judged by their past or origins but rather by their contributions to the growth and prosperity of America. Regardless, when the miners were unionized by the UMW, they increasingly resisted the company's control of their town and fought for their rights. The UMW soon merged its efforts with the Texas State Federation of Labor and the American Federation of Labor (AFL)."³

On January 15, 1900, Texas union representatives met in Cleburne, Texas, and organized the Texas State Federation of Labor (TSFL). Despite a slow and uncertain start, the TSFL increased its membership and gained a charter from the AFL two years later. The TSFL's success stemmed from the strong leadership of Edward Cunningham, an inspiring, future oriented, and innovative professional organizer who led the TSFL from 1912 to 1918. Cunningham was admired and respected by some leaders of labor unions but criticized by others, who labelled him a radical. Perhaps it was that approach that prevented Cunningham from achieving national recognition. Cunningham's positions and actions veered toward socialism. He strongly advocated for workers' rights and safety regulations, especially after an incident at the Wilburton mine in Oklahoma, where six miners died in a large explosion. In fact, Cunningham not only sided with the socialist

³ Marilyn D. Rhinehart, "'Underground Patriots': Thurber Coal Miners and the Struggle for Individual Freedom, 1888-1903," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 92 (April 1989): 541.

leaders of Oklahoma by declaring sympathy and solidarity with the miners, but he also proposed several resolutions to TSFL representatives concerning miners' safety laws, along with government ownership and control of natural resources, public utilities, railroads, and telephone and telegraph companies.

Moreover, Cunningham promoted the theory that capitalism produced unemployment and poverty instead of maximizing the potential of citizens. Along with advocating labor legislation, Cunningham was in favor of diversified union leadership, including people from various ethnicities, men as well as women. A true believer in modern equality, Cunningham kept the TSFL strong and cohesive but not invulnerable to controversy. He strongly disfavored and resisted efforts by white delegates who spread racial hatred and intolerance with xenophobic rhetoric. Another event in which Edward Cunningham opposed discriminatory measures against workers came in 1913, when he spoke out against a resolution for requiring literacy tests for TSFL members to vote. He was not the only one who opposed the resolution. Coalminer Gus Sparkling defined it as "un-American." The resolution failed. To Cunningham's credit, a progressive resolution in favor of publicly financed education and abolishment of the state poll tax was passed. Ultimately, the TSFL succeeded in compelling the Texas Legislature during 1913 to 1915 to pass a compulsory public education bill, two mechanics' lien bills, the eight-hour law

for workers on public projects, the fifty-four hour law for women, and a salary increase for Bureau of Labor Statistic's employees.⁴

The Need for Italians in the Southern States

Although between 1910 and 1920 Texas led the United States in cattle and cotton production, its industrial sector lagged behind.⁵ Louisiana and Texas looked to Italy, particularly southern Italy, for manpower. People in southern Italy were clearly most desperate for work, and American employers offered far better wages than were available in Italy. Immigrants from Italy were initially welcomed and praised by white Americans, who needed cheap labor as always. This welcoming attitude, however, did not last long, especially in Louisiana, because the so-called "birds of passage" (those who earned wages and then returned to Italy) were accused of not contributing to the economy and of taking advantage of the opportunities to work. As a result, many Italians moved to Texas, where they could own land and enjoy more privileges. As time passed, Italians started gaining opportunities for work that was sometimes more entrepreneurial and managerial. Their success caused resentment and discontent among whites who felt the pressure of competition. Such strong dissatisfaction, however, was often less extreme in Texas, since

⁴ Tonja Lisa Berry, "Cooperation and Segregation: A History of North Central Texas Coal Mining Towns, Organized Labor, and the Mexican Workforce" (MA thesis, The University of Texas at Arlington, 2004), 42-47.

⁵ Randolph B. Campbell, *Gone to Texas: A History of the Lone Star State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 325.

manpower was needed not only in agriculture but also in sectors such as the construction of railroads and the operation of factories.⁶

White racism and xenophobia, however, was still common and had deep historical roots. The American Party in the 1850s, otherwise known as the Know-Nothings, grew popular among many Anglo Americans because of its anti-immigrant, anti-Roman Catholic and pro-nativist ideals. After the Civil War, whites in Texas discriminated against African Americans, limiting them to hard work and low wages, while also showing similar prejudices against Italians and Mexicans, due to their illiteracy, poor knowledge of English, and their willingness to perform the kind of labor that had been required of slaves. Such work made them look dirty, inferior, and not white.⁷

Whites insulted Italians as “wops,” “dagos,” and even “darkies,” echoing the attitudes of John Parker, who participated in the notorious anti-Italian lynch mob in Louisiana and later served as governor. Parker defined Italians as “a little worse than Negroes, being if any filthier in their habits, lawless and treacherous.” The situation for Italians in Texas was not as bad as in Louisiana, since Italians were at least entitled to the possession of property. As landowners, they enjoyed more rights and recognition. In other words, Italians in Texas were not merely a source of cheap labor; they were taxpayers and had the prospect of becoming integrated members of society. But this did not prevent racial discrimination and persecution. The main reason why Italians were

⁶ Durso, “Of Seeds and Sorrow,” 88.

⁷ Durso, “Of Seeds and Sorrow,” 60-61.

more accepted in Texas than in Louisiana was permanent residency. In other words, they often worked seasonally and or temporarily in Louisiana, migrating to the North to seek better jobs or returning to Italy if they had earned enough wages. In Texas, Italians often owned land and were able to accumulate more wealth for themselves and their families. As a result, they were more prone to stay in Texas, provide for their families, and eventually claim citizenship.⁸

In addition, Texas newspapers reflected and guided public opinion, opposing the lynching of Italians in Louisiana and denouncing violence against Italians generally. Such condemnation encouraged white Texans to be more tolerant of immigrants and more sensitive to anti-immigration policies. For example, an article in the *Galveston Daily News* did not portray Italians as lazy, prone to crime and filthy as in Louisiana, but rather as compassionate, poor but honest and trustworthy. Italians' reputation was further bolstered by the press in an article that described how Italians welcomed a vessel of other Italians arriving in Galveston. Led by the Italian Consul Clemente Nicolini, Italians in Galveston prepared a banquet and made a display of great patriotism, both for their countrymen and for the United States, proving wrong those who claimed that they did not honor the American flag. The Texas press not only praised the qualities and values that Italians demonstrated, but also encouraged persecuted immigrant people to tell their stories.⁹

⁸ Durso, "Of Seeds and Sorrow," 79.

⁹ Durso, "Of Seeds and Sorrow," 84-85.

Nevertheless, despite Texas being a safer place for Italians to live in, a conspicuous contingent of Anglo-Americans harbored mistrust toward the Italian community and essentially questioned their whiteness. Italians shared many similarities with Mexicans as far as skin color, eye color, language and religion, and such racial ambiguity worked against them, fueling the racist sentiments of whites who insisted on Jim Crow segregation and discrimination. Italians were above Black people, who were at the very bottom of the racial and socio-economic hierarchy. But being “not so white” put Italians at a disadvantage in terms of equal treatment. Laws and policies were applied to Italians differently than to “true” white people. For example, when an Italian woman claimed to have been raped by Jim Reddick, an African American neighbor, the authorities did not react so promptly as in the case of a white woman, who suffered the same fate at the hands of the same man and two other black men. In fact, the three rapists were immediately arrested and lynched the next day.¹⁰ Lynchings in Texas were common, especially after Europeans began to inhabit the Brazos region in the 1890s, suffering the culture of racial oppression and violence that was long embedded in the Southern states. Such violence has been widely documented by historians who have demonstrated how white acts of retribution resulted from a desire for extreme vengeance.

Fear of the Newcomers

The arrival of newcomers (large numbers of whites and African Americans from the Deep South, along with foreigners including Italians) exacerbated social and political

¹⁰ Durso, “Of Seeds and Sorrow,” 86-87.

instability in Texas during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Southern racial social order, which extended from the years of slavery and culminated in the Jim Crow era, resulted in a racialized, exclusionary and hierarchical environment. Acts of racial oppression and violence were allowed and even encouraged. In 1916, for example, the lynching and burning of Jesse Washington, an African American teenager, occurred in Waco before a crowd of about 15,000 people.¹¹

In the specific case of Thurber, racism and discrimination occurred but with a different aspect: employees of the Texas Pacific Mercantile and Manufacturing Company (which managed enterprises of the Texas Pacific Coal and Oil Company) were in constant opposition. They were divided not only between management and labor, but also more blatantly by their race and ethnicity. Workers in the mines and brick manufacturing were increasingly so-called foreigners, born outside the United States, and non-white. In 1900, a large majority of well-paid white collar and blue collar employees of the TPMM were native whites, while only 13.27% were immigrants. Foreign-born miners working for low wages accounted for 66% of the total workforce. Miners and brick manufacturers made much less money than did TPMM employees, and although the company never implemented a formal segregation policy, all the different nationalities living in sections of the town by ethnicity. Segregation was also obvious in the schools. Although stores were not segregated initially, the opera house had designated sections by race and

¹¹ Cynthia Skove Nevels, *Lynching to Belong: Claiming Whiteness through Racial Violence* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), 9-12.

nationality. In addition, miners and TPMM employees were separated by a language barrier, because many immigrants did not speak English and did not trust clerks at the stores. As a result, the TPMM hired more Black and foreign workers and even built a general store in 1904, with Italian, Spanish, and Polish speaking clerks. Religion was also another major feature of segregation. Catholicism was prevalent among miners and their families, except among for African Americans, who had their own segregated Protestant church. The rest of population, especially white Americans, were nearly all Protestants.

Not surprisingly, the local press was biased and tended to discuss the activities of American-born whites. The other races and ethnic groups received less attention and little about their community was mentioned. A rather important difference between miners and TPMM company employees was their access to certain places and recreational facilities, such as swimming in Little Lake. Fishing and hunting or going to the opera was extended to everyone, but the R. D. Hunter Fishing & Boating Club next to Big Lake was reserved for the top corporate officers, executives, and others in the higher stratum of the racial and socio-economic hierarchy. Such disparities and stratification had always been evident in Thurber. This was a common pattern in mining towns and other large scale business enterprises during this era.¹² Not only were Blacks and foreign born workers kept from entering recreational facilities or hanging around the premises, but they were also

¹² Richard V. Francaviglia, *Hard Places: Reading the Landscape of America's Historic Mining Districts* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991), 99.

forbidden from participating in certain activities.¹³ As a result, miners had a very negative perception of the company. The barbed-wire fence around the perimeter of the town of Thurber symbolized the exploitative control the TPMM had on the lower classes.

Moreover, stores in Thurber often charged high prices for goods. Despite the invitation of Colonel Robert D. Hunter (the right-hand man of company manager William K. Gordon) for workers to purchase goods in other towns, workers were well aware that not many towns had stores offering competitive prices, and the fence was a deterrent to leave Thurber or allow people to enter the town. Hence, the company set whatever prices it wanted in its company stores. Nevertheless, the fence did not discourage some peddlers and farmers from entering Thurber to sell their goods. Contrary to what many people assumed—they believed that guards created a blacklist of workers who bought items from peddlers—the company could not fire workers on the basis that they had purchased goods from merchants who were not from Thurber. The actual reason the company erected the fence was to keep an outbreak of smallpox from spreading throughout Thurber, its railroad junction and mine camp. But this attempt to place Thurber under quarantine was misunderstood by the people, who already mistrusted the company, even to the extent that a woman accused Colonel Hunter of building the fence to prevent peddlers from reaching Thurber during a strike in 1903, causing further friction between miners and company executives and managers.

¹³ Gene Rhea Tucker, "Oysters, Macaroni, and Beer: The Texas Pacific Mercantile and Manufacturing Company of Thurber, Texas" (MA thesis, Tarleton State University, 2006), 96-101.

Beginning in 1890, businesses of various kinds, including saloons and peddlers' shops, started springing up around the junction of the Texas and Pacific Railway, which connected Thurber and Mingus. The junction soon developed into a small commercial area known as "the Y," allowing peddlers and wagons into Thurber. This was a trend that the company did not appreciate, since profits at the company stores decreased and they had to lower their prices. The Thurber railroad junction continued to prosper throughout the years with hotels, bars and a drug store. The benefits were enjoyed by the Italian families Corona, Ronchetti, Mazzano and Sealfi, who owned grocery stores and saloons. Although several company employees wanted to open stores at "the Y," only one of them succeeded (Robert Loflin and his Loflin Mercantile Company).

As it previously mentioned, the miners and the company were in constant disagreements, which resulted in the 1903 strike, with miners voicing their anger over the company's policies, especially regarding salaries, working conditions, and adequate rewards for coal nuggets they found. Although the company profited on any nuggets, regardless their size, pitmen in the mines were paid only for the largest ones. In addition, workers protested the high prices the company stores charged, pointing out the better deals offered by peddlers' shops, which allowed them to maintain a standard of living they would not have been able to afford otherwise. Some of these claims about the company's unfair policies were valid, as was evident in letters between William Gordon (vice president of TPMM) and Edgar L. Marston (president) in New York exchanged. In one letter, Gordon mentioned to Edgar the fixed percentage of profits he took advantage

of, which compelled workers to smuggle goods outside the fence, in spite of their fear of being fired or even worse, being forcibly expelled from Thurber.¹⁴

Another controversy highlighted during the 1903 strike was the scrip system of payment to the company stores. According to the miners, the scrip system often pushed them into chronic and spiraling debt, at high interest rates, owed to the company stores. Payday occurred only once a month, forcing miners to obtain scrips based on borrowing from their future earnings, which resulted in lower net earnings because of the deductions. This situation changed only after 1903, when Thurber was unionized. Workers' debt to company stores was made even worse by the lack of a bank. A bank was finally established in 1907. Prior to that, TPMM administered employees' savings.¹⁵

Unionization of Thurber

The unionization of Thurber occurred in September 1903 when TPMM president Edgar L. Marston officially approved unions. The fence was removed and miners received better wages. Machinists, ice plant workers, retail clerks blacksmiths, bartenders other workers joined the unions.¹⁶ Moreover, the mercantile company and the coal company separated and more autonomous from one another, allowing the people of Thurber to purchase goods wherever they wished and without apprehension. Paydays

¹⁴ Tucker, Oysters, Macaroni and Beer, 103-108.

¹⁵ Tucker, Oysters, Macaroni and Beer, 111-112.

¹⁶ James C. Maroney, "The Unionization of Thurber, 1903," *Red River Valley Historical Review* 4 (Spring 1979): 30.

occurred twice a month instead of monthly, increasing workers' wages considerably and giving them a major incentive to work more. This resulted in more coal extraction by workers. As a result, Thurber and nearby Grant Town boomed economically and attracted more workers and more customers from surrounding towns. There were two main businesses that competed with the company's general store: Joe Abraham's and Angelo Taramino's (a grocery store with dried goods and a saloon).¹⁷

By 1908, businesses owned by Italians and Lebanese multiplied to include meat markets, drugstores, restaurants, saloons, garages, a town mill, dry goods shops, and general stores, all of which provided cheaper merchandise and more convenient services than those offered by TPMM. All the businesses in "the Y" area thrived, unaffected by the company's attempts to counter their competitive prices. A cooperative store established by miners near "the Y" accepted both scrips and cash as forms of payment.¹⁸ In addition, miners' and other workers' negative perceptions of the company gradually changed after unionization, as they no longer encountered barriers preventing them from purchasing goods outside of Thurber. Workers' complaints decreased as their prosperity rose. They could obtain all they needed from a variety of new local stores. Ironically and fortunately, the company also benefitted because more money was circulating in Thurber. Miners' rights improved even more in 1910 when the union gained them the right to

¹⁷ Michael Q. Hooks, "Thurber: A Unique Texas Community," *Panhandle-Plains Historical Review* 56 (1983): 7.

¹⁸ Tucker, *Oysters, Macaroni and Beer*, 114-119.

strike without being evicted from the town, while also receiving funds and benefits from the union, the mercantile company and TPMM, a privilege that fellow miners in other towns of that time could not hope for or imagine.¹⁹

It seemed that workers and the company alike were benefitting from the unionization of Thurber. But as Thurber worker Joe Marchioni pointed out, wages increased but so did prices. This problem was dramatized in one of Edgar Marston's letters in 1917, in which the company president asserted that higher wages for workers had to be offset by higher market rates. In order to avoid economic fallout or worse—bankruptcy—the company responded to the demands of a new market, to the detriment of workers, by adapting to a new scenario in which the mine was running out of coal, and oil was replacing it. This jeopardized the already tense and unpredictable relationship between the company and the workers. President Marston focused all his resources into oil exploration. Otherwise, the company would have soon gone bankrupt. The search for oil began in 1915, and it was eventually discovered northwest of the coal town as a result of persistent efforts by William Gordon and his team of workers. Oil proved to be the company's salvation and means to counter the strike and cope with the workers' demands. The company continued the extraction of coal while also drilling for oil, which produced remarkable results in 1917. Marston was able to fund the drilling operations by

¹⁹ John N. Cravens, "Two Miners and Their Families in the Thurber-Strawn Coal Mines, 1905-1918," *West Texas Historical Association Yearbook* 45 (1969): 120.

taking profits from company stores and generating an equal surplus, resulting in \$160,000 of cash infusions. Such operations proved to be a resounding success. Oil production soon reached thousands of barrels a day, generating millions of dollars for the company. Soon after the oil discovery, the name Texas Pacific Oil Company replaced the old Texas Pacific Coal Company, and the town of Thurber started to be filled with officials from New York, who resided permanently in what later became known as the New York Hill. New houses were built, electricity ran throughout the entire town, a water filtration plant was established, running water became available in all dwellings, new hotels were constructed, and a golf course was made available for white collar workers.

From Coal to Oil Town

In 1910, the census in Thurber recorded 3,805 inhabitants, reflecting growth of about 50 percent in only a decade.²⁰ Thurber had become an oil town, and its expansion had produced a dramatic increase in population. People commuted in their cars to Thurber from Ranger and other nearby towns, which required the company to build new garages, hardware stores and a gas station. The demand for coal had fallen considerably, because now locomotives ran on diesel fuel. Miners still wanted high wages, but the company ignored their demands, and the president even cut wages and other costs while concentrating on oil drilling and production. An initial attempt to cut costs and increase profits was carried out by Marston and Gordon, who opted for the construction of two

²⁰ Marilyn D. Rhinehart, *A Way of Work and a Way of Life: Coal Mining in Thurber, Texas, 1888-1926* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1992), 93.

silos that would have contained feed grain for cattle. But the project failed miserably after only one silo was filled up after two years of work and expenditures. Another similar attempt occurred in 1918, when Marston suspended using delivering wagons throughout TPMM, as well as shutting down the company newspaper. Stores closed one after another, including the well-known general store on Polander Hill.²¹ Although miners tried to bargain for reasonable wages with company, their requests were denied and the mines were closed in 1921, an event known as a “strike/lockout,” since the company stopped paying union wages.

Miners and their families were soon evicted because they could not pay rent and bills. They flocked into “Tent City” (an encampment near Grant Town) subsidized by the miners’ union, as they tried to find new employment. The only remaining business that kept Thurber alive along with oil revenue was the brick factory. But the glory of the town did not last long. By 1921 prices were reduced by 50 percent because of the lack of workers. The few people who inhabited Thurber were Blacks and some Mexicans, who paid for food, clothing and mining tools with scrips. They did receive special benefits from the TPMM and the mercantile company because of their loyalty during a declining period. For the first time after forty years from its establishment in 1886, the mercantile company failed to produce a sufficient net income, and TPMM struggled to make good

²¹ Cantey H. Ferchill, “A Survey and Comparison of the Cultural Landscapes of Two Early-Twentieth Century Coal-Mining Communities Thurber, Texas and Buxton, Iowa” (MA thesis, University of Texas at Arlington, 1995), 93.

profits. With the advent of the Great Depression in the 1930s, Thurber faced inevitable and definitive closure, which came in 1934. Marston and Gordon had resigned and were replaced by John Roby Penn and Ed Britton after 1921, while the population dropped from thousands to a few hundred.

Many houses were empty, and if they were not purchased by farmers or other buyers for very low prices, they were torn down and their lumber was sold. Most of the stores made far less money than in the past, and some of them were forced to close. Stables slowly ceased activity, since people no longer used horses but instead traveled in cars and trucks. The dairy closed because products were transported into Thurber via train. The service station was renovated and upgraded, and the print shop continued to print ledgers and forms for businesses in and outside Thurber. The ice plant continued to supply the Texas and Pacific Railway, Mingus and Thurber with ice, for many years. The few remaining miners left the mine after 1927 and started to work as employees of the brick company (clay was taken from the Erath district),²² gardeners, housekeepers, porters or janitors. In 1926, the TPMM attempted to consolidate its financial sheet, investing in an electric cotton gin, but the factory did not produce the results the company expected. The only positive result of the expenditure was the construction of new roads. Besides, Lubbock and adjacent counties had become prominent in the production of cotton, while the TPMM gin lasted only a decade before being shut down.

²² Ruth Allen, *Chapters in the History of Organized Labor in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas, 1941), 99.

The Thurber Opera was affected by the crisis because it could not compete with the movies featured regularly at the Presbyterian church. The Opera was used for schooling, dances and theatre plays. The newspaper was partially revived in 1930 with the new *Thurber Tiny Journal*, a publication that covered local news as well as advertising TPMM goods, groceries, dry goods, and hardware. The oil refinery fell into decline, crippled by a nationwide drop in oil prices. The Thurber Brick Company suffered because of plummeting demand for brick as a result of the Great Depression beginning in 1929. In 1930 the company recorded nearly one million dollars in financial losses, and operations were disrupted when a fire badly damaged the general office, consuming the building very quickly, destroying official papers and credit payment records, and affecting some of the surrounding buildings. The brick company finally closed in 1931.

Although the TPMM and The Texas Pacific Coal and Oil Company were able to collect about \$100,000 in insurance funds, their management was eventually passed on to Clarence C. Dean, R. W. Wingo and Clarence Wightman, who founded the Texas Pacific Fidelity and Surety Company. All the stock was sold to the Texas Pacific Coal and Oil Company of Delaware, and the newly founded company insured the entire town of Thurber (including a large portion of the oil company property). By holding re-insurance policies with other companies in New York and London, debt from the fire damage reimbursement to the Texas Pacific Coal and Oil Company was reduced to only \$25,000. This allowed the Texas Pacific Fidelity and Surety Company to earn a surplus, pay for the debt and avoid any loss. Nevertheless, the insurance firm did not last long in Thurber,

and it was dissolved after a few months of inactivity, especially because the fire was considered an accident, and nobody thought to investigate for possible involvement by the company.

The mercantile company and TPMM briefly continued operations, selling equipment to the town of Gordon, while the Texas Pacific Coal and Oil Company did its best to recover from losses incurred before 1930. By 1931, only a few hundred families still lived in Thurber (especially after the brick plant was shut down), living rent free and subsidized by TPMM. Many of these families remained indebted to the company, even after finding new employment, some of them owing thousands of dollars. Most such debts were never repaid, and the kindness and generosity shown by TPMM on occasion (such as baskets of food donated to families at Christmas) was just ignored. Some people even complained that after getting injured while working in the brick factory, they never received any kind of reimbursement from the company.²³

Keeping Thurber alive with very few people became increasingly unsustainable, since the costs of maintenance for electricity and utilities outweighed the net profits. As Texas was gripped by the Great Depression during the early 1930s, the Texas Pacific Coal and Oil Company took drastic measures to avoid bankruptcy. Edgar J. Marston resigned as president of the company because of health problems, and in 1933 the board of directors resorted to hiring experts from the New Yorker firm Crandall and Osmond to seek advice on how to proceed and save as much money as possible. Crandall and

²³ Dan K. Utley, "The Children of Thurber," *Sound Historian* 1 (2001): 44.

Osmond suggested selling all the assets that were not focused on oil production, as well as suspending the activities of the Texas Pacific Coal and Oil Company, the brick company, TPMM, the construction company, and the Tank Line Company.²⁴

All of Thurber's personnel were relocated to offices of the Fort Worth National Bank. All remaining merchandise was offered for sale at deep discounts. As soon as the flyers were distributed by the print shop, crowds of people flocked to Thurber, anxious to secure bargains. Some took advantage of the chaos by stealing all kinds of merchandise, even walking out of stores wearing new clothes. Nonetheless, the clearance operation proved successful and produced satisfying gains. As soon as merchandise was entirely sold, TPMM ceased its activities in Thurber. The remaining employees of the oil and mercantile company were transferred to other towns, while the entire infrastructure was dispersed. Homes were either sold, transported to nearby towns, or demolished. The electric cotton gin, the motion picture operation in the church, the stock and shelves from the grocery store, gas and water pipes, and even toilets were sold. Buildings including the Masonic Lodge, the elementary school and high school, and the post office were closed permanently, while the superintendent's and assistant superintendent's homes were abandoned. Thurber became a ghost town.

²⁴ Dwight F. Henderson, "The Texas Coal Mining Industry," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 68 (October 1964): 210.

Thurber Nowadays

Still today, the empty dry goods store remains standing in the square. The drug store served as a filling station for a while and was eventually transformed into the “Smokestack Restaurant” before a fire destroyed it in 1992. The restaurant relocated to the old Texas and Pacific Mercantile building and is open for business. But all the rest of Thurber, a place once recognized as one of the most dynamic towns in Texas, is now a collection of uninhabited buildings, forsaken and in ruins.²⁵

Italians clearly played a major role in Thurber’s success. Italians arrived in Texas from different parts of the world, either Italy, the United States, or Latin America, and settled in Thurber with a common values and priorities: family, community, work ethic and traditions. All these traditions helped them to stay together and overcome every challenge and crisis. At first, they were no more than miners or other humble workers, treated with suspicion because of their skin color, religion, habits and social status. But their patience and perseverance reaped rewards, lifting them from their reputations as dangerous illegal aliens into real Texans. The acquisition of property certainly played in their favor, but what really made the greatest difference was their solidarity with fellow workers and their involvement in trade unions, particularly the United Mine Workers of America (UMW), which allowed them to fight for equal rights, regardless of race or gender, and to be seen as strong and capable leaders with all the necessary traits and qualities to provide leadership and serve the public.

²⁵ Tucker, *Oysters, Macaroni and Beer*, 120-145.

Italians' many accomplishments not only helped change the attitudes of Anglo-Americans who had long considered Italians unworthy of citizenship, but also helped change the embedded discriminatory practices that Americans had imposed on people of color and non-Anglo ethnicities since the early days of slavery. Such progress could be achieved by expressing ideals of equality, but the most serious progress nearly always required a group of brave people to push forward ideals and challenge the status quo in the face of adversity. Racism and discrimination could not be completely eliminated, but during the twentieth century racist attitudes and policies ran up against growing opposition that encouraged Italians and other oppressed groups to engage in self-improvement, public action (including labor unions) and leadership to advance the hope and substance of assimilation: genuine respect, better education and economic success, religious tolerance, and social harmony.

To quote historian Alan Kraut: "The fierce loyalty of Italians to family, the yearning of East European Jews for scholarship and intellectual inquiry, the Asian [...] emphasis on family and personal honor – all of these cultural imperatives have been woven into the American consciousness."²⁶

²⁶ Alan M. Kraut, *The Huddled Masses*, 181.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

In comparing Italians who came to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to those who arrive today, the most noticeable difference is not only regarding quantity but also overall preparedness, especially the level of education. American employers more than a century ago encouraged immigration because of the need for low cost manpower, but this trend has changed because of industrialization, globalization and the growth of technology, which has transformed the world into a technology driven universe in which tasks once performed by labor are now performed by a machine. As a result, today an Italian with a college degree in search of graduate education or a corporate position is more likely to come to the United States than an unskilled laborer looking for a low paying job. On the one hand, pursuing high-level education is less expensive than it was one century ago, but on the other hand, finding a job in the current world has become harder and more competitive, pushing lower educated people to the margins of society and the job market.

Regardless, so-called Italianness among Italian-Americans has virtually disappeared in the United States. It has almost completely lost its distinctive features because nearly all Italians have become Americanized, or at least they are compatible to the standards and values of American culture. The descendants of those who arrived in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have proliferated,

fully assimilating into American society, leaving to their children their family name, perhaps the only characteristic Italian feature. Italianness was in fact lost gradually, one generation after another, replacing the old national identity with the one of the United States. Language was not passed on to successive generations. In fact, the earlier Italian immigrants rarely mastered standard Italian themselves and could only hand down to their children local dialects of their hometowns. Handing down the local dialects only contributed to further fragmentation of members of the Italian community, who were able to communicate only by speaking English. The first settlers could be deemed “Italians” since they did not speak English, were born outside of the United States and had an Italian cultural heritage. Second generation and in some cases third generation Italians could be labelled as Italian-American, because of their strong attachment to the first generation on the one hand and the full embrace of American culture on the other. Then the fourth generation inherited an Italian family name but strongly identified themselves as Americans rather than as Italians.

Being Italian in the United States a century or so ago usually meant being stereotyped as unskilled, non-white and unworthy of respect, much like many persons of color and Muslims today who are stigmatized in American society. Nevertheless, one of the reasons that influenced American society to accept Italians more willingly was the rate of repatriation, which decreased in time; the so-called Italian “birds of passage” diminished in favor of those who decided to settle permanently in the U.S. acquiring citizenship and becoming fully American. Today Italian-Americans are perfectly “disguised” as white Americans, although many among them bear witness to the past and

still pass on to new generations traditions of a country of great workers with a and strong sense of adaptation and courageous travelers.

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