

Sicilians Helped Build Birmingham and Other Southern Cities

ITALIANS IN THE DEEP SOUTH

At the turn of century, thousands of Sicilians emigrated to America and settled in the Deep South to work in coal mines and steel mills, and to farm the land. Within decades of their arrival, however, they moved into the middle class as prosperous owners of thriving businesses. Here is their story.

By FRANK JOSEPH FEDE

FEW people realize that Italian immigrants settled in the South 100 years ago and had the same encompassing impact on American society as the Italians in the cities of the Northeast. Birmingham, Alabama, for example, benefitted enormously from the manpower and entrepreneurship of thousands of Italian immigrants, largely from Sicily, who arrived there in the late 19th century. By 1930, about 22,500 Italians lived in Birmingham and its suburbs, making them the largest immigrant group in the city.

Birmingham is unique among southern cities because it has no pre-Civil War history. It was established in 1871 when coal, iron ore and limestone were discovered in its hills. These resources are the raw materials for pig iron and steel — the building blocks of the newly united American nation.

The discovery of these rich deposits made Birmingham a mecca for Italians and other southern European immigrants. The city's industrialists desperately needed laborers for their coal mines and steel mills and widely advertised some 5,000 unskilled jobs.

The advertisements were aimed at European immigrants because the industrialists wanted to counterbalance an abundance of local black laborers whom they feared would compete with

L'ITALO-AMERICANO LABOR BUREAU ?

For the past ten years there has been a large immigration of Italians into the State of Louisiana. In this decade there disembarked at the part of New Orleans, 4500 ITALIANS. These emigrants are mostly STRONG, HEALTHY, ABLE BODIED INDUSTRIOUS MEN. AS LABORERS THEY HAVE NO SUPERIORS. Attracted by our temperate climate and the fertile resource of our State, they have come here in search of homes. CAPITALISTS, PLANTATION OWNERS, RAILROAD CONTRACTORS, AND, IN FACT, ALL PERSONS WHO WORK LABORERS IN GREAT NUMBERS, FIND THE ITALIAN IMMIGRANT A VALUABLE ACQUISITION, BECAUSE OF HIS WILLINGNESS AND HIS PECULIAR ADAPTABILITY TO HARD WORK. A WELL EQUIPPED AND RELIABLE LABOR BUREAU IS WANTED

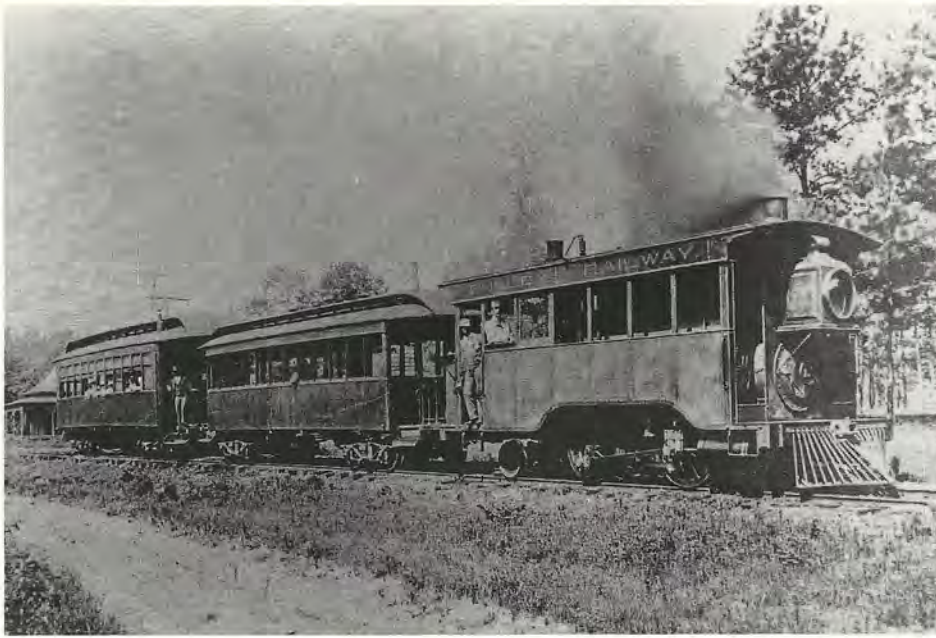
This want L'ITALO AMERICANO PURPOSES TO SUPPLY.

We will furnish Laborers, Proprietors, and employment to Laborers. One position is one which eminently qualifies us for the office we have elected to fill. Our circulation is not confined within narrow limits. It embraces nearly the entire United States, and our acquaintances with the Rail Road Authorities, Plantation Owners and Contractors gives us special facilities for serving satisfactorily and justly both employer and laborer.

L'ITALO AMERICANO LABOR BUREAU

**CORRESPONDENCE SOLICITED.
ADDRESS:**

**L'ITALO AMERICANO,
23 POYDRAS STREET,
NEW ORLEANS, LA.**



(Opposite page) *New Orleans was the port of entry for those Italians who settled in the Deep South. In this notice in the New Orleans L'Italo Americano of March 21, 1891, the newspaper announces that it has formed a labor bureau to supply Italian workers to railroads, plantations and all other enterprises in need of able-bodied, industrious men. (Left) The Ensley Railway. On this line the many Italian immigrants who lived in the Birmingham suburb of Ensley rode to their jobs in downtown Birmingham. (Below) Birmingham in the 1920s. Italians were the city's largest ethnic group in the early decades of this century.*

whites for ascendancy. The fact that the foreigners could not speak English was no obstacle since the tasks were simple, though backbreaking and dangerous, especially in the coal mines. They also believed that foreign workers would reduce the likelihood of strikes and demands for labor improvements because the language barrier prevented them from complaining — at least in the early years of their arrival in America.

Most of the Italians who responded to these advertisements came from the southwestern Sicilian villages of Bisacquino, Sutera and Campofranco. The rest came from eastern Sicilian provinces and from Naples and Calabria. Poverty had plagued Italian peasants for hundreds of years, but during the first decade of the 20th century, a series of natural disasters in southern Italy had made their lives unbearable. In 1905, several earthquakes struck Basilicata and Calabria; in 1906, Mount Vesuvius near Naples erupted. Two years later, a major earthquake and tidal wave struck Messina, destroying the city and more than 300 nearby villages. And finally, in 1910, Mount Etna near Catania erupted, wreaking disaster on the entire countryside of eastern Sicily. It was time to leave.

The voyage to America was a nightmare, according to Sebastiano Fede, the author's father, who left Italy in 1906. "The trip took seventeen days and nights. Many people crowded together and some became seasick in the close quarters. We ate bread and cheese and tried to cheer each other up with stories about home and the new land that we would be entering."



The land that they found was rich, but the working conditions were little better than the ones they had left behind. In his study of the early Sicilian immigrants to Birmingham, Professor Jeff Norrell reports that at least half of them started out as coal miners or steel workers. They were the lowest paid of all workers, earning less than black miners who had been former slaves. In 1910, the annual income of the Italian coal miners averaged \$286, or about a dollar for each day of work. Scottish immigrants received \$665 a year; native whites earned \$534; and blacks, \$461. Norrell attributes part of the reason for the salary disparities to seniority in the

mines, but discrimination also figured prominently in many cases.

The Italian immigrants settled in the Birmingham suburbs of Ensley, Bessemer and Thomas, which became known as "Little Italies," but the immigrants did not plan to stay there. Most of them who came to work in Birmingham's mines and mills had arrived with a goal: to save enough money to return home and start a new life. Meanwhile, like Italian immigrants everywhere, they sent money to their families in Italy. By 1914, it has been estimated, Italian immigrants in North and South America had returned almost a billion dollars to their relatives in Italy.



Some of the Italian immigrants in Birmingham did go back to their villages where they married their childhood sweethearts or found other brides, but inevitably they returned to America — with a big difference. The second time they arrived in Birmingham, they broke their ties with the mines and steel mills. They used their savings to buy homes, open grocery stores, and launch other commercial ventures, including real estate, which was especially dear to them since land had been so scarce in Italy.

In his aforementioned study of the Italians in Birmingham, Norrell found that most Italians left the coal mines and steel mills after several years of hard work and frugal savings. By the early 1930s, they owned more than 300 retail grocery stores and had moved into white-collar jobs at a surprisingly high rate. “An estimated 67 percent of Birmingham’s Italians started as laborers and ended their careers in middle-class occupations,” Norrell writes. He also found that the Italians in Birmingham were twice as likely to reach the middle class as were their counterparts in Boston and almost three times more likely than Cleveland’s Italians.

Part of the reason for their phenomenal success was that the southern Italians had arrived on these shores with some entrepreneurial expertise. Many had been fishermen or artisans who had been self-employed in Italy. In Birmingham, they found a boom town with a rapidly expanding local economy. In effect, the early Italian settlers found an entrepreneurial vacuum and quickly filled it.

Italians often opened their businesses in black neighborhoods because the white population of Birmingham tended to shun immigrant stores. The city’s Italians and blacks soon developed a mutually beneficial relationship: the

store owners gave their customers credit and provided needed services to the black community. The black community was loyal to the Italians and helped their businesses prosper.

But if these Italians found opportunity in Birmingham, they also found prejudice. Southern writers often questioned the wisdom of allowing so many Italian immigrants to settle in their part of the country. “The South should most carefully consider this problem of immigration,” wrote one such critic in the July 1905 issue of *The South Atlantic Quarterly*. “To the ordinary American, the Italian is a dirty, undersized individual who engages in degrading labor shunned by Americans, and who is often a member of the Mafia, and as

such, likely at any moment to draw a knife and stab you in the back.”

In the 1920s, the Alabama congressman John Burnett warned Americans to avoid bringing in more Mediterranean immigrants, because they were an “undesirable, dirty class.” He proposed that the federal government establish educational requirements that would exclude “undesirable newcomers” from America, and he urged restrictions against such “non-whites as Lebanese, Greeks and Italians.”

Instances of mistreatment of Italians in the South and mob violence against them were commonplace. One of the worst incidents was the infamous lynching of 11 Italians in New Orleans on March 14, 1891. Similar incidents oc-



(Above) A 1920 view of the town owned by the Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company in Birmingham, where many Italian workers lived. (Left) The author (right) presenting a draft of his history of the Italians in the Deep South to Birmingham’s mayor, Richard Arlington. (Right) Sicilian immigrant Sam Raine (far left) in his open-air market in 1913. Raine arrived in Birmingham in 1901 and 20 years later retired as a millionaire.

curred in Arkansas, Mississippi, Florida and the Carolinas.

Nevertheless, many Italian immigrants overcame the barriers of prejudice and began rising to wealth and power in Birmingham. One of the first was Domenico Lusco from Cefalù, Sicily, who arrived in Birmingham in 1889 when he was 23 years old. He began as a coal miner, but soon moved into farming and began selling his produce to the city's hotels and hospitals. Later, he founded a cooperative association of Italian truck farmers that allowed the Italians to get fertilizer and seed at cost and gave them a competitive edge in marketing their produce.

An even greater success story belongs to the Bruno family. Vincent and Theresa Bruno had been sharecroppers in Bisacquino when they decided to emigrate to Birmingham in 1910. Vincent worked in the steel mills where he earned \$1.25 for a 12-hour day, pouring coal into a sweltering furnace. On the side, he raised and sold vegetables to support his wife and eight children. In 1932, during the Great Depression, Vincent's eldest son, Joseph, took his family's savings of \$600 and invested them in a grocery store business. Today the family owns a \$2.5 billion-a-year grocery and drug store empire that employs 26,000 people.

And then there's the story of Mother Angelica, an Italian American nun from Canton, Ohio, who arrived in Birmingham in 1961 and founded a monastery

ITALIAN AMERICANS IN THE DEEP SOUTH	
(From the 1990 U.S. Census Report)	
STATE	ITALIAN AMERICANS
Florida	787,700
Louisiana	197,800
Georgia	112,500
South Carolina	56,500
Alabama	53,300
Mississippi	36,500
Arkansas	30,350
Estimated total number of Italian Americans in the Deep South today	1,274,650

in a Birmingham suburb that was only 2 percent Roman Catholic and a hub of Ku Klux Klan activities. Eventually, Mother Angelica also founded the first Roman Catholic satellite television network that reaches some 40 million people in the U.S. and abroad every day.

Perhaps the most spectacular success story belongs to the Raine family. Sam Raine arrived in Birmingham as a penniless 14-year-old from Sicily in 1901. He worked in a factory for several years, began selling fruits and vegetables and invested his savings in real estate. In 1922, he sold his land for a hefty

profit to a railroad company and, at the age of 36, retired with a fortune and took a trip around the world.

The successful assimilation of the Raines, the Brunos, and countless other Italian families into Birmingham's society was repeated in many cities of the Deep South during the first three decades of this century. Today, their descendants still live in Florida, Louisiana, Georgia, the Carolinas, and other states of the Deep South.

The history of the Italians in the Deep South is a profoundly moving saga of a people who for centuries had been denied opportunities in their own land. Poor and largely illiterate, they crossed an ocean to a new land where they found wealth and respect. To the land that gave them so much, they offered their Italian values of hard work, frugality, dedication to the family and deep religious beliefs — values that helped make them and their descendants extraordinarily successful American citizens. □

Frank Joseph Fede was the son of Italian immigrants to Birmingham. This article is excerpted from his original book, *Italians in the Deep South: Their Impact on Birmingham and the American Heritage* - hardcover 400 pages.

Victor P. Musso

