

The Italians from Southern Italy

The village of Montazzoli is nestled in the mountains of southern Italy in the Province of Abruzzi. To understand why my parents, relatives, and friends emigrated to America, one must have a knowledge of what life was like in this area.

Family solidarity is the heart of the Italian ethnic and can be traced to the culture of southern Italy.

The majority of Italians who emigrated to America at the beginning of the last century were poor, illiterate peasants from the southern part of Italy. Although their country had for centuries endured bloodless conquests by the Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Spanish, Normans, and French, the Italian people preserved their values, attitudes, and behaviors. As a result, a homegrown social order developed with the family as the central unit. With foreign domination, the Italian peasant found social order in the power of the family.

In 1861, Italy became a unified country. Since cultural identity is a process continuing over generations, it was not easy for the peasants who defined themselves by their association with family and neighbors to call themselves Italians. Barren hills and mountainous terrain made it impossible for the peasant in a mountain village to know his fellow countrymen. What came first in his world was family and village.

When they arrived in this country from the various regions of Italy (Abruzzi, Calabria, Neapolitan), their shared common identification was with the southern Italian.

The educated northern Italians, who had arrived in this country earlier, had assimilated into the middle class and had no close relationships with their countrymen.

It is not difficult to understand the cold attitudes of Americans, and the northern Italian as well, when the millions of immigrants from the south arrived in this country. Because of these hostile attitudes, the newly arrived immigrants reinforced the village customs and solid relationships they had left behind in Italy. They sought out their "paisai" (friends) who had come ahead of them and soon re-established communities similar to those they left behind.

Although assimilation into American society over the years has come through education and socioeconomic progress, traditional bonds of neighborhood and family continue to determine, in large measure, the accomplishments of Italian-Americans.