

Sunshine & Struggle, The Italian Experience in Los Angeles, 1827 -1927

Darrell Fusaro (December 13, 2009)



Some Italian settlers got here nearly a century before those who came to America through Ellis Island. Because of the cultural similarities between the Italians and the Mexicans, they did not face the discrimination that characterized their experience elsewhere in the country.

SAN PEDRO, CA. When Americans think of their Italian heritage, they think, New York, Chicago, New Jersey, but Los Angeles? So many may be very surprised, and if Italian very proud, to discover the origin of present day Los Angeles owes quite a bit to it's Italian settlers. It may even be more surprising to learn that these settlers came to reside in this area nearly a century before those who came to America by way of Ellis Island.

Olvera Street, which runs through a section of downtown Los Angeles that by all appearances seems



to be influenced mainly by Mexican settlers, was actually smack in the middle of what was known as Los Angeles's Little Italy. Matter of fact it was originally, Calle de la Vignas, "Wine Street." The early Italian settlers in this area can be dated back to 1827, that is twenty-three years before California achieved statehood. They were quite successful agriculturalists, and by 1869, Los Angeles had established itself as California's wine center, producing four million gallons of wine annually. Five Italian owned wineries were operating in the neighborhood.

The success of the Italians in Los Angeles early in Los Angeles's history was mainly due to the fact that because of the cultural similarities between the Italians and the Mexicans they did not face the discrimination that characterized their experience elsewhere in the country. For example, an Italian settler, Frank Sabichi was President of the Los Angeles City Council in 1874.

Much more of this "Largely Unknown History of Italians in Los Angeles" can be discovered at the current exhibition titled, "Sunshine & Struggle, The Italian Experience In Los Angeles, 1827 - 1927." It is located at 437 West 6th Street, San Pedro, CA 90731. A storefront has been transformed to reflect the early Italian experience in the area. Discovering the little known facts that are jam packed throughout the exhibit is as fascinating as it is surprising. Mariann Gatto, curator of this exhibition and author of, "Los Angele's Little Italy," has put together the perfect amount of facts and trivia to satisfy and enlighten the curious.

The exhibition runs from now until December 31st and more information on this show as well as the history of Italians in Los Angeles can be found at www.ItalianHall.org [2].

If interested in Ms. Gatto's book, "Los Angeles's Little Italy," it is available at area bookstores, independent retailers, and online retailers, or through Arcadia Publishing at www.arcadiapublishing.com [3]

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