

A Long Journey in the Italian American Story

Suma Kurien and Gianfranco Norelli (December 10, 2014)



"By understanding how Italians became Americans and what happened to them along the way, we have learned a great deal also about America". "Finding the Mother Lode" documents the experience of Italian immigrants in California, which was markedly different from that of their compatriots elsewhere in the United States. Screening: Preview of FINDING THE MOTHER LODGE at Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò December 15, 2014 - (06:00 PM) - Followed by a Q&A with director/producers Gianfranco Norelli and Suma Kurien. Moderated by Martino Marazzi, University of Milan / Tiro a Segno Visiting Professor, NYU



Over the last seven years, we have made two films about the Italian immigrants' experience in the United States: "[Pane Amaro](#) [2](Bitter Bread)" on the Italian immigrants in the East Coast and "[Finding the Mother Lode](#) [2]" about the Italian immigrants to California.

We decided to make the first film when during our travels in Italy we realized that Italians were treating the immigrants in their land much as their own ancestors had themselves been treated as they emigrated in large numbers to foreign lands.

Although most Italian families have had at least one relative who had emigrated, many Italians had either not known the realities of that experience or had forgotten them. The prevalent story remained that of their "Zio d'America" ("the American uncle") who had easily found riches, when the reality was one of working hard and in the face of blatant and sometimes violent discrimination.

So, the first film we made, "Pane Amaro" was in Italian, for [RAI](#) [3], the Italian National Television.

We later came to realize that many present-day Italian Americans too, remembered very little of the experience of their immigrant ancestors and we felt that this history still has relevance for the present. The English language version of "Pane Amaro" called "Bitter Bread", which we made in 2009, has been shown widely in the United States and is now part of many courses in American universities and high schools.

Then, as we showed "Pane Amaro (Bitter Bread)" in California we discovered that the California experience of the Italian immigrants had been a remarkably different one, of rapid economic and social mobility and acceptance. We wanted to understand what had made possible this very different experience.

Our second film "Finding the Mother Lode", completed in 2013, was the result of that exploration.

The Italian immigrants in California were able to a remarkable degree to continue to exercise the skills and knowledge they brought with them.

Farmers could continue to farm, fishermen to fish and winemakers to make wine, and under conditions that supported their success at these trades. Their skills were needed in a newly formed California and many flourished in a social and economic climate that was open to them. A very different story from what happened on the East Coast.

Our learning process

As new Americans, making our two films has been a way for us to learn about our new country.

By understanding how Italians became Americans and what happened to them along the way, we have learned a great deal also about America.

We are both immigrants, from different parts of the world - India and Italy - but with very similar immigrant experiences, as relatively "privileged" immigrants welcomed in America for our skills. But living in New York City we don't have to look far to see that this is not so for the vast majority of immigrants around us today. Italian American history provides a useful way to understand the immigrant journey because it is in many ways a completed journey.

It is one in which we can see the ending and see how it turned out. Yet it is also a recent enough journey that there are still people who remember what it was like to go through that experience. Over these seven years of exploring the Italian American experience, here's what we have learned.

An essentially American story

The Italian American story is also in essence the American story. It is the story of how immigrants come and make a place for themselves in this land of immigrants, sometimes relatively easily, but



far too often with great difficulty, and against many odds.

As we have heard over and over from members of our audience who are not Italian Americans, the Italian American story we tell is similar to the stories of their Irish ancestors, their Mexican ancestors, their South American ancestors, or their Slavic ancestors.

The attraction of the mythical American West that lay behind the exhortation “Go West, Young Man” was one that brought the adventurous from all over the world to California.

But as the many Italians who rushed to California in the hope of becoming wealthy overnight discovered, the mother lode lay not in the discovery of quick wealth, but in the fact that California valued the skills and knowledge they brought with them; it created a space for them, included them, allowed them to become part of building California. So, the timing of their arrival was crucial.

Italians started arriving in California in the 1850s, when its social and economic structure was fluid and still being formed. Instead, on the East Coast they arrived after many other immigrants had already established themselves economically and socially, leaving the Italians space only at the bottom, doing jobs that the earlier arrivals did not want to do.

And in California too, there was not ready access for all. Not everyone was going to be included into the fold or allowed to partake of its bounty. And while in most instances Italians were included into the American fold, others weren't: the Native Americans, the Chinese, the Japanese, the Mexicans. That too, is part of the American story.

Evolution over time

The Italian American story is also one of evolution over time as the Italian heritage and identity becomes part of the whole fabric of America. In both of our films, we trace the story of what happens to an Italian community over time.

Other immigrant groups often move into that geographic area, sometimes in that process adopting the cultural heritage of the earlier group and making it theirs. It is not always a story of easy sharing, but it seems to be part of the process.

In “Pane Amaro”, we saw that eventually the geographic space of Italian Harlem is no longer Italian, but Latino, and among the most passionate worshippers at the Italian Festa of the Madonna of Mount Carmel are Haitians for whom the same Madonna is the Patron Saint.

In “Finding the Mother Lode”, Simon Rodia’s steel and concrete towers built in Watts in the tradition of Italian master builders, become a way for him to leave his mark and heritage on the map of Southern California, the way millions of immigrants continue to do. And it is the African American community of Watts that continues his legacy as a mosaic artist at the [Watts Towers](#) [4] Arts Center, where the community is taught how to tile “because that is what Simon did”. It is the American story.

Working “a quattro mani”

In making these films, the challenge is that of weaving the many, varied strands into a whole, and doing that “a quattro mani” (“with four hands”) both add to the complexity of the task, and also make it easier. Professionally, we have both worked on issues of migration and immigration, but in different ways.

Many of the films that Gianfranco has produced over the years have dealt with migration-related themes. Suma was for over 25 years involved in educational programs for immigrants, the last ten as the Director of the award-winning Center for Immigrant Education and Training which she created at City University of New York’s LaGuardia Community College.



From our different vantage points, we have come to know well how disorienting the process of migration can be, and the loss of identity and self-worth that often accompanies the process.

As a first-generation Italian American, and a first-generation Indian American, we feel we bring both a familiarity as well as a distance to our understanding of the Italian American story. And this has been helpful. We bring to the project different strengths and ways of working.

Accommodating for those differences and learning to respect each other's strengths is by no means a smooth process. Since we have each of us in our way been responsible professionally for seeing a project through to its conclusion, giving up control over what we are doing is a hard thing to learn to do.

On the other hand, having a partner that you know well, and who you know is as committed to the project as you are, and who you can trust to fight and work hard for it, is a great resource. A loyal, loving critic is the best kind to have.

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[1] <http://www.iitaly.org/files/sumakurien1418258221.jpg>

[2] <http://findingthemothertode.com/about/bios.html>

[3] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RAI>

[4] <http://www.wattstowers.us/>