

ITALIANS IN THE DELTA: THE EVOLUTION OF AN UNUSUAL IMMIGRATION

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For Linda Reilly, thank you for everything — who I have become and who I hope to be.

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ABSTRACT

Italians in the Delta: The Evolution of an Unusual Immigration (Under the direction of Willard Rose)

This thesis explores the extraordinary immigration of Italians to the Delta from when they first came in 1895 to modern day. This project updates the Delta Italians' status within the modern era and explores their rise from lowly tenant farmers to some of the largest farm owners in the Delta. In particular, it looks at the Italians through the prism of discrimination, farming and fascinating personalities who have attempted to preserve its history. By using live interviews and journalistic story telling techniques, I hope to give people a flavor of what the early settlers were like and how their culture has evolved. This thesis is not meant to be an extensive academic study, but rather a journalistic approach told through feature stories using existing sources and multiple interviews with modern day Italians in the Mississippi Delta.

I would not seek to examine every aspect of modern Delta Italian lives, but instead would examine their hunger for information about family, their quest to preserve family history and ties to Italy, and how it has helped nurture the traditional Italian love of family and extended families. As for sources and methodologies, I will be producing journalistic stories in keeping with my training in the Meek School of Journalism and New Media and will be interviewing Americans of Italian descent and those with firsthand knowledge of Italian culture in the Delta.

The vast majority of my research comes from personal interviews with citizens of the Mississippi Delta, but is supplemented by magazine articles and books that have addressed the subject over the years. My research shows the importance of the Italians'

history in the Mississippi Delta and the major impact Italians had on farming and food culture.

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Preface

In the spring of 2013, I enrolled in a journalism course through The Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College and The Meek School of Journalism and New Media, which allowed me to help contribute to a magazine centered on food culture in the Mississippi Delta. Through the course I was able to travel all over the Delta and learn about the rich history and culture of “The Most Southern Place on Earth.” I was surprised to learn that there had been a large Italian immigration to the Delta around the turn of the century, and because my minor is in Italian and I studied abroad there, I was instantly fascinated. After the course had ended and the magazine completed, I realized that there were many Delta Italian stories to tell and recognized that it would be an ideal topic for my thesis because it was both interesting and extensive. The fact that so many Italian immigrants traveled to the Mississippi Delta is a significant piece of Mississippi’s history.

When the Italians arrived they found fertile land and an opportunity. I explored how Italians in the Mississippi Delta have adhered to Italian traditions since coming to this country. Italian settlers had a unique way of preserving their European traditions while still adapting to Southern culture. Italians maintained their love of food and established restaurants, which helped popularize Italian food in the state. Some Italians have continued to speak Italian but the numbers became fewer and fewer. Italians in Mississippi came from a predominantly Roman Catholic country and religion offered support through generations. Religion, family life and farming are all significant traditions still vital to Italians who came to Mississippi and carved out new ways of life.

To start my interviews I went to the author of recent books on Delta Italians, Father Paul Canonici. He and my Delta native thesis advisor led me to contact many other Italian descendants living all over the region. I interviewed Italian farmers, cooks and those interested in their Italian roots. I also sought out published sources of information on Delta Italians throughout history.

I spoke to Italians in Bolivar and Washington counties and in Lake Village, Arkansas. Since most of them seemed to strongly favor face-to-face interviews, I made no attempt to canvass the entire Delta but restricted the interviews to those three areas for the sake of time and convenience. But Father Canonici assured me that they were representative.

Some of the main challenges that arose were finding time to travel to my interviews and also finding the time to write while balancing my job and a full class load. As a journalism major, with an emphasis in broadcast journalism, I am often taught the logistics of camera work and active writing. I feel more well rounded after having written this body of work. This thesis taught me how to manage my time and the importance of organization. In addition, I feel that I have exponentially improved as a writer for having produced this work.

Chapter I: Patron Saint of Delta Italians: Paul Canonici and a Priest's Search for Roots

Surrounded by paintings on the walls of his Madison home, Paul Canonici sifts through a table full of photographs and documents containing the scattered pieces of his family's people.

His voice is clear but soft and the 89-year-old's eyes flame when he speaks about the "old country." The story of the Delta Italians is more than 100 years old, but if not for Paul Canonici much of the story would have been lost.

This Catholic priest's search for his roots has made him a saint to the many Delta Italians hungry for more knowledge of their families' history. He has become a Mississippi Italian version of Alex Haley, whose exploration of his own roots inspired countless black Americans to search for theirs. Like Haley's "Roots," Canonici's four books on the Delta Italians have kindled a movement of sorts, helping people from Tunica to Vicksburg rediscover long-lost links to their distant homeland and inspiring many others to begin their own quests. His books are stuffed with old family portraits of Italians who came to the Delta primarily between 1890 and 1910 to farm cotton as, for all practical purposes, indentured servants.

“It’ll be a part of me that lives on like my art. This I feel is my contribution to my people who were recruited for the cotton plantation and for all Italians to just preserve what remains of their story,” Canonici says.

He knows this is true because of the many phone calls and letters he receives from those who have read his books and begun their own searches of the past, taken their own trips to Italy and sealed tearful reunions with distant relatives there. Others are simply grateful to read family histories of friends and strangers, tales that open their eyes to what life must have been like for their forefathers who gave up everything in Italy to cross the Atlantic and wind up in the rural flatness of the Mississippi Delta, foreigners in a land of people with a different culture, a different language, a different way of thinking.

In conversation with modern Delta Italians, the name Father Paul Canonici is greeted with expressions of gratitude. Steve Fratesi, a Cleveland prawn farmer, was ecstatic at the mention of his name. “I need to show you something; this is like the Italian bible right here,” Fratesi said as he frantically flipped through Canonici’s book, “The Delta Italians.”

“If he hadn’t written this...this is my history! When you're young, you don’t listen. Your Dad and Mom tell you ‘I did this or I did that’ and it just goes right through. This is written!”

Born in 1927 in Shaw to Italian immigrants, Canonici, like most young children, focused on school and hobbies rather than ancestral roots. He graduated from Shaw High

School and went to a Catholic seminary. He was ordained to the ministry in 1957 in the diocese of Jackson.

Canonici has spent most of his adult life working in Catholic education and is now retired. He took a break and earned a doctorate from Mississippi State University at the end of the 1960s, and then was called back to begin a 13-year post as superintendent of Mississippi's Catholic schools at a stressful time— right in the midst of integration.

Since then, Canonici has spent a lot of time in Italy, making it his life's mission to do all he can to preserve the history of the Delta Italians and their relatives in the homeland.

His first trip to Italy was in 1972. “Strangely enough,” he says, “If I hadn’t gone then, I wouldn’t have met my relatives.” Most of the Italians who came to the Delta had no formal education. They couldn’t speak English and they couldn’t read or write.

“I took pictures of everything, as if I wanted to capture and take back to America every moment of my visit— every town perched on a hilltop, train stations, conductors, houses, everything.”

Often, immigrants’ names were changed to make them easier for non-Italians to pronounce. Unfortunately, unless a family made sure to tell succeeding generations about the original name, it became difficult to search for roots in Italy. Canonici had this same problem. He didn’t know it, but his mother had a two-word last name: “Casici Caci” which eventually became Canonici.

Canonici had met a priest from Italy on one of the priest's regular visits to the United States and learned of a boy's school in Ostra, Italy. That gave Canonici a place to work when he made his first trip to Italy.

He knew that Catholicism was an important part of people's lives, so to get in good spirits with the locals he slipped on his clericals when he went to join his friend at the parish's "Sacred Heart dinner."

"I had everybody's attention. 'Americano!' They seated me at dinner and afterwards I said my mother is from here but I don't know what her last name is," explained Canonici. "And someone mentioned to me that the town band director's name is Mesio Casici Caci."

When Canonici followed up and asked to meet the band director (and shoemaker), he was directed to a woman's house. Once again, dressed in his clericals, he caught the woman's eye as she looked up the street and saw him coming. As he got closer, she looked closer and said, "You are Alexander's son."

"Alexander was my Father's youngest brother, who had died years before," explained Canonici, "That's who she thought I was." When he went to the house he met Vanda, who turned out to be his first cousin.

She was the daughter of his father's brother, Antonio. Canonici found himself swept into her house where she threw herself into fixing him something to eat. While she rolled out her pasta, she talked about his father's lineage and he recorded hours of precious family history. As a child, Vanda lived with Canonici's grandparents. Extended

families lived in the same home and worked the same plot of land. At one time there were 35 members of the Canonici's bloodline living in that same house.

“On meeting the only uncle I have ever known,” he says, “my emotions were at the point of explosion. Uncle Antonio was blind and bedridden, but his mind was as clear as a 20-year-old. We talked and sometimes cried. He told me about my father and how tough he was in his youth.”

The visit opened a treasure trove of family history. As he looks back on it now, a grim smile flashes across Canonici's face. He said that if he had made that first trip now, 40 years later, all those people would have been dead and the knowledge of who they were would have been lost. Nor would he have been quite as likely to embark on a crusade of sorts to chronicle the family histories of so many Italians here.

At the thought, he banged his fist on the table, not in anger but almost as if to help him express himself. “What a pity it would have been,” he said, “but I was really happy that I had found my roots.”

Once he had met his relatives in Italy, he had to know more. When Canonici arrived back home in Mississippi, he found his mind wandering, imagining his family in Italy and how different a life can be because of the decisions made by ancestors.

Canonici found himself to be filled with regret, wishing he had traveled to Italy before his parents had passed away. Once, his appetite was teased by what his cousin had told him, he wanted to know more. His mind burned with unanswered questions.

He returned to Italy again and again, and eventually tracked his lineage to a cemetery in Lake Village, Ark., just across the Mississippi River from Greenville, Miss. To a passerby, the cemetery in Lake Village would appear to be a typical Southern graveyard. No one would suspect its historical significance –that some of the graves date back to the 1800s. The site is divided down the middle with Catholic graves on one side and Protestant graves on the other. As Canonici wandered the tombstones to seek out the names of his kin and saw Italian name after name, many of them born in Italy, he realized how much history was buried there. He had to capture it in his books. He quickly learned that the vast majority of Italians who came to the Delta were recruited to work on cotton plantations. “All of our families endured the same difficulties and lived the same lifestyle,” he said.

No longer able to steadily rely upon black field hands after the abolishment of slavery, Delta cotton planters sought a new cheap labor source to grow and pick their cotton. Italian peasant farmers offered promising potential. Since most couldn't read or write, so many people here wrote them off as backward and ignorant. What they hadn't counted on was how hard the Italians would work, how frugal they could be, and what savvy farmers they were. Before long, they had paid off their indentures, purchased land and started farming themselves. Today, many of the biggest farmers in the Delta are Italians.

The descendants of those early farmers also run plenty of restaurants, including the renowned Doe's Steak House in Greenville and Giardina's in the upscale Alluvian Hotel in Greenwood.

From Shaw to Shelby, Clarksdale and Leland, to Greenville, Greenwood, and to Indianola, phone books are full of names like Bramuchi, Fratesi, Sabattini, Malatesta and Radicioni.

But it wasn't always easy. At first, immigrants encountered ugly discrimination and for years they weren't allowed into the white schools and social clubs. Over time, they were assimilated and now are nearly indistinguishable from the surrounding populace.

Canonici is a perfect example of how quickly the Italians assimilated. He was born to parents who came to this country around 1905. They assimilated in public, but preserved Italian customs in private. "Our people," he says with no small amount of pride, were known to be farmers and they tried to hold onto pieces of their culture in the home. There were many distinguishing signs of an Italian home, such as a large vegetable garden, outdoor oven in the backyard, haystacks.

Canonici did not know it then, but he was about to become the champion of Delta Italians, the man who helped dozens of people in small towns rediscover their connections to Italy and share their histories with others.

Some of Canonici's readers have made trips to the Ancona and Marche Region of Italy. Some even connected with Italian relatives because of his writings.

Canonici stated that one of the most memorable stories he uncovered was the romance of Julius Fioranelli and Lena Mascagni. Lena's romance with Julius reads like a Shakespearean tragedy. Angelo Fioranelli disliked the idea of Lena as his daughter-in-

law. She was too prissy to fit the farm or pick cotton. He would mock her by calling her “the princess.” Just before they were to be married, Lena expressed doubts and wanted to end the relationship. In a moment of drama and sadness, Julius drank a potion that caused him to become deathly ill. Julius's nephew, Santo Borganelli, recalls the convulsions he experienced after having drunk motor oil. But Julius survived, and his near-death experience convinced Lena to marry him after all. Eventually they moved to Greenville and raised five children together happily. Stories like these, told by the people who treasure them, pepper the pages of Canonici’s books.

“I write a lot but I just pick up bits and pieces trying to preserve what little remains of our history,” explains Canonici, then, abruptly, he turns solemn. “If something happens to me, all this stuff will be junk and just thrown away.”

So he sits in that house in Madison with the ever-growing pile of letters and documents, still hearing from people who are hoping he can connect them with someone in their homeland.

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Chapter II: Italian Blood and Delta Soil

As a fine mist soaks the Delta, John Aguzzi sits high and dry on a comfortable covered deck at the rear of his house near Cleveland, Mississippi, looking out on 4,000 acres of rice.

Aguzzi, 66, has farmed his whole life and this soil has been more than good to him. The family empire spans 8,000 acres scattered across the state. Despite the constant threat of too much rain or too much sun, and despite the perilous financial ups and downs that go with farming, it has made a sweet life for him and his family.

At first glance, he is a typical successful Delta planter, a man whose financial savvy and farming acumen afford him a status many men in this economically challenged region can only dream of, but he is much more than that. He represents the fulfilled dreams of thousands of poor Italian peasant farmers who came to Mississippi between 1890 and 1910 to escape the suffocating *padron* system that prevailed in the hills of Italy in hopes of finding a better life.

Here, that hardy first wave of Italian immigrants became sharecroppers in name. But in reality, they were little more than indentured servants living in humble shacks on cotton plantations, encumbered by a load of debt to the landowner. Today, some of the

descendants of those early pioneers are some of the biggest farmers in the Delta. Their remarkable experience is a story of success many immigrants would kill for.

In one of his books, "The Delta Italians," Father Canonici describes the layout of the land when the immigrants first arrived. In the beginning, Italian settlers from Italy's Marche region were sharecroppers. They owned no equipment and no mules. They farmed "on the half." The planter provided a house, land, equipment, mules and seed. The Italian tenants provided work hands and shared half of the proceeds.

Many of these early immigrants started out at Sunnyside Plantation near Lake Village, Ark.

In the summer of 1991, Ernesto R. Milani wrote "Sunnyside and the Italian Government" for the Arkansas Historical society. He described the birth of the Italian immigration to the Mississippi Delta. It all began in 1895, when three powerful men met in the comfort of Delta cotton baron Leroy Percy's spacious mansion at Trail Lake Plantation five miles east of Greenville.

Percy, a fabulously wealthy man with interests in New Orleans banks, control of the critically important Levee Board, and some of the best cotton land in the Delta, held great influence with President Theodore Roosevelt. His guests were John Parker, another politically connected planter, and Charles Scott from Rosedale, an unsuccessful gubernatorial candidate who was the biggest landowner and planter in the Delta.

Until then, Percy had been concerned about black out-immigration. He had written "A Southern View of Negro Education," in which he told the State Bar

Association that white Mississippians may be caricatured “as standing with both heels firmly planted in the earth, and with both hands firmly clasping the coat tails of the fleeing negro, in one breath upbraiding him for worthlessness and inefficiency and in the other vowing that no other laborer should be allowed to replace him.”

But now he had a new plan.

According to John Barry’s acclaimed river history “Rising Tide,” all the plantation owners had one thing in common: a disdain for the black labor that weeded and picked their cotton, because they were considered lazy and unreliable. Citing multiple sources from the time, Barry’s book provides a detailed account of how these ambitious men decided to put in motion a grand experiment that would require using raw political influence to push the governments of America and Italy into action on behalf of a few dozen Delta farmers. In so doing, they would wind up changing the lives of thousands in both countries and introducing a new culture to a rural region that had already absorbed Chinese, Irish and African.

Their plan was to replace black labor with Italian peasant farmers, who had a reputation for hard work and frugality in the sometimes-rocky farming regions of Italy. Percy had already hosted President Theodore Roosevelt on, what became, a famous Mississippi bear hunt. When the hunting party struggled to find adult bears, a guide tied a bear cub to a tree for the president to shoot. Roosevelt refused, newspaper cartoonists depicted the scene and an enterprising businessman manufactured stuffed bear toys that he called “Teddy’s Bear.” Thus was born a toy and a nickname.

Percy and the others later persuaded Roosevelt to approve their audacious immigration plan. Then they successfully lobbied the Italian government to let them proceed.

Small numbers of Italians had already begun trickling into the Delta in 1880 as sharecroppers, and Percy liked what he saw. He told all who would listen that if larger numbers of Italians worked out as a result of his immigration program, tens of thousands might follow, increased profits would flow and Delta planters would no longer need black workers to tend their crops.

Barry's "Rising Tide" provides a detailed, colorful look at what happened next. Agents hired by Percy and his friends took to the farms of Italy, recruiting peasant farmers with few possessions and little chance of advancement, people entirely dependent on the good graces of the *padron* who owned the land. The idea was to pay for their transportation to America, turn them into indentured servants and dangle before them the prospect, however slight, that on fertile Delta soil they might eventually earn enough to pay off their debt to the landowner, buy their own land and start their own farms in America—the land of opportunity.

Soon, several thousand Italians made the voyage across the Atlantic Ocean to New Orleans, where they were transported up the Mississippi River to various plantations in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi.

With their cut of the labor bounty, Percy and his partners purchased 11,000-acre Sunnyside Plantation in Chicot County, Arkansas, just across the river from Greenville. However, he ignored what befell the plantation's previous owner.

In 1895, shortly before the Percy initiative was hatched, a smaller group of Italians had been brought in to work the cotton at Sunnyside. But after only a few months, the absentee owner of the place, Austin Corbin, died in a carriage accident in New York. Malaria and yellow fever then decimated the little colony.

Percy, never short on confidence, believed he could do better. The plantation already had its own railroad and a telephone line to Greenville in 1898 when the O.B. Crittenden Company, of which Percy was a partner, took over. Early reports were encouraging. Percy boasted to *Manufacturers Record* that Italians were "in every way superior to the *negro*...If the immigration of these people is encouraged, they will gradually take the place of the *negro* without their being any such violent change as to paralyze for a generation the prosperity of the country."

Later on, reports from the government would indicate that the Italian foothold had been firmly established. By 1900, according to a report from the U.S. Immigration Commission, 47 Delta plantations were working as many as 180 Italians each. Dozens of families set up housekeeping in towns like Shaw, Shelby, Rosedale, Friars Point, and Greenville.

At Sunnyside, 600 Italians farmed Percy's land. They were indeed a hard-working, frugal people who knew how to coax good crops from the soil. But trouble was

brewing– the sort of trouble that would change the landscape of the Delta in ways Percy could not imagine.

Barry’s “Rising Tide” describes Percy’s beguiling ways. Though some Italians at Sunnyside were making money – in six years a single family saved \$15,000 – far more sank deeper into debt. Percy squeezed his tenants, charging “flat” annual interest of 10 percent on all advances, a routine practice in Mississippi, but one that violated Arkansas law.

Barry’s book is full of accounts of Italians beginning to resent what once had seemed a wonderful opportunity. One Italian sharecropper wrote a pamphlet titled “Don't Go to the Mississippi,” warning that Italians would only find “slavery and fever.” He distributed it in New Orleans and Italy. In December 1906, tensions escalated when poor white men, jealous of the Italians, set a barn at Sunnyside on fire. When a labor agent tried to help some unhappy tenants relocate, Percy told him bluntly: “An unfriendly attitude on my part would be an injury to you.” When Percy learned some Sunnyside Italians were at the Greenville train depot, he told other planters not to take them on and sent a manager to intimidate them into returning, Barry wrote.

Federal law prohibited “debt peonage,” meaning employers could not force people to work in order to pay off debts. Percy was pushing against the edge of law. Federal law also prohibited advancing travel expenses and bringing in foreign workers under contract, none of which stopped Percy.

In the spring of 1907, complaints from the Italians reached Baron Edmondo Des Planches, Italy's ambassador to the United States. To co-opt him and regain their customary control of the situation, Percy, Charles Scott and others invited Des Planches to tour the plantation. Percy showed off families whose acreage was highly profitable, pointed out a modern cotton gin, the railroad, the office for a doctor who was on call, and the place reserved for Catholic church services. Friends "subtly" let the ambassador know that Percy's wife, Camille, was Catholic, according to Milano's "Sunnyside and the Italian Government."

Afterward, in Greenville, Percy hosted a dinner. He was an engaging and cultured host who entertained with grace and elegance and seemed to win Des Planches over. Des Planches assured Percy that he would continue to send Italians his way that would "not only make good farmers but *will* make good first class American citizens."

In actuality, Des Planches was no fool. He had seen the shacks in which many of the sharecroppers lived, walked the long rows of cotton assigned to each family, and had stopped to taste almost undrinkable water drawn from the river. He understood very well.

According to Randolph Boehm, "Mary Grace Quackenbos and the Federal Campaign Against Peonage: The Case of Sunnyside Plantation," Arkansas Historical Quarterly 1991, Des Planches reported back to Washington: "The Italian immigrant at Sunnyside is a human production machine. He is better off than the black man, more perfect than the black man, but like the black man, still a machine." He demanded a Justice Department investigation. Pugnacious investigator Mary Grace Quackenbos arrived to grill Percy and the others. She even filed peonage charges against Crittendon.

Her contest of wills with Percy would pit federal law against both Percy's friendship with Roosevelt and, in effect, all Southern society.

It was no contest. After a visit from Percy, the President called off Quackenbos, but Percy wound up losing anyway. The stubborn investigator leaked her damning report to Italian authorities, who quickly cut off the immigration spigot, Barry wrote.

By 1910, the Italian influx was over. Thousands of Italian sharecroppers, however, remained. In time, they would have the last laugh. Many left farm work and became some of the best restaurateurs in the region. Others worked enough to pay off their debts and buy land from the very Delta planters who had employed them.

The U.S. Immigration Commission report of 1911 found that 100,000 Italians, most of them farmers, lived in the states of the Mississippi Valley. In the Delta in the 1930s, according to another Immigration Commission report, there were 100 Italian families in Shaw, another 60 in Shelby, 130 in Rosedale. Most were farmers. Decades later, Italians would become some of the biggest farmers in the Delta.

Today, it is impossible to say with any precision how many Italians live in each Delta city. But the phone books of Clarksdale, Shelby, Shaw, Greenville, Cleveland and Greenwood are still stuffed with Italian family names. In Clarksdale, for example, there are 59 Italian names in the phone book. Many Sicilians also settled in the Delta, mostly in Greenville and Clarksdale, according to "Italians in Mississippi" by Charles Reagan Wilson.

Today, due largely to rampant poverty, poor schools and a slumping economy, the number of Italian farmers, like every other population group in the Delta, is shrinking. Good numbers are hard to come by, but anecdotal evidence is everywhere. Many small, older Delta farmers have stories about their children moving off to live elsewhere, leaving parents to consider selling the farm that has been their lifeblood. Add to that the trend toward big corporations buying out smaller farms and the future looks much smaller.

Ned Bramuchi of Memphis, former airline pilot for Braniff Airlines and United Airlines, grew up in Shelby. His father and uncle owned a large farm in Shelby and grew cotton and soybeans.

“We had everything in Shelby,” said Bramuchi, as he recalls his uncle’s cobbling shop and dry goods business and also many locally owned grocery stores owned by Italians. While he was in college, Ned’s father began to sense the young labor did not want to work and so he encouraged his son’s pursuit of attending college.

“We used a lot of black labor on our farm. The older blacks did a heck of a job, but the kids that were coming up, they didn’t like to work. That is the way this country is going now, nobody wants to work. He saw it coming back in the early 60s. You can’t do it all yourself. The labor wasn’t going to be there long. [Dad] made the right call”

When Bramuchi graduated from Mississippi State with a degree in aerospace engineering, he went right to work for Braniff Airlines in Texas, moved to Memphis to

work for United Airlines, and never looked back. Bramuchi still owns property in Shelby but only keeps it out of respect for his family.

“It’s not run properly; it’s kind of gone to the dogs,” said Bramuchi. “When we were there it was a great town. It had a great mayor and a great sheriff, but now the town is broke just like all those other little Delta towns. My generation packed up and moved on.”

Alvin Tarsi grew up on a farm in Shelby and he, too, fled the Delta. He just recently retired at 65 from a long career as a banker and marketing expert in Memphis. His family was large and owned a farm out from Shelby. He once campaigned for Robert F. Kennedy when Kennedy was running for president in 1968.

“I knew I was going to go on and get a master’s degree when I was in the 5th grade, it was just something innate in me,” said Tarsi. “I knew I was leaving for that and that big things were ahead of me.”

Tarsi’s father believed in being in business for one’s self and that it was never worth working for someone else. Tarsi explains how he never considered being a farmer because of his academic excellence.

“When I reflect on it,” he said, “I just knew that I could do big things somewhere else. I thought I had a greater potential somewhere else.”

Even though many people who grew up in the Delta chose other paths, a sizable number of young Italian farmers remain – especially on the more successful operations –

and say they and their children plan to continue the tradition. Phillip Rizzo, 65, son of another Italian family near Cleveland, understands the importance of family all too well.

“In the end, that’s all you got is family. It’s just something that Italians have large families and they normally stick together,” said Rizzo. “I would sell my farm today – not tomorrow, *today*, if my sons didn't help me.”

But farm work can take a toll, even on the young. One of his sons came home from Mississippi State one April night, well before the end of the spring semester, and announced he wouldn’t stay in college any longer. Rizzo put him to work on the catfish ponds every night that summer. “And guess who was the first one back to State in the fall?” Rizzo chuckles.

Farming may have been the early Delta Italians’ curse, but it also became their salvation.

Take John Aguzzi. He comes from one of the area’s oldest Italian families. His ancestors, peasant farmers, came over on the first ship from Ostra in 1895. They had seen a flyer describing a wealthy man from New York City who wanted to hire labor to develop land in Sunnyside, Arkansas.

“They really liked the Italian farmers because they worked hard, because they wanted to make the most that they could make,” said Aguzzi.

At the time, Italy’s economy was in tatters. Canonici’s book states that small farmers were losing the land they had rented for years, in part because powerful *padrons*

were selling out to accommodate the government's rush to industrialize rural sectors of the country. Not seeing a future in Italy, the Aguzzis saved their money and paid their way to America, where they signed a 20-year contract, but the contract was voided when the plantation went out of business.

Aguzzi's great grandfather tried to buy land, but it was too expensive. Then he tried sharecropping. For decades, the family subsisted, but just barely, on the small farm they rented. Later, Joe Aguzzi, John's father, purchased the original 40 acres that in time would expand into what is now the Aguzzi empire.

When John Aguzzi looks back on how it used to be, he is amazed. "Growing up, we lived in the country," he said. Now, "the city is right across the road. (But) I'm still in the country!" he chuckled.

"This was a dirt road when I grew up," Aguzzi said, pointing to the wide paved road along which he and his sons have built homes. During his childhood, he and the rest of his father's family lived in a shack located in a field not 30 feet from where Aguzzi's house stands today.

Now as he surveys his domain, he is content in the knowledge that his children live on the property in their own houses and one day they will inherit this sprawling farm. He is proud that unlike the hundreds of Italians who came here as indentured servants, Aguzzi's family took the leap, saved their money and traveled to Mississippi on their own volition.

The Aguzzis are a model for how to do it right. It's a family affair.

“We’re the labor. We meet right here and fix the water jugs and we all load up and go,” he said. Aguzzi, his two brothers, two cousins and a nephew farm the land. “It’s all in the family.” Only seven non-family members help work the farm. John’s sons farm the land with him and he hopes to pass the business on to them when he retires.

“There are advantages and disadvantages to working with family,” he said, “but we are all working for the same goal.”

Aguzzi shakes his head in wonder at how much the operation has changed since his grandfather’s days.

“They didn’t spend a penny. They walked everywhere. Daddy can remember. They were walking to school, walking to town. The only time they got in the car was to go to church, because they wanted to have clean clothes. They saved their money and gas,” he said.

Today, the Aguzzis drive modern pickups and live in spacious homes. Times are better. But they learned a valuable lesson in avoiding waste from their frugal predecessors.

“Maybe that was instilled in us and maybe it came from the old country. The point is you take care of what’s gonna take care of you first,” he said.

When Aguzzi graduated from high school, he figured he would farm like the rest of the family, but he looked around at all the farms going under and hedged his bets. He

majored in business at Delta State. “I thought if I didn’t farm, I could go into accounting. I needed a backup.”

It turned out he didn’t need one. “I loved growing up on the farm. I loved being in the fields. I like being outside and I don’t like being cooped up in a room all day long.”

The allure of a freer lifestyle and the love of land are things all farmers talk about and Italian farmers are no different. Most of the farmers remaining in the Delta never considered anything but farming, even in the toughest financial times.

Just as their grandparents adapted to the sandy loam and buckshot soils of the Delta, so different from the land in Italy, today Delta Italians have had to adapt to a changing farm economy. Steve Fratesi, 57, of Leland tried cotton, soybeans and rice but couldn’t make enough money. Now he is a prawn farmer, providing prawns to restaurants from Greenville to Memphis.

Fratesi and his wife, Dolores, are the proud owners of Lauren Farms. Named for their daughter, it is the only prawn farm in Mississippi. But he can tell you that not every farm family has been successful in keeping the kids close to the nest as their now lives in Jackson.

Steve Fratesi’s crop is unique, but how he got to it fits the journey of his relatives who traveled here from Ancona so long ago. Like those early farmers, he has evolved and adapted to survive. He looks the part, all callused hands, dirty, rumpled clothes and baseball cap.

In “Land of Plenty,” a spring 2013 magazine produced by students in the Meek School of Journalism & New Media, Rachael Walker described in her article “Prawns? In the Delta?” how Fratesi grew up in Indianola and planned from childhood to avoid the family farm. He studied accounting at Mississippi State University, where he fell in love with Dolores, who grew up in Greenville. They married and moved to Memphis. He was able to endure the indoor world of offices for a total of 3 years. But he turned to farming. It was, he says, in his blood.

“It’s what gives you a good feeling at the end of the day,” Fratesi explained. “That’s why I quit what I was doing in Memphis. I wanted to wake up in the morning and smell the sun.”

They had a long journey ahead of them. As Walker put it, “In 1985, as cotton’s allure waned, the Fratesis started growing catfish in manmade ponds, a hot new trend at the time. The industry boomed during the 1980s and 1990s but it peaked around 2003, when imports of cheap Asian fish similar to catfish began to flood America’s shores, undercutting local growers.” A meeting with a Mississippi State researcher got them interested in prawns.

“They were the first farmers to start growing what they and other farmers hope will be the future of aquaculture in the Delta,” Walker wrote. “They have become crusaders, nudging chefs to put them on menus and farmers to put them in their ponds. They have taken their story to the media, promoting the growth of prawn farming in the same way proud parents wax eloquent on the accomplishments of their children.”

Fratesi grows the prawns in tanks at his farm headquarters. Farming of any kind is tough, but Fratesi is used to hard work and tough times.

“My mama grew up in Shaw, she didn’t know there was a depression because they were already so poor,” he said. “They grew their own food and raised their own chickens.”

His parents didn’t go to the grocery store because everything they needed was in the garden. They also raised chickens and pigs and they would cook with the lard. Fratesi recalls how strange it was to see Crisco for the first time after having only seen dark brown lard used.

His grandmother would get up in the morning and start cooking. She would cook most of the day. “My grandmother did her own spaghetti. I can still see how she did it. She would do the dough and all, slice it up and do the strings and she’d hang them over the back of her chair to let it dry.”

“I started driving a tractor when I was 11 years old. I drove it all day and I loved every minute of it,” said Fratesi. “I remember when I was growing up, we would get on our bicycles and leave and we wouldn’t come back till 10 o’clock at night. One of the lures of being here in the rural Delta is it’s a great place to grow up.”

Fratesi remembers the old family stories of how tough it was when the first Fratesis arrived in the Delta and how his ancestors wanted so badly to blend in. “They didn’t dare speak Italian in the house, so we lost that,” said Fratesi. “I hate it. I would love to be fluent in Italian right now.”

Today, he finds himself grateful that family is so important in Italy. That's carried over to Italian life in America. It has helped, he says, that they are in the Catholic Church, which stresses family.

"After all," he says, "if your family is here, why would you leave?"

Phillip Rizzo's family farm got started long after the first Rizzos came to the Delta and started farming a small plot of land.

"Dad got out of the army and he got a lot of help from people since he was a veteran. He had a job with Western Auto and over some time he was offered some land" – 160 acres – by the local John Deere dealer, he said.

His father was one of the first rice farmers in Mississippi and Rizzo says he is loyal to farming rice, because he owes the success of his 6,800-acre farm to it.

"We are so connected to the dirt and to the land. My whole life has been here," said Rizzo as he points to the backyard. "My father put a lot of blood, sweat and tears right here."

Rizzo, too, regrets that his parents didn't teach the children to speak Italian "because it was looked down on so much. Boy, would that have been a treasure." He yearns for more reminders of his heritage. The Rizzo place is all buckshot soil, a clay mix better suited to the rice and soybeans that became their prime crops.

“There were several times,” Rizzo admits, “when we thought about getting out. [In the] Late sixties commodity prices were really low and it was hard to make ends meet.”

Like so many, the Rizzos stuck it out, endured, and prospered. Now Rizzo says he is trying to cut back, leaving more and more of the work in the hands of his sons.

“I enjoyed it. It’s a great living. You’re close to the land. You make your own decisions. You are your own boss.” More so than other businesses, he believes, if you work hard at farming “you will succeed.”

Italian farmers have made it, he says, because they are “smart and hard working. It’s instilled in us from day one. I don’t know why, but the majority of them are hard working. I’m not better than anybody else, but I am 100 percent Italian.”

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Chapter III: Discrimination: Strangers in a Strange Land

At times, when Phillip Rizzo is driving his \$2 million, two-ton harvester through his 500 acres of soybeans, thoughts drift back to how he got here— how his great, great grandfather arrived at the Port of Greenville with nothing but the clothes on his back, how as he grew up in the house on Highway 61 in Shelby he heard a mixture of English and Italian, and how every Christmas his parents would tell stories about the “old country.” Rizzo, a successful Cleveland farmer, remembers his mother’s tales of how she and other early Italian immigrants were cheated bullied and discriminated against.

You don’t have to talk long to older Italians across the Delta to realize a pattern among the stories: Italians at first were barred from the all-white schools, teachers treated the Italian kids cruelly and bullies yelled racial slurs. Father Paul Canonici’s recent books about Italian culture in the Delta describe how the first arrivals, like most immigrants, faced all of that and more. It was not nearly so vicious and pervasive as the rigid, sometimes violent segregation experienced by African-Americans. But it had its effect. And those who remember it will never forget it.

Many in this newer generation may find this difficult to believe considering how Italians today are so much a part of mainstream society in the Delta, with some of the biggest farms and businesses and with sons and daughters winning big honors in schools.

Now it is often impossible to tell if someone is Italian if you don't know the name. Blatant discrimination, for the most part, tapered off and ended as hard-working and frugal immigrants bought their own restaurants and stores.

But it was very different in the late 1890s and early 1900s when white planters led by Leroy Percy imported boatloads of poor Italian peasant farmers from Italy in a scheme to replace black workers in the cotton fields. The Italians, full of complaints about unreasonable charges from the plantation store and too small a share of profits from cotton sales, did not consider Percy's experiment in imported labor so successful.

After all, the good people of the rigidly segregated state of Mississippi did not exactly welcome them with open arms. John Barry's "Rising Tide" tells how because of their olive skin, people tended to treat those first Italians like African-Americans. They were banned from the all-white public schools for years. They were considered ignorant, uneducated and low class. Their strange language, the unaccustomed smell of garlic, their effusive tendencies and emotional nature alarmed Southern Protestants who were used to a quieter, more servile attitude from farmhands. Sometimes, alarm even erupted into violence.

In 1899, three Italians were lynched in Tallulah, Louisiana. In 1901 two were murdered in Greenville. In 1907, another violent incident in Mississippi prompted the Italian government to demand an investigation. Asked by the U.S. State Department for an explanation, the Mississippi governor, James Vardaman, explained that the victim deserved what he got because he was "a very dirty, low-caste Italian, of the '*dago*' type – very mouthy...causing others to be discontented with their work," Barry wrote.

From all accounts, discrimination did not extend to those few Italian Americans whose families had long ago made it to America and achieved financial success. For example, at the same time the new Italian immigrants in the Delta were experiencing hardship, Mississippi had a governor whose family had come from Italy. Andrew Houston Longino, an Italian American, served as Mississippi's thirty-fifth governor from 1900 to 1904. He was, in fact, the first Italian American governor of a southern state.

Canonici says that he never experienced any discrimination growing up but remembers overhearing a woman in his hometown of Shaw giving him a backhanded compliment – “he's such a good kid. Too bad he's Italian, right?”

Libby Borgognoni, a resident of Lake Village, Arkansas, and author of “Italians of Sunnyside,” feels the Italians endured so much hate because of their success.

“They felt threatened because they could see how industrious [Italians] were,” said Borgognoni, “How they planned everything they did and how they acquired and saved and when they had dances.”

The few times that Libby did attend school were never free of bullying from the “American” students. “They would call us *dago* on the school bus and some people would reply ‘I’m a *dago*, you're a *wop*, I eat spaghetti, you eat slop.’

Phillip Rizzo also believes a lot of the discrimination was fueled by jealousy.

Rizzo became emotional recounting the discrimination his mother experienced. When he was young if someone was being prejudiced against him, she would tell him to

be thankful because the racism he experienced was “nothing in comparison to what she had to endure.”

Tony Pete Borgognoni is now retired but still works in the garden. When he and his wife were farming, Borgognoni Farms was 8,000 acres and they owned 6,000 acres. Tony grew up in Lake Village and was born in a house not 10 steps from where his house stands today. When he was growing up he would wake up every morning with his siblings and milk the cows, pick up the pecans, do other chores and then walk to school. Even though the school bus route would pass his house every day, the driver refused to stop for the Borgognoni children.

There is a section in Canonici’s “The Delta Italians” titled *Prejudice in Schools*. This section describes a young Maria (Mary) Eusepi Allegrezza growing up in Shaw in the 1920s.

“Mary and her siblings had to walk a mile and half from their home to the gravel road where the Shaw school bus passed. Often the bus driver would see them coming, but he took off and left them. They had to walk in the cold and sometimes in the rain, and couldn’t speak English well enough to explain why they were late.”

Allegrezza said that when she and her siblings did get on the bus, the white “American” boys filled their pockets with rocks, which they would throw at the Italian girls’ legs when they got off the bus. Mary’s mother made school lunches for the children. She used homemade bread to make sandwiches with homemade sausage and other cured meats, seasoned with garlic. Because of the smell, the teacher would put their

lunch bags outside the window. They would often go home hungry because dogs had eaten their lunches.

Many Italians had this same lunch experience. Teachers would ask them to move somewhere else in the classroom or put their lunches outside, even when it might merely consist of scrambled eggs and onion. One Italian, Mickery Galtelli, was asked to move his lunch when he had not even brought food to school that day.

In “The Delta Italians,” Mary Mangialardi Malatesta told how in the mid-1920s, when her family lived in Boyle and her brother Joe was about 5, that one of the Italian boys in the community made a remark that was offensive to some of the white “Americans” at the local barber shop. Apparently, someone associated with the Ku Klux Klan heard the remark and mistook the Italian boy for her eldest half brother, Mike Mancini. That night a gang of men on horseback circled her house. They were robed in white sheets and shouted blasphemy. Mary’s papa shouted to the children— there were seven in all— “Get under the beds!”

“Papa” had two guns in the house, a shotgun and a double barrel. He gave Mary’s mother the double barrel and told her to watch the window. The men outside yelled, “Come out, you damned *dago* or we’ll burn you out!” They kept circling the house and shot Mary’s dog and kept shooting. The men never did come into the house. The next morning Joe picked up shotgun shell cartridges in the yard. The dog survived with a broken leg.

Charles Reagan Wilson, who for 33 years was a history and southern studies professor at Ole Miss,” wrote a paper entitled “Italians in Mississippi,” for the Mississippi Historical Society that discussed Mississippians’ attitudes toward Italian immigrants in the 20th century. Wilson reported that they were sometimes portrayed negatively as dirty, violent people, and newspapers encouraged such stereotypes by printing sensational stories of occasional violent behavior.

“Mississippi was a racially conscious society,” he said, “and Italians were sometimes dismissed as second-class citizens because their skins were darker than those of whites of northern European ancestry. The Italian immigrants who were tenant farmers were downgraded because they did the same work as African-Americans who were at the bottom of the social scale. Italians experienced bigotry and prejudice directed at their ethnic background. Groups like the Ku Klux Klan targeted Catholics, including Italians, for discrimination.”

This is what Rizzo’s mother was describing when she warned her son of discrimination. He tried to take all of this philosophically. “It’s just another hurdle in life,” said Rizzo. “It was just so that we would know, not everybody is fair and honest and she wanted us to watch out for people.”

Today, Rizzo recalls clearly how it took until the 1980s for him to become the first Italian member of the Cleveland Country Club. “There was a man, a farmer, who didn’t want Italians into the club,” he said. “Every time I saw him, this guy would call me over and shake my hand.” After three or four years, a friend of Rizzo’s told him that just a few years prior that same farmer had said “he would never let an Italian in this club.”

The Delta is full of such stories—fathers not letting their daughters date Italian boys and the use of “*dago*” and “*wop*” as derogatory slurs at Italians. For many years in restaurants from New Orleans to the Delta, “wop salad” routinely appeared on menus. Most of that was a long time ago and Italians in the younger generation won’t remember those days, but there are many who do remember.

Sandy D’Angelo, owner of Chillie’s Package Store in Greenville, remembers vividly.

“Look, when somebody slaps you, you never forget. You might forgive them, but you never forget,” said D’Angelo. “There is no way that we can change anything that happened. Ever.”

As D’Angelo munches on some pasta salad from South Main Deli in Greenville, he describes times his family felt the sting of perceived slights because of their ethnic heritage.

His grandfather was murdered in 1921 but no one was ever prosecuted or even jailed. D’Angelo’s paternal grandfather was “hauling” whiskey in a wagon leaving Arkansas, he said, when strangers knocked him in the head and killed him. “They said they robbed him, but they only investigated it for one day.”

“I dated girls and their daddy owned plantations. I would have to get other boys to pick them up,” said D’Angelo. “Discrimination never stops. Whether it’s with people or money or education.”

The history of discrimination against African-Americans is better known than the discrimination against Chinese, Jews, Lebanese, Irish and, of course, the Italians. Interestingly enough, many modern day Italians believe that African-Americans had an advantage over the Italians at the time. After all, Italians got off the boat and found themselves in a strange and alien world, surrounded by people who spoke a different language and had different customs whereas the African-Americans had more years to become assimilated to the culture, they suggest.

“Black people had more of an advantage,” said D’Angelo, “because they could speak the language and they knew everything else.”

Joe Aguzzi owns one of the largest rice farms in Mississippi. In 2013, he received the national "Rice Farmer of the Year" award from the USA Rice Federation. He describes his impoverished family and how he was influenced by discrimination growing up in Cleveland.

“They didn't have nothing, just like any black, but they saved and worked hard for what they got to send their kids off to school,” he said. Growing up, when Joe Aguzzi woke up in the morning, his father, Ned, would already be in the field. Joe Aguzzi would have coffee and bread for breakfast every day. Once a week his father would buy 15 cents worth of hamburger meat.

As a boy, Aguzzi said, he never comprehended why people were discriminated against. Especially since, through his eyes, everyone was suffering.

“I was called *dago* and I would get in fights. They felt like we weren't supposed to go to school with them...that they were better than us,” said Aguzzi. “They were poor too, but just because they were ‘white’ they looked down on us for a long time.”

The Italians fought hard to assimilate but World War II would bring about a whole new era of prejudice.

“The Delta Italians” describes in detail what the Italians in the Mississippi Delta experienced during World War II.

“Although nearly all eligible Italian-American men were serving in the American military, Delta Italians were looked upon with suspicions because Italy had sided with Germany,” wrote Canonici.

Italians were required to move pictures of Benito Mussolini from display in their homes. U.S. officials went to Italian homes and collected guns and shortwave radios. Josephine Pandolfi Belenchia said they even took an Italian version of “Romeo and Juliet,” Canonici recounted.

Steve Fratesi of Leland remembers his grandparents wanting so badly wanted to blend in that they refused to even speak Italian.

“My uncles were in World War II,” said Fratesi, “When they came home my grandmother made them take their guns and paraphernalia and put it in the parachute and bury it because she didn’t want anybody coming and seeing anything.”

Joe Aguzzi, who is now 89 years old, wasn't able to experience regular meals until he became a scout in the infantry during World War II. On the 18th of May 1944, Aguzzi was wounded when a bullet went through the femoral artery in his leg.

“I should have been dead in a minute, but I stuffed my clothes in it,” said Aguzzi. “When we got back, the fields were snow white with cotton. I was glad to be back in the South. I’m still glad I’m in the South.”

Aguzzi’s father would tell him stories of the early Italians working on the plantations. Many Italians have heard horror stories of the way their ancestors were treated at Sunnyside Plantation near Lake Village, Ark., including instances when they would want to leave for the day but a plantation overseer would threaten them with death and rape.

“It doesn't bother me,” he said, “because I did more for the community than the people who would discriminate against me. “We never cheated anyone who worked for us. We did what was right.”

Aguzzi rented and farmed land for years following his return from the war. He rented a particular plot of land from the same owner for 15 years, but one year he came to discover it was already rented to someone else.

From that point on, Aguzzi began to save his money so that he could buy his own land. And he resolved never to repeat the mistake of trusting someone without a signed contract. And so began the accumulation of land that is now the Aguzzi farm empire. Since those first 40 acres were purchased the Aguzzis have not sold one inch of land.

Despite the hardships that Aguzzi faced he remains optimistic about his life and his family's future.

His oldest son, John, was occasionally bullied at school because of his Italian roots, but he remained intensely proud of his heritage. He speaks with great admiration of Italy's rich culture and its great artists.

The 1960s brought the civil rights movement, which created racial tension when black people began to try to assert their rights. Sometimes, the struggle pulled in Italians who did business with the perceived interlopers.

Joe Malatesta owned the Midway Grocery in a black neighborhood in Shaw. Canonici told how Malatesta had a good business, predominantly black, and he knew all his customers by name. Many young civil rights workers came into the neighborhood to help with voter registration. Malatesta befriended them and cashed their checks when the local bank would not. Some of the locals started a smear campaign against the civil rights workers and others who were helping African-Americans. They distributed vicious bulletins like this one:

NOTICE TO ALL WHITE CITIZENS

THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS ARE TRUE AND FACTS ABOUT SHAW

MISS.

...

A CERTAIN DAGO ON THE NORTH END OF TOWN IS WORKING HAND
AND HAND WITH THE (NIGGERS) AND (WHITE TRASH).

...

THE CITIZENS OF THIS AREA ARE URGED TO TAKE THEIR BUSINESS
ELSEWHERE. AFTER ALL, GROCERIES ARE CHEAPER IN CLEVELAND, AND
A MAN CAN WALK DOWN THE STREET WITH HIS WIFE WITHOUT RUBBING
ELBOWS WITH A BUNCH OF (STINKING CIVIL RIGHTS WORKERS).

DEDICATED TO BELIEVERS OF WHITE SUPREMACY

After this bulletin was posted, someone burned a cross in front of Malatesta's
Midway Grocery store, Canonici wrote.

One of Mississippi's greatest writers, Tennessee Williams, a former Clarksdale
resident, wrote often of Italians in the state, and his portrayals show the complexity of
views about them. Williams's play, *The Rose Tattoo*, resulted from his appreciation of
the life he saw along Italy's Mediterranean Coast and from his vivid memories of Italians
he had known in south Mississippi.

"I think Italians are like Southerners without their inhibitions," Williams wrote,
insisting that their "vitality is so strong, it crashed through them."

Sandy D'Angelo of Greenville knows something about that kind of vitality.
Although Italians are characteristically known for having a passion for life, they are also

known for being hard working, he said. He is proud of his ancestors' willingness to get their hands dirty.

“The farmers were like the apostles of the Delta,” said D’Angelo, “After it rained they would take their shoes off and walk out there and pull up any grass and make sure there weren't any weeds. Italians would take a piece of ground and they never stopped working it.”

Shelby native Bill Rose, a journalism instructor at The University of Mississippi and the advisor of this thesis, told how he was disturbed as a boy to hear old tales of discrimination against Italians and how he witnessed the remnants of some of those old biases himself.

“I remember when I was playing little league baseball, age 12,” said Rose, “My daddy remarked on “the number of *dagos* on the baseball field.”

After Rose’s father's death, his mother married again, to a local farmer named Albert Murphree. who had Sugar Ridge Plantation north of town.

“We were at Albert's house one night,” he said, “when his daughter was reminiscing about the people she dated in high school. She giggled at the memory of her daddy "throwing a fit" when she wanted to date Jimmy Pongetti. ‘He would say, hell no, you're not going out with that damned *dago!*’”

Before her death, Rose's grandmother told stories about the year she was a substitute teacher at the Shelby Elementary School and how the school turned away the children of prominent local Italian merchant Sam DeMarco.

"After they wouldn't enroll his boys, Sam was leaving the school property, rejected, when my grandmother ran after him," explained Rose. "She told him she would teach his boys in her fifth grade class. She did, despite a school board order to kick them out. Eventually the school let them officially enroll, probably because they couldn't find another teacher."

In an interview with oral history researchers at Delta State University, Amervina Mei and Grace Bologna Venuti talked about their experiences with discrimination in Delta schools.

"We had two strikes against us," said Venuti, "We were Catholic to begin with and we were Italian. So we were treated like second class citizens."

"I know one boy, who used to bring his lunch to school," she said. "He had sandwiches with the meat and it had garlic in it and they made so much fun of him—he had to put his lunch out on the windowsill. Who became the biggest garlic eaters? The ones that didn't want to smell it."

"I had a big fight with a boy for calling my sister a *dago*," said Mei. "I went up to him and I told him to not call my sister a *dago* anymore."

“He says, ‘You don’t like it?’ I said, ‘I sure don’t like it.’ ‘You want to do something about it?’ I said, ‘I sure do.’ Of course it was a great big boy and he beat me up and I went to the teacher but she didn’t do anything.”

“They ended up making the Italians here stronger and more desirable. If I keep you down your whole life, you will want your daughter to be stronger and have better,” said D’Angelo. “They never got any benefits or subsidies and I think it made them stronger.”

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Chapter IV: Recollections of Early Italian Life

Surrounded by her gardens and horse pens, Libby Borgognoni, 79, grabs her cane and leads a guest into a large, brightly decorated sunroom in her spacious brick home, set on 60 flat acres on the shore of Lake Chicot at Lake Village, Ark.

Here, amid her flowers and Roman statuary, she tends her memories of the early days of the Mississippi Delta Italians.

“We were one of the first people in this area to get ceramic tile, and it took six months to get it from Italy,” said Borgognoni.

That she would want tile from Italy is understandable. Borgognoni is a direct descendant of the first sizeable Delta Italian colony, established at Sunnyside, Ark., in 1895 with Italians who rode river boats up from New Orleans and were dropped off there. They were later joined by Italian settlers from the Greenville area that took the ferry across to Sunnyside.

Borgognoni’s grandparents were among the first boatload of Italians to arrive in the Delta, courtesy of a scheme by Leroy Percy and other Delta planters to replace black ex-slaves in the cotton fields. Her maternal grandfather was distraught over the rough conditions that the first Italian immigrants faced. “He died of a broken heart,” she sighed.

Libby herself grew up in a double shotgun house riding a cotton sack. Through her entire childhood at Lake Village she worked out in the fields helping to make their

living and the crops were just “pitiful,” she said. A mule pulled their plow through the fertile topsoil.

She helped raise gardens. Her grandmother lived with the family and spoke only Italian. She died of leukemia when Libby was 10, but by then Libby had soaked up the rhythms of her grandmother’s language. It never left her. She can speak Italian – one of the rare ones – even today.

It takes her a day or 2 to get back in the rhythm when she travels to Italy, but then she can speak it with the best of them, she said.

Libby began working in the broiling hot fields when she was two. She couldn’t pull the heavy cotton sack but she was given a small sack and she would add whatever she gathered to her mother’s sack.

“As soon as any of us were able, we were in the fields, we had to always be out there,” said Borgognoni, “If it was good weather I would have to stay home, but if the weather was inclement we would go to school and had to make up for all the work I had missed.”

Even though she was forced to miss school and had to make up an enormous amount when she did attend, she never resented her parents’ rules.

“I did very well in school, and I loved to read,” said Borgognoni. “I would read a book every night by the light of a coal oil lamp behind a wood stove heater.”

“My mother, as soon as she had a child, she was in the field,” she said. “The women worked harder than the men, not physically, but longer hours. The women stayed up long past when the men went to sleep – ironing, nursing babies, washing clothes, cleaning the house.”

Her family would buy 25-pound cotton and sugar sacks and that fabric is what Libby's mother, Teresa Petti, would use to make her clothes.

Libby's parents and four siblings would wake up when the sun rose – earlier than any of the workers they had hired to help them pick cotton on their little rented farm. Sometimes, she said, in order to stay ahead, her family would work by the light of moon. They slept on mattresses made of corn shucks. She remembers how every morning she would put her hand in the shucks to stir them up and make the bed smooth and easy.

“My grandmother remembered that one year when she shucked the mattress she found a snake's skin in the corn,” said Borgognoni “Every time I would go to do that I would visualize that and I would just be scared to death.”

Borgognoni's recollections of those early Italians in the Delta provide stark evidence of just how tough, how primitive conditions were on those first farms. As she is quick to point out, Italians were not always the big farmers that so many of them are today and not nearly so prosperous.

Her interview, along with an earlier interview with researchers at Delta State University, provide valuable glimpses at the challenge that faced those first intrepid settlers, especially the infamous colony at Sunnyside. It also shows how many of the early Italians' traditions have disappeared and how many they still cultivate.

“See, over in Italy they were on the *mezzadria* system,” Borgognoni told the Delta State researchers. “*Mezza* means half, so all of these people who lived on these farmlands also had an overseer. You see only the noble and the rich and the lords had lands and it was such a premium value that none of the Italians who didn't own it could ever buy any.

That was what was such a spark that led them to want to come to America so they could own their own.”

Those first Italians came over from Italy not knowing anything about how to grow cotton. They had to learn from scratch, because the temperatures in Italy are mild and not conducive to raising cotton. But once they got the hang of it, as anyone in the Arkansas or Mississippi Delta can tell you, they became very masterful at it.

Borgognoni has always been obsessed with her family’s history and the stories passed down to her by relatives. She is the author of “Italians of Sunnyside,” a local history that she wrote for Our Lady of the Lake Catholic Church’s centennial celebration in 1995. She interviewed hundreds of Italians and made it her priority for months.

She even helped create a small museum dedicated to the Delta Italians in the back of the church. Later on, she helped Father Paul Canonici gather contacts and information from the area for his popular series of books on Delta Italians.

“I interviewed every Italian I could, especially the oldest of the ones still living and they never spoke of their hardships to their children,” said Borgognoni. “They were blocking out the fact that they had left the motherland of flowers and geniuses, investors, poets, artists and everything in the world to come over here to *hell*. They never spoke about it. That surprised me the most.”

Like an abused child, they wanted to bury the painful bitterness of the past and concentrate on the new world they had carved out of the fertile Delta, as if not talking about it would help them blend in and encourage their children to move on.

Even though many of the Italians who crossed the Atlantic in search of owning their own land were depressed by what they found at Sunnyside, they had each other and made the best of their situation, she said.

The Catholic Church provided salvation, literally and figuratively. It gave the Italians a sense of community in tough times. They would come together at the church and make food, turning meals into joyous celebrations of family and religion, she said.

The tradition holds true even today.

On March 1 of this year, Our Lady of the Lake Catholic Church hosted its 105th spaghetti dinner. It was held in the parish hall to raise money for the church.

Borgognoni said the local community – including non-Italians – keeps it going “because they can't get enough of it. They come there in droves and some buy 50-60 orders and they'll freeze them. Most every church that there is of Italian heritage buys their spaghetti. But, we make ours,” she said proudly.

“We get all of the women of the church together who are largely Italian, or who married Italians to come together for two or three days in a row or five or six days in a row to make the home made meatballs, the spaghetti, the bread, the desserts, the dressing. It is all home made.”

It's a major production. Fifty people usually work together to make the dinner. It used to be only women but in the last 10 to 15 years men have helped with the cooking and organizing.

Despite the iron hand with which Italian women traditionally run their kitchens, Borgognoni said, she has many tender memories of her father cooking for the family.

“He made a delicious concoction from the broth of hog backbones,” said Borgognoni, tenderly stringing out each word as if it were a juicy morsel. “He would use corn meal and raisins and eggs. It was divine.”

Italians may have thoroughly assimilated into the mainstream Delta culture, and they may have lost some of the traditions they brought over from the old country, but Borgognoni is quick to point out that they have clung fiercely to some traditions.

“The wine making, the cooking, the farming traditions, close family ties, the weddings and whenever they have the baptisms, there is still a lot that goes on in the way of bringing in relatives and friends to celebrate the birth.”

Della Olivi Pianelli, Libby’s grandmother, had a grocery store. Despite her inability to speak English, her business was very successful. She sold everything – flour, sugar, tobacco, groceries, canned goods, Borgognoni remembers.

But so much of the old ways have changed. Delta Italians were known for their use of garlic in cooking, their dark, oiled hair, demonstrative gestures and their romantic language. Early on, parents were reluctant to let their children date outside of their ethnicity and their faith.

Borgognoni, for example, wasn’t allowed to date until she was 18 years old, demonstrating that the old ways lasted well into the last century.

“My father enjoyed dominoes when he had the chance,” Borgognoni said. “He would hear the other men or boys talking about girls, and he wasn’t going to let anybody talk about his little girl.”

Today, the home life of the American Italians is drastically different from what it was like in Borgognoni’s youth.

Steve Fratesi of Leland breaks eye contact at the mention of family, clearly an emotional subject. “It used to be, we would go to grandma’s house. All the nieces and nephews would all sit down and the house would be full. Now everyone is gone. I’ve got four sisters, their kids are scattered all over, but before we were here.”

“I think it was both a southern thing and Italian thing, I don’t know where you would start one and stop the other. Italians are close no matter what,” he said.

In recent years, Libby Borgognoni has become increasingly concerned about the shrinking population of the economically depressed Delta both in Arkansas and Mississippi. She’s concerned because she knows that Italians are joining that exodus.

“It’s really dwindling now,” said Borgognoni. What, she wonders, will that do to the Italian tendency to gather the family at the slightest opportunity.

“One of my best friends is 88 years old and every Sunday of the year her five children and their families are at her house. She grew up with her mother having all of the family over, so it just carried on from there.”

She believes this is an innately Italian characteristic, not necessarily southern. “Italians are about God and family,” she said. They always have been.

“Because they were close knit in Italy where they lived in these compound homes, they had the great grandparents, the grandparents, fathers and sons, all of their wives all under the same roof,” she said.

Sandy D’Angelo of Greenville agrees that Italians are the most familial people you will find.

“We still have families that get together more than other races of people do,” said D’Angelo. “We will meet and we have Christmas or Thanksgiving or Easter. We would have around 30 or 45 people at the meal and would have 20 to 30 meals for you to eat.”

Now, he said, many families split up and never see each other for holidays. D’Angelo’s family, however, hews to the old ways. They still make massive amounts of ravioli and tortellini for holidays.

“You would never leave my house without a package of sausage or some wine, because we think it’s normal!” said D’Angelo.

It is undeniable that Delta Italian culture today is often synonymous with Southern culture. After all, the Delta is part of the South and Italians have lived in the Delta for more than a century. Southerners, too, often tend to cherish large families, a strong faith, and place importance on food.

“Southern people and Italian people are not like Yankees because of one thing. We enjoy life better,” said D’Angelo. “Yankees are more educated than we are because they stay inside and read only because they couldn't do anything outside.”

But Libby Borgognoni sees strong differences between Delta Italian culture and southern culture. Based on her experience growing up, she thinks mainstream southern culture has traditionally been more about seeing to it that their children were more polished and educated, but the Italians wanted their children to work and earn and make it on their own rather than it being handed down.

“The southern belles didn’t work like the Italian ladies did,” said Borgognoni. “They were more educated. You see, I never went to college; I was never afforded that privilege. I just feel like when I was picking cotton, they were able to take music lessons,

and engage in sports that I couldn't engage in. They were in glee club. I couldn't do that because I went to work every day as soon as my classes were over.”

She says the Delta's current plight goes right back to mechanization of the farms. Prior to that, the Borgognonis had many workers and tenant farmers. Now, farming requires very few employees and, as a result, thousands lost jobs and the economy changed forever.

“We have been to Italy a number of times. They are so much more relaxed,” said Borgognoni. “America has indoctrinated people to believe they must go after that almighty dollar harder than the nations that their ancestors came from – nations that are more relaxed and more family minded and more satisfied with less.”

Borgognoni explains that when she was young many of the Italian girls were encouraged to join a convent, because it was a way out of the hard work. By going, they would no longer be in the cotton fields.

But she also remembers how the Catholic faith that meant so much to the Italians seemed so strange and therefore taboo to many Americans.

Amervina Mei and Grace Bologna Venuti shared much of the same opinion in their interviews with researchers at Delta State University.

“They didn't think that you were even Christian,” said Venuti. “They thought we were like a cult or something. It was horrible.”

“One day, I was clerking in a store,” said Mei. “I heard these prominent citizens from Shaw say, ‘I wouldn't let one of my daughters marry a Catholic for nothing in the world.’ And the other one said, ‘Why?’ Well, don't you know, the priest goes to sleep with the bride the first night.”

Even now, Borgognoni said, she detects a surprising ignorance surrounding Catholicism and its practices. “There was a woman I knew six or seven years ago. When she found out I was a Catholic she said, ‘You aren’t even a Christian.’ She said I worshipped statues.”

Borgognoni had to take time to explain the role religious statues play in the Catholic Church and how they are used to bring spiritual things to the minds of parishioners.

“It makes us more prayerful when we see these things, but we do not adore and we do not worship those statues.”

Libby could not believe that even after her explanation the woman was puzzled, “She had heard differently all her life.”

Phillip Rizzo of Cleveland remembers the disagreements between Protestants and Catholics when he was growing up. But he has grown tired of the arguments.

“If you believe in God, you believe in God,” Said Rizzo. “There ain't no arguing about it. I'm not going to condemn somebody for believing something different than me. That's a lot of prejudice and I've had enough of that.”

If one emotion rings throughout Borgognoni's conversations and interviews with other Delta Italians, it is pride in their Italian ancestry.

They are proud of the fact that their ancestors endured through poverty, discrimination and illiteracy, and prouder still that they never lost their pride or fervor for life.

Joe Aguzzi, 89, of Cleveland recalls how the family gathered whenever precious letters arrived from the old country. His father had attended school through third grade,

so everyone relied on him to translate the precious letters. The parents didn't know English and the children didn't know Italian.

Sandy D'Angelo says one reason Italians have been so successful is that so many of them are able to take nothing and turn it into something.

"My family didn't have enough money to buy a meal," said D'Angelo. "But now a lot of Italians are doctors and lawyers, and my daughter went to Notre Dame. We have successfully increased the education for our children and we've done a lot better."

Ask Borgognoni about Italian pride, as Delta State did, and she becomes downright poetic.

"I'm just a romanticist about loving my ancestry and where we came from and all of the culture and art and music that is and was came from Italy," she said. "I may be very biased in that, but there was a man, Paolo Rocconi, who when he left Italy he says, "Goodbye land of music, land of art, land of culture."

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Chapter V: It's Not Just Food: How the Family Depends on the Table

In the Delta, if you are talking food, you are most likely talking Italian.

On any given day, a conversation about food can lead to what locals call “the three O’s”— Lillo’s, Doe’s and Lusco’s in Leland, Greenville and Greenwood respectively. All three are Italian owned. All three are venerable Delta favorites that have thrived through several generations of the same families.

Perhaps it should not be surprising that Italians own the dominant restaurants in a region otherwise known for soul food and southern cooking. Food has always been central to the lives of Italians, both in this country and in Italy. Food tends to slip into most conversations. And meals have long been a central gathering point for family life, with multiple members of the same family often gathering to catch each other up on the latest news and share family guidance and concerns.

The Italian influence is so pervasive that in the spring of 2013, University of Mississippi journalism student Sarah Bracy Penn, assigned to write a magazine piece on Italian food in the Mississippi Delta, waxed eloquent on how omnipresent it was.

“Today, spaghetti with pasta gravy and meatballs is as much a Delta staple as fried chicken, black eyed peas and turnip greens,” Penn wrote.

Her article, published in “Land of Plenty,” a journalism school magazine on the Delta food, went on at some length on Lillo’s and how Italian restaurant owners seem to be able to merge Italian culture and Delta culture into their menus and decor.

“The authentic Italian-American restaurant,” she wrote, “was formerly an American Legion hall, its simple white clapboard exterior and black shutters in no way alluding to the entertainment held within. Upon entering, diners are hit with a heavy smell of garlic. Family snapshots and portraits of customers litter the cashier’s counter.”

“Similar transformations took place in many Italian groceries. What started as a plate lunch for a few men led to daily herds of hungry customers, all eager for a little taste of Italy.”

“Being immigrants, the best thing they knew how to do was cook good food, so that’s what they did,” said Karen Pinkston owner of Lusco’s in Greenwood, famous for the curtained booths that offer a modicum of privacy and mystery to diners. “After a while, all Italians were in the food business in some capacity, whether it was selling food, cooking food or delivering it. It’s just what they knew how to do,” said Pinkston, who married a Lusco’s heir.

It was much the same with Doe’s, located in a rickety old house in a bad neighborhood with an entrance that takes diners through the kitchen. Doe and Mamie Signa were the original owners. The place is famed for its massive steaks and lemon-flavored salads, originated by Mamie herself.

Doe started the place as a grocery store but soon started feeding people. The place even survived the 1927 flood, when water was several feet deep in the city. Through the years, the family’s influence has remained.

When guests walk into the dining room, the first person they see is 89-year-old Florence Signa, who has been working there for decades. She makes those famous salads, lovingly rubbing the lemon flavor into the wooden bowls. Folks stop by just to find out how she does it. Others ask her to rub their bowls so they can make their own salads.

When she first started 68 years ago, she fried potatoes, then cashiered, seated people, and waited tables. At this point, she has worked any job that Doe's requires. The restaurant, the food, the customers are all like family to her.

Signa grew up out in the country and remembers the important role food played in her early life. She fondly remembers that typical Italian brick oven, *al forno*, out in the yard.

“On Sundays we would all go out and gather all the vegetables. My sister-in-law would cook. When we all got older, all of my siblings and their spouses would drive out in the country, five miles from Greenville down on old Leland road halfway between Greenville and Leland. We would have spaghetti and meatballs, fried chicken, salads, potato salads and homemade bread from the brick oven. We never went hungry.”

Her house is covered wall to wall in portraits of her children and grandchildren. She sits on her comfy sofa that seems to swallow her tiny frame. Next to a pillow embroidered *Home is where Grandma is*, Flo reminisces about her mother's home cooking.

Her memories provide valuable insight into the critical role Italian women have traditionally played in the family, especially in terms of meals.

“We raised eggplant and my Momma said, ‘I’m going to cook eggplant every night until you say you are tired of them.’ I loved eggplant and I said, ‘You are gonna get tired of fixing them, before I get tired of eating them.’”

“When she made the homemade bread, she would fix a casserole of eggplant and tomatoes and parsley. When I got off the school bus I would run and drop my books and sit at that door and wait for her to open the oven for that casserole and homemade bread.”

Born Florence Strazi, her mother came from Bologna to work on a farm near Greenville when she was 4 years old. She and her family lived on Old Leland Road out in the country until Florence’s husband-to-be “came and swept me off my feet.”

They farmed cotton, corn and all sorts of vegetables. Every day they would all go out and gather the vegetables to be sold at the market.

Growing up, Signa said, they were poor country people, but during the depression they raised pigs, chickens, even rabbits. They raised their own vegetables and had eggs. Florence had two dresses for school, one for winter and one for summer. When they wore holes in their shoes her mother would put a piece of cardboard in the bottom until they could raise enough money to buy new ones.

“We were the happiest family in the world, because everybody loved each other,” said Signa. “We would all die for any member of our family. We didn’t go out to restaurants or go out to all those places. We were always together. We were just so thankful for our health and our food and our family. Maybe the bottom line is that we didn’t know any better,” she laughs.

Florence’s husband loved to cook. Doe’s brother, Frank “Jughead” Signa, cooked for his co-workers. He would go hunting and he made what he called “wild kingdom

stew” which had doves, squirrels, rabbits, deer, and anything else they caught. It would be brought to Frank to go in the pot, she said. Frank passed away 26 years ago and Florence Signa shows no signs of retiring from the restaurant that has been her second home for so long.

“It is like therapy for me. I now work four nights a week,” said Signa. “I can stand on my feet from 4:30 to 10:30 and I’m never tired because I am so excited about being there and seeing people and talking to people. Everybody that comes in Doe’s has to come by my salad station and I hug everyone.”

Libby Borgognoni remembers how in her youth, food was at the center of everything. For example, every time someone got married it was a three-day affair with dancing and music, mandolins, accordions and guitars. And food, lots and lots of food.

“In Italy nobody makes pasta anymore,” said Borgognoni. “They go to the *pastaria* and they buy it and it’s like homemade. They don’t make the breads anymore. We make it. The people who came from Italy have held to the Italian traditions more so than the Italians of the homeland, which is incredible.”

It is a way to hold onto the memories and traditions of the homeland, a way to take pride in being Italian.

Borgognoni said the first Italian settlers in Lake Village not only brought with them their love of Italian staples, but they also brought “all of the recipes for cakes, for Easter breads and everything.”

She has published as many of the old Italian recipes as she could cobble together in a book for the Our Lady of the Lake’s Altar Society. It’s called “Italian and European Favorites.”

Even today, Borgognoni says, there are those who hold onto the old ways. Right there in Lake Village, Johnny Grassi has a food bank. But not just any food bank.

“He makes lonzas and proscuitto, which is ham, cured ham and salcicca, which is the cured sausage,” she said.

“We have a Peironi family who also does that. They make wine. Anybody who would ever come, he would send them away with a big gallon of wine.”

Underneath his parents’ home, she said, he had “what we call a *grotta* which was a cellar. It was like six feet under the bedroom area of the house and they would pick berries on the levees or they would buy grapes and then they would mash them and they would put whatever ingredients that were needed into the grape juice and put it into these open barrels and left it to ferment and become wine. But every Italian family that existed in this area had that. I remember that growing up.”

Much of the old ways are gone now. Borgognoni, like Signa and countless others, miss them. But they cling tightly to others, especially the reverence for Italian food.

It is important, they say, to hold onto the best of what you have.

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Exhibit I: Libby Borgognoni's Recollections of a Delta Hog Killing

Spaghetti dinners aren't the only gatherings of Delta Italians that revolved entirely around food. Libby Borgognoni, 79, of Lake Village, Arkansas recalls how in her childhood, Italian farmers used to have "hog killing time." This is her account:

"They would kill all of their hogs, dress out the pigs, do all of the lard, the lonzas, the prosciutto, the salciccia, the sausage, everything that they would make.

"I can remember lying in the bed on those winter mornings and they would build this big bonfire in the back yard and they would put these huge cauldrons of scalding water there and then they would get the pig and hang it up and slit the throat and they would catch that fresh blood and made blood pies. I would hear that hog squeal. I can hear him today. It was just unbelievable.

"There was just such merriment and fun and they would just start scraping the hair off. They would pour that boiling water, scrape the hair off and that pig was as clean and pink and pretty as it could be and you had that wonderful skin with the fat that they made their own lard.

"Then they would take some of that lard and use lye and make their own soap. Then they would take whatever it is that they had to do with the hog to cure with all of the seasonings such as rosemary, the sage, the black pepper, and the vinegar. They beat it and cured it. Then we all had smoke houses where we put all of these things to hang where the sausages had to drain and drip dry so that after a period of time you could just eat it without cooking it."

Conclusion

When the Italians arrived in America they had hopes of becoming landowners in order to escape Italy's *mezzadria* system, but once here they found themselves confronted with a sometimes-hostile native population and tough living conditions. Over time they persevered and prospered, becoming some of the largest landowners in the Delta. Today, the biggest threat to the Italian culture is white flight as people leave the Delta because of school integration, a depressed economy, and farm mechanization.

And there's something else. This classic immigration success story is full of stories that show the warm, effusive personality of so many Italians in the Delta. Yet despite their hospitality and their good nature, there always, *always* lurks the memory of how their predecessors were treated when they came to America. Memories of injustice done to loved ones, to family, always die hard.

My research shows that the Delta Italians possess a strong bond to their roots as Italian peasant farmers, and that passionate love of roots, family and land has led to many of them remaining in farming in the Delta. In a very real sense they have become a classic American success story. Even as many other people, including Chinese, Lebanese and Deltans of European descent, have fled the slumping economy, Italians cling proudly to their heritage of food traditions and love of family and church.

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