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The Italians of Rochester An Historical Review

By BLAKE MCKELVEY

For more than four decades the Italians have comprised the largest group of foreign-born residents in Rochester. They became, in the 1920's, one of the ten major Latin settlements in America; indeed only in Newark and Providence did the percentage of the Italian-born exceed that at Rochester. With their numerous offspring, they have made increasingly important contributions to the city's development. Moreover the progress of the Italian "colony," as it was frequently characterized, now dates back a full century and invites historical review.

Like the Irish, the Germans, and other ethnic groups that settled here, the first Italians who came to Rochester had many characteristics of the pioneers and suffered comparable hardships. As their number increased, friction within their congested quarters and with their landlords and bosses erupted, on occasion, into violent outbursts which the press reported with gusto. The strange ways and dramatic spirits of the Italians attracted keen interest, and soon a group of conscientious ladies arose to champion their cause. But the Italians were themselves ready in the 1890's to organize and assert their rights as residents of an American city.

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Many hastened to become full-fledged citizens. If the incidence of crime sometimes seemed high among the Italians, the strength of their family ties, the eagerness with which they filled all available jobs, and the joy they derived from social intercourse ultimately overshadowed the sinister elements. By the 1920's they were able to win recognition in the economic and political realms and in several cultural fields as well. Their acculturation continued unabated, and if its extent does not even today match that of the Germans or the Irish, the Italians have nevertheless achieved great influence in the city.

The Pioneers

An early account of the Italian migration to Rochester gives the date of the first arrival as 1860 but fails to mention his name. This anonymous pioneer worked as a laborer for three years and then moved to Chicago; he returned in 1864 and found two newly arrived Italian families engaged in making plaster images at Rochester. The state census a year later indentified nine of the city's 50,940 inhabitants as Italian-born, and the federal census counted 16 in 1870. Only in the late sixties do we reach firm records as to the identity of these lonely pioneers.

The first Italian whose name survives was Domenico Sturla. Listed in the directories of the late sixties as an organ grinder, he occupied a house on Carthage Alley in an area known as "Sleepy Hollow," a depressed district north of Andrews Street between St. Paul and the river. Isaac and John Verspelle, two others listed in the 1868 directory, one as a laborer and the other as a gardener, resided north of the tracks. Sturla was, that year, the first to apply for his citizenship papers, and his wife gave birth in July to John Sturla, the first child born to Italian parents in Rochester. Domenico Sturla died in 1874, but his widow later married Antonio Mancini and continued to reside in the city. Other Italians arrived, boosting the total in Monroe

County to thirty, most of them in Rochester, by 1875. The next year Antonio Nucci and Paul Regali were the first to secure their full citizenship rights.

Fifty years later Clement G. Lanni, editor of *La Stampa Unita*, celebrated the anniversary of that event by writing a series of historical articles reviewing the achievements of the local Italian colony. By diligent search he found the names of 36 who had received their final citizenship papers at Rochester before the end of 1890. A few others, who like his father had completed the naturalization process elsewhere, may have been resident at Rochester, but some of those admitted locally had already died or moved away, and the number of voters among the 516 Italian-born residents of that year must have been less than two score.

Most of the Italians who came to Rochester during the seventies and eighties were migrant laborers who did not become permanent residents. Thus a trainload of 305 "destitute Italian immigrants" who were brought to the city to work on a street railroad were soon shipped out again. A graphic account of the conditions some of these early migrants endured came from the broken English of young Antonio Pasche who appealed to the police for protection in 1875. He had fled, he declared, from the hovel maintained by Frank Perosle and his wife in Sleepy Hollow. Perosle, a padrone, had brought Pasche and ten other lads from Naples to America two years before and, after several months in New York, had chosen Rochester as his base of operations. Each lad was sent out daily to blacken boots, deliver papers, or perform other simple tasks, and those who returned with less than a dollar or two were, according to Pasche's story, beaten by the padrone or his wife. Touched by his ragged appearance, the police assured the lad of fair treatment in an adoption home, but nothing further is known of him.

Life was harsh and cruel among these struggling immigrants

during the depression of the mid-seventies. When a succession of Italian women, each with a sleeping baby in her arms, appeared begging alms on Main Street, the police, discovering that several of the babies had been drugged to keep them quiet, drove the women off. A reporter followed one to her destination in Sleepy Hollow where he found her billeted with an itinerant violinist, an organ grinder, and a nut vendor, all in one squalid room. Popular indignation over the heartless treatment of their young sometimes provoked harsh penalties from the police court, but the newly formed Bergh Association, which sought to safeguard the children, protested in 1878 when two illiterate Italians were fined \$50 each because the minor child of one was hired out to play in the other's saloon orchestra—the penalty in this case seemed excessive.

A major obstacle was the inability of the police and other citizens to communicate with these strange newcomers. Neither the officers nor the reporters could investigate the occasional outbursts among the members of an Italian labor gang or in a padrone's family without the aid of Joseph Sandry who sold peanuts from a rig designed as a gondola which he wheeled up and down Main Street for several years during the eighties. "Peanut Joe," as he was known, had left Bologna for Rio de Janerio as a lad and, after serving part of his term in a padrone's family there and in New York, had run off and drifted to Rochester where he found a room on Front Street. Pressed into service on frequent occasions as a court-room interpreter, he also accompanied reporters on their occasional visits to the Italian sector. As the number of these newcomers in the eighties overflowed the old tenements on North Water and St. Paul Streets, many occupied other wretched quarters on South St. Paul or across the river on Front and Mill Streets. Since "each Roman carried a knife," as one reporter testified, Peanut Joe's jolly presence was welcome on more than one count.

Efforts to investigate and correct the unsanitary conditions in these tenements met stiff resistance from the landlords and others who profited by the cheap labor thus assembled. The Board of Health ordered a thorough renovation of the worst block on North St. Paul in 1887, and "Poison Row" as it was called was demolished the next year, yet an observer who rejoiced over its disappearance noted that other crowded tenements had taken its place on North Water, Platt and State Streets and elsewhere. The Italians, he reported, spent little on luxuries or on meat since they favored fruit and vegetables and macaroni, which enabled them to live economically; indeed some of their most enterprising members were engaged in the production and sale of these commodities. The women, still greatly outnumbered, had heavy household duties, yet they sometimes served as the cashier for a padrone, a nut merchant, or a vegetable market. Although they loved brightly colored clothing, they proved frugal guardians of the family horde.

It was in 1889 that several prominent matrons, hearing that a number of Italians had been turned away from the public evening schools because of their inability to understand English, organized an Italian Mission to help them. The mission leased quarters on State Street where the ladies, several of whom had picked up a smattering of Italian during trips abroad, assisted Miss C. R. Cutler whose year in Rome had equipped her to serve as chief instructor. Some 90 Italian men enrolled at the start, but others soon applied for admittance, and the average attendance at the classes held three nights a week jumped from 50 to 70 during the first year.

Organization of the Colony

The ladies taught more than English. They gave some instruction, too, in arithmetic and in American manners, but chiefly they imparted a new self-respect to the hundreds of eager students who crowded the mission rooms annually during

the next ten years. Perhaps even more important was the awareness these ladies and their husbands and neighbors gained of the potentialities as well as the problems of the Italian newcomers in their midst. Yet it remained for the Italians through their own organizations to achieve equal recognition in the community.

Unlike most of the other ethnic groups, the Italians did not immediately establish their own churches and schools. Coming in large part from peasant backgrounds, many retained a strong faith in family and old-country saints and a traditional attachment to Catholicism, but they did not feel the need for a specific church home. Most of those who found homes on the west side attended mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral; those on the east side attended Our Lady of Victory or St. Mary's Churches; yet seldom did they hear an Italian sermon, and few of the priests could understand their confessions. The harsh conditions in the workgang camps and the ragged character of the men's clothing discouraged any attendance at church by these men who comprised approximately half the Italian population during the early nineties. Many of them returned home during the depression, but others found a place as permanent residents and frequently celebrated their good fortune by attending mass.

Since many Italians did not feel at home in these Irish-dominated churches and their clubs, they hastened to establish a number of independent societies. Those who had secured their citizenship papers joined in 1889 to found a local unit of the patriotic and benevolent society Bersagliere La Marmora. Its members acquired flashy uniforms and made their first public appearance as a marching unit in the Fourth of July parade in 1893. They staged an annual ball in Germania Hall on the Italian independence day each April and conducted annual Italian picnics in September. Some Italians with their first papers, unable to join its ranks, formed a new society in 1894,

called the Societa Italiano, which participated with the older Rochester unit and with another from Syracuse in a joint celebration of Victor Emanuel Day in September 1895. Since these benefit societies were nonpolitical, a number of Italian homeowners on the west side met in April 1896 to form the West End Political Club and soon enrolled 250 members. The organization that year of the Italian Columbia Military Band, equipped with 60 instruments, assured these and other societies of appropriate musical accompaniment for their activities.

The society most frequently mentioned in the press was, of course, the Maffia or Black Hand Society. No resident would confess to membership in this terrorist band, and several prominent Italians denied that it had a footing in Rochester, yet the reporters frequently linked an extortion case or a murder to its dread agents. The old padrone system was disappearing, but the mounting tide of newcomers, mostly men, often crowded sixty or more into a dilapidated rookery where each man's knife was his own protection. Their wretched conditions and volatile spirits produced frequent outbursts of violence which the police were seldom able to unravel. The appointment in 1905 of an Italian interpreter, Abraham Laturri, popularly known as Abe Lincoln, and the enlistment two years later of Alexander Elliott, an Italian who could understand and speak both languages, as a member of the force brought improved supervision, yet neither was able to cope with all Italian factions, and both ultimately lost their jobs under clouds of suspicion.

Nevertheless the desire of most Italians for security and progress gradually assured discipline within the colony. Over 300 achieved full citizenship during the nineties and almost twice as many in the next decade. Since, however, the flood of newcomers was mounting even more rapidly, several colony leaders endeavored to strengthen its organization. An Italian Democratic Club made its appearance in 1901 in the 5th Ward

where Michael Cariola soon assumed leadership. The diversity of the emerging forces was revealed by the establishment in these years of local units of such national societies as Regina Elena, Giovanni Garibaldi, Duca Degli Abruzzi, and Joseph Verdi. All of these joined with the older Bersagliere La Marmora in a gala celebration of Victor Emanuel Day in 1904. A year later the Bersagliere La Marmora finally acquired title to old Germania Hall which they converted into a community center for the Italian colony.

The year 1905 marked a turning point. Nicola Iannone established a weekly journal that summer, *La Corrier di Rochester*, and several months later Professor Louis J. Vannuccini proposed the organization of an Italian civic and educational league to be composed of delegates of all societies. Dr. Charles Ferrari and attorney Salvatore Vella, the colony's only other professional men, supported the move. The Italian Protection League, as it was popularly indented on its establishment early in 1906, quickly assumed an aggressive defense. It protested the practice, followed by most newspapers, of headlining as Italian all crimes committed by their nationals—a treatment not usual with other immigrants. It urged the police to enforce the ban against concealed weapons throughout the city and supported a clean-up drive conducted in "Little Italy" the next July. The number of its affiliates and the weight of its influence increased as the popular Garibaldi Society established four units in the city and several other Italian societies made their appearance. Some of the younger men, including sons of the early families, formed the Political Buontempone (Good Time) Club, and in 1909 a newly organized Cristoforo Colombo Society spurred the league to stage a great parade on October 12, the first official Columbus Day holiday in the state. An estimated 20,000 turned out for that occasion and many journeyed to Seneca Park for a gala festival in the afternoon.

The first Columbus Day revealed the improved status of Rochester's Italians. At least half the onlookers were of old American or other ethnic backgrounds. Many of these and other citizens had responded in a more significant way several months earlier when reports of the desolation inflicted by an earthquake in Sicily had inspired a cooperative move by leaders of Rochester and of the Italian colony to raise a relief fund which totaled over \$8,000. Mayor Edgerton supplied city wagons to collect the piles of clothing brought to the school houses by sympathetic residents, and Rochester shipped 19 great boxes weighing nearly three tons to be distributed in the devastated area by the Red Cross.

The contributions received from many Italian families revealed the improved circumstances some now enjoyed. Day laborers still predominated, and these men now performed much of the work on the city streets at a minimal cost to the public. Many others, however, had already become bosses, contractors, merchants, even professional men. A dozen Italian saloons had appeared in the early nineties, and a score or more stores of various types; as the colony expanded these tradesmen multiplied and exceeded a hundred by 1910. Many more found employment in the skilled trades, notably as tailors in the clothing industry where they competed with their more securely entrenched Jewish neighbors. These jobs and those with the work gangs plunged Italians of peasant origin unprepared into the industrial revolution. Several spontaneous strikes by disgruntled work gangs soon attracted the attention of labor organizers who formed locals for them in the hod-carriers and other building trade unions as well as in those of the clothing workers and street laborers.

In their efforts to improve their position many Italians encountered discrimination from employers and landlords alike. Their low-wage standards enabled them to gain a footing in

some struggling firms, however, and their readiness to purchase old houses even in deteriorating neighborhoods, paying for them with rentals from many boarders, hastened their invasion of adjoining districts north of the railroad tracks on both the east and the west sides. Yet the rapidity of their growth after 1905 threatened serious trouble. Fortunately a lengthy letter by Miss Florence L. Cross, published by the *Post Express* in January 1908, served to prick the complacency of many citizens and to rally support for a Housekeeping Center opened on Davis Street a few months earlier. Miss Cross and her backers also established a Bureau for Information and Protection of Foreigners on Frank Street; in 1910 they moved the two projects to Lewis Street to form the nucleus for the city's second settlement house.

Miss Cross, who had also learned Italian as a student in Rome, secured the support not only of several prominent citizens but also of the North American Civic League which quickly formed a local branch to carry on the information and protection services. H. H. Wheaton, its local agent, investigated 53 complaints in 1911 and assisted in finding jobs for 82 registrants. Mrs. Hiram W. Sibley, Mrs. Helen B. Montgomery and other board members visited an Italian labor camp and an industrial crafts class in order to focus attention on their programs. They applauded when the City Club held a new-citizen's banquet at the Powers Hotel on July 4, 1910. That historic event, at which each member served as host to a newly naturalized resident, many of whom were Italian-born, was but the first of a long series of similar banquets dedicated to the fostering of friendly relations between old and new citizens.

These developments promoted the stability of the Italian colony, but the most rapid improvement was occurring among the children. The early indifference to their fate and the exploitation of child labor had long since given place to a desire to send

them to school and to prolong their stay there. Despite the extra cost involved, the majority at first were sent to the parochial schools, yet an increasing number were enrolled in the public schools after 1900. Anthony W. Fromen, the first Italian lad to receive a diploma from St. Patrick's School in 1895, Charles E. Lanni, the first to complete the public school course a year later, and Salvatore M. Vella, the first to graduate from a high school in 1902, were but the forerunners of a great host who crowded schools No. 5, 9, and 10 as well as several parochial schools by 1915, the year in which Clement Lanni was the first Italian to graduate at the University of Rochester. The organization of day and evening school classes in Italian at Schools 5 and 18 and the appointment of Professor Vannuccini to the East High School faculty in 1907 encouraged many adult Italians as well as their children to seek the advantages of an education. While Italian remained the customary language of the home and but few of the men could converse with ease in English, their American-born children increasingly adopted the speech of the school and hastened the acculturation process in most neighborhoods.

The Italians, who considerably exceeded 10,000 in number by 1910, had long since undertaken to establish and maintain churches of their own. The first concerted effort in 1898 to establish a separate Catholic church bore fruit with the dedication of St. Anthony of Padua in the renovated building of old No. 6 School in 1906. The flock gathered there under Father J. E. Gefell had met for several years in Our Lady's Chapel at the Cathedral. Its establishment as an independent church may have been hastened by the plans of the Methodists to erect an Italian Methodist church. This in turn was an outgrowth of a Sunday school held at the First Methodist Episcopal Church since 1902 when the old Italian Mission had moved its headquarters to that location. The Methodists engaged the Rev.

Joseph Vitale, an Italian Protestant, to conduct classes and visit interested families; after four years the time seemed ripe for the opening of a new center on Portland Avenue. It was 1911 before this group was able to acquire a permanent site on North Street where it dedicated its new building two years later. By this time, local Baptists had opened an Italian mission on Hebard Street and local Presbyterians, a similar one on Magne Street. The Catholics, however, retained the support of the great majority and established two additional Italian churches—Our Lady of Mt. Carmel on Ontario Street in 1909 and St. Lucy's Church on Troup Street in 1912. Italian societies in several of the older community churches, where the celebration of favorite Italian days become increasingly popular, helped these newcomers to feel more at home in their neighborhoods.

Some were already contributing in a vital way to the life of the city. The action of a number of Italian lads in reviving and presenting an old Sicilian passion play in November 1908 stirred wide interest and prompted several repeat performances in that and succeeding years. The Italian love of the theater, and especially of opera, added new zest to the community's response to commercial entertainment in these lines. Many of the old organ grinders or their sons found their way into one or another of the community's orchestras, and in August 1913 two all-Italian bands, one directed by Biagio Antinarelli, popularly hailed as "Little Creatore," vied for city-wide favor at Exposition Park.

Of course the majority of the 15,000 Italian-born residents of 1915 and most of their 10,000 offspring participated only as observers in community-wide functions. They were generally content to restrict themselves to the activities of the Italian colony which were often more lively and colorful than those of the city at large. In addition to the numerous picnics and balls of the established societies, many Italians observed the

feast days of their native towns, sometimes in intimate family gatherings as described years later by Jerre Mangione in his delightful, reminiscent novel, *Mount Allegro*, sometimes in great picnics such as that organized by John A. Roncone on St. George's Day each year. Roncone, who came to Rochester as a day laborer in the early eighties, had become a gang boss and a contractor and was instrumental over the years in bringing several hundred of his former neighbors in Pignataro Maggiore to Rochester. His annual picnics grew in size until the number attending exceeded 2000 in 1915.

General recognition of the importance of the local colony came with the arrival of Cesare Sconfiatti to open the first consular office at Rochester in 1911. Mayor Edgerton, Children's Court Judge Stephens, the Rev. Dr. Edward J. Hanna, and other leading citizens attended the banquet given in his honor by the federated Italian societies that April. His arrival proved most timely, for the outbreak of war between Italy and Turkey later that year presented new challenges to young Italians in Rochester and heralded a new era with radically expanded and altered horizons.

The Colony at Its Prime

No major group in Rochester felt the outbreak of the First World War more directly than the Italians. In contrast, most residents of German or English birth were advanced in years and more completely Americanized. Although several small contingents, from Austria, Russia, Belgium, and other countries directly involved, followed the course of the war with keen concern, none responded with as many enlistments as the Italians whose sense of ethnic unity was powerfully stirred by Italy's declaration of war against Austria and Germany. Cesare Sconfiatti reported in May 1915 that nearly 2000 in his 12-county area had indicated their readiness to return for military service. The first entrainment of 61 young Italians brought a

cheering throng to the station on June 17. Similar crowds gathered as successive contingents left Rochester during the next two months. Italian bands played martial music as 866 Monroe County lads, most of them from the city, responded to their homeland's call.

Many Rochester Italians, with brothers and friends already on the battle front, rejoiced when America finally joined the Allied cause. Local recruiting offices soon enrolled some 2000 men of Italian birth or ancestry in the armed services. Of these, 54 gave their lives, one, John A. Sturla, a grandson of the city's pioneer Italian family.

The war not only renewed the ethnic bonds of local Italians but also strengthened their patriotic ties to America. Because of Italy's early involvement in the Allied cause, they escaped the stigma of enemy aliens and experienced, in its place, a new sense of dignity as the Chamber of Commerce not only assumed responsibility for conducting periodic New Citizen banquets but also included two Italian heroes, Col. Americo Pio and Lieutenant Roselli, among those invited to address its forums. The latter, who spoke in Italian, drew a crowd that numbered many who thus made their first visit to that stronghold of the city's business groups. More Italians enrolled in the citizenship classes conducted by the public schools in these years than ever before; indeed in 1916 their number, 983, comprised almost half the total registration. Nearly 1000 received full citizenship the next year, and the number who took out their first papers at this time boosted the total of Italians naturalized in one year to 1440 in 1921.

Local Italians were naturally eager to acquire a recognized place in the affairs of postwar Rochester. Clement G. Lanni assumed the lead in promoting such participation. He helped to merge *La Tribuna* and *Il Popolo Italiano*, two warring Italian weeklies, into *La Stampa Unita* in March 1920. As its editor he

gave full coverage to the activities of the numerous Italian societies and endeavored both to promote the welfare of the colony and to extend its influence in the community. Most of its eight or more pages, issued weekly, were printed in Italian, but Lanni wrote his editorials in English accompanied by an Italian translation. Other occasional articles in English reported the activities of English-speaking societies, such as the Flower City Post of the American Legion, comprised exclusively of Italians. Most of the local news bulletins and the many reports on Italian activities in other cities and countries were printed in Italian and thus helped to strengthen the ethnic bonds of the readers. If the circulation seldom exceeded 3500, the number of readers of each copy must have been large, and the contribution this journal made to the preservation of their Italian heritage must have been great.

In addition to its function as bulletin board and calendar for the colony, *La Stampa Unita* supplied a continuing flow of promotional admonitions. Its first issue urged local Italians to support the current drive of the Rochester Community Chest, which had, only a year before, contributed generously to the relief of Italian war babies. The editor launched a question-and-answer series on American history and earnestly recommended that all readers brush up on that subject and help those who had not yet acquired full citizenship to do so promptly. He called upon and secured the promise of his English-language contemporaries to stop headlining the origin of criminals of Italian birth or background, and when a number of young Italians committed a series of crimes which the daily papers covered without a mention of Italy, he seized the occasion to remind his readers that, if the Rochester dailies could be so considerate, it behooved local Italians to redouble their efforts at self-discipline.

Lanni rejoiced over each successive recognition of Italian

contributions. The visits of three distinguished Italians in 1921, including Ambassador Vittorio Rolandi-Ricci, provided occasions for banquets at the Chamber, with George Eastman present at one of these events. The editor took special pleasure in announcing the opening of the new Eastman Theater since its architectural style was borrowed from the Italian Renaissance and its sculptural ornamentation was Italian in origin; he had frequent opportunities as the years advanced to hail the arrival on its platform of leading Italian soloists and performers. Better still was the news that Maestro Creatore's band, after a popular triumph at the Industrial Exposition in 1920, received a return invitation the next year and for many seasons thereafter.

Lanni brought out special editions on successive Columbus Days and in 1926 issued his 24-page Semi-Centennial number celebrating the 50th anniversary of the first grant of citizenship to a Rochester Italian. Here he reviewed past accomplishments, such as the advance local Italians had made in the clothing and technological industries and the successful establishment of the Italian Business Men's Association. He also depicted the bright prospects opening to able Italians in the professions of medicine, dentistry, law, and education. Most of all he stressed the colony's increased weight in local politics. His edition attracted such favorable notice that the Rochester Historical Society invited Lanni to deliver a paper on the history of the Italians of Rochester and published it in its annual volume for 1927.

La Stampa Unita never tired in its campaign for greater emphasis on education. A second series of historical articles, a hearty endorsement of the action of the Italian Women's Civic Club in granting an annual scholarship to the University of Rochester for many years after 1921, and a congratulatory editorial on three Italian boys who won top prizes in a twelfth grade essay contest were incidental examples of this concern.

The support the paper gave to Italian cultural groups, notably in music and the theater, prepared the way for the colony's hearty response to an invitation extended by the Chamber of Commerce to participate in a Community Music Festival and Homelands Exhibit in 1928. The latter was a repeat of a highly successful festival in 1920; the former was in its turn repeated in succeeding years. The paper also congratulated the Renaissance Club of East High School on the presentation of an Italian play in 1928, the first of a series of such performances. It gave almost weekly notice to the recreational and other activities of the Flower City Post. It supported the efforts of Miss Mary Pulvino, whose annual picnics for the widows and orphans of Italian residents commenced in 1921; it promoted Italian participation in the Knights of Columbus, and generously publicized the activities of some forty local Italian societies.

Yet politics assumed an increasingly dominant place in Lanni's consciousness as well as in that of the colony. Most of the newly naturalized Italians leaned in the early years, as did *La Stampa Unita*, towards the Democrats. Their hostility to prohibition and their opposition to the immigration laws most urgently advocated by the Republicans made support of that party difficult. The Democrats, as the minority party in Rochester, were the first to nominate Italian candidates, although a Republican candidate for constable was, in 1915, the first Italian to win. Cariola's Democratic forces first elected a 6th Ward supervisor in 1923, when two Italians nominated for that post by the Republicans in the 2nd and 9th Wards also triumphed. The latter party elected Cosmo A. Cilano to the state assembly the next year, and the Italians were never again missing from the candidate slates of either party.

Issues as well as men determined the lineup of colony voters. Wilson's veto of the Immigration Bill as his last official act

helped to draw many to his party, and all Italian factions supported a resolution sent to Congressman Jacobstein urging a liberalization of that law as adopted two years later. Indeed Lanni based his switch from Democratic to Republican affiliation in 1926 on Governors Smith's failure to speak out on the immigration question as forcefully as his opponent, Ogden Mills, had done. Yet Lanni, who had been an unsuccessful Democratic candidate for sheriff and for the assembly, was the author of *Beat 'em or Join 'em* and other books on local politics, and he decided to follow the Aldridge strategy and take his paper into the dominant Republican party. His early enthusiasm for the city-manager charter cooled under the administration of Stephen B. Story, and he supported Joseph Guzzetta who as councilman opposed the attempt to make the elections under the new charter nonpartisan.

A new organization, Il Popolo Republican, assumed the task of converting local Italians into Republicans. Formed in 1925 and led for many years by Paul Napodano, it became the local unit of the Columbian Republican League organized by Edward Corsi and other state leaders in 1927. Lanni supported both groups and became editor of the state party's Italian journal. After attending a meeting at which Herbert Hoover addressed and impressed a group of foreign language editors early in 1928, he hastened back to Rochester to indorse Hoover against Smith and may have helped to reduce the latter's following among Rochester Italians that November. Assemblyman Cilano won advancement to the state senate at this time, and Dr. Richard Leonardo became coroner. Nevertheless the popularity enjoyed by both Smith and Roosevelt held eight of the ten most heavily Italian wards in the Democratic column.

La Stampa Unita which expressed hesitant admiration for Mussolini's strong government, endeavored to strengthen its hold on the Italian reading public in Rochester by introducing

a comic strip and a special series on children's problems. It rejoiced when Pasquale F. Metildi of Rochester graduated with highest honors from the University of Rochester Medical School in 1929 and again two years later when Harry C. D'Annunzio, principal fashion designer at the consolidated Fashion Park and Stein-Bloch factories, received one of several papal honors conferred on Rochester Catholics. It congratulated Alfonso Gioia on his election as a bank trustee in 1929 and Anthony Talerico who received an appointment to Annapolis two years later.

Thus the Italians greatly improved their economic position in Rochester during the first quarter of the twentieth century. They held 40 per cent of the jobs in the clothing and shoe industries and supplied several hundred workers to the local utility companies and many more to city contractors. They owned and staffed hundreds of grocery and confectionary stores and barber shops; moreover the Business Men's Association, organized in 1925 by college graduates engaged in commercial enterprises, numbered 45 within two years and increased sixfold in the next decade. Italians advanced in the professions, too, and the pioneer lawyer and doctor of 1905 had each a score of associates by 1930 and many more as the years advanced. The occasional all-Italian radio programs of the late twenties won favor and became a weekly Italian hour a decade later.

The Colony Goes Into Eclipse

The great depression and the great war dimmed the luster of the local Italian colony, yet its eclipse came from the progressive assimilation of its members by the larger Rochester community. Most of the early societies that persisted stressed social rather than ethnic programs, and several new groups appeared devoted to antiquarian or cultural interests rather than to folk

traditions. Even those Italians who specialized in politics displayed greater zeal in the development of power groups than in the promotion of ethnic preserves. Gradually the Italian colony, like the earlier Dublins and Germantowns of Rochester, lost its distinctive character as the new city it had helped to build emerged.

Along with other residents, the Italians of Rochester saw the bright prospects of the mid-twenties fade during the next decade. Lanni was more careful to avoid any mention of the depression in 1929 and 1930 than his editorial contemporaries partly, perhaps, because the Italians, who had increased most rapidly in the twenties, were the first to lose their jobs. That fact inflicted heavy burdens on their merchants and strained all elements within the colony, including its editor. The tenth annual widows' and orphans' picnic in 1931 proved the most successful as several leading societies joined in its promotion. The publication that year of an Italian Directory, listing the occupations and addresses of some 20,000 residents, failed to check the downward trend. A year later when the number of Italians on local relief rolls began to attract unfavorable comment, Lanni protested that it was only because their many jobs at construction work and on other postponable projects had been eliminated for economy purposes; the Italians, he maintained, much preferred jobs to relief and would welcome any move to provide them.

La Stampa Unita staunchly backed Hoover against Roosevelt but failed to swing the Italian wards in that direction. Paul Napodano, who had become president of the Columbian Republican League in the state the year before, faced severe criticism because of defections in the city. Even Lanni warmed to Roosevelt after his stirring inaugural and was able to view the local Republican defeat the next November as "perhaps a good thing" for the party and the city. He congratulated Francis J.

D'Amanda, who had helped rally Italian votes for the Democrats.

The big event for the colony in these years was Italian Day at Rochester's Centennial Exposition in 1934. A chorus of 250 voices, enlisted by 45 cooperating societies, vied with the Civic Orchestra in the rendition of Italian music in a program arranged by the United Italian Civic League. Over a third of the city's 60,000 residents of Italian birth or descent attended, making August 26 one of the banner days. The Valguenera Society formed the year before by descendants of that central Sicilian town, enjoyed a burst of popularity and opened a community center on Bay Street in 1936, where it maintained a scout troop and other activities. The Italian Civic League held a benefit at the Armory for Red Cross flood relief in Italy, attracting a crowd of 12,000 from its 65 cooperating societies. Yet these programs scarcely differed from those conducted by other Rochester groups and tended to emphasize the extent of their assimilation.

Some Italian leaders did sense and protest against a resurgence of discrimination in the late thirties. Lanni among others demanded equal rights for Italian youths to the few jobs available in the hard times. With the object of reviving latent skills, the Italian Women's Civic Club sponsored an exhibit of Italian handicrafts at Gannett House in 1939; the club hoped to launch an Italo-American Educational Center to stimulate unemployed teenagers, but the project lacked the appeal of paying jobs.

Unfortunately the Italians faced an additional handicap in Rochester at the outbreak of World War II when Mussolini's collaboration with Hitler placed those who had failed to secure full citizenship on the enemy alien lists. Of course the Italian societies had long since banned use of the Fascist salute, and some of their leaders had been outspokenly critical of many of Il Duce's edicts and programs. Few Rochesterians doubted the

loyalty of local Italians, and the demand for workers soon assured jobs to all, enabling many to improve their status. Local Italians rallied with other residents when the attack on Pearl Harbor drew America into the war, and many rejoiced with a special sense of relief when the American forces liberated Sicily and southern Italy in 1943. They celebrated Columbus Day with unusual fervor that year happy over the announcement that all restrictions had been lifted from Italian aliens, but another tense year and a half elapsed before they could rejoice over the surrender of the German forces in Italy.

Rochesterians of Italian descent bore their full share of the war's losses, but as Americans, not Italians. Many returned from the war with such a strong sense of national unity that the attempts of the older ethnic societies to emphasize their cultural origins aroused but limited response. Even *La Stampa Unita*, which had changed its name to *The Rochester Press* in 1940 and introduced new features in the English language, finally succumbed late in 1942 as the number willing to subscribe to a colony paper—even one that printed historical articles in a language they could read—declined sharply.

Yet the passing of spoken Italian in the city streets inspired the formation of a new society to preserve its finer qualities. The Italian Cultural Club, organized in 1939 and open to all who could speak Italian, welcomed scholars of varied backgrounds who wished to pursue their study of Italian culture. It was interested in Italian plays and operas, and some of its members helped in 1944 to establish an Italian language summer school, known as *Il Scolo*, which persisted for several summers. The club staged an Italian Mardi Gras at the Powers Hotel in 1946 and continued in later years to cultivate a sophisticated interest in Italian culture. Still another group appeared in the postwar years with the object in this case of drawing Italy more securely into the sphere of American influence. It

commenced in 1942 as a Committee for the Preservation of Christian Democracy and launched a campaign to persuade Italians in America to write to their relatives in Italy, urging a vote for democracy rather than Communism. The Rochester group helped to establish a National Committee of Free Italian-Americans which soon numbered its adherents in the thousands.

A score of the older Italian societies persisted, many with increasingly Americanized programs. The Italian Women's Civic Club celebrated its 25th anniversary by crowning an Italian beauty queen in 1944, a practice it had inaugurated two decades before, but it switched a few years later to an annual fashion show. The Bersagliere La Mamora observed its 61st anniversary with a banquet that drew 100 members and their wives in 1950, but few could recall the days when the society had provided civic leadership to the entire colony. New groups, such as the Florentine Club and the Romulus Club among others, held feasts said to rival those of ancient Rome, yet the lavish succession of dishes, though Italian in origin, came from the fertile soil and affluent economy of America. Indeed the organization of a new Committee on Italian Migration in 1954 represented an effort on the part of leading business interests in the city to stress the opportunities available in America as an inducement for the migration to Rochester of skilled Italian craftsmen.

Although local Italians had failed as yet to produce a mayor, a congressman, or a president of the Chamber of Commerce, they could name distinguished sons and daughters in almost any field of activity. It is not necessary to list here the able and gifted lawyers, physicians, artists, and scholars they have produced, nor the business executives, labor leaders and civil servants, for most of them are still at their prime. Few have attracted wider fame, however, than Sam Urzetta who won the

national amateur golf championship in 1950 and was chosen "outstanding athlete of the year" by a Buffalo jury.

Even most of the basic Italian institutions have in large part been Americanized or absorbed by other community organizations. With the dispersal of the Italian colony, as the second and third generation moved out to other sections of the city and its environs, two additional Italian Catholic churches were established, St. Francis of Assisi in 1929 and the Most Precious Blood Chapel in 1930, but the use of Italian has gradually declined in these and in the three older Italian Catholic churches. Only at Our Lady of Mount Carmel does the Rev. Charles J. Azzi conduct two weekly masses in Italian. The three Italian Protestant churches gradually became bilingual during the late forties and all have since been merged or absorbed in other churches. A continuing stream of newcomers from Italy has helped to retain the use of Italian in Catholic confessionals and has preserved it as the official language of one Amalgamated local, but even there the pressure for the adoption of English and other American forms is strong as those of Italian ancestry outnumber the migrants two to one.

Yet the steadily declining percentage of residents of Italian birth in the old wards of their concentration, resulting in an eclipse of the colony, has not extinguished its influence, which has spread in diluted form throughout the city as residents of Italian ancestry have increased to approximately a fifth of Rochester's total and have assumed their full weight in the community—in industry and labor, in both political parties, and in high and low cultural activities.