

THE STEELE'S STORE COMMUNITY

During the 1860s Italians were to be found in every state in the Union, despite the limited number of them who immigrated to the U.S. The first Italian settler came to Bryan in 1868 after having lived in Houston for two years previous. He was a shoemaker by trade. (Unfortunately, his name is not mentioned in this reference.)¹ Between the years of 1880 and 1914 nearly four million Italians arrived in the U.S., eighty percent of whom were from the provinces south of Rome and the island of Sicily. In 1909 overpopulation became a serious problem within that country, and Italians were encouraged to emigrate. Known to be thrifty and hard-working, the Italians were much sought after and preferred over other European laborers.

Steamship travel across the Atlantic improved, and trips which had often proved arduous became safer and more comfortable usually lasting from ten days to two weeks. The convenience of being able to depart from Naples, Palermo, Messina, and Genoa was an important factor, and Naples soon became the leading European port of embarkation for emigrants going overseas.²

Railroad companies were looking for unskilled labor for construction and maintenance work and hired padrones, or labor agents, for recruiting. As more male immigrants became established in America they began to help each other secure jobs. Consequently, more and more began bringing their families with them. To promote the movement of Italians to farms, the Italian and United States governments, individual states, and even private agencies supported the establishment of agricultural colonies throughout the country, especially in Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama.

Early Italian settlers to the Brazos Valley were often assisted with travel and living expenses by businessmen of that area and by the local Agricultural Benevolent Society, which was formed for that purpose.

By 1911 the largest Italian agricultural colony in the South, numbering at least 1,700 persons, was located in Brazos County.³ It is thought that over fifty percent of the Italians who settled in the lower Brazos Valley in the early 1870s came from Poggioreale, in the province of Trapani, Sicily, and the rest from Cefalu, Corleone, and Salaparuta in the province of Palermo.

Since most of these immigrants reached the United States through the Port of New Orleans, many found it necessary to take jobs in the sugar cane fields of Louisiana cutting cane until a number were able to earn enough money to move to Texas. Many of these settled at Steele's Store, a community located approximately 10 miles west of Bryan and about 2 miles north of Texas 21. A part of the "bottom lands" of the Brazos River⁴ this community was formerly called "Mudville" and later named Steele's Store for Henry B. Steele, who had built a small general merchandise store to supply the families with a few necessities. Farming in the Brazos Valley was not easy for these immigrants since the area was prone to very severe flooding, particularly during the years 1885, 1899, 1900, 1913, and 1921.

The trip to Bryan on horseback or by wagons was quite long. In 1910 an interurban railroad was built from Bryan to Steele's Store, but improper management and lack of funds caused it to fail.⁵ Not only did this store provide a convenience for shopping but it soon became a social center where the farmers tended to collect around the big wood stove and "swap yarns" and play checkers on rainy days and other slow times.

"From 1850 to 1882 a prison farm was located in the Brazos Bottom adjacent to this area. The prison labor was used in building a levee along the river to prevent floods. When the slaves were freed in 1865 there was a shortage of labor on the plantations; therefore, these prisoners were hired out in chain gangs to do the field work. The prisoners were kept in iron cage like wagons at night and were exposed to mosquitoes and the cold, damp air. Diseases spread through these camps rapidly and many men died without any attempt whatsoever to save them."⁶

The floods of 1899 were quite disastrous, and heavy losses were suffered in cotton, corn, sugarcane, melons, small fruits, and livestock. The majority of landlords, mostly of Anglo-Saxon stock, gave the tenants the opportunity to take the land rent-free and make what crops they could during the remainder of the season, even going so far, in most instances, as to furnish fresh seed for the tenant to plant. This was done partly to keep the tenant from leaving the plantation and partly to prevent the growth of weeds and prepare the land for next year's crop.⁷ The total area covered by the flood was about 2,300 square miles.⁸ Many became discouraged and moved away, but the vast majority of the settlement stayed on to battle the elements.

In order to encourage settlers to come to this area, the government offered large tracts of land to anyone bringing in a large number of families willing to try their luck. The land was rich, but the enormous task of clearing and draining often proved too much for the immigrants. Malaria became prevalent because of poor drainage and proved to be a hazard. Therefore, the land could be purchased for less than five dollars per acre so that this was an enticement for some.⁹ According to the tax receipts filed at the Brazos County Courthouse the average size farm purchased at the time was 69.3 acres.¹⁰

After a more effective system of flood control was established, the Italian immigrants successfully raised cotton, corn, and other crops. They lived on farms that varied in size from one hundred to four hundred acres, and most were owned by the family. As farmers, the Italians were considered by some to be superior to the local laborers. Some of the early Italian settlers to this particular area were the families of Dominico Angonio. Joe Bonano, Antonio Cangelosi, Pietro Catalina, Luca Collette, Vincenzo Courte, John DePuma. Manuel DePuma, Giovanni Fazzino, Antonio Salvato, and Antonio Varisco.

They introduced new methods of farming by cultivating gardens and trucking to local markets. Today, cotton is one the principal crops grown in the Brazos Valley. Remnants of an early cotton gin may also be found in the area.

In 1889 a one-room school house was built in this community at what was then known as Bryan junction, but is now Varisco junction. Reading, writing, arithmetic, and spelling were the only subjects taught from the first to the seventh grades by Mr. E. D. Closs, the school's first teacher. The equipment was very poor, and the students had to buy their own books. Long, rough handmade benches holding six pupils were used instead of the single desks now found in even the most remote rural schools. The building was heated by a large wood stove, for which each student's parents furnished a certain amount of fuel. Each student was also required to carry a certain amount of the drinking water from the well up to the school house for the water barrel located on the back porch. Serving on the school board of this rural school were early settlers. John and Manuel DePuma.¹¹

Later, in 1894 another school was built about five miles farther down on the Steele farm. This made it more convenient for the pupils in that area.

Six years later these two schools were consolidated into one large school, but this building was destroyed by fire in 1924. While awaiting the construction of a two-story school building, classes were held in the homes of the teachers. The new structure was designed by J. M. Perrone, Sr., and consisted of four large classrooms downstairs and a large auditorium upstairs. Each year more equipment and supplies were purchased until it had a fairly sufficient supply of maps, blackboards, reference books, and other classroom equipment. Water fountains, book lockers, butane gas stoves and a piano were also purchased. Later a radio was added and a Works Progress Administration library, which was available to the general public. The school was used until the mid-1940s and is still standing today.¹²

Because this immigrant settlement was predominantly Roman Catholic, it was often visited by the priests from St. Anthony's Church, which was built and established as a parish in Bryan in 1896. In 1903, the San Salvador Catholic Church was built across Texas 21 from the Steele's Store settlement. Father A. Petillo was the first pastor of St. Anthony's and served the outlying districts, such as Steele's Store, as well.

Family gatherings in connections with the activities of the Church were the chief source of entertainment during that time period and continue to be so today. The celebration of the St. Joseph's Altar on or near March 19 is an ancient Sicilian tradition which the immigrants brought to the United States. Today it is still one of the more celebrated Church holidays. St. Joseph is revered as the patron of peace, a happy home, and charity to the poor. Families devoted to him extended hospitality to all who come to their door.¹³

Families desiring to honor St. Joseph get together prior to that date for the cooking and baking of traditional Italian foods. As a rule, an altar has three sides consisting of a stair-step arrangement of wooden shelves in a pyramid fashion and covered with lace cloths and decorated with small statues of Saint Joseph, as well as, Jesus, Mary, and sometimes other saints. Floral arrangements and many varieties of traditional Italian cookies are included. Elaborately decorated cookies with a fig filling, small cakes, *biscotti* and *nelli* (small rings) are still among the most popular recipes served. In addition, a traditional Italian spaghetti dinner is served to the hundreds of guests attending. Since this holiday usually falls during the Lenten season, meat is not used in the cooking. During the week preceding

the actual Feast Day, prayer services are held each evening during which the Holy Rosary is recited. On the Feast Day a group of people selected to represent the Holy Family, march in a small procession toward the altar. Afterwards, they take their place at a special table to preside over the festive meal while the guests eat. Generally, several families come together to prepare a St. Joseph's altar so that several may be found throughout the Brazos Valley.¹⁴

Descendants of many of the original Italian settlers still farm and reside in the Steele's Store area, which still produces quality crops today and plays an important role in the economy of the Brazos Valley.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 United States Congress, Senate. U.S. Industrial Commission on Immigration and Education. *Recent Immigrants in Agriculture*. Part 24 of *Immigrants in Industries*. 61st Congress, 2nd Sess. Senate Doc. No. 633. June 15, 1910. Serial Set #5682. p. 350.
- 2 Boykin, Rosemary E. *The DePasquales. From Italy/Sicily to Texas*. College Station, Texas. 1986. p. 17.
- 3 United States Congress, Senate. U.S. Industrial Commission on Immigration and Education Italians in the Southern States. *Abstracts of Reports on Recent Immigrants in Agriculture: Italians*. Vol 7., 1911. p.567.
- 4 United States Congress. Senate. U.S. Industrial Commission on Immigration and Education. *Recent Immigrants in Agriculture*. Part 24 of *Immigrants in Industries*. 61st Congress, 2nd Sess. Senate Doc No. 633. June 15, 1910. Serial Set #5682. p. 349.
- 5 Boykin, p. 18.
- 6 Moore, John William. *A Social and Economic Study of the Italian Settlement, Steele S Store, Texas*. Thesis: MS, Rural Sociology. Texas A&M College. February 1941. p. 15.
- 7 United States Department of Agriculture. Bureau of Statistics. *The Brazos River (Texas) Flood of June-July 1899, and Its Effects upon the Agriculture of the Submerged Regions*. Circular No. 10. Washington. GPO. 1899. p.3.
- 8 Ibid. p. 4.
- 9 Moore. p.16.
- 10 Ibid. p. 22.
- 11 Ibid. p. 25.
- 12 Ibid. p 26.
- 13Lapaglia, Toni (ed.) *Italian American Favorite .Recipes from the Kitchens of St. Anthony's Parishioners*. Bryan, Texas. 1986. pp. 5-6.
- 14Ibid. pp. 7-8.

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4. Lapaglia. Toni (ed.) *Italian American Favorite Recipes from the Kitchens of St. Anthony's Parishioners*. Bryan, Texas. 1986.
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7. Nelli. Humbert S. *From Immigrants to Ethnic: The Italian Americans*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press. 1983.
8. United States Congress, Senate, U.S. Industrial Commission on Immigration and Education. *Italians in the Southern States*. Abstracts of Reports of the Immigration Commission (1911), pp. 566-572.
9. _____ *Recent Immigrants in Agriculture*. Part '24 of *Immigrants in Industries*. 61st Congress, 2nd Session, Senate Doc. No. 633. June 15, 1910.
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11. The University of Texas at San Antonio, Institute of Texas Cultures. *The Italian Texans*. San Antonio, Texas. 1973.