

Thesis Abstracts

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By the turn of the twentieth century in the midst of almost every significant urban centre of Canada and the United States, there existed a so-called "Little Italy" or "Italian Colony." These were sections of cities or towns where the recent Italian immigrants lived in overcrowded dwellings. The purpose of this study of Fort William's "Little Italy" is to present an analysis of the experience of Italian immigrants within the context of this particular Canadian setting from the beginning of the twentieth century to the second World War.

The subjects who made up the phenomenal current of emigration from the Italian peninsula did not represent a cross-section of society. They were overwhelmingly contadini (peasants) and artisans from rural Italy. A burgeoning North American industrial capitalism was the magnet that drew the contadini to the New World, and upon their arrival they joined the ranks of the proletariat. Thus, an analysis of how they functioned in their new occupational role and inevitably how they influenced the course of industrial relations at Fort William is one of the major areas of concern of this study. Contadini were generally perceived by Canadians as being docile people who readily accepted very low wages and in doing so lowered the standard of living of the native working class. This local study demonstrates that this perception was only partially true and that the contadini formed the vanguard in several significant labour struggles in the pre-World War One era. Equally important in this regard is to consider how the contadini's militant reaction toward industrial capitalism influenced their status within the community.

For the Italian immigrants, the transition from their agrarian world to an urban, industrial North American environment was a particularly complex process. Almost overnight the contadino immigrant was faced with having to learn to work and live in a milieu radically different from his pre-industrial background. One of the stumbling blocks in his path of adjustment was his general inability to master the English language of the host society. This handicap was aggravated by the generally hostile reception accorded to the contadini in their new communities where they were considered "undesirable foreigners." For these reasons Fort William's "Little Italy" came to encompass the residential but even more importantly the social perimeters of the Italian immigrants. What was life like in a "Little Italy" in Canada? The aim of this study is to provide some answers to this question.

One of the most popular cultural resources which emerged in most of the "Italian colonies" in the adjustment phase of immigration was the

mutual aid or benevolent society. So far little historical probing has been done into this immigrant North American institution as historians have tended to view such societies with considerable suspicion because of the aura of ritual and secrecy that has surrounded them and the inability of most historians to cope with the foreign language in question. A detailed case study of such a benevolent society, Società Italiana Di Benevolenza--Principe Di Piemonte from its inception in Fort William in 1909 and throughout the period under consideration forms another important aspect of this thesis. This case study reveals that collective action was a necessary vehicle for the establishment of a coherent social life within Fort William's "Little Italy." The benevolent society became a pivotal secular moral force and thus an informal agent of social control. It was at this collective level that the contadini articulated the theoretical framework that regulated their lives in the adjustment phase of immigration.

Because the Italian immigrants usually intended to make their journey a temporary affair and because they were received in North America as "undesirable foreigners," the model of adjustment had to take into account this double-edged dilemma. The model which the founders of the Principe Di Piemonte articulated did reconcile these two factors. Individuals were called upon to live their lives in Canada with the view of doing honour to the Patria (motherland), for in doing so they would become better accepted by the host country. In practical terms this meant that the contadini were to display respectable behaviour and cultivate mutual material and moral assistance amongst themselves. This simple and practical approach promoted stability in the social life of Fort William's "Little Italy," as the contadini retained their Italian connection and thus their identity while at the same time striving to become "respectable" members in their new community.