

# The Sicilians of Louisiana

BY JOSEPH L. CACIBAUDA

In September 1900, Giovanni Cacciabaudo, age 21, left his family in Sant'Anna di Caltabellotta, Sicily to emigrate to America. He kept no journal of his voyage because, like 80 percent of his countrymen, he was illiterate. In spite of the unification of Italy in 1860, three-fourths of Sicily was still owned by wealthy land barons, who lived in comfort while the island's peasants struggled with poverty, hunger and disease. School was a luxury few could afford.

Sicilian peasants like Giovanni worked the land as sharecroppers, giving a sizeable portion of what they grew to their landlords. With future prospects dismal, Giovanni had taken the advice of a local recruiter and signed a six-month contract to work on a plantation in Louisiana during sugarcane season, the *zuccherata*, for \$20.00 a month plus room and board.



Italians were considered “the missing link” between the white and black races when they first arrived in America.



Giovanni Cacciabaudo left Sicily in 1900 to work on a Louisiana sugar plantation.

He was also given a \$22.00 ticket in steerage aboard the *SS California* sailing from Palermo to New Orleans. He would be paid half his salary each month with the balance coming when he completed his six-month commitment, but he would be docked pay if there was bad weather and he could not work or if he got sick.

Contracts like Giovanni's were the norm for Italian and other immigrants in the South, according to Vincenza Scarpaci in her definitive book, *Italian Immigrants in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes*.

Why did Louisiana need Sicilians? Simply put, for manpower. The Civil War emancipated the African slaves that had worked on the sugarcane plantations. Many headed north while those that remained demanded better pay and working conditions. Southern planters solved the problem by recruiting workers from Europe – a measure other southerners opposed. They did not want immigrants -- especially ones from Sicily.

## White or black?

When Giovanni arrived in New Orleans on October 21, 1900, he entered a new world that considered him neither black nor white, but the missing link between the two races. Labeled a member of the “in-between” race, he and other newly arrived Italians were sometimes housed with black workers instead of sharing quarters with other white workers.

Italian immigrants were also lynched – a punishment reserved almost exclusively for blacks in the South. The lynching of 11 Italians in New Orleans in 1891 is the larg-

est mass lynching in U.S. history. It was not an isolated event. Historian Peter Vellon estimates that between 1890 and 1915, 47 Italian immigrants were hanged by vigilante mobs – most of them in the south.

## Plantation Life

On the plantation, Giovanni was housed with other unmarried men in a large dormitory, heated with a wood-burning stove and lit by kerosene lamps. The next year, he married and moved to a small apartment on the plantation where the couple had a small vegetable garden for their own use.

Work in the fields began at 4:30 A.M and ended at sundown. Sugarcane needed many workers from planting to grinding. Since Sicilians were seasonal hirelings, they were assigned unskilled tasks of hoeing, cutting cane, digging ditches, weeding, and other menial chores.

These so-called *dago jobs* paid the lowest rate of 60 to 75 cents a day while the cane cutters, loaders, the overseer, and other specialized laborers earned up to \$1.25 a day. The Sicilians' pay scale and unskilled work further defined them as low-class and of inferior intelligence.

## Moving Up

By 1900, Louisiana had the highest number of Italian farm laborers in the United States, about 18,000, mostly Sicilian. At around the same time, U.S. sugar prices began falling due to imports from Cuba, Puerto Rico and Hawaii.

Finding themselves short of cash, plantation owners began offering Italian workers parcels of land on the plantations where they could grow crops that would be shared with the owners as rent. Sharecropping had followed these immigrants to America. But other landowners sold parts of their land outright. Many Italian immigrants would pool their family's savings and earnings to buy their own land.

One of these was Giovanni, who began growing and selling vegetables and fruits as a truck farmer. Other Italian immigrants left farming to become wholesale food



Sicilians got the worst jobs and were paid less than other workers on Louisiana sugar plantations.

distributors, grocery store owners, saloon keepers, and restaurateurs. Joseph, Felix, and Luca Vaccaro and three D'Antoni brothers, for example, formed the Standard Fruit and Steamship Company on the New Orleans waterfront and eventually owned banana plantations and shipping companies.

Over the years, the descendents of many Sicilian sugarcane workers moved up the ladder of success in America, according to Joseph Maselli and Dominic Candeloro in their book, *Italians in New Orleans*.

**Antonio Monteleone**, for example, came to New Orleans in 1880 as a cobbler. By 1886, he owned a 64-room hotel he gave his name to, which is still operating. Other famous Italian Americans of Louisiana include **Nick La Rocca**, who formed the first jazz band in 1914; **Dr. Felix Formento**, who pioneered skin grafting and **Adelina Patti**, the world's first international opera superstar.

Today, **Mary Landrieu** of Louisiana is the first woman of Italian heritage to serve in the U.S. Senate. Her father, **Moon Landrieu** was once mayor of New Orleans and the family believes one of its relatives, named Macheca, was among the victims of the aforementioned New Orleans mass lynching.

The Sicilians who came to "la Merica" left behind all that was dear and familiar. "*Fatti coraggio*," – "Be brave" – their fathers would tell them as they said goodbye – usually forever. It was good advice. They needed courage to face life in the sugarcane fields of Louisiana.

*Joseph L Cacibauda is the author of "After Laughing Comes Crying," a novel based on his grandfather's experiences working on a sugar plantation in Louisiana. (136 pages; paperback; \$14.95. Order from Legas Publishing, P.O. Box 149, Mineola, New York 11501*

*Contact author: <http://sites.google.com/site/afterlaughingcomescrying/>*



**Adelina Patti, (1843-1919) one of the most famous sopranos in history, was the daughter of Salvatore Patti, a Sicilian tenor. [Portrait by Franz Winterhalter]**