

— HISTORY —

# Italian immigrants energized city for years

*Part two of two*

In 1879 Charles Dondero, a fruit dealer, became one of the first Italian immigrants ever to settle in Willimantic. Several families arrived during the 1890s to work in the cotton mills, but the largest influx came in 1899, arriving as builders for the construction of American Thread's Mill No. 5.

More Italians arrived in 1907 to dig the foundations for American Threads Mill No. 6 and were paid \$1.75. However, their arrival caused some controversy in the city. They were housed in a shantytown camp at Sodom, and their weekend celebrations caused friction with Sodom's French Canadian community.

The next batch of Italian immigrants came to the city from New Jersey and New York City in 1911 to work in the Ernst Rossie Velvet Co. mills on South Street.

The Rossie Velvet Co. employed over 200 people, and manufactured silk and velvet cloth. In

1912, Frank and Nicolena Melo opened a grocery store on Main Street, and catered initially for the town's growing Italian population, serving families such as the Insalacos, who worked as weavers at the Rossie Velvet Mills.



Tom  
Beardsley

Some Italian immigrants also found employment at the Turner Silk Mill on Bank Street. In 1917, a strike at the Rossie mills brought the establishment to a standstill. Ernst Rossie fired the strikers, and brought in replacement workers from New Jersey, many of who were Italian.

The next wave of Italians came to Willimantic in 1928 after the establishment of the Willimantic Silk Co. and the Kobe Weaving Co. in the vacant cotton mills on Bridge Street.

For example, the 1932

Willimantic City Directory reveals newly arrived Salvatore and Angelina Guarneri, warpers working at the Willimantic Silk Co. and Michael Spinnato, a weaver at the Kobe Silk Co.

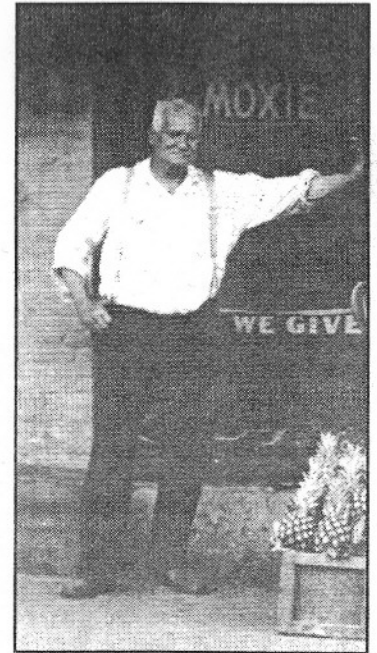
By the 1930s, the local Italian-Americans had formed two voluntary societies, the Guiseppe Garibaldi Lodge No. 267, and the Princess Yolanda Lodge No. 1526 Sons and daughters of Italy, who met at the Elks Club on Pleasant Street.

On June 19, 1932, the lodge held its first Italian Flag Day celebrations. Joseph Rumpella was the general chairman. Frank P. Lombardo was marshall of the program and Michael Carusillo, Paul Locrasto, Camilla Santa Lucia, and Joseph Cerreto assisted him in his duties.

The assembly met at the corner of Valley and Walnut streets at 1:30 p.m. The march began at 2 p.m. from Valley to Jackson, where services were held at St. Joseph's Church to bless the American and Italian flags.

The marchers then paraded up Union and Main streets to Bridge, and then up Mountain and down Pleasant to Elks Park, where "patriotic exercises" were conducted. The marchers consisted of the police, the Elks band, the Connecticut National Guard from the armory on Pleasant Street, the American Legion, James J. Shea Post, and Italian organizations such as the Loggia Gloria from New London, and the Logia Fratellanza of Hartford

Frank T. Cunningham was the master of ceremonies at the Elks Park, and the ensemble was welcomed by Mayor James H. Hurley. Attorney V. F. Denezzo of Hartford was the principal speaker, and Alderman Rocco Palloti of Hartford, Alderman Pasquale DeCiccio of New Haven, followed him upon to the podium. Concluding remarks were by Harry Gaucher, exalted ruler of the Elks. The day was considered a great success, and the lodges continued their annual flag day until the 1950s.



*Onofrio Lombardo of Palermo, Sicily, founded a confectionary and fruit store in Willimantic in 1903. This picture is from 1910.*

This digitized version of Tom Beardsley's article is made possible by The Willimantic Public Library. All Tom's articles and much more Willimantic history can be accessed at the library. We are grateful to the copyright owner, "The Chronicle" for permission to reproduce this article. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.