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Fiesta's Founding Families:

From Sicilian immigrants' early struggles, a celebration was born

One hundred years ago, they boarded boats for Boston or New York, then trains for Gloucester, Sicilians no more.

They came from the northwest coast of Sicily, emigrating from an island to an island and from fishing port to fishing port, settling in the cold, dark, unheated tenements of the Fort, isolated by choice and hostile circumstance, custom and language.

They came to be free of poverty, oppression and discrimination so extreme Booker T. Washington found his own black people in America's South far better off than the Sicilian peasants he'd seen.

They knew that here, as they did there, they would fish and took it as an article of faith that their labors on the sea would lead to a better life than the one they left behind.

What they didn't know - nor thought much about in the struggle for shelter, food, boats, bait and tackle, according to recollections of members of Gloucester's founding Sicilian families - was what they were going to be beyond immigrant settlers.

Americans they were not and would not be until naturalization years later. For the first years here, they were nothing but families - fishing families.

Only the sea that lapped their toehold in America was familiar to them. Where they landed was where the city's poor fishermen for decades had been conveniently relegated - so close to the docks that ice chips off trucks that bumped up and down Commercial Street's granite cobbles could be scooped up by urchins and run home to keep fish and, now and then, meats.

In 1909, among the very first to call the Fort their home, according to city records, were the Frontiers - Paoli, 31, Antonio, 28, and Guissippe, 20.

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They shared a cold-water flat at 28 Fort Square with a 25-year-old listed as Salvatore Favazzo. His real name was Salvatore Favazza. The city officials who kept the census had yet to learn how to spell or pronounce the names of these young fishermen from Sicily.

Changing names

The language of the Fort and the city was English. It was spoken by immigrants as well as the natives - more than half of Gloucester's 28,000 residents were down from Canada, and 21 percent were from Ireland.

Of the more than 75 men living on Fort Square in 1909, only the three Frontieros and Favazza spoke Sicilian-Italian.

How quickly that would change. In just eight years their language would become the language of the Fort as a Sicilian-Gloucester community formed, sunk roots, fished and lured families from their former home ports of Terrasini and Marsala to join them. They bore American children, and they gained confidence.

In 1909, No. 2 Fort Square facing Commercial Street was occupied by fishermen named Landry, Welch, Olson, McEachern, Riley, McCullum, Budrow and Frelick.

By 1917, it was home to fishermen the census identified as Tony Fonteria, Philip and Sam Ventiniglia, Joe Paris, Joe Rathazo and Tony Gentle - more likely, Frontiero, Ventimiglia, Parisi, Randazzo and Gentile.

In other houses, Ciaramitaro, Cucuru, Nicastro and Aiello replaced Parsons, Amero, McDonald and Hodgkins.

Not all of the newcomers came directly from Sicily.

Salvatore Favazza went first to Detroit to work the railroad before settling at 28 Fort Square.

Salvatore Linquata's grandfather and Jennie Ciaramitaro's father got off boats in Boston and stayed briefly to try fishing from there.

But the big city was too big, the problems of fitting in and even getting to the boats too arduous, as they discussed in oral histories taken in 1978 for the Sawyer Public Library.

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Linquata's family took the train north to Gloucester. His grandfather "heard about this little town - it was easy to get to the boats," Salvatore Linquata said. "It was one of the safest harbors in the world, easy to get into."

Ciaramitaro's father moved the family from Boston to San Francisco to fish, but his "mother got homesick for Boston. Father said, OK. Then he discovered Gloucester."

Oppressed in Sicily

As the early emigres made room for more kin and near kin, their isolation deepened.

They were moved to leave their homeland by treacherous political changes that pushed those already on the bottom even further down.

The Italian peninsula and its great cousin of an island - for millennia the Mediterranean's Grand Central Station, a strategic battlefield and melting pot of African, Greek and Italian influences and a native culture - were united into a nation in the 1860s that promised democracy and equality.

But Italy, like the United States, was divided between an industrial north and rural south. And as in the United States, after Italy's unification, the industrial north held and played the good cards.

Taxes were placed on mules, the beast of burden for poor southerners, but not on the cattle owned by wealthy landowners. Taxes were raised on the wheat that the southerners used to make their staples, bread and spaghetti, but not on the corn raised in the north, Natalie Johnson notes.

"The new Italian government taxed those who could afford it least - the southern peasants," writes Johnson in her 2005 Princeton University history thesis on the Sicilian emigration to Gloucester, "Rocking the Boat," which is on file in the Sawyer Public Library. The same thesis quotes Booker T. Washington on the plight of Sicilians.

Poor Sicilians left to escape the authority of government. They arrived here ready to help feed a nation exploding with immigrants from other parts of Europe with fish that now could be caught more easily and in greater numbers with modern technology and shipped quickly and safely in refrigerated rail cars.

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But they brought with them their well earned Sicilian suspicion of uniformed authority, and they had no initial need to assimilate. From their Sicilian-Italian speaking Fort, the men went to sea with one another, often in gaily painted little power boats purchased with pooled scrapings of cash.

"Flexible and protective," their "kinship system" of labor organization, as Russell Borne notes in his book, "The Views from the Street," was ideally suited to spikes and crashes in fishing. It also prolonged their insularity. "In lean times, the working age males were rotated about the fleet, each having a chance to earn his worth," Borne writes. "In richer times, money went into the purchase of more boats and the hiring of cousins on the fringe of the family circle. No one ever starved ... all members of the family used their minds and talents for more productive and rewarding lives." Borne recalls the wisdom of a Fort philosopher: A boat will buy a house, but a house will not buy a boat. The first property in Gloucester the Sicilian immigrants acquired floated.

Life in the Fort

In the first decade of the Sicilian settlement, 1917-1927, as they found their sea legs and settled in, they were lucky when they were just ignored. The Gloucester Daily Times relegated the "Italian boats" to back pages and didn't deign to name their captains as it troubled itself to do with the English-speaking boats.

In the Fort, as at sea, life was precarious.

"Italian people were called all kinds of names," Jennie Ciaramitaro Auditore recalled. "We were treated rough" while living in flats with no electricity or toilets, but more than enough cockroaches.

On bare feet, children ran after the low-lying carts carrying fish up and down Commercial Street to claim what fell off or could be pilfered, Auditore said.

The gleanings supplemented a basic two-meal-a-day diet of "coffee and Italian bread for breakfast, spaghetti, one egg, fish and vegetables for supper," according to Rosalie Favaloro oral history at the Sawyer.

"We had steak once a week," her husband Leo added. It was sliced from the side of beef that was carried in on a wagon that regularly circled Fort Square, along with wagons of pots and pans and vegetables and fruit from the farms in Bay View, Riverdale and Rockport. The women had no more need to enter Gloucester proper than the men.

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Just after the immigrants filled the Fort in 1917, they were visited by the influenza epidemic. It took children and elders alike in an unmatched culling and brought visits from uniformed soldiers knocking on doors.

A nightmare begat a nightmare that the immigrants thought they escaped when they left Sicily.

Jennie Ciaramitaro Auditore recalled the Fort's fright, not knowing the National Guardsmen were searching for the infected to be taken into quarantine. "Whoever was taken away," she said, "never came back."

Her brother "was very, very sick," she said. But when the guardsmen knocked, a neighbor with whom her family shared a door whispered to whisk him into her apartment so "they won't get him."

He was saved from quarantine but did not survive influenza.

Fiesta is bornIt was the children who learned English first as the schools began lacing the immigrants into the larger community. The Ciaramitaros - or "Giammagos," as the name was written by hand in the census book - were destitute after Jennie Ciaramitaro's father, Rosario, was partially paralyzed by a blow to the head while fishing.

"He pulled us through; my mother pulled him through," she said.

And in shoes supplied by the nuns, Jennie Ciaramitaro bravely walked up Commercial and Washington streets each weekday, together with two boys, a Nicastro and a Linquata, to attend elementary school.

"I was the first Fort girl to graduate from the Forbes grammar school," she said. "I managed through ninth grade" which then was taught at the Collins School, on Prospect Street near the site of the McPherson Park apartments.

For graduation in 1921 or 1922 from the Collins School, Jennie's mother prepared for a proud occasion.

She "made this beautiful, beaded, white silk dress," Jennie recalled. "It was really out of place."

Then Mayor Wheeler Percy called her name - or tried.

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"Mayor Wheeler mispronounced my name," she said. "Ciaramitaro was a worthy name. He mispronounced it so badly that I could have climbed under a chair and cried and hid. It was real bad."

Five years or so after Jennie's mortifying graduation, in 1927, Salvatore Favazza - the man who came in from Detroit to settle in Fort Square with the Frontiers in 1909 - found in his community enough self confidence to organize the first St. Peter's Fiesta.

It didn't reach beyond the Fort. The Times paid no heed to the first fiesta or the following three.

But in 1931, the immigrants from Sicily opened themselves up; they gave their fiesta to their adopted city, and Gloucester adopted it.

The Times finally took notice. "With the Italian colors proudly flying beside the American flag," the paper reported, "the Italian quarter of this city is radiant with a festival spirit ..."

In the bargain, Gloucester took for itself a rich and powerful cultural identity.

"Today," Jennie Ciaramitaro Auditore said in 1978, "the Ciaramitaros are well known, and it's being pronounced correctly. Everybody has learned to say Ciaramitaro."