

## Italian Americans in California



East on Balboa St. from 15th Ave. Aug. 1927. Shows parts of the auto after the valise explosion loaded with Nitro-Glycerin killing Dominick Crawford and sending Angelo Luca to the hospital. They are members of the Italian Black Hand.

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### Room Two: The Big Immigration (1880-1924)

#### Organized Crime

It is time to put to sleep a few myths about Italian immigration to America. The hand of Italian organized crime had little hold on the Italian communities of California in the second half of the 19th and first half of the 20th. This does not mean that organized crime did not exist in California, on the contrary, organized crime controlled many prostitution, gambling, and bootlegging rings in the state, but this crime didn't have a predominantly Italian flavor. There are two other industries in which organized crime had a strong influence, those being film making and politics. It is slightly ironic, then, that the enduring stereotype of Italian immigration, that of the Mafia, was perpetuated in California by Italian-Americans through the use of cinema when actual Italian colonies in California were much less likely to contain mob elements.. One other major organized crime connection to California was that Al Capone was held in Alcatraz Prison from 1934-1939 partly because he had so little hold in San Francisco.

While there is not a comprehensive answer as to why Italian organized crime did not prosper in California as much as other areas, three factors seem to have played a big role. First, most Italian immigrants to California were from Liguria, as opposed to Sicily, where the organized crime syndicates we know as the "mafia" has the largest influence. Second, there seems to have been a quicker ascension to the middle-class in California for Italian immigrants than there was on the eastern seaboard. This is probably related both to the smaller community as the 20th century unfolded, as well as the availability of land and agricultural success that often followed it. The third factor is that Italian-Americans were able to assimilate much more quickly in California than elsewhere. This was due to the relative lack of prejudice against Italian-Americans in California, as well as their economic mobility. This was partly due to the success of Italian Americans in rebuilding Little Italy after the earthquake of 1906.