The Major Immigration Years: 1880s - 1930

1880s Earthquakes, soil erosion, and high taxes in southern Italy, all exacerbated by the newly unified government, encourage Italians in the regions south of Rome and Sicily to leave, at least temporarily. Overpopulation and the French capture of the wine industry were strong incentives for northern Italians to emigrate, and the majority of these moved to California and other western states. While approximately 80% of Italian migrants to the United States are from southern provinces, 80% of the Italians in California are from the northern regions. Men make up 75% of the migrant population, and many of them go to Latin America in the winter months for agricultural work. Most left with the intention of sending money back to their families and eventually returning to Italy.

1882 The Oriental Exclusion Act increases the demand for Italian agricultural labor.

1883 Anthony Caminetti is the first American-born Italian-American to be elected to the state assembly.

1885 The Italian Chamber of Commerce on the Pacific Coast is founded. Also at this time, the Italian-Swiss colony is formed. In 1888 Pietro Rossi becomes president of colony, and his name lives on in the most famous wine vineyards in California.

1890s The Sutter Home winery is opened in Howell Mountain. Meanwhile, Pierce’s Disease ravages Italian wineries in southern California.

1891 Anthony Caminetti is the first American-born Italian elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.

1900s Sicilian family units begin arriving in California in large numbers.

1904 The Bank of Italy is founded by Amadeo Giannini (it later becomes the Bank of America).

1906 A major earthquake devestates San Francisco. However, Little Italy rebuilds relatively quickly in comparison to other neighborhoods in the area.

1908 L’Italo Americano is founded by Gabriello Spini in Los Angeles.
1910 San Francisco has 16,918 Italian immigrants, mostly from northern Italy. Italian truck farms produce crops worth approximately $19 million dollars.

1911 Anarchists, socialists, and IWW members (many of whom were Italian immigrants) fought police in what became known as the San Francisco Free Speech Fight.

1913 Anthony Caminetti is appointed by President Wilson to serve as Commissioner of Immigration.

1920s The ratification of the 18th amendment puts California vineyards into economic crisis. The situation is not helped when Prohibition forces vinters to market their products as "sacramental" wine or medicinal elixirs. Meanwhile, this time period sees a new wave of immigrants from Italy which includes World War I veterans and political opponents of Mussolini. The Italian population of Los Angeles nearly doubles from 9,650 in 1920 to 16,851 in 1930, a surge due in part to a downturn in the Italian film industry which encouraged many Italian film technicians and filmset designers move to Los Angeles.

1924 The Immigration Act is passed, setting quotas for admission and limiting Italian immigration more than other countries.