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SOCIAL STRATIFICATION : THE

RESEARCH TOPIC

MODULE IV

SOCIOLOGY 121

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION: THE ITALIAN
COMMUNITY IN CRANBROOK, B.C.

by

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A

INTRODUCTION

This essay is about the Italian community in Cranbrook, British Columbia; the circumstances of their arrival here, their assimilation into the community at large, and their somewhat paradoxical survival as a distinct ethnic group. The researchers assume of their readers a familiarity with the concept of social stratification and both its applications and implications in Canadian society. The essay will attempt to locate the Italian community within the prevailing social stratification system and describe how and why they have come to occupy this position. The story is not a simple one.

Reference material concerning Italians in Canada is minimal; concerning Italians in Cranbrook is nil. Therefore, most of the information and opinions presented here have been gleaned from interviews with four Cranbrook residents of Italian ethnic origin. Two are males; a schoolteacher, 35, and a priest, 48, while the other two are a housewife, 50, and a secretary, 24. They do not represent what we believe would be an accurate cross-section of the Italian population, but because of a high positive correlation of answers to a set series of questions we believe them to be sufficiently reliable and accurate sources of information for the purposes of this research. The set of questions used is included in the essay as Appendix A. The interviewer was not restricted to only these questions, however, and much interesting and valuable information was obtained in further conversation. The other main source of material was Montrealese Antonio Spada's book, *The Italians In Canada*, published in 1969 as the first in a series about Italians in this country.

THE ITALIANS IN CANADA

Before talking about the Italian community in Cranbrook, it is useful to look at the history of Italian immigration to Canada. Although the first Italian to set foot on Canada's future soil did so in 1497, it was not until almost 400 years later that the first wave of immigrants landed here "en masse" in 1895.¹ Actually they were more migrants than immigrants - they came as seasonal laborers, 150,000 strong, to work for the summer and return home with their savings in time for Christmas. This type of migration was prevalent for several years until it became evident that it was a marginally profitable venture and that real economic success could only be gained by longer term immigration.²

There are several important facts to be considered about these immigrants. They were recruited primarily from several small areas in the north and in the south of Italy - thus they brought with them the peculiar features of local areas as well as the old rivalry between northerners and southerners. These men were usually from poor families and quite often without trades. They came to Canada as unskilled labourers to work on the westward-expanding railroads^{and} in the mines of Ontario, Nova Scotia, and British Columbia, and in the factories of Montreal, Toronto and Hamilton. Professionals, skilled tradesmen and even farmers were very seldom included in a party of immigrants. They left a poor country filled with expectations conjured up by railroad advertisements of a "promised land" - their universal reaction was one of great disillusionment with the life of hard work and poverty they were obliged to lead upon arrival.

Immigration continued quite strongly, however, until the beginning of World War I, and resumed at a slower pace from 1919 until 1925 when laws were passed making entry into Canada for people of Italian

origin very difficult. This policy was continued until 1947 when Italians sponsored by relatives or employers were again allowed to immigrate. Over 200,000 people of Italian birth were allowed to enter the country between 1951 and 1961, compared with total Italian immigration figures to date in 1931 and 1951 of 42,500 and 57,800 respectively.³ This leaves a generation of Italians virtually unrepresented in Canada, and this period serves as a sort of boundary line between the two generations. ✓

The members of generations which have arrived since 1947 are in a somewhat different situation from those who came before them. Generally speaking, they had more money and were better educated than those who came before them. They were not faced with establishing themselves in a totally foreign and undeveloped land; they came to relatively stable economic and social community established by the "pioneers". Nevertheless, the recent Italian immigrant, while frequently a little "higher" on the ladder of social stratification than earlier immigrants, find themselves just as frequently below the position of the pioneers' sons and daughters. They, too, represent another significantly different component of an Italian community. ✓

British Columbia ranks third among the provinces in its Italian population - 17,207 in 1951 and 38,399 in 1961.⁴ Some authorities claim these figures are much lower than the actual numbers. The figures are for Italians born both here and abroad. They are certainly not numerically accurate in 1974 because the high level of immigration has continued well into the 60's, but do give some idea of Italian numbers here. A figure of 80,000 for 1974 would probably not be too unrealistic.

THE ITALIANS IN CRANBROOK

Cranbrook is a city of about 15,000 ethnically mixed but largely English - speaking people centrally located in the eastern Kootenay River Valley. The city itself was not a major destination of the original wave of Italian immigrants to this province. In the Kootenays, Rossland, Trail, Kimberley and Fernie were favoured spots because of the employment possibilities in the mines in those areas. Nevertheless by 1939 an estimated 75 families had settled here and comprised about six to seven percent of a total population of slightly under 5,000. The earliest immigrants worked for the CPR which had a regional depot here: others came to work in the small mills and logging operations that soon sprang up. Here is the story, more or less typical, of one of Cranbrook's first Italian residents:

seems to contradict your earlier statement about the background of early immigrants
Giuseppe Mauro, a young policeman in his native Chiasso province, came to Cranbrook in 1907 with four of his fellow countrymen to work on a CPR section gang. He wanted to escape a life of poverty and "no future" in Italy and make his fortune in "a great new land". He found life here terrible. The work was long and hard, the living conditions, a run-down company bunkhouse, were dirty and uncomfortable. The winters were long and hard. There were only a small number of his countrymen to remind him of his home. But although he was greatly disillusioned with the realities of Canadian life, he was determined to succeed.

When war broke out in 1914, he joined the Canadian army and returned to Italy to fight. Demobilized overseas in 1919, he married an Italian girl and returned to Canada in 1922 leaving his bride at home until he could establish a new home in Canada. This time he

settled in the Crows Nest area and worked underground in the coal mines. He finally sent for his wife in 1928 and they worked and lived in "the Pass", he at the same job, for the remainder of their lives.

Naturally, some of the original immigrants neither joined the army or moved away. They continued to work at their jobs, sometimes working until they could establish small businesses of their own. It is significant to note that the Italians were concentrated almost exclusively in the unskilled and semi-skilled occupations. ✓ Consequently there were no Italians here amongst the early settlers who became wealthy or influential outside of their own small community. The emphasis was on having a steady job, one's own home and upon family and Italian community activities. They sought security, stability, and a life without poverty.

Perhaps the biggest barrier to any sort of occupational and vertical class mobility was their almost universal lack of ability to communicate in the English language. This coupled with their general lack of monetary wealth and education, left them virtually at the bottom of the class structure in Cranbrook, only slightly higher than a small Chinese population who had the additional disadvantage of being an Oriental race. Their religion, too, was a "minority" one although the effects of this fact on their status here is difficult to determine.

An interesting feature of early Italian life in Cranbrook was the concentration of Italian residences in two small areas adjacent to the two main companies employing these original labourers. The area bounded by Little Van Horne St., Wattsville Rd., 3rd Street S. and 3rd Avenue South includes many neatly kept, small, older dwellings

*A small map
would be useful
for the reader.*

built by the Italians who worked for the CPR. A similar sized area centering on Briar Ave. N.W. and 4th St. N. housed the men who worked at the old Cranbrook Sash and Door Co. Ltd., mill, which has since expanded its operations and become Crestbrook Forest Industries. These homes were often built together by groups of countrymen who felt that they must provide a decent home for their overseas wives and families to induce them to stay in this rugged wilderness.

Life for the early immigrant was hard but not lacking in its rewards. Life revolved around the smaller community with its heavy accent on social and religious activities to maintain cohesion among the members of this group. In the 1920's an organization known popularly as "the Italian Lodge" was formed "for the betterment of the Italian people". The immigrants found a need to converse in their native language and talk about their homeland, and also a need to "overcome their suspicions" about their new milieu. For, although there was little overt social discrimination, some felt they were being taken advantage of by their employers because of their ignorance of the language and of their "rights". Through this organization newcomers were alerted to expect a certain rate of pay, certain hours of work and other norms of business procedure. As the lodge expanded the scope of its activities, recreational activities such as "bocca" (a form of lawn bowling) and card games and social events such as public dances were incorporated on a regular basis. These public activities helped integrate the Italians into the larger community, as did the English language classes sponsored by the lodge.

Religious activities also had a wide-ranging significance for Cranbrook's Italian residents. Most of the families and especial-

ly the women, were devout Catholics and regular churchgoers. Here again was an opportunity to mix with the larger community outside of an economic context, for the Italians were always a minority group in the parish and attended the same church as the other Catholics. A child's first communion was always a great religious and social event, an effective "rite of passage" into a more mature position in the community and always an occasion for a large celebration among kinfolk and friends. The church hall was also a focal point for recreational and social activities which tended to mix the norms and standards of the new and old worlds.

Essentially, however, the immigrant lived his life within the boundaries of the working class. By 1930, several Italians had managed to save enough to start small businesses, including a grocery store and a hotel. But the main hope for advancement in the larger community rested on the shoulders of the community's most dynamic asset, its children.

The new immigrant might find himself condemned to a life of hard work because of his lack of education and ability to speak English, but he was aware of the implications of these limitations in terms of economic and social success and was determined they should not impede the mobility of his children. A very great emphasis was placed on obtaining the best possible education and great encouragement was given the child to embark upon a professional career. The sons and daughters of parents with little or no formal education came to regard a college education as a natural or expected course to follow. The diligence and determination of both generations has resulted in the wide scale "liberation" of these children from the

people often say that they regard themselves as Canadians, while

limitations of the working class, almost solely by the vehicle of higher education.

These people now add an entirely new dimension to Cranbrook's Italian community rising in many areas to prominence in their chosen fields. For example the mayor, the regional planning chairman, the county court judge and their parish priest are all sons of Italian immigrants born in B. C. The leading contractors and sub-contractors are mainly Italian. Italians own many prosperous local business and are employed as teachers throughout the school system. These positions were virtually out of the range of possibility for the immigrants of fifty years ago.

There is some indication that this phenomenon has a particular relation to British Columbia. The level of education reached by B. C. males of Italian origin in the labor force is almost 20 percent higher than the national average for Italians.⁵ They exceed all other ethnic groups except the French in terms of this excess above their respective national averages. The reason, perhaps, that the Italian national average is the lowest in Canada is because of the high rate of immigration compared with the Italian population already here.

So through education, young Italians obtained better jobs, more money and more authority and prestige in the community at large. But the other side of the coin was assimilation, the blending and shaping of the immigrant son into the Canadian matrix. As he spent more time and energy outside his ethnic community, he became more like those outside of his community. Although there is no known incidence of name-changing, the new Italio-Canadian tended to play down the Italio and emphasize the Canadian. Indeed, these people often say that they regard themselves as Canadians, while

Italy is merely their country of ethnic origin. There is a tendency for these people to participate in the community in terms of their socio-economic level rather than their ethnic affiliation. There remained little contact, material or otherwise, with their parent's homeland.

Indeed, as the older Italian immigrants passed away and their children and childrens' children increased, a distinct community might have virtually disappeared had it not been for the third and largest component of Cranbrook's Italian community, the new immigrant. He shares many of the characteristics of the "old-timers". He comes from Italy, poor and uneducated by North American standards, to a country whose language and people he hardly knows. In a social and economic sense, he faces the same problems as the old-timers - he cannot communicate so he cannot find a high-paying, high-status job. He too works for the CPR, for Crestbrook, for the City of Cranbrook maintenance Department and for some of the Italian businesses already established in the community. Sometimes this immigrant may have a trade and be able to make relatively better wages than his forefathers, but essentially he is relegated to the socio-economic status of those two generations earlier.

These men and their families are estimated to account for almost two-thirds of Cranbrook's present Italian population of approximately 1,000. Because of current immigration laws giving preference to relatives and friends of the old immigrants, many came from the same towns and villages as those who preceded them here. They revived old manners and customs, and the lodge and other specifically ethnic pastimes flourished again. These newcomers

have also established a highly homogeneous residential area, centering on the intersection of 4th St. N. and 16th Ave. N., and extending several blocks in all directions. The homes reflect the tidy moderation of the first Italians, although they are somewhat larger and better equipped.

There is a possibility that the same pattern as evidences with the first generation will reoccur. The second wave of immigration from Italy once heavy, has slowed down to a trickle. It is estimated that no more than half a dozen families arrived here last year. Meanwhile, the children of the early-comers in the late 1940's and 50's are preparing to enter the labor market. It remains to be seen whether they will repeat the pattern of the children of the first generation and become heavily assimilated into the larger community. If so, then maybe the existence of a distinct Italian community might once again be threatened.

But upon observation of the second generation of Italio-Canadians born here, one notices another variable opening up new possibilities. These children, while considering themselves totally Canadian, have an increased awareness and pride in their ancestry. While none of the Italians interviewed said they felt "inferior" to people already here, the first generation born here has tried to play down their ancestry. Now their children want to learn the Italian language, customs and history, perhaps in an attempt to "locate" themselves in a rapidly-changing world. Whatever the cause, this phenomenon gives the survival distinctive ethnic community here a better change than it would have otherwise had.

PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED IN RESEARCH

Several problems were encountered in attempting this research, some of which are a reflection of the limited time available and others a function of a lack of suitable sources.

As previously mentioned, there was no written material, historical or otherwise, on which to draw. The "facts" were obtained by personal interview. Those interviewed were from the first Canadian-born generation and their information given about the other generations may or maynot be completely accurate. Subjects from these other groups would quite possibly give the same facts a different kind of emphasis. Unfortunately these people are largely outside of the social circle of the researchers and even if they were included there would not probably be a communication problem. Here the time element comes into play and seriously limits the general access to these sources. Scientific accuracy is obliged to play second fiddle to convenience. On another level, one might question the absolute accuracy of verbally transmitted facts in comparison with written historical accounts. There seems to be little alternative to these verbal accounts unless one wished to launch an exhaustive search for personal records of events, lodge meeting minutes, old telephone directories, etc. This, too, was not feasible.

Another problem deserves mentioning. In team research there seems to be something of a phenomenon similar to the loss of momentum in an energy transfer - the eight ball continues at a slightly slower speed than the cue ball was travelling at impact. Similarly research done by one person and described by another can suffer in the trans-

Normally the opposite is true. Team members bring different skills & perspectives to the problem so that the final product is greater than that which could be produced by an individual. In your case you both worked on the same thing - i.e. interviews.

mission of information. Under these circumstances a tape recording of the interviews would be of great benefit to the writer to complement the notes taken at the time.

AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Some of the more obvious areas in which further research could be profitable have been hinted at in previous section. A more exhaustive study would include interviews with representatives of all generations, even if an interpreter were required. Although the general themes would probably be similar to those presented in this essay, there would certainly be a wealth of elaboration and variation on various aspects of community life.

There are also several areas which were not explored or related to the social status of the Italians in the community. Attitudes towards family and marriage, and particularly the widespread non-use of consumer credit amongst Italian-born immigrants would each have some bearing on their position in the stratification system. A study of greater depth might also try to ferret out some of the historical factors which tend to differentiate Italian immigrants from those of other lands, in order that their relative stratification might be more completely understood. A questionnaire designed to reveal subjective impressions of Italian people about the nature of the status system and their place in it would also be of considerable interest. In short, there are many different aspects of research which could be profitably employed to bring out a more complete picture of Italians in Cranbrook.

FOOTNOTES

Note: Certain facts and figures quoted were obtained from interviews and will not be individually acknowledged.

1. Antonio Spada, The Italians in Canada Montreal: Riviera Printers and Publishers Inc., 1969. p. 74.
2. Ibid. p. 75
3. Ibid. p. 135
4. Ibid. p. 140
5. Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, "Ethnicity, Religion and Educational Advancement" in Curtis, J.E. and Scott, W.G., Social Stratification: Canada Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, 1973. p. 150

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APPENDIX A - Field Interview Questions

- 1) When did you come to Cranbrook?
- 2) What brought you here?
- 3) Did many others come with you.
- 4) Were you able to find work?
- 5) What was life like for you at first?
- 6) What was life like for the others?
- 7) Did Italians tend to live together in specific areas?
- 8) Where there any attempts to organize Italian groups or organizations?
 - a) social
 - b) fraternal
 - c) educational
 - d) religious
 - e) cultural
 - f) other
- 9) What kind of work did people do generally?
- 10) When were Italians just able to own their own companies and businesses?
- 11) Was there a tendency to employ mostly other Italians in these businesses?
- 12) What was the community's reaction to the first group of Italian people to come to town?
- 13) Did the Italians or Italian community as a whole feel discriminated against by other people.
- 14) Has there been a change in attitude by people here towards Italians?
- 15) Do Italian people tend to stay together in a more or less tightly knit community or is there a tendency towards an assimilation into the community as a whole?
- 16) Why? (answer for no. 14)
- 17) What is the community feeling about intermarriage? about the family?
- 18) Are there specific things that Italians have done to become more Canadian, like changing their names to a more English sounding one or taking special English courses?
- 19) I understand the Italian parent often stresses very highly the value of higher education - What is their purpose in doing this?
- 20) Do religious beliefs or activities tend to be considered important in the community? What role do they fill in the Italian community or is this a very personal kind of activity for the churchgoer?
- 21) What was the general status or social standing of the old immigrant in the community as a whole?
- 22) Has this status changed from what it used to be?
- 23) Why (why not?) has it changed?
- 24) Do you feel there is room for Canadian of Italian descent to make it to the top of this community?
- 25) What does it mean to have the mayor, the regional planning chairman and the Catholic priest all being Italians?

Does it increase the social standing of Italians generally in the community.

- 26) How do you feel Italians compare in (rank) status with other ethnic groups in the community - Germans, French, English
- 27) Are there "cliques" or social groups within the Italian community in Cranbrook - a differentiation say between the new and older waves of immigrants.
- 28) Is there still a strong reference to Italy - return visits, Italian newspapers etc.