

Italians in Walla Walla Collection, 1917-2011

Overview of the Collection

Creator	Italians in Walla Walla
Title	Italians in Walla Walla Collection
Dates	1917-2011 (inclusive) 1917 2011
Quantity	3.5 linear feet
Collection Number	HTM_WCMss145 (collection)
Summary	Materials related to people of Italian heritage in Walla Walla, Washington compiled by Alice L. Williams.
Repository	Whitman College and Northwest Archives Whitman College and Northwest Archives Penrose Library, Room 130 345 Boyer Avenue Walla Walla, WA 99362 Telephone: 509-527-5922 Fax: 509-526-4785 archives@whitman.edu
Access Restrictions	None.

Languages

Historical Note

Italian immigration to Walla Walla, as with many ethnic and cultural groups that came to the United States, worked in a "stepping stone" fashion. A few individuals ended up in the United States after their military duty ended and some entered the country through Ellis Island to seek a better life far from home. The west coast was flourishing, which attracted settlers to mine for gold, purchase land and engage in farming. One such individual was Frank Orselli who is thought to have been Walla Walla's first Italian settler.

Born on April 27, 1833 in Lucca, Italy, it is thought that Orselli remained in the United States after his engagement with the Fourth Infantry ended. He came to Walla Walla in 1857 when the town consisted of a few shacks and land was cheap. Orselli used his military pension to invest and by 1865 he was the owner of 180 acres, ran multiple businesses and was known for his vast orchards.

Extensive Italian immigration to Walla Walla is thought to have started around 1870 and it was success stories, such as the one of Orselli, that attracted hundreds of immigrants. Patterns of immigration started to evolve as primarily Italian men came to the Walla Walla area to work in agriculture from the 1870s to the 1890s. Initially, a large number of Italians came from the northern part of Italy. They were known as the "Milanese" and they set up quarters near the downtown area of Walla Walla. Another group of Italians began to migrate from southern Italy and Sicily. Known as the "Calabrese" they tended to settle in College Place. There was little communication between the two groups in the early years, and both kept their distance which, over time, may have contributed to a lack of upward mobility and Italians in the region slowly faded.

The story of Pasquale Saturno illustrates the immigration pattern that most Italians followed in gaining access into the Walla Walla community. Saturno came to Walla Walla alone, in 1875, with nothing but his expertise in gardening. He soon partnered with fellow Italian agricultural worker Joe Taschi and together they started their own gardening business. As their wealth grew they began sponsoring Italians to come from Italy to work for them with the promise of receiving land if they worked hard to help build the company. Over time, entire Italian families were brought to Walla Walla as men earned enough money to bring their wives and children from Italy to settle in Walla Walla.

There are several historic elements that must be highlighted when talking about Italian immigration to Walla Walla. One of the early contributions of the Italian community, in Walla Walla, was the donation of a seven foot statue of Christopher Columbus which stands on the Walla Walla County courthouse lawn. The statue was privately funded by ninety-eight Italian families and a large parade was held on October 12, 1911 to unveil the statue. This gift demonstrates the extent in which Italians had become integrated into the community.

Another well-known Italian contribution can be attributed to their horticultural skills. In the early 1900s, a French soldier settled in Walla Walla and started growing and cultivating an onion that, unlike the conventional onion, was large and sweet in taste. The onion was given the name "The French Onion". As it turned out, the soldier had picked up this strand of onion on the Italian island of Corsica. Soon, the Italian farmers noticed the popularity of this Italian onion and by 1915 hundreds of Italian gardeners were involved in perfecting the size, texture and sweetness of what is known today as the Walla Walla Sweet onion, an onion that has helped put Walla Walla on the map.

Throughout the years the Italian community grew and their involvement, in the community, took place in all areas of employment, politics and social life. Nevertheless, the families always stayed closely in contact and are proud of their heritage. On November 24, 1985, the Italian Heritage Association was formed by Lila and Ray Locati and it still plays an active role in the community hosting many events and providing scholarships.

Content Description

The collection is well-organized and chronicled. The materials included provide the historic background of Italian immigration to Walla Walla throughout the period of the mid-1800s to the present day. Binders, containing information about specific families, trace the routes of immigration, the growth of their families in Walla Walla and their contributions to the community. There are photographs and newspaper clippings as well as subject information on onions, truck gardens, religion, stories, Italian Jesuits and the Columbus monument. A collection of handouts and notices, provided by the Italian Heritage Association, is also included.

Administrative Information

Names and Subjects

Subject Terms :
Italian Americans

2011



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