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A PADRONE LOOKS AT FLORIDA: LABOR RECRUITING AND THE FLORIDA EAST COAST RAILWAY

by GEORGE E. POZZETTA*

THE YEARS SURROUNDING the turn of the present century constituted a golden era of railroad construction and consolidation in Florida's history. It was during this period that developer Henry B. Plant absorbed many small lines, pushed his steel rails to Florida's west coast, and insured the future significance of Tampa Bay. William D. Chipley, "Mr. Railroad of West Florida," constructed lines throughout the panhandle and invested heavily in the port of Pensacola. The railroad man epitomizing this age's spirit of optimism and enterprise, however, was Standard Oil millionaire Henry M. Flagler, who chose the east coast of Florida as his domain. Flagler's road plunged through swamps and sandy barrens to link Jacksonville with Miami in 1896, and he captured the attention of the nation after 1904 with the construction of his famous "Overseas Railroad" to Key West.¹

In performing these impressive feats, Flagler's Florida East Coast Railway overcame difficulties of every kind, both man-made and natural. If one is to believe the company's own records, however, the problem that proved to be the most longlasting and irritating centered on acquiring a constant supply of dependable, cheap, unskilled labor for the line's ever expanding track gangs. Company officials complained constantly of the quality and quantity of black labor available to them in Florida, and native whites simply would not take the more menial, dangerous positions offered by the road.² The search for workers often took

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1. Charlton W. Tebeau, *A History of Florida* (Coral Gables, 1971), 281-87; George W. Pettengill, Jr., *The Story of the Florida Railroads, 1834-1903* (Boston, 1952), 63-101, 102-08, 115-23.
2. These problems became acute on the Key West Extension project. Todd M. Tinkham, "The Construction of the Key West Extension of the Florida East Coast Railway, 1905-1915" (term paper, Kalamazoo College, 1968), 31-36; Carlton J. Corliss, "Building the Overseas Railway to Key West," *Tequesta*, XIII (1953), 3-22.

railroad employers into the urban centers of the northeast where thousands of recently-arrived immigrants resided. To secure these laborers, the railroad frequently relied upon the services of an important immigrant institution— the padrone, or labor boss.

The padrone served the needs of American employers such as the Florida East Coast Railway and immigrant newcomers by acting as a middle man. Native businessmen rarely understood the old world traditions, customs, and languages of foreign workers and, hence, found it difficult or impossible to deal with them directly. This was particularly true of employers, such as those in Florida, who were away from the immigrant-filled cities of the North. Similarly, these newcomers often were ignorant of American employment practices and economic trends. For the most part they lacked contacts with native firms, and few possessed the language skills necessary to acquire them. Labor agents were normally foreigners themselves who had acquired some use of English and who had made connections with American contractors.³ As such they were in a position to act as intermediaries between the country's burgeoning economy and the immigrant masses.

Florida businesses were willing to utilize the services that the labor boss could provide. The typical padrone advertised for prospective workers in the immigrant community, collected the requisite number of men, and shipped them to the work site. In many cases they supplied room and board for laborers (at a fee), sold steamship tickets, transmitted funds back to the old country, and performed dozens of other needed services for immigrants.⁴ These were tasks that most Florida concerns were unable to perform effectively. Unfortunately, the padrone system had no con-

3. Although the padrone system existed among many different ethnic groups, including Greeks, Austrians, Turks, Poles, and others, it came to be identified most clearly in the American mind with Italian immigrants. For information on the Italian padroni see Humbert S. Nelli, *The Italians in Chicago, 1880-1930: A Study in Ethnic Mobility* (New York, 1970), 56-66; and Luciano J. Iorizzo, "The Padrone and Immigrant Distribution," in Silvano M. Tomasi and Madeline H. Engel, eds., *The Italian Experience in the United States* (New York, 1970), 43-75.

4. John Koren, "The Padrone System and Padrone Banks," *Bulletin of the Department of Labor*, No. 9 (March 1897), 114-17; Frank J. Sheridan, "Italian, Slavic, and Hungarian Unskilled Immigrant Laborers in the United States," *Bulletin of the Bureau of Labor*, No. 72 (September 1907), 437-38.

trols beyond the honesty of individual bosses, and it soon became rampant with abuses.

Padroni often advertised false information regarding wages, types of work, and location of job sites. When unsuspecting laborers signed contracts, they sometimes found themselves transported to undesirable areas, forced to work at tasks they disliked, and paid less than advertised wages. One typical case concerned forty Greeks shipped to Punta Gorda, Florida. These workers found an isolated, fly-infested work camp with only a ditch to supply drinking water. When some attempted to flee, foremen threatened them with guns to force them to remain on the job.⁵ In return for finding jobs, padroni collected a fee (*bossatura*) generally totaling one to six dollars depending on the nature of the work. Many immigrants were victimized by agents who took their fees and abandoned them in transit. Others arrived to find that more workers than were needed had been hired. Meanwhile the padrone pocketed the extra fees. Agents also promised long periods of employment only to discharge men after a brief period so as to collect the *bossatura* from additional workers.⁶

On the job site most employers allowed padroni to run the commissary.⁷ This system was supposed to make available suitable food and supplies at reasonable costs, but often padroni served food of poor quality at mark-ups of fifty to 100 per cent. Moreover, workers often had a fixed amount deducted from their pay each month whether they bought from the commissary or not. Occasionally, bosses required their men to buy the tools they worked with, again at inflated prices. Many employers turned the men's wages in a lump sum over to the padrone, trusting him to make an equitable breakdown. This was an almost open invita-

5. Pete Daniel, *The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South, 1901-1969* (Urbana, 1972), 40-41. For other complaints about conditions in Florida, see Henry S. Marks, "Labor Problems of the Florida East Coast Railway Extension from Homestead to Key West, 1905-1907," *Tequesta*, XXXII (1972), 28-29.

6. Salvatore Merlino, "Italian Immigrants and their Enslavement," *Forum*, XV (April 1893), 186; unsigned, "Americanizing the Alien," *Immigrants in America Review*, I (July 1915), 3-4.

7. The FEC seems to have been atypical in this respect. During the construction of the Key West extension, the railroad assumed responsibility for the housing and feeding of workers. The FEC hired a chief steward who oversaw the operation of all dining halls in the railroad's many camps. See Sidney Walter Martin, *Florida's Flagler* (Athens, 1949), 211.

tion to larceny.⁸ Padroni regularly deducted sums to cover a wide range of usually nonexistent services such as life insurance, medical care, letter writing facilities, and recreational materials. One particularly innovative boss even made a monthly charge for a *diretta di madonna* (contribution to the Holy Mother).⁹

To look only at the abuses of the padrone system in Florida and elsewhere would be to present a flawed picture of this institution. However exploitive, it did provide a vital function to the immigrants which could not have been fulfilled by any other organization in its day. As one scholar noted, padroni often victimized newcomers mercilessly, "yet without them the immigrants would have found themselves unable even to make a living."¹⁰ Beyond this basic significance, the labor boss was instrumental in distributing immigrants throughout the nation. Accustomed to residing in tight-knit urban enclaves, many immigrants received their first introduction to Florida and other sections of the country while in padrone employ. Moreover, bosses occasionally took the lead in establishing immigrant colonies in the nation's rural sections.¹¹

The padroni were particularly active during the 1890s. Thereafter, a series of forces intersected to bring about a sharp decline in their power and influence. Immigrant protective societies and American authors combined to produce an impressive volume of anti-padrone literature, and the reform impetus they generated ultimately resulted in state laws severely limiting labor boss operations.¹² Immigrants themselves became more knowledgeable of American economic conditions and, therefore, less dependent on their countrymen. When public pressures after 1900 forced American railroad and construction officials to terminate

8. Dominic T. Ciolli, "The 'Wop' in the Track Gang," *Immigrants in America Review*, II (July 1916), 61; Walter E. Weyl, "The Italian who Lived on 26¢ a Day," *Outlook*, XLIII (December 1909), 969; "Labor Abuses among Italians," *Charities*, XII (May 1904), 449.

9. Frances A. Kellor, "Who is Responsible for the Immigrant?" *Outlook*, CVI (December 1914), 912; Gino C. Speranza, "The Italian Foreman as a Social Agent: Labor Abuse in West Virginia and their Consequences to the Community," *Charities*, XI (July 1903), 26-28.

10. Giovanni Schiavo, *Italian-American History*, 2 vols. (New York, 1947-1949), I, 538.

11. Luciano J. Iorizzo and Salvatore Mondello, *The Italian-Americans* (New York, 1971), 140.

12. For examples see Frances A. Kellor, *Out of Work: A Study of Unemployment* (New York, 1905; facsimile edition, New York, 1971); Charles B. Phippard, "The Philanthropist-Padrone," *Charities*, XII (May 1904), 470.

padroni contracts and turn instead to certified labor agents, the fate of the labor boss became sealed.¹³

Although the amount of business correspondence and records generated by padrone activity must have been considerable, very few of these documents evidently have survived. Three items in the holdings of the St. Augustine Historical Society relate specifically to such a business arrangement.¹⁴ The documents consist of a letter from Mr. V. Palumbo, a New York City labor boss, to the Florida East Coast Railway office, concerning the details of an ongoing contract to supply Italian workers to the company, and two clippings from an Italian language newspaper printed in New York. One is a classified advertisement calling for workers to go to Florida; the other is a lengthy defense of Mr. Palumbo's Florida business ventures addressed to New York Italians.

The materials are unique in a number of respects. The letter is detailed and frank; it describes, in Mr. Palumbo's somewhat fractured English, the full range of difficulties that confronted a padrone in his Florida operations. This is a perspective on labor boss activities not normally found, and it shows that the job was not an easy one. Palumbo had to deal with uneducated, suspicious immigrants who often failed to understand fully the terms of contracts. When they perceived something awry, more often than not they walked off the job or refused to go at all. As such, the labor recruiting business proved to be quite risky and funds expended for travel, commissary supplies, and office expenses were occasionally lost beyond recall. On the other hand, American employers were not to be taken for granted. They were shrewd bargaining agents who were not adverse to taking advantage of bosses; they generally entered into contracts only on terms most favorable to themselves. These documents further point out that padroni operations extended even to Florida businesses which allegedly harbored deep reservations about using foreign labor. Finally, they have significance because they bring to light a

13. Nelli, *Italians in Chicago*, 64-65. Faced with a hostile public and more unsure of their relationships with American employers, labor bosses after 1900 increasingly began to deny their identification as padrone or to claim that they were against the boss system.

14. V. Palumbo to R. J. Goff, February 3, 1901; clipping from New York *L'Araldo Italiano*, dated February 2, 1902; undated newspaper clipping, all three in Florida East Coast Railway Miscellaneous Correspondence, 1901 folder, St. Augustine Historical Society, St. Augustine, Florida.

largely forgotten aspect of Florida's colorful history and serve to remind us that the hands of many different nationalities went into the building of the state. To retain the letter's original flavor, spelling, grammar, and punctuation have not been altered. The newspaper advertisement has been translated from Italian to English.

February 3, 1901

R. J. Goff, Esq.¹⁵

Gen'l Superintendent
Florida East Coast Railway
St. Augustine, Fla.

Dear Sir: Following my letter of the 31st ult, I beg to acknowledge your form of the 27th ult, to which I shall catagorically answer as follows:—

First: If I have asked you to give me a position it was because in your letter of June 22, 1901,¹⁶ you offered the same to me, though you withdrew said offers in successives letters.

Second: If I have accepted to furnish you with 150 laborers the acceptance of it, not based upon the conditions specified in your favors of June 22nd and of July 3rd and according and in basis of the verbal understanding had between myself, yourself, and Mr. Ingraham,¹⁷ Vice-President of your road, during my visit in Florida; namely, upon the establishment of an agricultural colony composed of Italians and the sale to them of land varying in price from \$5.00 to \$15.00 per acre.¹⁸

Third: After having travelled at your expense along your entire railroad system, and after having explained to you, that I would have been able and capable of furnishing steady and

15. As superintendent, Mr. Goff was in charge of the overall building and maintenance of the railroad's lines. He would also have been in charge of the hiring of laborers.

16. The author of the letter seems to have confused his dates. Internal evidence suggests that the mailing date should be February 3, 1902, and that all dates within the letter should be in the year 1901.

17. James E. Ingraham was third vice-president and land commissioner of the Florida East Coast Railway. Ingraham controlled the extensive land holdings of the railroad and would have been the appropriate official to deal with in any transaction involving the establishment of a colony.

18. It is not known if this effort to settle a colony of Italians succeeded. The FEC, however, maintained a continuing interest in the idea. See Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, December 17, 21, 1905.

honest men just as you desired, we came to the conclusion that I should return to New York, and begin the work of gathering men. After a long and troublesome correspondence, and after great sacrifices on my part, in a letter under date August 22nd Mr. Ingrahm informed me that he would make arrangements towards colonization, but that the company would not agree to pay me any salary: I accepted the conditions only because I could not go back on my words to those with whom I had bound myself. At last tired of waiting I sent you another letter under date of Nov. 6th 1902 and on the 11th day of the same month you wrote to me to send you 150 laborers, upon conditions as already stated in your letter of June 22, 1902; and offering me the commisfion of \$1.00 for each man sent you, and I accepted: not because this is in my line of business, for I have always been against the padrone system, but simply as the commisfion aided to defray the postage and telegraphic expense, besides the people who have been helping me in this matter.

Fourth: During the month of December I have sent you 31 men, who were to your complete satisfaction, and in as much as those men were desirous that I should go and live with them, some would not like to go without my accompanying them, and considering that you were not ready to pay me a salary, I have entered a contract with them providing that they should leave with the company \$2.00 per month, to be applied to the doctor's fee in case of sickness and the balance toward the maintenance of a social bureau, which was to look after their interest, in the buying and selling of lands: moreover I have stipulated in the agreement the conditions of the work, which I have guaranteed to them. A copy of this contract together with a note of \$14.00 each attached to his contract and sent to you by special delivery the receipt of which you have only acknowledged.

Fifth: As a man by name of Pietro di Gerolamo had missed his way to Florida, the 25 men I had got together and who were ready to go South on the same conditions met at the office of Mr. Eayer,¹⁹ 19 State Street, and they refused to go, as they claimed

19. This name is possibly a misspelling of Theodore G. Eger, traffic manager of the Clyde Steamship Company, the only concern to offer direct steamship service between New York and Jacksonville, Florida. The main offices of the Clyde Line were located at 19 State Street in New York City.

they would have to sleep in tents, and the air and climate were bad and so forth.

It was then that I told Mr. Eayer that I would start advertising in the Italian Papers for men, stating the conditions copy of which I sent you at once. In the advertisement, I stated that he who desired to go to Florida was to purchase an acre of land, costing from \$25 to \$30 dollars per acres, paying five dollars in cash before leaving, and the balance in monthly rates of \$2.00 each, to be paid into the hands of the company until fully paid.

In answer to this ad, I received over 300 letters; and 23 men were ready to leave on January 24th 1902. I notified the Clyde Line²⁰ to reserve me 23 places, and that I might have had a larger number, as they would have forfeited the \$5.00 deposited, in order to guarantee you the full advanced and to be sure to get good men. On the 23rd I was surprised to received from you a letter suspending the departure of the men. I was compelled to reimburs them not only the deposits but also, the fares coming and going to their residences outside of New York; and to avoid other trouble I advertised that the departure for Florida was suspended until new order.

Sixth: Salvatore Farano and son lately arrived from Italy with their family had paid \$7.50 on account of an acre and one half of land, and if he came alone it was because he could not wait until the 24th not having means to sustain themselves, and that is the reason why I took the responsibility of sending him alone: I know that it is not convenient to send one man at a time, and that it would have been better to send 30 or 50 but had you fixed a limit I would have known how to govern myself, and I would have known whether to accept or not. And now that after request from the laborers I have bought macaroni, cheese, wine, oil etc. with a great loss, am I to be the sufferer of this loss?

Ten days are not sufficient for me, in order to furnish you all the 120 men requested, as I shall have to write, to those who did not go. If you want me to, I may send you about 25 men or more

20. The Clyde Steamship Company had a vested interest in stimulating travel to Florida, and the company's passenger department published several attractive pamphlets describing the wonders of the state. See *Florida and the Sunny South* (New York, n.d.) and *Facts About Florida* (New York, n.d.), copies in the P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville.

at a time. I shall renounce to the Dollar Commisfion: but you must fulfill the contracts which I shall enter with the men, that is to found an agricultural colony and I shall endeavour to make a living by myself, in Florida looking over the interests of these people as indeed I am responsible to them in case of any eventuality.

Every day of the week I am receiving letters from the laborers asking me to go South: they say that they have paid the checks: I cannot understand all this. They on the first of February will have to leave with the company \$2.00 each to pay for the Doctor, and for the maintenance of a bureau of protection in case I should come south, if not only for the doctor.

I ask you Mr. Goff, to see that this matter should be settled loyally because I have made and entered a contract with the *Araldo Italiano*²¹ for 4000 lines of advertising at a cost of \$400, besides other expense, that I have made and sustained. At present time I am sick with bronchite & reumatism at right foot; I ordered to publish again and called 120 men more for you; I will wire to you as soon these people are ready to go— I enclose to you a article published in answer at Italian Counsell, who advised the Italian of U.S. to not go in Florida, because exist malaria and the law not good; Call Mr. O. Brien²² and try to translate in English what I said; if you stop to accept laborers you will ruin me in many ways, and I want that my countryman came in your place because the clime is all right.

With my regards I am

Yours respectfully
V. Palumbo

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21. *L'Araldo Italiano* (the Italian Herald) was the second largest Italian language daily printed in New York City. For additional information see George E. Pozzetta, "The Italian Immigrant Press of New York City: The Early Years, 1880-1915," *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, I (Fall 1973), 34.
22. Presumably this referred to Robert E. O'Brien, an engineer in the employ of the railroad, who evidently could read Italian.

The *Italian Herald*
February 2, 1902

TO FLORIDA

(Received and Published)

Director of the Italian Herald

New York

Please allow me to present and reply to some of the Consul's publications found in another daily newspaper.

The workers that I sent to Florida arrived in a healthy place, where there is absolutely no malaria.

From June 22, 1901, I have been in negotiations with the Florida East Coast Railway to establish an agricultural colony in the vicinity of St. Augustine and Miami.

The land is adaptable to the cultivation of vines and fruits, and the climate is identical to Sicily. I have made a run through the railroad's lines— 476 miles from Jacksonville to Miami, Fla and I found a terrestrial Paradise. When those workers sent by me actually arrive there, they will write to their parents and friends and tell them to go there immediately. The undersigned is the only one to have conducted a seven year long campaign to abolish the slavery of Italians in the United States, and in fact it was abolished, and thus I have always continued to emancipate those poor wretches who remain in New York all their lives without hope of making any progress. Now the bell has rung! I am requesting that 120 men be ready to leave on the 5th day of this month under the conditions publicized by me in the *Herald* some time ago. Those who come will arrive safe and will find no malaria or beasts, but instead will find honest and educated men. In order that Italians may buy land to cultivate, they will be employed as a mobile squadron²³ by the railroad company and paid \$1.25 a day: board is free and one pays neither shanty²⁴ nor *bossatura*.

23. Palumbo was referring to the common practice of employing immigrants in transient work gangs which could be shifted from job to job without a permanent base.

24. Such words as *shanty* and *bossatura* were Italian-American slang expressions that began increasingly to appear in Italian language newspapers after the decade of the 1890s.

When the workers earn enough to be able to live on their own, they will find themselves the possessors of a plot of land that could be sold for 800 to a thousand dollars profit per acre. For example, an acre of land planted in pineapples after eighteen months gives a profit of 700 to 800 dollars.

Wine costs four or five dollars a gallon. If one plants vines after three years an acre of land will produce a profit of more than 1,000 dollars. I am always disposed to refute those who would like to keep the Italians of our colony under control, without thinking that for Italians there is an absolute need to go and colonize the fertile land of Florida, not that of Tampa, let us make this point clearly, but that around St. Augustine. For the moment I ask only and at once for 120 workers, eventually the number will be 150. I Will pay the expenses of the trip for all the workers who promise to repay in three installments. Whoever will not be ready for the 5th of this month will lose the chance to have the best of fortune. Then to Florida! To Florida all who want to become well-off. I will be personally responsible to you if you do not find everything as I have publically stated.

I dare anyone to refute that in St. Augustine and on the job site itself the workers are not affected by malaria.²⁶

V. Palumbo

I am requesting that 150 workers for Florida present themselves throughout this month at the Italian Herald, Mondays at 12:00, 90 Centre ST.

V. Palumbo

25. The fact that Palumbo took such great pains to deny repeatedly that malaria existed in Florida indicates clearly the importance that prospective Italian settlers attached to this information.