1982

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Recommended Citation

Mormino, Gary R. (1982) "Immigrant Women in Tampa: The Italian Experience, 1890-1930," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 61 : No. 3 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol61/iss3/6>

IMMIGRANT WOMEN IN TAMPA: THE ITALIAN EXPERIENCE, 1890-1930

by GARY R. MORMINO AND GEORGE E. POZZETTA

THE historical study of women, particularly immigrant women, has advanced dramatically over the past decade. Recent scholarship has rescued from neglect a great deal of historical material and has placed in clearer perspective the important roles played by women in American society. Ultimately, women's history will be fully integrated into the pageantry of the American experience. Sufficient specialized studies to accomplish this goal, however, do not yet exist. More regional and local investigations detailing the histories of women in many different locations, time periods, and life situations are required.

During the period 1890-1930 the state of Florida possessed no more cosmopolitan mix of population and culture than that which existed in Tampa. Residing there, and working primarily in Tampa's cigar industry, were thousands of immigrant Spanish, Cuban, and Italian men and women. The necessities of coming to a new land, coping with a strange culture, and adapting to new demands resulted in the creation of a unique ethnic community called Ybor City. Immigrant women added their own distinctive contributions to the quality of life existing in this enclave. During the tumultuous strike of 1910, one reporter took note of "bevvies of gayly dressed Spanish, Cuban, and Italian women," waving their red bandanas as striking cigar makers marched to the *Internationale*. In 1931, the year of Tampa's last great cigar strike, a German visitor marveled at the city's "Spanish India [Ybor City] . . . What a colorful, screaming, shrill and turbulent world! Spanish and Cuban women and cats— both equally beautiful, equally exotic . . . a veritable narrow ghetto, rich with life's

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smells."¹ The hints of romance and radicalism that such images put forth belie the more fundamental roles played by women.

The Italian women who came to Florida traced their roots back to a cluster of small villages in the western part of Sicily; it was here that the outlooks and values of the immigrants took shape.² These remote, hill-top settlements had a history that was tintured with fatalism and gloom. For them, the unification of Italy in 1870 had only changed rulers not masters; power emanated from wealthy landowners who controlled the area's wheat, olives, vines, and sheep. From these urban-villages numbering 6,000 or more inhabitants, peasants walked several miles each day to tend their plots of earth. In Sicily, peasants lived not on the land but in "agro-cities," and because of this rural-urban mixture, a crude middle class of artisans and shopkeepers had evolved.³

"If you want a large family," a Sicilian proverb instructed, "begin with a girl, but she may not live beyond the first year."⁴ The bittersweet message this folk wisdom imparted is evocative of the vital role played by women in the Sicilian agri-urban system. Pleasant women derived their esteem from their domestic prowess and economic contributions. In general, Sicilian men preferred that women not work outside the home, since the women's status as a wage earner jeopardized family honor and male prestige. In 1907 only fifteen per cent of all Sicilian women labored outside the home in non-agrarian occupations.⁵ A 1909

1. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, August 12, 1910; Anne France-Harrar, *Florida, Das Land des Überflusses*, trans. by Georg H. Kleine (Berlin-Schöneberg, 1931), quoted in "The Suncoast Viewed through German Eyes," *Tampa Bay History*, III (Fall/Winter, 1981), 80.
2. In order of their importance to Tampa, these villages were Santo Stefano Quisquina, Alessandria della Rocca, Bivona, Cianciana, and Contessa Entellina. The authors spent academic year 1980-1981 in Italy, including time in these villages and archive centers in Rome and Florence.
3. Sidney Sonnino, *I contadini in Sicilia*, Vol. 2 of Leopoldo Franchetti and Sidney Sonnino, *La Sicilia nel 1876* (Florence, 1877), 171-72; Denis Mack Smith, *A History of Sicily* (London, 1968); Jane and Peter Schneider, *Culture and Political Economy in Western Sicily* (New York, 1976); Giuseppe Giarrizzo, Gastone Masacorda, et al., *I fasci Siciliani* (Bari, 1976); Calogero Messina, *S. Stejano Quisquina: Studio Critico* (Palermo, 1976); Salvatore Salomone-Marino, *Customs and Habits of the Sicilian Peasants*, translated from *Costumi e usanze dei contadini di Sicilia* by Rosalie Norris (Rutherford, N.J., 1981).
4. Charlotte G. Chapman, *Milocca: A Sicilian Village* (New York, 1971), 30.
5. *Annuario Statistico, 1905-1907* (Rome, 1907), III, 40; Anton Blok, *The*

government survey conducted in Tampa found similar patterns in force: 10.5 per cent of the city's Italian women had worked outside the home for wages before coming to America, and another 18.4 per cent had toiled as farm laborers.⁶ The work experience for these women, therefore, resided principally in the context of the family.

The key point basic to understanding the Sicilian family is its function as a collective producer, a common pool of familial resources. The family was the Sicilians' state. The Church had joined forces with the *galantuomini* (upper classes), the government had betrayed the people, justice was corrupt, only the family could be trusted. Sicilians denigrated and denied individualism for the greater family good. Parents regarded their children as economic assets whose incomes helped stave off disaster and added to the family fortunes.

An over abundance of children, however, exacerbated the island's many problems. In 1800, Sicily's population stood at 1,000,000; by 1900 the island groaned to support 3,500,000 inhabitants.⁷ Emigration functioned as an endemic rather than epidemic phenomenon, decimating some villages while leaving others untouched by its pressures. One of Tampa's points of origin, the village of Santo Stefano Quisquina, provides a textbook case of the dynamics of demography. Local birth and census records, preserved in the parish church and town hall, reveal the classic pattern: in 1861 Santo Stefano listed 5,464 citizens, the number climbing to 6,315 in 1881, but falling to 6,087 in 1901, and 5,897 in 1931.⁸ The decline after 1881 points to heavy rates of emigration beginning in that decade. Birth records reinforce this picture. In 1867, 232 births were recorded at the parish church, La Madre della Chiesa. In 1887 a near record 292 babies were born; but in 1907— at the very climax of Italian emigration—

Mafia of a Sicilian Village, 1869-1960: A Study of Violent Peasant Entrepreneurs (New York, 1974), 49-50.

6. U.S., Congress, Senate, *Reports of the Immigration Commission, Immigrants in Industries*, pt. 14, "Cigar and Tobacco Manufacturing" (Washington, 1911), Table 132, 199. The table referred to foreign-born females who were sixteen years of age or over at the time of immigration.
7. Schneider, *Culture and Political Economy*, 115.
8. Istituto Centrale di Statistica, *Comuni e loro popolazione ai censimenti dal 1861 al 1951*, "Provincia di Agrigento" (Roma, 1960), 266. With some temporary rises and falls, the statistics for the other villages confirm this pattern.

only 160 children were registered, the fewest births in three generations.⁹ Santo Stefano confirmed historian Frank Thistlethwaite's thesis that "there is a direct correlation between the rates of emigration and the natural increase twenty years previously."¹⁰

Emigration severely dislocated the rhythms of village life in the old country. In the process women accepted new challenges and assumed new responsibilities. This was particularly true in light of the heavy male predominance in the early phases of the immigration experience. The masculine imbalance wrought by migration altered sexual roles in the villages. When the men left, women often became managers for the estates, handling business needs and working in the fields.¹¹ Oftentimes with husbands away in Tampa, women held together the unbroken international circle, underscoring the peasant proverb, "If the father should die, the family would suffer; if the mother should die, the family ceases to exist."¹² Other women chose to chart entirely new directions for themselves.

The case of Salvatore and Agatina Cannella illustrates the immigrant experience and its effects upon the participants. Salvatore Cannella operated a dry goods store in Santo Stefano, a business which he resumed in New Orleans after emigration. Like many of the early immigrants, the Cannellas returned to Sicily after earning several thousand dollars. Unfortunately, Salvatore died shortly after repatriating. Agatina Cannella, shrouded in black, contemplated a life of mourning as custom dictated, but she opted to break away from convention. Rosalia Cannella Ferlita, her daughter, explained her mother's decision, an alterna-

9. Liber Baptizatorum Sancti Stephni Ad Quisquinam, La Madre della Chiesa, Santo Stefano; Archivio Comunale, Santo Stefano, Agrigento.

10. Frank Thistlethwaite, "Migration from Europe Overseas in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," in Herbert Moller, ed., *Population Movements in Modern European History* (New York, 1964), 90.

11. Anna Maria Ratti, "Italian Migration Movements from 1876-1921," Walter Willcox, ed., *International Migrations* (New York, 1969), 451-52; Emiliana P. Noether, "The Silent Half: *Le Contadine del Sud* Before the First World War," in Betty Caroli, Robert F. Harney, and Lydio Tomasi, eds., *The Italian Immigrant Woman in North America* (Toronto, 1978), 3-14; Robert F. Harney, "Men without Women: Italian Migrants in Canada, 1885-1930," in Caroli, Harney and Tomasi, eds., *The Italian Immigrant Woman*, 79-103.

12. Quoted in Leonard Moss and Walter Thomson, "The South Italian Family: Literature and Observation," *Human Organization*, XVIII (Spring 1959), 38; Robert Foerster, *Italian Emigration of Our Time* (Cambridge, 1917), 449.

tive inconceivable to an earlier generation: "My mother was used to the business. . . . Well in Italy she had to stay in the house. There was nothing to do. . . . There was no communication. Sit and sit. Finally she decided to come back to America. But she didn't want to go back to New Orleans— too many memories— so she came to Tampa."¹³

In Tampa, Sicilians joined Spaniards and Cubans to develop Ybor City. The creation of Vicente Martinez Ybor, this enclave was carved out of palmetto scrubland in 1886 to become the capital of hand-rolled cigarmaking in the United States. Incorporated into Tampa in 1887, this ethnic settlement by 1905 was composed of about 6,000 foreign-born "Latins." In order of numerical importance, they included Cubans, Italians, and Spaniards.¹⁴ Ybor City evolved into a unique experiment: a company town financed by foreign capital; an industrial community amidst a rural South; and a Latin workforce in a state dominated by WASPs. Such was the environment which greeted the Sicilian immigrants who arrived between the late 1880s and the 1920s.

Evidently, and the records are sparse, the period of predominantly male settlement was short-lived. Several early records document the female presence in Tampa. In May 1892, the Italian consul of New Orleans reported nearly 300 Sicilians in Tampa, approximately one-third of whom were women.¹⁵ The 1900 manuscript census provides a more in-depth portrait of an emerging Italian community. The fraction of females in 1900 remained at one-third, but the overall colony numbers had increased to over 1,300. The typical Sicilian female was sixteen, re-

13. Interview with Rosalia Cannella Ferlita, May 13, 1980. A number of Tampa's earliest Italian immigrants had come to the city indirectly after initial stays in New Orleans and St. Cloud, a sugar plantation to the east of Tampa.

14. L. Glenn Westfall, "Don Vicente Martinez Ybor, The Man and his Empire: Development of the Clear Havana Industry in Cuba and Florida in the Nineteenth Century" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Florida, 1977), 55-75; *Third Census of the State of Florida, 1905* (Tallahassee, 1906), Table 17, "Foreign Population According to County," 112, 120, 124. Many Latins also settled in West Tampa, forming an ethnic community very similar to Ybor City. The figure cited represents an estimate arrived at by deducting residents in West Tampa and various other county and city locations not included in Ybor City.

15. Ricardo Motta, "Nuova Orleans, Rapporti di agenti diplomatici e consolari (Roma, 1893), 464.

flecting the youthful character of the colony. A scant two per cent of the Italian women were listed age fifty and older. Most Italians, men and women, were illiterate. Husbands on the average were five years older than wives.¹⁶ The 1905 Florida State Census listed 2,574 Italians in Tampa—1,370 males and 1,204 females. By 1909, one report indicated that ninety-nine per cent of the Italian husbands in its survey had been reunited with their wives.¹⁷

Curiously missing from the 1900 census, as it related to Italians, were two standard immigrant institutions, the boarding house and the extended family living under one roof. Several explanations may clarify this absence. The year 1900 may have been too early to capture the extended family, since the Italian community was in the process of establishing itself. The census did reveal a pattern of boarding on the part of Italian men, but not in homes managed by Italian women. This again is undoubtedly a function of the early stage of family immigration then in place for Italians.¹⁸ Provision must be made also for the presence of boarding houses that went unrecorded because of bureaucratic omission or group commission. Census takers have always had difficulty in recording the newest immigrants. Given the abominable spelling of Italian names by census takers, there would be difficulty in obtaining completely reliable information from the mobile residents of a boarding house, particularly if a group felt a sense of alienation.¹⁹

16. U.S., Census Office, *Twelfth Census of the United States: 1900* (Washington, 1902). Population, II, Florida, Table 27, 214; also see *Twelfth Census, Florida*, Hillsborough County, Manuscript Census Schedules, microfilm reel 170, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville.
17. *Immigrants in Industries*, Table 105, 432; *Third Census of State of Florida, 1905*, 112, 120, 124.
18. Helen Smith, "Immigrant Women in Ybor City, 1900" (seminar paper, University of Florida, 1982). Also influencing this factor may be the fact that housing in Tampa was remarkably inexpensive, both in terms of rentals and overall purchase price. The 1930 census listed Tampa at the very bottom of a list of 100 cities in terms of median value of non-farm homes (\$2,882). U.S., Census Office, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930*, (Washington, 1933). Population, VI, Florida Table 67, 60. Also see *Immigrants in Industries*, Table 159, 232, for information on rentals.
19. City officials in Tampa, then as now sensitive to the barometer of population count, complained in 1900 that "practically no count was made of the Spanish and Italian residents." *Tampa Morning Tribune*, November 8, 1900.

Nearly sixteen per cent of Tampa's Italian households maintained boarders in 1909, as documented by a United States Senate Immigration Commission survey. In these arrangements, women played a central role. The owner's wife, oftentimes with the support of female children, tended to the boarders' many needs, including washing, cooking, mending, and various other household tasks. These jobs were added, of course, to the duties required in caring for the woman's own family. Among Italian households supporting boarders in the survey year, an average of seven boarders were found per residence.²⁰ While at home, Italian women somehow found time to continue the handicraft arts of sewing, crocheting, and embroidering.

Italians were counted most heavily where their presence was courted— at the city's burgeoning workplace. Ybor City boasted in the early twentieth century nearly 200 cigar factories which, by 1911, were producing in excess of 1,000,000 hand-rolled cigars daily. Each week the more than 10,000 workers earned \$250,000 dollars in wages.²¹ Women played a significant role in making Tampa synonymous with quality cigars, a function that went beyond just posing for the comely cigar labels that advertised Tampa Girl and Farnesia to the world.

Latin *patrones* such as V. Martinez Ybor and Ignacio Haya welcomed women on a number of levels. Their presence stabilized what once appeared as a wild, male frontier community; more importantly, women demonstrated their expertise in the cigar factories. Unlike the Spanish and Cubans, Italians brought with them no previous experience in the tobacco industry save a sheer doggedness to work hard and long. Their tenacious commitment to work, combined with values such as frugality, dependability, and abstention from hard liquor, made Italians ideal workers. Women shared this acceptance of the work ethic. "Work hard, work always, and you will never know hunger," a proverb promised.²² As early as June 1900, nearly seventy per cent of all gainfully employed Italians in Ybor City

20. *Immigrants in Industries*, Table 162 and 163, 234.

21. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, December 18, 1911; *Immigrants in Industries*, 187.

22. Salomone-Marino, *Customs and Habits*, 48; Foerster, *Italian Immigration*, 342; Richard Gambino, *Blood of My Blood* (New York, 1974), 84, 273, 319, 339.

were engaged in the cigar industry. By 1909 Italians accounted for almost twenty per cent of the total cigar workforce.²³ If one added the numbers involved in *chinchales* (storefront workshops), the figures would be even greater.

The 1900 census revealed patterns characteristic of Italian immigrants. Italians, whether in New York, San Francisco, or Tampa, almost always started at the bottom of the occupational ladder and faced a long upward climb. In 1900 most female Italian cigar workers labored as unskilled tobacco strippers, widely regarded as the least desirable position in the industry.²⁴ Tobacco stripping involved removal of the hard stems from the tobacco leaves, a job that many observers felt was particularly suited to the nimble fingers of women. Because of poor pay, unhealthy working conditions, and lowly status, the position of stripper often fell to those women who could find no other employment. One Tampa labor newspaper observed in 1917 that stripping attracted, "Orphan girls, maids who have no male helper, widows with young children, the victims of divorce, the daughters of large families, the victims of vicious men or of sick and disabled men."²⁵ Italian women, however, used the stripping tables in the early years as springboards to launch themselves upward into the ranks of cigarmakers. So successful were they that by the second decade of the new century they posed a serious threat to displace male cigarmakers.

To become a skilled cigar worker, many Italians underwent a long apprenticeship lasting at a minimum eight months but sometimes extending to well over a year. An Italian consul once suggested that this requirement reduced the number of prospective Italian cigarmakers because, while apprenticed, candidates received no assistance.²⁶ Having endured the training period, how-

23. Earl R. Hendry, "A Revisionist View of the Italian Immigrants of Ybor City in 1900" (seminar paper, University of Florida, 1982), 10; *Immigrants in Industries*, Table 128, 195.

24. Hendry, "A Revisionist View," 7-8, 10; Helen L. Sumner, *Women and Child Earners in the United States*, 19 vols., IX; "History of Women in Industry in the United States," 61st Cong., 2nd Sess., Sen. Doc. 645 (Washington, 1910), 196-97; *Twelfth Census, 1900*, Manuscript Census Schedules, microfilm 170, P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History.

25. Tampa *El Internacional*, March 2, 1917.

26. Cav. G. Fara-Forni and Luigi Villari, "Gli Italiani nel distretto consolare di Nuova Orleans," *Emigrazione e Colonie*, III (Roma, 1909), 217-18. The same report indicated that workers often required three years to become fully skilled in the craft.

ever, Italians could expect handsome wages. "Italian women have become very adept at this craft," noted the same consul in 1909, with some earning \$25.00 a week. "On average, the workers average sixteen to eighteen dollars a week."²⁷ Those cigarworkers who received pay on a piecework basis earned substantial wages compared to other skilled workers during this period. The curious fact that apparently Tampa's Italian women earned more than men (certainly a rarity in industrial history) was buttressed by a 1913 report in *Bolletino dell'Emigrazione* indicating that Italian men averaged \$15.00 to \$18.00 a week while women earned \$15.00 to \$20.00 a week, but some "even to twenty-three dollars a week." Children earned between \$6.00 and \$12.00 a week.²⁸

If women were limited in their work roles—no woman was ever elected to the prestigious post of *lector* (reader) and few have been discovered in the leadership of the local labor movement—a remarkable number of Italian women did work. In 1909, sixteen per cent of the foreign-born women in America were employed for wages; in Tampa, just under one quarter of the Italian-born women were so occupied.²⁹ The latter figure was almost certainly undercounted. The 1900 census, for instance, revealed many examples of Italian girls, aged ten to sixteen, whose occupation (one could generally expect "at school") was left blank. One surmises that these girls worked but, because of minimum age work laws, the figure went unreported. Government reports further substantiated the Italian proclivity for work. In 1900 substantially more Ybor City Italian women were employed in cigar factories than their male counterparts. Fully sixty per cent of the foreign-born women employed in the cigar industry were Italian.³⁰ In Tampa, Italian wives were twice as likely to hold jobs

27. *Ibid.* Also see, E. Mayor des Planches, *Attraverso gli Stati Uniti: Per l'emigrazione italiana* (Torino, 1913), 117.

28. G. Moroni, "L'Emigrazione italiana in Florida," *Bolletino dell'Emigrazione*, I (1913), 40. Other sources have indicated that Italian men earned generally higher wages than women. See *Immigrants in Industries*, Tables 139 and 140, 209-10.

29. Corrine Azen Krause, "Urbanization without Breakdown," *Journal of Urban History*, IV (May 1978), 291-305; *Immigrants in Industries*, Table 150, 219.

30. Hendry, "A Revisionist View," 7-10; Louise C. Odencrantz, *Italian Women in Industry* (New York, 1919), 48-49. In both 1920 and 1930 Tampa ranked first nationally among cities of 100,000 or more residents in terms of the percentage of married women gainfully employed. The

Women cigar strippers working at the Perfecto-Garcia factory. Stripping the tobacco leaf attracted a large number of Italian women, who used the position as a bulwark. (From Burdet Brothers Collection, Tampa Public Library).

Cigar Label, La Rosalia. Santo Rosalia, the patron saint of Sicily and a native of Santo Stefano, commanded fervent respect and devotion from the Sicilians. (From Glenn Westfall Collection).

Women cigar makers at the Perfecto-Garcia factory. The factory's large, black water tower dominated the Ybor neighborhood. Three generations of cigar workers labored at the factory. (From Gary Mormino Collection).

A woman worker at the Salvadore Sanchez factory (today the Arturo Fuente plant). Sanchez popularized the "Charles the Great" brand, incidentally, the only pure Havana cigar with an English name. (From Gary Mormino Collection).

as Cubans, three times more likely than Spanish *senoras*, seven times as likely as such women in Pittsburgh, and twelve times more likely to work as Italian wives in Buffalo.³¹ Why?

Clearly, to understand why women worked, one must first understand not only the meaning of work, but also its significance in the local, structural and ethnic group context. In her study, *Family and Community*, Virginia Yans-McLaughlin concluded that Italian women in Buffalo preferred seasonal occupations, such as canning, fruit picking, and homework rather than more lucrative and steady industrial employment. "Italian immigrants," wrote Yans-McLaughlin, "transformed the canning factories into communities where Old World social attitudes and behavior could continue, maintained by kinship ties."³² Tampa's Italians similarly accommodated themselves to the new industrial order. Tampa's cigar industries beat to a different rhythm compared to northeastern mills and foundries. The *galeria* (work floor) loomed less threatening than the Bessemer blast furnace. The cigar industry offered a congenial atmosphere punctuated by frequent doses of *cafe con leche*, dramatic readings from popular *novelle*, the companionship of *paesani*, and the heady solidarity of strong unions.³³ Furthermore, there existed in Tampa no established native or immigrant class, such as the Irish or Germans, to supervise or intimidate Latin women—at least in Ybor City. Thus, in this setting traditional Italian values could survive, albeit in somewhat altered form, and rapid economic development could occur within the context of social conservatism.

Even the city's turbulent, fractious labor history failed to dislodge Italian women from the cigar factories. Strikes became benchmarks of time in Ybor City. A series of violent and pro-

year 1930, for example, saw 33.4 percent of such women at work. *Fifteenth Census, 1930*, IV, Table 30, 81.

31. Italian women employed in Ybor City cigar factories actually went against the wider trend then operating in Tampa's cigar industry, which saw the percentage of women versus men obtaining employment go downward by 1900. Among Italians, more women than men in Ybor City worked in the factories. For the larger patterns see, Durward Long, "Women Workers in the Cigar Industry," paper delivered at the Florida Historical Society meeting, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, May 8, 1982.
32. Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, *Family and Community: Italian Immigrants in Buffalo, 1880-1930* (Ithaca, 1977), 217.
33. Louis A. Perez, "Reminiscences of a Lector: Cuban Cigar Workers in Tampa," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, LIII (April 1975), 443-50; "Older Cigarmakers Miss Factory Reader," *Tampa Daily Times*, April 23, 1946.

tracted strikes led by fiercely militant unions enveloped Ybor City between 1899 and 1931.³⁴ Conflicts generally revolved around challenges to pre-industrial fringe benefits and sovereignty of the workplace. The workers' embrace of popular leftist causes, such as socialism and anarchism, intensified the struggle.

Italian men and women clearly supported the cause. During the general strike occurring in 1900, the *Tampa Tribune* observed the following scene: "The hall was literally packed with women who work daily in the branch of the cigarmaking industry. There were Americans, Cubans, Spaniards and Italians in the mass of feminine toilers . . . 1248 women members. . . . It was the largest body of women ever assembled in Tampa. It was a sight worth seeing."³⁵

In 1910 the *Tribune* described as "ludicrous," nine Italian women who picketed the factory of Arguelles, Lopez and Brothers. "The misguided ones, armed with clubs," an observer wrote, "paraded the streets about the factory. Their weapons they brandished and their tongues they did wag, giving vent to threats that they would beat all to death who would work."³⁶ Tampa-born author Jose Yglesias, in this reminiscences with Studs Terkel, confirmed the pattern: "People date their lives from various strikes in Tampa. When they refer to a scab, they say, 'It's no surprise he's going to break the strike since his mother did it in 1921.' In my hometown strikes were passionate affairs . . . Women beat up women scabs."³⁷

Italian women earned their place in the rank and file. And yet in historical perspective, their essential group experience embodied a conservative lifestyle. How does one explain the re-

34. Durward Long, "La Resistencia: Tampa's Immigrant Labor Union," *Labor History*, VI (Fall 1965), 193-214; Durward Long, "Labor Relations in the Tampa Cigar Industry, 1885-1911," *Labor History*, XI (Fall 1971), 551-59; George Pozzetta, "Italians and the General Strike of 1910," in George Pozzetta, ed., *Pane e Lavoro: The Italian American Working Class* (Toronto, 1980), 29-47; George Pozzetta, "Alerta Tabaqueros! Tampa's Striking Cigarworkers," *Tampa Bay History*, III (Fall/Winter 1981), 19-30; Gary R. Mormino, "Tampa and the New Urban South: The Weight Strike of 1899," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, LX (January 1982), 337-56.

35. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, November 18, 1900. Women were also active in the formation of Women's Union Label Leagues. See Tampa *El Internacional*, February 24, 1911.

36. *Ibid.*, November 15, 1910.

37. Quoted in Studs Terkel, *Hard Times* (New York, 1970), 134.

lationship of labor radicalism and domestic conservatism? The work choices made by Italian women which took them out of homes, gave them higher wages than their menfolk, and placed them in militant unions must be understood in the context of their family obligations. The individual's identity assumed importance only as it contributed to the group well being. Sicilian women— and girls— worked not to enhance their self-identification, nor to achieve a share of American independence, but to maintain and sustain the family unit.³⁸ The general pattern was to utilize cigar factory jobs as a means to an end rather than as permanent employment selections. While women labored for wages in the factories, often for extended periods of time, men began to move in different directions. Typically men labored for a few years to build a small amount of investment capital, usually put toward some form of property. "The Italian cigar makers are not content until they own their own homes," wrote an official in 1909.³⁹ Soon men began to purchase dairies, truck farms, and cattle herds on the fringes of Ybor City. Others invested in the first small beginnings of a trade or business— a fruit stand, fish store, grocery, confectionary, bakery, or import house. Women and children often provided steady wages until these ventures matured. The elderly and very young also contributed. Old women cared for children during the work day, and youngsters of six, seven, or eight years acquired rudimentary cigarmaking skills at home.⁴⁰ The strategy reaped dividends.

Italians achieved extraordinary progress in the street trades compared to their Latin counterparts in Ybor City. In 1909 Italians boasted forty-seven fruit and vegetable vendors, seven fish markets, and fourteen ice and ice cream dealers as compared to a total of only three such Cuban and Spanish enterprises.⁴¹

38. See John Bodnar, "Immigration, Kinship and the Rise of Working-Class Realism in Industrial America," *Journal of Social History*, XII (1980), 45-65, for a discussion of these trends. William Leuchtenberg's study, *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-32* (Chicago, 1958), 160, was surely not describing Italian women when it concluded, "By 1930 more than ten million women held jobs. Nothing did more to emancipate them."

39. *Immigrants in Industries*, 264.

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.*, Table 137, 207; *Italian Business Directory, 1911-1912* (New York, 1912), 399-400. A complete set Tampa city business directories from 1899-1930 contained in the Tampa Public Library also confirm the pace of Italian business development.

Many of these business ventures were launched on precisely the basis described above. The case of Alex and Josephine Scaglione typified this paradigm. The couple met while rolling cigars in Ybor City. Soon Alex left the factories and opened a grocery store. Josephine continued to roll cigars until the business stabilized. Their son became a high school principal and college president, characteristic of the generation after 1930, once Italians had struggled to carve themselves a niche in the bourgeois world.⁴²

Family obligations extended to the unit's more junior members as well. "A family's wealth," an old world proverb reminded immigrants, "depended upon the number of hands it has," and Italians were not reluctant to enlist all available support.⁴³ Parents directed the vocations of their children, and during the period 1890-1930, work began early. Few Italian children in Tampa— as elsewhere— entered high school before the Depression. "The education of children is almost altogether neglected," complained one official.⁴⁴ Reflecting Old World priorities, girls fared much worse than their brothers in educational opportunity and achievement. "Education was out of the question for a single girl," explained Mary Italiano. "I went to school as far as the fourth or fifth grade."⁴⁵ The necessity of going to work, either at a factory work bench or in the home, came soon to the lives of most Italian women.

Tampa's Italians exercised patience and persistence in their efforts to achieve success. When strikes depressed the local economy, Italians proved particularly adept at probing the urban and rural economies, finding work mining phosphate, picking oranges, gardening, or peddling. Tina Provenzano remembered fleeing her cigar factory in Tampa during the 1920 strike and living with her father, who then was working for a Clearwater farmer.⁴⁶ A taste of tenant farming did not cheapen the family dignity. "Italians were more interested in building something for ourselves," explained Nick Nuccio, one of Tampa's most successful Latin politicians: "The Spanish and Cuban people . . . they come here to make a little money and go back to Spain and Cuba.

42. Interview with Josephine and Alex Scaglione, April 2, 1980, Tampa.

43. Quoted in Yans-McLaughlin, *Family and Community*, 180.

44. *Immigrants in Industries*, 264.

45. Interview with Mary Italiano, April 20, 1978, Tampa.

46. Interview with Tina Assunta Provenzano, March 13, 1982, Tampa.

The Italian people knew they were going to live [here] for the rest of their lives, raise a family. I lived in the same house for thirty-eight years."⁴⁷

Just as Italians adjusted to the new demands of the workplace, so too did the patterns of Italian domestic life reflect the impact of a new environment. Old World fathers soon discovered their daughters saw little romance or utility in Sicilian-style marriages. While mothers rarely hand-picked their daughter's future mate, neither did they play an inactive role. The chaperone entered the scene. Courtship followed a strict code of ethics. Friday and Saturday evenings climaxed around Ybor City's main thoroughfare, Seventh Avenue. Throngs of Latins converged during the evening hours for shopping, indulging in guava tarts with coffee, and dancing at one of the four mutual aid societies: L'Unione Italiana, Centro Asturiano, Centro Español, and Círculo Cubano.⁴⁸ Young couples were allowed to flirt and dance, but always under the watchful eye of mother or an older sister. In Ybor City there were no privileged sanctuaries. "Mother would take us walking up and down Seventh Avenue," smiled Angelina Spoto Comescone; "and all the boys would be standing on the curb and the mothers would be like little hens watching her chicks. So that nobody would look at us or touch us. . . . The boys would go wild trying to get a word with us. . . . It was beautiful. It was entertainment. It was beautiful"⁴⁹

Helen Martinez Spoto concurred: "We had to have a chaperone, always It was nicer then. We were more together . . . the family together." Rosemary Scaglione Craparo offered her insights into the institution: "Marriage was the only way, the only way to get from out, from under the skirts of the mother. . . . We thought that by getting married young— you see we couldn't see a fella, couldn't sit on the porch with the light on at night— so the first [male] to come along and smile at us, we would marry him. And there was not divorce."⁵⁰

More structured recreation took place within the mutual aid

47. Interview with Nick C. Nuccio, June 10, 1979, Tampa.

48. Salatha Bagley, "The Latin Clubs of Tampa, Florida," (master's thesis, Duke University, 1948), *passim*.

49. Interview with Angelina Spoto Comescone, July 29, 1979, Tampa.

50. Interview with Helen Martinez Spoto, April 30, 1979, Tampa; Interview with Rosemary Scaglione Craparo, July 29, 1979, Tampa.

society, but women typically operated at the fringes of this institution. Organized in 1894, L'Unione Italiana ministered to the social and economic needs of Italian immigrants. It dispensed cradle to grave benefits, from unemployment compensation to burial expenses. In 1914, a magnificent clubhouse was erected, replaced a few years later, after a fire, by an even more resplendent four-story structure. The club served, however, as the principal domain of men. Club rules allowed women to join in the 1920s and participate in medical benefits, but their role was explicitly defined by their committee names: the Women's Auxiliary Committee and Women's Recreational Committee.⁵¹ Yet, even before formal entry, women participated fully in the numerous Sunday picnics and outings sponsored by the club. They also labored diligently in the many fund raising drives for various civic and national causes highlighting the club's existence.

If Italian women seldom frequented the *cantina* of the social club, they were invisible at the ballot box. No woman possessed the vote until 1920, of course, but even as late as 1930 Tampa's Latins—men and women—wielded little leverage in the city's ward system. For good reasons, Italians declined the franchise. In the old country, the peasantry was virtually disfranchised until 1892, and a universal male franchise was not won until 1912. Moreover, most of Tampa's Sicilians never learned to read or write English, a requirement for registering to vote in Florida. For example, in 1909, only six per cent of Tampa's foreign-born Italian women who were employed could speak English, as opposed to twenty per cent of their Cuban counterparts.⁵² Ironically, this figure belies the very rapid linguistic adaptation achieved by Italian women in adjusting to the dominant language of Ybor City. In this ethnic enclave, the *lingua franca* was Spanish, not English, and because of their heavy representation

51. Interview with Paul Longo, June 1, 1979, Tampa. Longo served as president of L'Unione Italiana and during the 1920s helped organize the women's groups.

52. *Immigrants in Industries*, Table 188, 259. Tampa again contrasted with patterns found elsewhere in the nation, this time in terms of the ability to speak English among Italian women. The trends in other locations saw unemployed females lagging behind employed females in ability to speak English. The reverse was true in Tampa (41.3 percent) versus 6.0 percent), a situation directly attributable to the fact that Spanish was spoken in the cigar factories. See Table 187, 259 for this contrast.

in the cigar factories, Italian women may well have acquired facility in Spanish more quickly than men. Fluency in Spanish, however, did not translate into a high rate of voting or naturalization. Indeed, by 1930, only twenty-four per cent of Tampa's foreign born population was naturalized, easily the lowest percentage of any large city in the United States.⁵³

In general, women accommodated to the social dictates of this period. The Italian family was father-dominated but mother-centered, a delicate balance of wills.⁵⁴ Few women challenged this arrangement. Today elderly Italian women yearn nostalgically for the halcyon days of yesteryear. "Ybor City was one big family," sobbed Angelina Comescone. "In the evenings our parents would take us walking . . . Ybor City was all one big family. We all loved one another. It was beautiful. We could go walking, singing all the way, Italian, Spanish, and American songs. Nobody walks anymore. It was beautiful then. Nobody sings anymore. . . . Today, you don't hear anybody sing anymore."⁵⁵

The alienating and disruptive consequences of the immigration process, as chronicled by such historians as Oscar Handlin, require modification when applied to the Tampa experience. The Sicily-Tampa odyssey reveals that the tenacious Italian family structure provided a flexible and effective tool in coping with the New World. It worked as a moderating cushion to insure survival in a strange new land. Clearly, the rigors of immigration, industrialization, and urbanization as it applied to Tampa did not break the Italian family.

When asked to summarize the role of women in Ybor City, seventy-year old Nelson Palermo pondered, and then said, "Cigarmaking, kitchen, raising children. And respect."⁵⁶ In the broadest terms, his characterization speaks accurately. And yet, Italian women in Ybor City played a myriad of roles, many of them undefined and unrecorded. One is reminded of an observa-

53. *Fifteenth Census of U.S.: 1930, Population, Florida*, "Citizenship of Foreign-Born," Table 21, 463.

54. Constance Cronin, *Sicilians in Sicily and Australia* (Chicago, 1970), 72; Anne M. Pescatello, *Power and Pawn: The Female in Iberian Societies and Culture* (Westport, CT, 1976), esp. 160-204.

55. Interview with Angelina Spoto Comescone, July 29, 1979, Tampa.

56. Interview with Nelson Palermo, March 11, 1982, Tampa.

tion in Ann Cornelisen's classic work on Italian life, *Women in the Shadows*. "As for the women," the speaker explained, "Put any label you want on it. It amounts to the same thing; . . . Men work and talk about politics. We do the rest . . . We decide, but we don't have to talk about it in the Piazza."⁵⁷

Italian women were thus significant forces in determining the nature of immigrant adjustments to life in Tampa. Their tenacious efforts helped to preserve a culture, with its emphasis on hard work, frugality, and strong family bonds. Yet, at the same time, they often played a leading role in flexibly adapting Old World ways to cope with the new conditions encountered in Florida. In the end, both the immigrant group itself and the urban environment in which it existed were reshaped as a result of this delicate balance between the old and new.

Any complete study of immigrant Tampa includes many other questions surrounding women that remain unanswered. Why, for example, did Italians after the Depression suddenly embrace the educational system and pursue professional degrees with the same success they had earlier brought to fruit peddling and cigarmaking? How did women relate to this phenomenon? What was the nature of the interrelationships existing between immigrant men and women as the second, third, and fourth generations interacted? How did the working class culture of cities such as Tampa change over time and where did women fit into this evolution? Much of the information needed to address these issues will undoubtedly have to be ferreted from oral interviews. And, as responses to these perplexing queries emerge, surely new questions will surface and heretofore unrecognized women will appear as agents of social change.

57. Anne Cornelisen, *Women of the Shadows* (New York, 1977) 227-28.