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Italians of the Gold Country (Images of America: California)

Carolyn Fregulia

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California’s gold country has been profoundly influenced by Italian culture for the last 160 years. Immigrants from Italy’s northern provinces were drawn here by the lure of gold, but it was the allure of the California foothills, where they found the terrain and Mediterranean climate similar to that of Italy, that convinced them to stay. California’s fledgling economy provided unparalleled opportunities for Italian businessmen, and unclaimed land was available for agriculturalists. Settlement soon brought women and children, and within a decade, Italians represented a significant portion of the population in the region, numbering among the gold country’s leading farmers, merchants, and tradesmen. The Mother Lode also offered women unique advantages, and Italian women proved wonderfully resourceful when necessity demanded. The 1870s saw a second wave of immigration, as Italian laborers arrived to work in the large, corporate-owned gold mines. Descendents of many of these Italian pioneers remain in the gold country to this day.

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