

THE ITALIANS

*Mezzogiorno
literally means
“middle of
the day.”*

My dad’s side of the family came to America in the late teens. They weren’t real open about why they came. I guess it was the reason everybody came, for a better life.

Until the middle of the 19th century, there were really no Italians in America, because there was no Italy. The country that is now Italy was a collection of smaller countries, each with its own dialect and customs. From north to south were Piedmont, Venetia, Lombardy, Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Marches, Latium, Abruzzi and Molise, Campania, Apulia, Basilicata, Calabria, Sicily, and to the west Corsica and Sardinia. From north to south was the way the economy went, too, with the northernmost countries being the richest and the southernmost the poorest. There was very little emigration—for a time, it was forbidden—and when people did leave the country, it was often simply to France or Germany to do seasonal work and then return. Those who crossed the ocean more commonly went to South America than to the United States.

When Italy unified in the mid-19th century, the northern Italian economy improved even more. Like in Ireland, Italians from the north sought to distinguish themselves from southern Italians, whom they considered to be members of an inferior race. This snowballed into a caste system in which inhabitants of each country thought they were better than people from any country south of their own.

Natives of Italy did not see themselves as Italians. They saw themselves first as a member of their family, then a member of their village, then a member of their province. The customs of each village and province were different from the next.

Southern Italians from the Mezzogiorno, the six provinces east and south of Rome, were *contadini*, peasant farmers who put food on their landlord’s table as well as their own. The land they tilled was often in a malaria-infested valley, forcing workers to live on surrounding hillsides, which added the toil of walking to and from the fields each day.

Like farmers all over the world who depend on Mother Nature for their livelihood, Italians from the Mezzogiorno believed in luck and fate. Some villages didn’t even use the future tense in their

