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# ALIENS IN SOUTHERN APPALACHIA, 1900-1920

## *The Italian Experience in Wise County, Virginia*

by MARGARET RIPLEY WOLFE\*

THE development of bituminous coal mining in Southern Appalachia coincided with the arrival in the United States of millions of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe. Before 1900 operators had depended on native whites and Negroes for their labor force. Between 1900 and 1907, however, "new" immigrants in considerable numbers entered the coal fields of Alabama, Virginia, and West Virginia. According to a report of the Dillingham Commission, foreign-born workers represented three-tenths of the labor force in these states during this period. The South Italian was the largest ethnic group, comprising over thirty percent of the foreign-born and more than eight percent of the total number of all employees.<sup>1</sup> The possibilities for Italian laborers in this area of the country had been recognized as early as 1906 by Gino Speranza, an American-Italian lawyer with the Society for the Protection of Italian Immigrants in New York City. He had remarked on the "unusually good opportunity to study the question of Italian non-farming labor in the South" and urged finding "means for preventing forced labor among Italians in the South without closing a market which seems particularly well adapted for the Italian laborer."<sup>2</sup> The Italian immigrants in the coal camps of Wise County, Virginia, from 1900 to 1920, offer a microcosm for the study of foreign labor in Southern Appalachia.

The principal coal mine in Wise County in 1900 was at Big Stone Gap. Because of the mountainous terrain, the area had been severely retarded in industrial and urban development, and the native culture survived on a meager agricultural base. Prior to the establishment of the coal camps, Wise County had a sparse population.<sup>3</sup> Mine operators were confronted not only

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\* Dr. Wolfe is an associate professor of history at East Tennessee State University, Kingsport, Tennessee.

<sup>1</sup> United States, Congress, Senate, *Reports of the Immigration Commission*, S. Doc. 633, 61st Congress, 2nd session, 1909-1910, *Immigrants in Industry: The Bituminous Coal Mining Industry in the South*, V, 136-140.

<sup>2</sup> Gino Speranza to Conte A. R. Massiglia, May 25, 1906, Gino Speranza Papers, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota, St. Paul.

<sup>3</sup> U. S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States*, 1910, III, 960. With the introduction of northern capitalism, the population of Wise County more than tripled in a twenty-year period increasing from 9,345 in 1890 to 34,162 in 1910. The significance of these figures becomes evident when compared to the previous twenty-year period; census figures for 1870 showed 4,785 residents; two decades later, 9,345.

by a shortage of native laborers, but those that they employed were poor in quality and uninterested in underground work. The operators claimed that a generation earlier the residents of the county had been "at least two hundred years behind the civilization of the more densely populated sections of the United States."<sup>4</sup> The Stonega Company, the largest mining operation in Wise County, with home offices in Philadelphia, therefore began recruiting foreign labor, newly arrived in the country, or native labor elsewhere in the United States.

The first aliens to enter the Big Stone Gap field were Hungarians from the Pocahontas Field of McDowell, Mercer, Mingo, and Logan counties in West Virginia and Tazewell County in Virginia. They found employment with the Virginia Coal and Iron Company (later the Stonega Coal and Coke Company) at Stonega in 1896. Within the next few years Italians, mostly from southern Italy, followed the Hungarians into the area, but never seriously challenged the dominance of that group among foreign-born elements. The Immigration Commission reported that the first Italians in the Big Stone Gap field arrived at Norton in 1900 and entered the mines in considerable numbers around 1902. By 1907, 650 were at work in and about the mines. That particular study also indicated that Italian men were migratory and that only a small proportion had families with them. With the high degree of transience in the coal camps, thousands of different Italians may have worked the mines of Wise County from 1900 to 1920.<sup>5</sup>

Government records, probably generally correct, contain some errors. Italians had actually arrived in Wise County before 1900, a fact recorded by the native Appalachians who noted their lawlessness. The *Big Stone Gap Post* reported in May 1898 that an Italian named Rossa had been a participant in a Sunday morning shootout at Stonega that left one man dead and five or six wounded. By the end of 1900, this same newspaper referred to "the Italian Colony" at Stonega and accused Italians there of being the aggressors in a shooting scrape on Christmas day, resulting in the death of one man and the injury of another.<sup>6</sup>

Italians with the Stonega Company experienced exceptional treatment compared to foreign laborers employed by some companies in the Southern Appalachians. There is no evidence indicating that this particular company abused the foreigners in its service; on the contrary, company officials made every reasonable effort to keep earnings as well as working and living

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<sup>4</sup> Stonega Coal and Coke Company, *Annual Report, 1917*, p. 3, Westmoreland Coal Company, Big Stone Gap, Va.

<sup>5</sup> *The Bituminous Coal Mining Industry in the South*, V, 165-166.

<sup>6</sup> *Big Stone Gap (Virginia) Post*, May 26, 1898, and January 3, 1901.

conditions at a level to retain foreign labor. Housing received perpetual attention. Stonega officials not only concerned themselves with the original construction but also tried to maintain and improve dwellings. One candid official reported that

Twenty-three box houses located at what is called 'Slabtown,' in the upper part of Osaka town, were remodeled and set on brick foundations in November and December 1915. These houses were always unfit for habitation, and only part of them were occupied by a low-class of labor previous to remodeling. The houses as finished, with fences and garden plots, are particularly attractive to the foreigners, and this has been made a district for foreign miners working in the Roda mines, and is popular with this class of labor.<sup>7</sup>

Stonega officials also displayed a concern for the health and safety of miners and their families that was unique for the area and time. Not only did they maintain a company hospital at Stonega staffed by a well-trained company doctor, sometimes assisted by other physicians, but they also established mine-safety programs. In 1915, according to the annual report, "The Engineering Department . . . with the assistance of the Medical Department has advanced the cause of 'Safety First' this year." There had been "Complete isolation of contagious diseases, guarding of electric circuits and moving parts of machinery, posting of warning notices and a thorough training of First Aid Teams at all plants." Race entered into the safety crusade, the company had nineteen white first-aid teams and three colored. The latter existed for the benefit of Negroes, and all whites, including foreigners, were to be saved by the other nineteen.<sup>8</sup>

Education likewise received attention. Stonega town, established by 1897, had schools in operation as early as the 1898-1899 school term. The *Big Stone Gap Post* reported in June 1899 that the company had provided the teacher's salary for a six-month supplemental term at the white school and paid the entire salary of the teacher at the colored school. By August of the same year, the white school building had been enlarged by an additional room to meet the demands of an increasing population. The company financed all the improvements, relying on the school board of Wise County to reimburse it when its treasury would permit. According to the *Post* reporter, the addition to the building was "a decided improvement" and and gave it "the appearance of an academy."<sup>9</sup>

Recognizing the religious needs of foreign workers as well as more mun-

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<sup>7</sup> *Annual Report*, 1915, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> *Post*, June 29 and August 31, 1899.

dane requirements for existence, the company arranged for Catholic priests to live in the camps and constructed houses for the clergy and churches for the congregation. In 1906 Charles G. Duffy, a Stonega official, reminded the abbot at St. Bernard, Alabama, of the company's efforts after the Reverend Bernard Menges had ordered a priest popular with the Hungarians to another locality. "Now this would be a hardship on our coal field, and unfair to the companies because of the great shortage of labor in this locality," he lamented. "The Coal Companies throughout this region, and particularly the Stonega Company, were the pioneers in encouraging church work in this part of Virginia. The new house for the Priest, which is just about completed, is a very nice one, and better than the original plan called for." The abbot responded within two weeks, explained his action, and concluded that the company's interests would not suffer. As an apparent afterthought, Menges penciled the following: "The spiritual interests of the congregation will also be taken care of." He also promised Duffy that the popular priest, Father Anthony Hoch, would "use his best influence among the Hungarians at Stonega to have them remain where they were."<sup>10</sup>

In spite of the efforts of the Stonega Company to secure and retain foreign labor, which were exemplary, it enjoyed no long-term success and incurred considerable expense. Newly recruited labor often abandoned the Stonega mines once they were in the area and found employment with rival operators to avoid repaying transportation charges.<sup>11</sup> Even those who stayed long enough to enjoy the benevolent paternalism of the company could not be retained. The high degree of transience in the camps impeded the development of the type of group identity necessary to sustain a sense of community and the limited opportunities for upward mobility discouraged individual adaptation.

The outbreak of World War I further aggravated the circumstances confronting the Stonega Company and other firms that had come to rely on unskilled immigrant laborers. First, the entry of the United States into the war necessitated enlarging the military forces and expanding industry, thereby intensifying the already-existing labor shortage in the country. Second, hostilities in Europe virtually halted emigration, depriving American industrialists of their principal nondomestic source. Nonetheless, officials of the Stonega Company reported continual efforts to secure foreigners. Desperate for a better quality of labor, after relying during World War I on

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<sup>10</sup> Charles G. Duffy to Rt. Rev. Bernard Menges, August 15, 1906, and Menges to Duffy, August 27, 1906, Abbey Records, St. Bernard's Abbey, Cullman, Ala.

<sup>11</sup> *Annual Report*, 1916, p. 13.

illiterate Alabama Negroes, who had "little interest or pride in their employment," they sent a representative through Ohio and Michigan in 1920 searching for foreign-born workers, but without success.<sup>12</sup>

Although coal operators were primarily responsible for the presence of Italians in Southern Appalachia, railroad contractors lured others to the region; noteworthy in this endeavor was George L. Carter of the Carolina, Clinchfield and Ohio Railroad. In 1902 Carter and his associates purchased the property of the Ohio Railway and Charleston Railway Company and organized the South and Western Railway Company specifically planned to implement the development of Southwest Virginia and Eastern Kentucky coal fields. The completion of the road, known as the Clinchfield, marked a new era in railroad construction. Where other roads had gone around mountain barriers, the Clinchfield cut through them. Throughout almost its entire length, from Spartanburg, South Carolina, to Elkhorn City, Kentucky, it traversed a rugged mountain country, cutting through the intervening ridges with a high standard of construction and easy grades which fit it for the carriage of immense tonnage. This remarkable engineering feat owed its success largely to Italian immigrant labor.<sup>13</sup> Apparently all of the contractors, but definitely the Meadows Company and the Spruce Pine Carolina Company, employed labor agents, some Italians, who routed new arrivals in northern port cities to jobs in the southern mountains. They procured thousands of Italians, many just off the boat, unable to speak English, anxious for work, and ignorant of their destination when they fell in with the agents. When the railroad was completed, some of the Italians who survived the construction moved into the coal fields of Southwest Virginia and Eastern Kentucky; others made their way to northern cities.

The Italian experience with the construction of the Clinchfield Railroad represented a somber chapter in the annals of Southern Appalachian history. Destruction of the Clinchfield contract labor records leaves much of the story recounted only in the myths and legends of the mountains. Nonetheless, enough concrete facts remain to provide convincing testimony of the cruelties and injustices suffered by Italian laborers. Some evidence survives in the form of unmarked graves along the railroad right-of-way and in scattered churchyards paralleling the construction route; the most convincing, however, survives in diplomatic correspondence.

On June 20, 1906, Italian Consul G. C. Montagna lodged a formal protest with Secretary of State Elihu Root, complaining of the harsh treat-

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<sup>12</sup> *Annual Report*, 1920, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Clinchfield Railroad Company, Engineering Department, Historical Files, Erwin, Tenn.

ment of Italian laborers by the Spruce Pine Carolina Company at Marion, North Carolina. The listed abuses included using armed guards, forcing Italians to work underground when they had contracted to work above ground, whipping them, compelling them to buy all supplies at the company store thus securing the return of all the wages, and withholding mail from families of the employees. Montagna filed this protest after Italians who had escaped from the company sought the help of the consul in securing back pay and the possessions they had left behind. Montagna had then commissioned an investigation by Gino Speranza who was aided by the Italian Consular agent in Charleston, South Carolina, and United States District Attorney Alfred Holton. Their findings supported the complaints of approximately 200 Italians who had escaped, leaving behind about 1,500 of their countrymen.<sup>14</sup>

The incident that immediately preceded the diplomatic protest, a bloody row, occurred on May 14, 1906, at Marion. Local law enforcement officials in the employ of the Spruce Pine Carolina Company organized a posse and launched an armed attack on the Italian camp, leaving two dead and five severely wounded. Nine uninjured Italians were jailed. They were eventually tried, found innocent, and released. The leaders of the attack were indicted for manslaughter and warrants were issued against some agents of the Carolina Company. After several conferences between Italian officials and representatives of the South and Western Railroad [early name for the Clinchfield], the company agreed to pay indemnities to the heirs of the dead and all the Italians who were innocent victims of the incident on May 14. The company also promised to dismiss and never again employ those agents who had been guilty of ill-treatment of Italian laborers.<sup>15</sup>

The outrageous cruelties by the Spruce Pine Carolina Company did not repeat themselves elsewhere on the construction line and did not represent official policy of Carter and his associates. Speranza, in fact, did not want the South closed to Italian laborers. "Indeed," he said, "I personally should like to have Italians sent to work for the Carolina Company especially in its Clinchport (Virginia) section where conditions are almost ideal."<sup>16</sup> This is not to say that there were not other isolated incidents of cruelty by inhumane labor bosses. Working conditions varied from one location to another on

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<sup>14</sup> Italian Legation in the U. S., Notes to the Department of State, 1861-1906, Consul G. C., Montagna to Secretary of State Elihu Root, June 20, 1906, National Archives, Washington, D. C.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, Montagna to Root, August 25, 1906.

<sup>16</sup> Speranza to Massiglia, May 25, 1906.

the route depending on the contractor, as did the reception of Italians by the native mountaineers.

The environment of railroad work camps was uncertain, the nature of the work taking a fierce toll in human lives. Sophisticated construction machinery had not come into use, and except for blasting and some mule-drawn carts and drag pans, picks and shovels cut the road through the mountains. Internal fights also cost lives. Reid Queen, Sr., Little Switzerland, North Carolina, who worked on the Clinchfield construction project, recalled one altercation among Italians. Fifteen or so men had hired one of their countrymen to prepare their meals. One evening they returned from work to find him drunk and no signs of supper. An explosion of Italian temperament resulted in the execution of the cook who was tied to a tree and shot.<sup>17</sup>

Not only did Italian laborers in Southern Appalachia suffer abuses at the hands of their native American employers, but their tragedy was further complicated by their own countrymen who sometimes delivered them into the hands of harsh taskmasters. There is no doubt that the padrone system operated in Southern Appalachia. The Spruce Pine Carolina Company employed Jim Mazzone to recruit Italians in New York. Mazzone, however, became irritated with his associates when they failed to provide transportation funds for him, and he emerged as a leader of the discontented Italians at Marion, North Carolina. Gino Speranza also found the padrone in operation in West Virginia. Responding to complaints of Italians there, he visited Kelly's Camp in Kanawha County. Kelly, an Italian contractor despite his name, had vowed "by the national tricolor," in a letter to the Italian consul in New York, that there were no Italians in his area of West Virginia. Speranza, after walking railroad ties and riding a mule to reach the isolated camp, found several Italians at work. The foreman, Kelly's partner, who greeted him was a "Neapolitan of splendid physique." Italians in West Virginia were held by force after transportation had been advanced; beatings had occurred and workers had disappeared mysteriously.<sup>18</sup>

Records of labor abuses during these years in Southern Appalachia remained to overshadow the benevolent paternalism of such organizations as the Stonega Company. Even the most humane employers shared in the greater tragedy, however, for railroad construction and mining development at the turn of the twentieth century marked the beginning of capitalistic

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<sup>17</sup> *Charlotte (North Carolina) Observer*, August 23, 1953, Clinchfield Files.

<sup>18</sup> *Montagna to Root*, August 25, 1906, Trial Transcript; Speranza, "Getting Evidence in the Labor Camps of West Virginia," Speranza Collection.

rape of Southern Appalachia by northern investors. Just as the northern capitalists exploited the mineral resources of Appalachia, they also exploited its natives and its adopted children. Interestingly enough, the transplanted Southern Italians and the natives of Southern Appalachia possessed certain common characteristics: they were victims of geography and related political developments; they seemed to share a penchant for violence and lawlessness; they engaged in similar economic pursuits; they lagged behind their national counterparts in educational opportunities; and a resemblance existed between their general levels of sociological development. The great irony lay, however, in the fact that South Italian immigrants had broken the bonds of a retarded society, migrated to America in search of opportunity, and been lured to Southern Appalachia only to find themselves in a locale exhibiting many of the characteristics of the society from which they had fled.

The Southern Italians who filtered into the Appalachians from northern ports of entry found themselves in a rugged mountainous area not unlike their native region. The political remoteness of rural Eastern Kentucky and Southwest Virginia resembled the second-class status of Southern Italy, dominated by the more prosperous, highly industrialized North. Southern Italy, under the monarchy, according to one historian, "received treatment more appropriate for a colony or appendage." In the 1880s, Baron Sidney Sonnino had reminded parliament that the government had not made any significant move to improve living and working conditions for Southern Italians. After the turn of the century, diplomat-historian Luigi Villari noted in a published work: "The North has made a great advance in wealth, trade, and education, while the South is almost stationary."<sup>19</sup>

The native of the Southern Appalachians was as helpless in the face of encroaching northern capitalism and the related economic and political developments as the South Italian under the monarchy. Coal company officials recognized the cultural retardation and victimized the mountaineer. Harry M. Caudill, in his "biography" of Eastern Kentucky, noted that outsiders who followed the railroads into the Cumberland Plateau viewed the mountaineer as "a sort of latter-day border pioneer, summed up in the expression 'our contemporary ancestors.'" Caudill observed that the mountaineer still lived in a manner "not strikingly different from that of his forefathers forty years after the first settlements." Agents for coal companies who persuaded the natives to sign over mineral rights to their land exploited this weakness. Caudill described such a transaction: "On one side of the rude

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<sup>19</sup> Humbert S. Nelli, *The Italians in Chicago, 1880-1930: A Study in Ethnic Mobility* (New York, 1970), p. 4.

table sat an astute trader, more often than not a graduate of a fine college and a man experienced in the large business world. He was thoroughly aware of the implications of the transaction and of the immense wealth which he was in the process of acquiring. Across the table on a puncheon bench sat a man and a woman out of a different age. Still remarkably close to the frontier of a century before, neither of them possessed more than the rudiments of an education." Given these circumstances, the coal company officials likewise were able to impose their political will in local, state, and congressional elections.<sup>20</sup>

In view of the political and economic subjugation of South Italians and Southern Appalachian mountaineers, it was not surprising that locally they gloried in a savage individualism that often spent itself in lawlessness and violence. In Southern Appalachia the lawless element of native mountaineers and Italian immigrants constituted a small minority of the population, but often their deeds were so flamboyant that they received disproportionate attention. Well known were the myths, legends, and some of the facts of Italian criminality in the mother country and in American cities. Less well known, perhaps, were such deeds in remote rural and small-town America. Local journalists in Wise County, Virginia, celebrated the shootings and knifings in the Italian colony at Stonega around the turn of the century and noted with delight a somewhat unique occurrence in 1904. On a payday in January, two Italians shared a keg of beer. The resulting merriment led to the disfigurement of one when the other attempted to carve a map of Italy on his head. In the Virginia-Tennessee stateline town of Bristol bordering on the Southwest Virginia coal fields, newspapermen likewise observed the lawless nature of Italians. They reported in 1908 that Mike Scarpina, an interpreter and restaurant owner, was arraigned for carrying a concealed weapon. He pleaded guilty and paid a fine of \$25.00 and court costs of \$9.60. Bristol newspapermen also followed the activities of Italians as far away as Memphis and reported a dreaded Black Hand incident there in 1909.<sup>21</sup>

Local journalists who took delight in publicizing the lawlessness of the wild-spirited Latins reported with equal alacrity the same trait in their fellow mountaineers. Before capitalism unleashed itself in full fury, law and order had languished; and even the coal operators were helpless in curbing many of the bloody feuds and skirmishes. One native reminisced that

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<sup>20</sup> Harry M. Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands: A Biography of a Depressed Area* (Boston, 1963), pp. 73-75, 124.

<sup>21</sup> *Post*, May 26, 1898, January 3, 1901, January 21, 1904; *Bristol Herald Courier*, September 9, 1908, June 29, 1909.

gunplay had been common on the main street of Norton, Virginia, where glass chimneys on street lights had to be replaced about once a week because they were usually shot out on Saturday nights. In 1889 the town had boasted one church and eight saloons. A reliable merchant reported in 1895 that a gang of robbers had been preying on wagoners en route to the railroad station at Norton. The editor of the *Big Stone Gap Post* added: "Pound Gap has always been a bad place; over a dozen people have been killed there since the war. . . moonshine whiskey is plentiful on both sides of the state line at one dollar per gallon." Two weeks later the editor asked how long this situation would be tolerated. Not even the lives of law officers were safe in some areas of Southern Appalachia as evidenced by the murder of Tom Osborne, sergeant of the Norton police, by a black man on July 15, 1895. The area newspaper recorded the circumstances: "The colored people of the town were having a dance in the suburbs, and Osborne had gone there to see that the peace was preserved." The murderer was not apprehended until eight days later. Even as late as the 1920s, ambushes were commonplace and attempts on law enforcement officials continued. In August 1923 an unknown "bushwhacker" blasted away at a Norton policeman while he was waiting for a car reportedly loaded with moonshine whiskey. The bullet passed through his hat, missing his scalp by less than an inch. The officer returned to town and changed his hat, apparently undisturbed by his experience.<sup>22</sup>

The Appalachian natives and Italian immigrants not only shared a lawless nature but had followed similar economic pursuits prior to their exposure to capitalism. The natives of Wise County were preindustrial, small-scale merchants and farmers before the introduction of modern industry. In Eastern Kentucky, according to Caudill, "From all over the plateau there trooped in motley gangs of rawboned mountaineers with their bonneted wives and barefoot children, to seek jobs in the mines. Initially most of them were sharecroppers whose lessening returns from the soil had brought them to a point only a few jumps ahead of starvation." Of the foreign-born who settled in the Southern United States, the Dillingham Commission reported that nearly three-fourths of the total had been engaged in farming or farm labor prior to emigration. Of 1,072 Southern Italians investigated, 78.4 percent had been involved in farming or farm labor, 5.1 in mining, 5.3 in

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<sup>22</sup> Pres Atkins, *When the Trains Came to Norton, Wise County in Old Virginia in 1891* (Reprinted from *The Coalfield Progress*, June and July 1941), pp. 53, 71, *Big Stone Gap Post Office, Big Stone Gap, Va.; Post*, January 31, February 14, July 18, 25, 1895, August 29, 1923.

general labor, 1.1 in manufacturing, 7.2 in hand trades, and 2.9 in other occupations.<sup>23</sup>

Estimated agrarian-based income of Appalachian natives before the introduction of northern capitalism and that of South Italians around the time of the mass migration to America suggested the relative poverty of both groups in comparison to their more prosperous countrymen. Some wretched dirt farmers in the southern mountains harvested no more than ten to fifteen bushels of corn per acre. A census of agriculture conducted as late as 1930 revealed that the Appalachian region contained the highest percentage of low-income farms in the nation, some returning annual incomes of less than \$600. An official report by the Italian government indicated that the annual income for the head of a household possessing a small house with a piece of land might be \$273 while his expenses amounted to \$295. According to a popular Italian saying, "If it had not been for immigration, we in Italy would have had to resort to violence in order to make a living."<sup>24</sup>

The South Italians who had the vitality to emigrate to America renounced their traditional agrarianism as did Appalachian natives who left their small farms for the coal camps. Nonetheless, it was doubtful that either group substantially bettered the relative quality of their existence when they entered the service of the coal barons. In the coal and coke industries of Virginia and West Virginia, employees fell into three general categories—miners, coke drawers, and company men. Pay for miners and coke drawers depended on piece work while all other employees, inside or outside, received a stated wage per day. Daily earnings in the South for a majority of native whites, Negroes, and South Italians amounted to between \$2.00 and \$2.50 per day. Steady employment depended on generally good economic conditions. The average annual income of 230 foreign-born male heads of families in Virginia and West Virginia in the decade after 1900 stood at \$500; South Italians, \$456. Furthermore, the remoteness of the camps from cities limited the opportunities of foreign-born wives to supplement the family income by working as domestics.<sup>25</sup> The Italians who settled in Southwest Virginia were employed mainly as coke drawers and outside laborers with very few in the mines because of their fear of the dangers associated with underground work—which speaks well for their instinctive intelligence—a trait they

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<sup>23</sup> Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, p. 103; *The Bituminous Coal Mining Industry in the South*, V, 171.

<sup>24</sup> Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, pp. 82-83; Jack E. Weller, *Yesterday's People: Life in Contemporary Appalachia* (Lexington, Ky., 1965), p. 18; Speranza, "The New Spirit in Immigration," Speranza Collection.

<sup>25</sup> *The Bituminous Coal Mining Industry in the South*, V, 176-177, 186, 189.

shared with native Appalachians "who looked with disdain and distrust at anything they did not understand."<sup>26</sup>

Whatever the advantages of instinct, a significant minority of native Americans and Italians in Wise County lacked many of the benefits of formal education. The census of 1910 revealed that 15.4 percent of the native-white male population of voting age was illiterate, 20.5 of the foreign-born white, and 34.0 of the Negro. This report did not provide a breakdown by national group. Ten years later the situation of the foreign-born and Negroes had further deteriorated. The efforts of the coal companies had clearly benefited the native whites and either had impeded or stabilized the condition of other groups. In 1920, 11.9 percent of the native-white males, twenty-one and over, were illiterate; 32.6 of the foreign-born; and 37.9 of the Negro.<sup>27</sup>

The significance of these figures is subject to speculation. Several possibilities should be considered. While the coal companies supported compulsory education and longer school terms, constructed school buildings, and hired teachers, it might be assumed that their efforts were directed more toward native whites than the foreign-born and Negroes. Existing evidence indicates, however, that opportunities were not denied these groups. In Stonega, the Virginia Iron and Coal Company paid substantial percentages of the salaries for teachers and erected a modern school building for whites. Negroes, properly segregated according to the standards of the time, had their own school staffed wholly at company expense. Officials of this company argued for longer school terms, and in May 1902 could boast the first nine-month school term in Wise County. A year later, they expressed regret when the state legislature failed to muster the votes to enact a compulsory education bill and cited a statement by the Virginia superintendent of public instruction that not ten percent of the children in mining districts attended school, "growing up in ignorance to be a future menace to society and the state." At the same time, according to Caudill, "the overwhelming majority of the people possessed little concept of the role of learning in the building and nurturing of civilization." Parents prided themselves on their accomplishment if they kept their children in school through the eighth grade.<sup>28</sup>

Mobility and alienation may provide further explanation for the rising illiteracy of Negroes and foreign-born. Those who benefited from educational

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176; Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, p. 97.

<sup>27</sup> *Thirteenth Census*, III, 961; U. S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920: Population*, III, 1073.

<sup>28</sup> *Post*, May 14, 1903; Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, p. 131.

opportunities may have fled the mountains, leaving behind the less able and the more recent arrivals. Immigrant and Negro parents may have believed that their economic situation prevented them from educating their children or that the established society scorned them. Natives often ridiculed the speech of the foreign-born and pretended that they could not understand them when they attempted to converse in English. Under such circumstances, parents may have found it easier to keep their children at home. Whatever the explanation for the rising illiteracy among foreign-born and Negroes, the disparity in literacy between native whites and foreign-born was not nearly so great in 1910 as a decade later.

Physically drained by the difficult labor and struggling to eke out an existence, immigrants could hardly be expected to concentrate on intellectual pursuits. Gino Speranza found a seventeen-year-old Italian orphan in Kanawha County, West Virginia, whose penmanship was unusually good. The youth volunteered that he had completed the third grade in Italy and added, "I used to write well, but shovelling makes my hand shake."<sup>29</sup> Labor and living conditions for immigrants in Wise County, Virginia, although difficult, appeared to have been generally superior to those in West Virginia at that particular time.

Prior to the establishment of company towns in Wise County, public education there had lagged behind the progressive areas in this country and was comparable with that in Abruzzi and Molise. One observer, traveling in Italy, commented on "narrow, dark, damp rooms, without water or toilets . . . the pupils exposed to the bitter mountain winds because the windows lack panes." Such conditions were not unheard of in Appalachia at mid-twentieth century and were undoubtedly more common at the beginning of the century. In 1960 Caudill spoke at an eighth-grade commencement in a coal-camp school. "The seven graduates," he wrote, "received their diplomas in the dilapidated two-room building which had sheltered two generations of their forebears. A shower sent a little torrent of water through the ancient roof onto one of the scarred desks. The worn windows rattled in their frames and the paper decorations which had been prepared by the seventh-graders fluttered in drafts admitted by the long-unpainted walls."<sup>30</sup>

Education has been viewed by sociologists and historians as one means of facilitating assimilation and upward mobility. If this process remained slow in Southern Appalachia, and other opportunities were likewise lacking, then

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<sup>29</sup> Speranza, "Getting Evidence in the Labor Camps of West Virginia."

<sup>30</sup> Speranza, "The New Spirit in Immigration"; Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberland*s, p. xiii.

northern urban environments were more favorable for assimilation than rural and small-town southern settings. Most Italians who took up residence in American cities developed a group consciousness, formed benevolent societies and clubs, and forged a sense of community. This resulted in their adjustment to new conditions and their subsequent social and geographical mobility out of the tenement districts. If contemporary sociological studies of Southern Italians and mountaineers of Southern Appalachia have any applicability to past generations, the natives encountered by Italian immigrants to Southern Appalachia between 1900 and 1920 were not unlike countrymen that they had left behind in Italy. Edward C. Banfield, in his study of a poverty-stricken Southern Italian village during the early 1950s, found the peasants tradition-bound, fatalistic, family-oriented, and victimized by *la miseria*. He contended that the appalling conditions there could be explained largely "by the inability of the villagers to act together for the common good or, indeed, for any end transcending the immediate, material interest of the nuclear family." Jack E. Weller, basing his observations on thirteen years of residence as an outsider, identified remarkably similar characteristics of the Southern Appalachian natives. He pointed to individualism, traditionalism, fatalism, and family orientation. According to Weller, "The members of a family . . . are bound to one another by ties of emotional dependence which tend to increase insecurity. In a sense, the family is not so much a mutually supporting group, in which each member gives himself for the other, as it is a group in which each member demands support from the others."<sup>31</sup> Assuming that Italians who migrated from Southern Italy had been motivated by a drive to escape hopeless conditions, they could hardly be expected to tarry long in a region that suffered from the same backwardness.

Apparently the Italians who remained in Appalachia assimilated without difficulty. Few in number, they developed no exaggerated sense of group consciousness and, therefore, posed no obvious threat to the mountaineers. Instead their attitudes blended with the pervasive mountain mentality which in turn helped to bind them all to conditions of poverty.

Given the significance of family ties to Italian aliens prior to emigration and the role played by the family unit and ethnic community in assimilation into American society, some effort must be made to assess these factors in reference to Italians in Wise County. Records of baptisms, deaths, and

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<sup>31</sup> For a thorough study of Italian mobility in a northern city, see Nelli, *The Italians in Chicago*; Edward C. Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (New York, 1958), pp. 9-10, 110-111 *passim*; Weller, *Yesterday's People*, pp. 44-45 *passim*.

marriages, maintained by Catholic priests at Sacred Heart in Stonega from 1900 to 1920, while leaving much to be desired, nonetheless offered some interesting insights. This congregation represented the largest community of Catholic immigrants in Wise County during this period. Several Italian family units lived in Wise County; most married adults had entered into their contracts before they came into the area; intermarriage with other ethnic groups, native and foreign, was not unheard of but most of the Italians married within their own community, and very few deaths, natural or accidental, occurred during this period among the Italians who were affiliated with this congregation, suggesting that the incidence of industrial and mining fatalities was not disproportionate for this ethnic group.<sup>32</sup>

Although the Italians who maintained their ties with Catholicism may have been exceptional, their lives revealed a degree of group consciousness. Marriage and baptismal records showed no concrete evidence of any Italian female having married a non-Italian male between 1900 and 1920. Italian males, however, married native Appalachian females and some had married native Americans from other parts of the country before coming to Appalachia. The Italian male influence in such unions was evident, the children being baptized in the church of their fathers even when the mothers were Protestant. A few families forged close ties, brothers of one family marrying sisters from another and Catholic Italians becoming godparents for each other's children. When deaths occurred, the Italian community felt duty-bound to bury its own—often in its segregated cemeteries.

Italian family ties and some measure of group consciousness can be documented, but the degree of sophistication in Wise County hardly compared with such developments in northern urban ethnic communities. Furthermore, the Italian experience in the coal camps of Wise County was more likely to foster such developments, minor as they were, than that of their counterparts in isolated areas of West Virginia and in the railroad construction camps throughout Southern Appalachia. Italians in this region of the United States were not able to develop political influence between 1900 and 1920 or protect their personal rights. Instead they were forced, by their sheer helplessness, to depend on Italian aid societies in large northern cities and the Italian consular agents.

Although the native whites and the Italians shared the experience of hardships and certain cultural characteristics, extreme differences existed in the areas of religion and ethnicity. The Italians who came to Wise County broke

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<sup>32</sup> Sacred Heart Baptismal, Marriage, and Death Records, Stonega, Va., maintained at St. Anthony's Catholic Church, Norton, Va.

the bonds of a highly formalized Catholicism. Furthermore, because of their relative numerical weakness, they did not possess the advantage of a neighborhood Italian Catholic church. Those who continued to practice the old religion had at their disposal the services of Benedictine priests from St. Bernard's Abbey, Cullman, Alabama, but many of these priests were Germans who directed their principal attention to the more numerous Hungarian immigrants. The Reverend Clarence Meyer, who worked in the Appalachian coal fields during the 1920s, reported that although "there was not much formalism in the profession of their faith as the opportunity to practice their faith formally was limited" that Italians still "considered it a must to have their children baptized and to marry and be buried in a Catholic rite." The spirit of the frontier evidenced itself in religion as practiced in the mountains. One priest in Wise County entered the following in his baptismal records: "Child was baptized in woods/ Mile above Appalachia (town)/ Had no time to take name/ Waving to the train coming/ Received name on the 17th of December 1904."<sup>33</sup>

Coupled with the break of ties to a highly ritualistic church, Italians found themselves surrounded by rock-ribbed Protestant fundamentalists, mostly Baptists and Methodists, who considered themselves the elect, caring little for the fine delineations between other religious groups. Father Ambrose Reger, one of the priests who worked in the mountains, caught the spirit of the Protestant attitude toward Catholics as revealed in the following: "Some Catholic miners had come to Coalport (Kentucky), and one of them asked a native whether there were any Catholics in Middlesboro. The good man said he didn't know for sure, but wouldn't be surprised if there were—Middlesboro being such a tough town."<sup>34</sup>

The difference in religion between natives and immigrants represented no small matter, but different ethnic backgrounds, and all that that meant loomed as a more serious problem for the newcomers. Natives of Appalachia prided themselves on their English and Scotch-Irish ancestry and their peculiar kind of culture molded and perpetuated in the remote mountain valleys. Open hostilities flared when Italian laborers entered the region, including such brutal incidents as that at Marion, North Carolina, and those in the hollows of West Virginia. That these episodes did not repeat themselves in Wise County should be attributed to the general concern of company operators for the well-being of their employees and the fact that

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<sup>33</sup> Reverend Clarence Meyer to the author, September 25, 1974; Sacred Heart Baptismal Records.

<sup>34</sup> Accounts of Father Ambrose Reger, *Scrapbook*, St. Bernard's Abbey, Cullman, Ala.

Italians were so few that natives did not view them as a threat. Nonetheless, the natives, whatever their class, considered themselves superior to the newcomers by virtue of birth and long residence in the area. Italian immigrants or other newcomers were not allowed to forget that they were aliens in a strange land.

Discrimination against foreigners in Wise County and in Southwest Virginia and East Tennessee was often subtle, characterized by snide remarks about lawlessness and the inferiority of the newcomers. The editor of the Johnson City, Tennessee, *Comet*, endorsing the efforts of the Carolina, Clinchfield and Ohio Railroad, which was involved in a crusade to return native southerners to their birthplaces after having used Italian labor to lay the tracks over which they could be transported, voiced prevailing sentiments: "The foreigner is all right. Frequently he makes a good citizen and leaves behind him a family of strong, good American people. But we have a hankering and a yearning for our own, the men and women born in our own air, from our own soil and of our own stock."<sup>35</sup>

The generalization that southerners disliked Negroes as a race but liked them as individuals might well be paraphrased to explain the Southern Appalachian attitude toward Italian immigrants. The same newspaper, the *Big Stone Gap Post*, that carried an editorial favoring restricting immigration and supporting the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s printed a front-page obituary for Tony Nard on December 5, 1923. Nard had lived on a small farm near Big Stone Gap for the past twenty-five years. As eulogized, "He was a familiar character in and around Big Stone Gap where his honest dealing and devoted friendship won for himself and family many friends in this section." Another immigrant, Colisco Francisco Anatonio, who worked as a laborer on the Clinchfield construction project, settled at Ross Camp Ground, a farming community near Kingsport, Tennessee. Clipse, renamed by the local postmaster, stood only five feet, a portly man with strong features. He became an asset to the community where he was affectionately known to some and derisively to others as "Frank Tally." Local farmers sought him as a laborer because of his reputation as a builder of good, strong fences. Yet, his children sometimes suffered the taunts of their classmates.<sup>36</sup>

The desire of Italians to escape a backward society is evident in their emigration from their native country. Their relative retardation as pre-

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<sup>35</sup> *Johnson City Comet*, August 27, 1910.

<sup>36</sup> *Post*, April 20, 1921, May 23, 1923, August 22, 1923; Interview with Ewell Clipse, son of Colisco Francisco Anatonio, Kingsport, Tenn., April 23, 1974.

industrial people in an industrial world, and their similarities to and differences from the natives of Southern Appalachia shaped their experience in Virginia from 1900 to 1920. The Italians found themselves caught in the vacuum of a cultural clash as northern capitalism crept over the remote mountain valleys. In a progressive sense, the concept of northern capitalism represented a superior cultural phenomenon when compared to the pre-industrial, agrarian orientation of Appalachian natives and Italian immigrants. The appearance of northern capitalism in Southern Appalachia made native mountaineers short-term beneficiaries and long-time victims. The present-mindedness, individualism, and poverty-produced fatalism of the local people left them virtually helpless to contend with the forces of modernization. Although the personal characteristics of the natives of Appalachia matched many of those which have been identified in Southern Italian society, they did not mold the lives of Italian immigrants who rose above the circumstances of their birth to seek better lives elsewhere. Although Italian immigrants sometimes suffered abuses and injustices in Southern Appalachia, they had the presence of mind to defend themselves even if they were dependent on the Italian consulate and northern immigrant aid societies. Failing to develop a high degree of group consciousness in the southern mountains, they nonetheless, as individuals, rejected in America a society remarkably similar to that in Europe from which they had escaped.