

## Digital Media Reviews

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*Italian Americans in California:*

[www.bancroft.berkeley.edu/collections/italianamericans](http://www.bancroft.berkeley.edu/collections/italianamericans)

*Italian Los Angeles:*

[www.italianlosangeles.org](http://www.italianlosangeles.org)

*Italians in the Gold Rush and Beyond:*

[www.IGRB.net](http://www.IGRB.net)

Three websites, accessed between September 1 and 15, 2009, dedicated to various aspects of the Italian immigrant experience in California ([www.bancroft.berkeley.edu/collections/italianamericans](http://www.bancroft.berkeley.edu/collections/italianamericans); [www.italianlosangeles.org](http://www.italianlosangeles.org); and [www.IGRB.net](http://www.IGRB.net)) present material that can be useful for researchers and also interesting for the general visitor wanting to learn more about Italians in California. They can also serve, however, as examples of what works and what doesn't work when one attempts to develop a website designed to educate as well as generate interest and furnish important information that might not be readily available or accessible.

Italian Los Angeles, [www.italianlosangeles.org](http://www.italianlosangeles.org), with sponsorship from various sources (foundations and the Italian government's Istituto di Cultura), is a project involving members of the Los Angeles academic, civic, cultural, and commercial community under the leadership of Luisa Del Giudice, founder of the now sadly defunct Italian Oral History Institute. The site attempts to counter the widely held perception that the Italian presence in Los Angeles is scattered and largely invisible. Designed to make the Italian community in Los Angeles and its resources better known both to insiders and outsiders, the site is intended "as a village piazza—providing a familiar meeting place in this diffuse city of Los Angeles." The ultimate goal of Italian Los Angeles is to foster a sense of community—however virtual—and to highlight its richness. As such the site is ambitious, documenting the history, folklore, architecture, etc., of the Italian-American presence in Los Angeles, while also providing information about businesses, restaurants, products, and services related to Italy that are available in the city.

The historical section draws on the research of scholars in the field, with a historical overview that begins with the 1823 presence of Giovanni Leandri in El Pueblo and moves all the way to an excellent analysis by Del Giudice of today's diverse Los Angeles Italian-American community. Further focus is furnished by a short history of the Italian-American fishing community of San Pedro. References to scholars of Southern California Italian history (together with contact information) are included, as well as an extensive bibliography. Given Del Giudice's specialty in folklore, the section on folklife, covering foodways and traditions, gardens, celebrations of saints' days, harvest festivals, folk art, and artisans is particularly interesting. The point is made throughout that Italian life is still alive in these Los Angeles residents of Italian descent as they maintain Old World traditions or establish new ones (such as the feast of San Gennaro).

This site is rich in information for a general audience but also for the researcher. It has links to outside sources, excellent visuals that are integrated in the text, demonstrating

sound yet accessible scholarship. Besides researching various aspects of the Italian immigrant experience in Los Angeles, Italian Los Angeles could be used as the basis for drawing up an itinerary of Italy-related sites in the LA area, from the Watts Towers to Hollywood; one could also use it to find out where to buy a *bomboniera* (party favor for a rite of passage celebration) or get information about where the nearest Italian regional club is located.

Italian Americans in California, [www.bancroft.berkeley.edu/collections/italian-americans](http://www.bancroft.berkeley.edu/collections/italian-americans), is the work of The Bancroft Library, the special collections library at the University of California–Berkeley whose mission includes major research and instructional activities. The project was in part funded by the National Italian American Foundation (NIAF) and the text written by a graduate student, Dan Lee, in the History Department at UC Berkeley. The site is designed as a virtual exhibit, much like the experience one would have in a museum walking from room to room. Italian Americans in California includes five virtual rooms, each covering a different period of Italian history in California and each containing very brief textual information supplemented by links to photographs from the library's collection. The exhibit also attends to changes in the community over time, covering this topic in a creative if very limited way. This should not serve as a criticism, however, since the major highlights of the Italian experience are covered.

Each of the first four virtual rooms covers an introduction to a specific historical period. Each has three links to subtopics, each with one graphic drawn from the Bancroft's collection of maps and photographs. Room One, for example, covers the first arrivals with links to Italians in the Spanish and Mexican era, Italians in the gold rush, and lastly a description of the places from which most Italians came. The most interesting of the rooms is the last one, which instead of continuing the statewide story of Italian Americans in California, focuses on one San Francisco neighborhood as a microcosm of the larger experience.

Besides the virtual museum, which points out that Italian Americans have been involved in almost every major event in California's history since the seventeenth century (something that I might question), the site also provides more detailed timelines for each period as well as information on the sources, both text and web, used for the exhibit (I was surprised that Andrew Rolle's work was not cited here). In keeping with the virtual museum theme of the site there are easy ways to navigate from one room to the other and from one period to the other. This is a useful site for anyone interested in an overview of Italian-American history in California; it is sound in its scholarship, creative and engaging in its presentation, and while focused on Northern California does not altogether ignore other areas, such as the Italian presence in Los Angeles.

Italians in the Gold Rush and Beyond, [www.IGRB.net](http://www.IGRB.net), is said, by its promoter, Alessandro Trojani, to be an extensive project based on the history of Italian Americans on the West Coast from the beginning of the Gold Rush Era (1848) up to the present. It is described on the website as "the most complete multimedia database of Italians in North America from the Gold Rush to today," and vaunts on its home page the sponsorship of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome, the Consulate General of Italy in Los Angeles, the University of Florence, and California State University–Long Beach.

In spite of these claims and what appears to be its vast support, the site is confusing, very limited, disorganized, and incomplete. From its home page it appears divided

into four areas: Content, Web Links, Encyclopedia, and Media Gallery. The last three have no information at all other than a link to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website. Its Content section consists of four parts: Documenti/Documents, Eventi/Events, Luoghi/Places, and Persone/People. The Documents section consists of 36 links, not listed in alphabetical order, with information that ranges from all the worldwide branches of *Piemontesi nel Mondo* to “Cosa è la Niaf,” as well as a history of Italian masonry. The Events link has nothing listed, while the Places link provides information scanned from various sources on such topics as the University of Santa Clara, a handful of towns in the Gold Country and beyond, information about New Mexico and Utah, as well as California’s military museum. Under People, the site provides links to a variety of individuals most of whom have little connection to the Italian immigrant experience in the Gold Country or anywhere in the United States, for example, links to the life of George Washington, John Quincy Adams, and even Madeline, which is hardly a person but a stop on the Nevada–California–Oregon Railroad.

The site, which claims to be “[t]he most complete Multimedia database of Italians in the North America from the gold rush to today” leaves much to be desired. Because the Chi Siamo (About Us) link is blank, there is nothing to indicate who is actually responsible for the site. The information it has scanned is useless for researchers or even the general public because it is disorganized and incomplete. The site, in spite of its pretense to focus on Italians in North America, lacks focus. It covers people and topics that are not tied to the Italian immigrant experience and is, besides, full of typographical errors in English and quotes without citation marks.

Writing a review of online material presents one with challenges not faced when reviewing a book. Besides the accuracy of the material presented, a reviewer is interested in whether the site is user friendly, whether text is interspersed with visuals that complement written material, and whether links that are provided actually connect one to relevant information. There is no doubt that anyone going to [www.bancroft.berkeley.edu/collections/italianamericans](http://www.bancroft.berkeley.edu/collections/italianamericans) or [www.italianlosangeles.org](http://www.italianlosangeles.org) will find a site that provides accurate and well-organized information presented in a creative and engaging manner. Whether a small five-room virtual museum documenting the history of Italian Americans in California, or a more extensive site where the Italian-American virtual community of Los Angeles is presented in its many aspects, these are two excellent and fascinating sites for anyone interested in things Italian and Italian-American. Italians in the Gold Rush and Beyond, instead, presents us with exactly what a site should not be. Disorganized, still incomplete after six years, and full of irrelevant material, it in no way approaches “the most complete multimedia database of Italians in North America from the Gold Rush to today” that it pretends to be. It should serve as a warning for any group or institution that puts its name as a sponsor to any site.

The web allows us to disseminate all aspects of the Italian-American experience, it is accessible to a worldwide audience, and can accommodate creative presentations that are cheaper and often not possible in print media: [www.italianlosangeles.org](http://www.italianlosangeles.org) and [www.bancroft.berkeley.edu/collections/italianamericans](http://www.bancroft.berkeley.edu/collections/italianamericans) furnish us with two excellent examples of the web’s endless possibilities.

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