

More Here Now Than In Sicily

Long Ago, Trabians Invaded S.J.--Most Have Prospered

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On a wall in the high school of the village of Trabia, Sicily, 18 miles from Palermo, hangs a motto by the famous Italian patriot Mazzini: "Better Yourself, This Shall Be the Goal of Your Life."

To more than 8,000 residents of the Santa Clara Valley these words have real meaning. They are either former residents or descendants of former inhabitants of Trabia.

In the Sicilian tradition—which is strong on local patriotism and family ties—these Americans are both patriotic citizens of their new land and a people with ties with Trabia which probably never will be completely dissolved.

Trabia actually is now more a part of the Santa Clara Valley than it is of Italy. The 8,000 transplanted Trabians in this area are more than the 5,000 present inhabitants of the town.

What remains of the village cannot expand, geographically, at least, for it is hemmed in by the rocky Sicilian hills and the Gulf of Palermo. Its expansion, instead, has been across the Atlantic to California.

This push to a new land—typical of many other towns in Sicily—began, according to Domenico Cirincione Jr., a San Jose insurance man and one of the town's unofficial historians, before the turn of the century.

At that time Sicily was swept by epidemics of cholera and malaria. Trabians began packing up and moving to the New World. They landed first at New Orleans and promptly found themselves in the midst of yet another epidemic. As a result, they traveled on to California, stopping first in San

Francisco and then, after the 1906 earthquake there, finally coming to rest in the Santa Clara Valley.

Here they began to raise fruit, an occupation still followed in Trabia today, and to become doctors, something which Cirincione attributes to the cholera and malaria epidemic.

It was the goal of almost all families from the village that at least one of their children would become a medical man, or at least a druggist. There are several Trabian families where two sons, two daughters, or two cousins are physicians. In all, about 30 San Jose area physicians are members of Trabian families.

Another way in which Trabians have prospered is in the canning of what Americans call cactus, but which is known to Italians as "the Indian fig."

One group of former Trabians has built a million dollar industry out of this traditional Sicilian dish. They introduced its production here and have pioneered in its canning for shipment east to large Italian-American colonies in cities there. The process developed largely from Old World processes and methods.

Trabians have prospered in other ways, too. Many are large land holders, industrialists and realtors. Some are barbers, others shoemakers and shoe repairmen.

Few of them are poor and many of them regularly send money back to what remains of their families in Sicily.

In the tradition of Sicilian families, they have named the first born of their children after fathers and mothers of their families and the line of families is thus easy to follow.

Actually the base for the

Trabian invasion is about 12 family names and includes many well known in San Jose—Campisi, Sunseri, LoBue, Dana, Rubino, Cancilla and Sanfilippo.

The largest number of the original residents of Trabia to reach California came in the early part of this century. There have been later waves, the most recent since World War II when about 100 Trabians were brought to California. Immigration laws have cut the influx considerably in recent years, however.

Surprisingly enough, too, Trabians have gone almost nowhere else but California or the United States. There are a few left in New Orleans and a few have settled in Pennsylvania, but almost all the rest came to the Santa Clara Valley or have settled nearby.

This, too, is true for residents of other towns in Italy. For example, many of the former residents of Turman in Sicily, another town near Palermo, have settled in Cleveland.

One of the reasons for this migration to a selected spot is again the strong family tie which binds Sicilian clans together. In Sicily where such traditions were once so strong that intermarriage between villages was almost forbidden, even dialects vary so much from town to town that Trabians, for instance, have difficulty in understanding Turman.

Such ties draw Trabians back to their hometown whenever they get the money and the opportunity. Cirincione revisited Trabia, where his father still lives, last May.

The village still hangs on the "Conca D'Oro"—the Golden Shell of Palermo—a long curv-

ing bay, its square stone block houses fronting on a beach with loquat groves on the hills behind. Trabians harvest the loquats, ship and preserve the fruit and fish for tuna in the Mediterranean Sea.

The principal landmark of the village is the castle of the Prince of Trabia, an ancient square stone building on the edge of the sea with many grottos or sea caves under it. The prince, now married to a movie star, has interests in the fishing industry and still owns land about the village.

Each year the "Tomara" or tuna fishing fleet makes a square of boats and hauls in large catches of tuna which are either sold on the beach or shipped to Palermo. In addition a sea trout, peculiar to the region, called "Treiglia" is caught and sold as a fresh fish.

Before World War II Trabians used to raise a variety of citrus fruit and sell alcohol made from its skin, but synthetic production of citrus oils and products has ended this industry.

All this, of course, is a long way in distance for the former Trabians, many of whom now own more land here than the entire area of the village.

Yet the memories and traditions which bind Trabia to its former residents and their descendants seem as strong as ever, despite the passage of time.

And almost all of them have remained true to the motto on the high school wall. They have bettered themselves—in a new land.

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