19th Century Basilicata Emigration: A Fratellanza & Sorellanza Based Society

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Part 5A of 6: The Adaptation and Transport of Sorellanza Structure to America

Introduction: Late 19th Century Basilicata Social Background

Historically, Italian culture and western European culture is patrilineal. This is true of the regional subset culture of the State of Basilicata which is the subject of these articles. In Italy's preindustrial 19th century Basilicata, the primary source of employment was agriculture. Further, the agricultural system as it then existed, was feudal in nature. Most of the large tracts of tillable land were owned and controlled by absentee noble elite, or religious institutions. The local population supplied labor and local management. The peasant class subsisted on a meager percentage of what was grown and harvested while most agricultural production was exported.

Beginning in the mid-19th century rapidly changing natural, social and political events began to have a profound impact on agricultural production, as well as on practical day-to-day traditional rural life. The focus of this article is on the evolution and transformation of traditional regional gender roles in the later part of the 19th century. This is a subject which has not been given the examination and acknowledgement that it deserved. I intend to, at least, introduce the topic over this Part 5 two-part article. I will begin by first examining the regional culture as it adapted to the many challenges of late 19th century Italy. Then, as those adaptations developed, the focus on how Basilicata's societal gender roles were transported, thru immigration, to America. Finally, I will discuss how those gender role, adaptations were incorporated into the early Basilicata-American communities.

The Basilicata region has always depended on agriculture as its principal source of daily sustenance and support. Therefore, we must acknowledge that all pre-industrial agricultural societies, regardless of environment, were labor-intensive, community involved, undertakings. This was particularly true in regions with short growing seasons, limited crop diversity, and little tillable land such as that found in Basilicata. Under the best of circumstances crop yields were limited in variety and the yields modest in comparison to agricultural production on southern Italy's coastal plains. In preindustrial agricultural societies the entire community actively participated in the labor associated in bringing about a successful harvest. This meant that it was expected that everyone worked. Men, women and children all engaged in traditional agricultural tasks. Participation in the workforce was not a "right", it was a necessity for community survival. In that sense, women and children were historically seen as part of the work force. However, their labor was directed and restricted to specific tasks by the male dominated social order.

In the mid-1800's events began to occur which had dramatic impact on basic traditional life in northwestern Basilicata. In past articles I have written extensively of those events, starting with the major earthquakes of 1851 and 1857 and concluding with the political excesses and suppression that followed Italian unification.

These conditions lead to an unprecedented late 19th century outward migration from Basilicata. In fact, Basilicata had the highest per capita emigration experienced in all of Italy. This mass emigration continued unabated from the 1860's thru to the 1930's. It was abruptly halted only by restrictions on immigration instituted in the 1920's-1930's by Italy's fascist regime. The continued and substantial exodus of people from the region was not universal within the population. It was, in fact, skewed primarily to young working age men who sought economic success and opportunity abroad, especially in the Americas.

The multi-generational and successive depletion of young able-bodied men from Basilicata's regional population forced the communities, consisting mostly of small towns and villages, to make societal adjustments in order to survive. Many of those adjustments are obvious. For example, depletion of male agricultural labor meant subsisting on lower farm productivity from less acreage farmed. Also, the absence of marriage-aged men resulted in lower marriage rates, lower birth rates, and a corresponding decline in overall village and town populations. Although some of the immigration was temporary, with return anticipated, much was permanent. Many of those who found new lives in foreign countries eventually arranged for the emigration of wives, children and extended family which further depleted the population. Using San Fele as an example, census data shows an overall decline in town population in each ten-year census cycle from 1860-1930.

The more subtle result of this population depletion was the creation of a new unique social evolution within Basilicata's town and village communities. The evolution was brought about by successive generations in which a disproportionate percentage of each town's population consisted of either young, unmarried women, or married women with absent husbands. Women, living with the prolonged immigration absence of men, suddenly were thrust into roles of temporary head of households or into labor tasks previously filled by men. This required women to work around an Italian traditional codified legal and social system that did not recognize their equality or encourage their independence. For the average rural Basilicata women, community and family survival often depended on her "resourcefulness" in overcoming patrilineal based gender bias and barriers.

The unique regional "work around" of gender barriers in Basilicata was recognized early on by Italian sociologists. The subject was discussed in a number of studies and papers over the years dating back to the early 20th century. It drew substantial academic attention from sociologists during the fascist era. Sociologists of that era acknowledged that large-scale immigration and depletion of young men was causing a concurrent expansion of the role of women in local Basilicata communities. They concluded that this transference of traditional male roles to women

"presented" a threat to Italian moral and social/masculine values and needed to be corrected or at least have its root cause guarded against.

However, in 19th century Basilicata, local communities were more willing to accept the social changes as the practical reality created by the excessive migration and absence of young men. This made the Basilicata gender attitude of the time somewhat unusual in Italy. In Basilicata starting in the late 19th century, women, and in particular, married women were socially encouraged by conditions present to muster what resources were available to sustain village and family viability within a traditional society.

The family is the central unit of Italian culture. Traditionally, the husband/father was the "legal/social" head of the household. It was the husband/father figure who had the designated social rights and dominated the legal, financial and social interaction of the family within the community. During the late 19th century, husbands and young male family members usually emigrated first. Often the emigration process was a protracted version of what is known as chain migration. In the long absences of the men, national legal, moral and social norms in Italy did not readily provide for women caught up in a gender role shift. Government and social norms did not automatically transfer the male head of household authority to "left behind" wives.

Beyond the direct loss of husbands and their legal authority, the loss of other young men within the extended family structure of the villages also presented new social obstacles for women. Women found that under these conditions they did not have the resource of brothers, cousins, etc. to petition on their behalf to authorities. This created a scenario where individual women and the collective family of women, had to function in the absence of their supportive male relatives and therefore, had to represent themselves when addressing local government authorities.

The prolonged absence of young adult males promoted the formation and necessity, in Basilicata, for what I have called the Sorellanza, or sisterhood. The women left behind had to ban together, primarily in family clans, for mutual support. Often, these informal women's groups would have elders, women of social status, or women with special skills, literacy, medical, financial, etc. to help them navigate barriers or problems. In dealing with male officials, a spokeswomen or advocate might represent or advocate on behalf of a single women or on behalf of a group of women. Because they represented an advocacy concerned for a community of women, their social position as an advocate was elevated beyond gender.

The role of the collective sisterhood in Basilicata's gender role expansion is one of the more subtle aspects of the Basilicata migration story. The sisterhood's presence is hard to discern from official Italian documentation. Italian male bias probably had difficulty in attributing organizational structure to interactions with local women and their advocacy. Nevertheless, there developed a strong sense of independent resourcefulness within the women of the Basilicata community.

Among married women, the prolonged absences encountered between couples also created a dynamic that forced married couples to function as long-distance partnerships. They understood and accepted that a degree of independent authority, for the good of the family, was the only way the separation would work. From my family's 19th century migration, I would note a migration process that extends from 1862 thru 1879, or 17 years. During that time my emigrating great-great grandparents, Vito and Rafaela were apart, divided by an Ocean, at intermittent intervals that covered roughly half of those first seventeen years of their marriage. Employing female independence to the work arounds necessary in Basilicata was the only way the couple could support their young family and move toward reunification after immigration to America.

As many of these young Basilicata women emigrated, whether married or unmarried, they brought this tradition of collective supportive sisterhood and the heightened degree of independence with them into 19th century Basilicata-American communities.

The Arrival of the Basilicata Émigré Women:

The Basilicata women that were arriving in the late 19th century were arriving from small town and village communities. Most did not speak any English and had little or no formal education. For most, the emigration probably represented the first time they had travelled more than ten or twenty miles from their villages. On both sides of the Atlantic, customs officials and immigration authorities discouraged travel by unescorted women. As a result, in the early emigration phase fewer women received visas to emigrate. Many had to wait to travel to their final destinations with male relatives. In addition, women usually had to demonstrate to officials, sponsorship by relatives, or guaranteed employment and housing upon arrival.

Once they arrived, they were quickly ushered to local destinations where relatives clustered in tenement neighborhoods. These neighborhoods usually consisted of dilapidated cramped urban housing unlike any housing environment they had known in Italy. In America, poverty for these young emigrants was often cold, dark, windowless and vertical. Sewage, bad water, and disease were rampant. In the mid to late 1800's the majority of Basilicata emigres settled first, in New York's infamous Five Points.

Photo #1 by Jacob Riis: Italians living conditions in the Five Points 1870-1890's

Initially as a vastly outnumbered minority group, without language skills, and situated within an often hostile, mix of foreign cultures, the environment must have been a shock to these early few Basilicata women. However, our oral histories demonstrate, in the face of these challenges, there developed a comradery that became part of the Basilicata-American sorellanza.

The emergence of the Basilicata- American sorellanza/sisterhood was related to but, somewhat different than, what was in play in Italy. First, Basilicata men were generally physically present in America. In fact, in the late 19th century they outnumbered their female counterparts in a ratio of about four to one. Although males were present, the women experienced a different type of male absence from the home. Many men worked long hours and sometimes resided in work camps out of the urban centers during construction seasons. Second, the women were mostly young and the mentoring and traditions of existing mother-daughter, close extended multi-generational family relationships were dissolved by the miles of the Atlantic. Nevertheless, even

in the earliest period of emigration you begin to see these resourceful “young” Basilicata émigré women creating avenues of mutual support.

I think the best way to document how the Basilicata émigré women began to organize and support each other is to give several early examples from our community records.

The Midwife:

One of the most critical immediate issues confronting young women at the time was childbirth. In the 19th century, under the best of circumstances, childbirth was very risky, sometimes life-ending. In 19th century America the majority of women faced the childbirth process with only the support of other women, trained or untrained as midwives. Men generally did not actively participate or were present in the childbirth process. Attendance by male physicians was rare, especially in poorer, non-English speaking immigrant communities.

While 19th century agricultural communities, including Basilicata, historically had high birth rates those births took place within long established communities that had culture specific supports for young mothers. Those culture specific supports were absent for the newly arriving Basilicata émigré women. In addition, since most of the emigre women were young, they did not have the benefit of the experience and knowledge of the older generations in the community to help in the childbirth experience. This, together with poverty and language issues, left these young women at a disadvantage in the birthing process.

Added to this, since the 1830’s the Five Points neighborhood in which many found themselves had the highest maternal childbirth and child mortality rate in the United States. This was due to the community’s many environmental hazards which were byproducts of early 19th century industrial waste. Yet this is precisely where the largest concentration of early Basilicata emigres women found themselves. It was also the specific circumstance that these women had to cope with and overcome.

Most 19th century child births in rural Basilicata were assisted by midwives. There were few if any women substantially trained as midwives among the 1870’s-1880’s young Italian immigrants in the Five Points. There were a few women however, who had given birth or had observed midwives in Basilicata. Many of these women stepped up to help. History attests that these “self-taught” midwives became quite good at assisting. Basilicata émigré women within the Five Points relied heavily on them. In the late 19th century 80-90% of all Basilicata births in the Five Points were with the assistance of self-taught midwives.

From family records, I note that the earliest of my female émigré ancestors were among the women who relied on midwives in the Five Points. Both my Great-great grandmother and Great-grandmother emigrated and took up permanent residence to Trenton in the 1870’s. Both women according family birth records, gave birth to children in the early 1880’s. At that time there were few Italians in Trenton and no Italian doctors or midwives. As a result, family records indicate all of those early 1880’s family births physically took place, not in Trenton, but in New York City.

Further, family records indicate that the births were at locations on Mott Street and Mulberry Street in New York City. (I presume at the homes of relatives). These are locations which were in the heart of the Five Points and demonstrate that young Basilicata women would, if they could, travel to give birth and to support each other in the process.

This pattern of travel to New York for births however began to change in Trenton in the late 1880's. Explaining why this change occurred actually further illustrates the resourcefulness and the important role of women in the Basilicata community.

Old Lady Fisher

By way of background, Carmella Santamano-Radice was born in San Fele, Basilicata in 1867. She emigrated to America and Trenton with her husband Peter Radice and their two young children in the mid-late 1880's. This suggests her age at the time of emigration at around twenty. Emigration to America in the 1880's would have placed this young family's arrival among the first 250,000 or 4% of Italian immigrants to the U.S. It was common for women in rural Basilicata in the 19th century to marry around 15 to 18 years of age. The men generally married at about 18 to 20 years of age. Marriages in the small rural villages of Basilicata often involved a process of courtship. That process combined life-long acquaintance, as residents of a small village, with the services of matchmakers guiding negotiations and approval between families.

Unfortunately, shortly after settling in Trenton's Basilicata enclave Carmella's husband died. This left her a young widow with two small children. Not too long after her husband's death, Carmella developed a relationship and married another young man in the community, Anthony Frascella, not a direct ancestor. Together, they would go on to have nine additional children. In an age of high child mortality, and few social support programs, it was common to see large families and the remarriage of young people who were widowed.

While giving birth to, and raising eleven children may seem like accomplishment enough, Carmella was an exceptionally, resourceful women. Carmella's settlement in Trenton was at a time when the community began to see an extraordinary influx of young Italian immigrants. However, the majority of the newly arriving community was poor, with little education. The community had no Italian speaking doctors or midwives. Carmella, as a woman who had experienced childbirth several times, began to provide birth assistance to the growing number of Italian immigrant expectant mothers in Trenton. From her small home on Asbury Street, it is estimated that between 1890 and 1930 Carmella assisted in the delivery of over 3,000 babies in Trenton's Italian immigrant communities. Known affectionately as "Old Lady Fisher" the sight of her travelling the streets with her instruments, which she carried in a brown maternity suitcase was a fixture of life in North Trenton and Chambersburg for four decades. It is estimated that this one individual woman assisted in over half of all babies born to the Italian immigrant community in Trenton during those decades. One of the local legends concerning Carmella was that young Italian American neighborhood children upon seeing her would ask their mothers, what was in the brown suitcase she carried? The mothers would reply that she was carrying babies in the

suitcase to deliver to local families. The children would exclaim, but she brings so many! Whether that is a true conversation that took place, or not, it was a story passed down for generations in Trenton's Italian community.

While it is known that Carmella had experienced childbirth herself in Italy, we don't think she had any formal training as a midwife. Her skill appears to be largely self-taught and acquired in America.

Through the first two decades of the twentieth century more than half of all U.S births were with the assistance of midwives. However, beginning around the turn of the century States began imposing licensing on midwives. Many midwives, especially in minority and immigrant communities could not pass the licensing test as they were illiterate or non-English speaking. Carmella could and did get licensed and was literate. This allowed her to continue to practice, certify and personally register births with the county clerk's office. Her ability to register births also provides records of the incredible dedication and work ethic of this woman in service to the Italian immigrant community.

As was the case with many of the stories of immigrant midwives of the era, the young pregnant women they assisted were poor, often suffering from prenatal malnourishment and inexperienced in postnatal care. Many could not pay for midwife services or could only pay with food, chickens, bread etc. In many instances where the mother could not even afford that, midwives, including Carmella, would in fact, bring food to the family. These self-taught midwives recognized that the mother's nutritional support was key to both mother and child's health and survival. By their selfless actions and personal financial sacrifices, they quietly supported generations of healthy babies.

Consistent in our community's records, are many stories attesting to the leadership among the Basilicata sorellanza/sisterhood, not just midwives, who prioritized family nutrition and health within the community. Often when men were out of work or had fallen on hard times, the women of the sorellanza network, would gather and deliver food from their food pantries to families in need. This was usually done secretly, so as to not embarrass or disturb the dignity of the family in need. Carmella was certainly one of the early examples of that aspect of the sorellanza community. Among her many efforts on behalf of the community, I am told, she also would negotiate the purchase of vegetables in bulk from local farmers. She would buy the produce with her own funds at below retail cost and then resell to the community without profit at cost. The focus of the sorellanza leadership in insuring food access, especially to the women and children of the community, was a very high priority and a subject which I will address as these articles go forward. However, I think the structure of their efforts in this regard relates back directly to their experiences in Italy and the independent unity of women that the absences of the support of men created during the migration period.

The Unione E Sorellanza San Felese

The Unione E Fratellaza San Felese, was originally a male Basilicata heritage-based organization, which was incorporated in New Jersey as a “benefit” society in 1902. As it was originally set up, the membership dues, among other benefits, established both sick and death benefits for its members. This form of a self-insured “community support” organization was very popular and common in the U.S. at the time.

Photo #2 Turn of century early membership photo of San Felese organization

The founding of the San Felese organization in 1902 was the same year that St. Joachim’s Church was incorporated as an Italian national parish, in Trenton’s predominantly Basilicata/Italian community. The incorporation of Trenton’s Basilicata social organization and the local Italian national Church, parallels the earlier founding, in New York City’s Five Points, of the Potenza Society, a Basilicata Heritage benefit Society which was incorporated in 1889. This was the same year that St. Joachim’s Church, an Italian National parish, in the predominantly Basilicata section of the lower east side was also incorporated.

This is not a coincidence. The establishment of the Church was viewed by the Basilicata community as a critical step in organizing, promoting and helping the immigrant community

adjust and survive within American society. In both cases, informally Basilicata women established a female based, sorellanza organization, closely associated with the male organizations. Again, the purpose was to organize, promote and help the immigrant community. The male and female aspects of the organization had separate areas in which they applied their community effort, as well as areas where they came together with one purpose. For example, when the Trenton San Felese organization was first incorporated the men focused on fund raising and actual construction of the Church. At the time of the church's construction, all of the parish council's advisory seats were held by Basilicata men. The women's organization's role in the early church matters was to support the men's labor and to address preparations for traditional feast days. We have records from the Church concerning, for example, purchases of alter decorations for the Ma Donna Di Pierno mass.

Each male and female organization elected their own leadership and choose independently their own community projects including the raising of funds for special projects. As I mentioned above, one of the prioritized missions of the sorellanza was the health and well-being of family and what were considered "women issues". This included monitoring women/children in the community and to provide food security when necessary. (As a side note, I witnessed the sorellanza leadership providing families in the community with food support well into the 1960's. However, these later efforts were the result of economic downturns resulting from factory closings and job losses, not immigration).

(Note: Although, the two San Felese organizations, male and female choose to merge into a single group about twenty years ago, we continue to preserve some of the records of the sorellanza as part of our now unified archives).

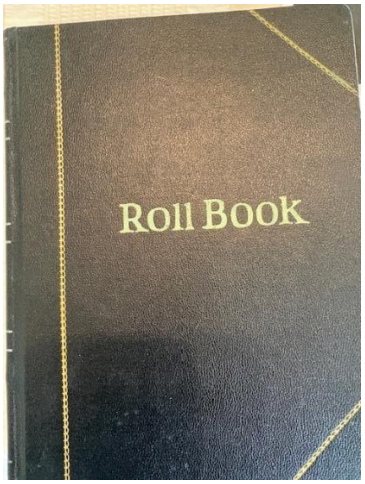


Photo #3 One of the later membership role books of the San Felese sorellanza from about seventy-five years ago

Because the sorellanza, and their efforts to aid the community flowed very unobtrusively throughout the Basilicata immigrant story, it is easy to miss the profound impact these women had in the community. They intentionally preferred keeping a low but effective profile. In Part A as well as B of this article I am excited to record some of the sorellanza's discrete efforts that might be forgotten if not recorded in articles like this one. Among those efforts I will include in Part B of this article the sorellanza's involvement in early St. Joachim's Church social/civil community support actions that generally have not been written about.

The Italian Baking and Trading Company of Trenton N.J.

A third way in which the early Basilicata community in Trenton helped organize for the benefit of the community was the incorporation of the Italian Baking and Trading Company in New Jersey in 1904. It is an example of how both the male Basilicata and female Basilicata organizations came together to help their community in a common cause. To start, in describing how Trenton's first corporate Italian bakery got started, I will include a copy of the original local Trenton newspaper announcement of the company's founding.

ITALIAN COMPANY TO SELL BREAD HERE

Concern Chartered Yesterday With $25,000 Capital Will Make Other Edibles.

CORPORATORS LOCAL MEN

The certificate of incorporation of the Italian Baking and Trading company was filed in the secretary of state's office yesterday. The company is capitalized at $25,000.

The purposes of the company are to supply bread to the Italians of Trenton, to buy, sell and manufacture bread, to let out and hire the baking ovens of the company for the purpose of baking bread and other food articles.

The certificate of of incorporation permits the company to enlarge its scope by supplying its customers with biscuits, cakes, confectionery and other foods and food products.

The stockholders of the company and the number of shares held by each is as follows: Guiseppe Petrino, Guiseppe Frascello, Pasquale Dileo, Pietro Felice, Augustino Aversano, Sebastian Giabello, Michelangelo Pulono,, Pietro Frascello, Dominico Chianeso, Donato Pierro, Nicola Brunno, each two shares.

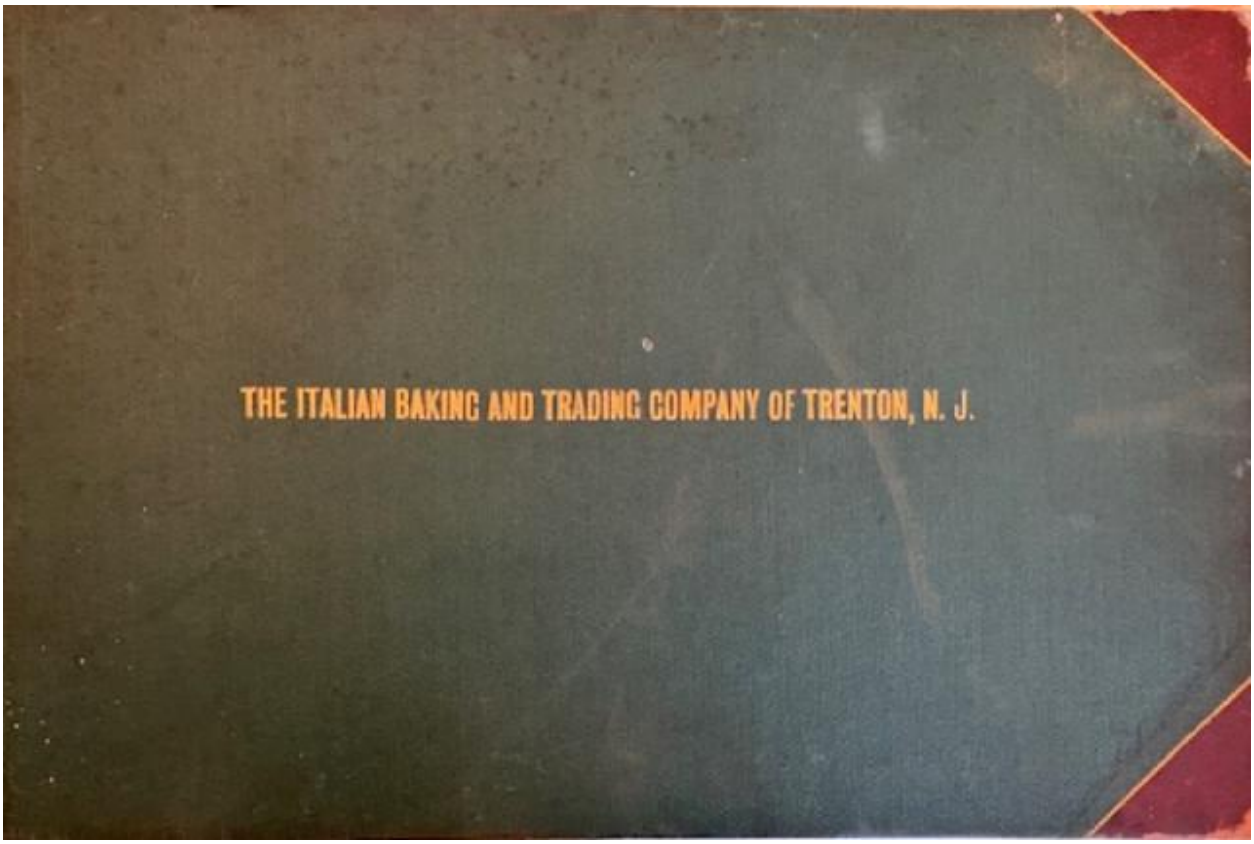
The agent of the company is Pasquale Dileo at 57 South Clinton street, and the attorney for the company is Benjamin A. Freeman.

Graphic formatted by Tom Glover

Photo #4 Original newspaper notice of incorporation of the Bakery 1904

As the article indicates there was a core group of original shareholders in 1904, and although not expressly stated, all of the men listed as founders are part of Trenton's Basilicata community. Reading the article, you might conclude that the undertaking was intended primarily as a collective business opportunity, it was not. Even with a stated goal of seeking a capitalized goal of $25,000, a substantial amount of money, profit was not the main objective.

Fortunately, our local Basilicata society was given the books of the company when the company was dissolved and the stocks redeemed. Review of the original stocks, which were purchased at fifty dollars a share, is an interesting look into the purchase and sales history of the company. Although there are hundreds of original shares, it is clear that all of the shares were purchased exclusively by male members of the Basilicata community. The sheer volume of collective purchase is impressive, and I am sure represented a financial sacrifice for many of the individuals recorded as purchasers. An interesting note is that the original stock purchase price is redeemable at full purchase value at any time upon demand. If someone had to cash out their stock ownership, they needed only to submit the request. The stock would then immediately be purchased by another member of the community. The capitalization seems to have acted as something of a community support trust fund more than as a business fund.



Photograph #5 One of the Bakery company's stock recording books from 1904.

Photograph #6 One of the original Bakery stock certificates issued by the company.

As it was explained to me, the men of the community incorporated the company. Its daily activity was supervised and run by the Dileo family. In the day to day, operation of the bakery the men would purchase the ingredients and mix them with the yeast, creating the raw bread dough. At that point, women of the Basilicata community were organized under the leadership of the sorellanza. Apparently, the women that choose to participate were supplied with uniform baking molds. They could go daily and acquire on credit as much raw bread dough as they desired. They then would go back to their homes and bake the bread, selling back the finished product to the bakery minus the cost of the dough. The bakery's principal place of supply/mixing facility was in an alley warehouse parallel to Hudson St. As far as I know the company never owned any ovens or baked on premises. The company also never employed bakers for the purpose of actually baking.

An ambitious emigrant women however, could make a profit at home by her labor, pay the cost of heating the home by her baking in her kitchen, and make fresh bread for the family's consumption. A simple and effective way to ensure ready access to a food staple throughout the

community, while providing the dignity of honest work for honest profit. The excess loaves would in turn, be sold and delivered by the men at the company's warehouse to restaurants, grocery stores, and individuals throughout the city. The overall sales in turn created the profit for the continuance of the enterprise. My understanding is the bakery operated in this collective way for about thirty years. The entire enterprise was modestly developed to support the Basilicata community's food needs, profit was secondary.

Article Part 5B will continue the discussion of the sorellanza structure as we experienced it in Trenton.