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Canton Ticino and the Italian Swiss Immigration to California

by Tony Quinn

“**T**he southernmost of Switzerland’s twenty-six cantons, the Ticino, may speak Italian, sing Italian, eat Italian, drink Italian and rival any Italian region in scenic beauty—but it isn’t Italy,” so writes author Paul Hofmann¹ describing the one Swiss canton where Italian is the required language and the cultural tie is to Italy to the south, not to the rest of Switzerland to the north.

Unlike the German and French speaking parts of Switzerland with an identity distinct from Germany and France, Italian Switzerland, which accounts for only five percent of the country, clings strongly to its Italian heritage. But at the same time, the Ticinese² are fully Swiss, very proud of being part of Switzerland, and with an air of disapproval of Italy’s ever present government crises and its tie to the European Union and the Euro zone, neither of which Ticino has the slightest interest in joining.

Today’s Ticino is a popular holiday destination for thousands of other Swiss. Hofmann, writing in the *New York Times* in 1984, described its unique appeal, an appeal that has finally allowed Ticino to enjoy Swiss style prosperity after lagging behind for centuries. “The dominant sounds in the Ticino’s hotels are Teutonic. To many German-speaking Swiss, as well as to uncounted Germans, Dutch, and Scandina-

¹ Paul Hofmann (1912-2008), “Switzerland’s Little Italy,” *New York Times*, October 14, 1984.

² The people of Canton Ticino call themselves “Ticinesi” (people who live in Ticino) in Italian. This is usually rendered in English as “Ticinese.” The canton is often simply called “The Ticino” after the river whose tributaries form most of its valleys.



A Ticino village today.

vians, the Ticino is the South they like best: A soft climate with plenty of sunshine, lazy hours in outdoor cafes, lush gardens, palm trees, pastel-colored arcaded buildings at lakefront promenades, spaghetti with piquant sauce, full-bodied wines, mandolin music wafting through jasmine-scented nights—all this without the exuberance, frequent strikes and usual unpredictability of present-day Italy.”³

Yet the Ticino as part of Switzerland is an accident of history, an accident that ultimately required thousands of Italian Swiss to leave their native mountains and valleys for life in the New World. But this is an historical accident that has worked out.

The earliest known settlers of the Ticino valleys located just south of the Alps was a Celtic tribe known as the Lepontii, who may have arrived there as early as 900 BC. Just to the north were other Celtic tribes, including the Helvetii, so the initial settlers of today’s Switzerland were a series of Celtic tribes.⁴ And they stayed a long time. Recent

³ Hofmann, *New York Times*.

⁴ At the time of the Roman conquest of Switzerland in the first century, the region was inhabited exclusively by Celts, organized into three nations: the Raeti, the Gaesatai, and the Helvetii. The Lepontii were in the southwestern corner of Raeti including the southern slopes of the Simplon and St. Gotthard Passes. Dwight Page, “The Golden Age of Roman Helvetica,” *SAHS Review*, Vol. 33, No. 2, June 1997, 6.

DNA testing of living Italian Swiss whose ancestry is in the more isolated villages of Ticino shows a high degree of Celtic ancestry.

Even the coming of the Romans seems not to have disturbed that Celtic past. The Romans may have been the first to recognize the strategic value of the Ticino valleys since at their northernmost junction is the St. Gotthard Pass, one of the few passes that allowed transport from the Italian Peninsula into the Germanic lands. For the Romans it was important to control that Pass, but there is little evidence they settled extensively in the Ticino area during the 600 years Ticino was part of the Roman Empire, although there are some Roman ruins in Lugano and Locarno, and some evidence of Roman ancestry in Ticino DNA.

The next occupiers were different. In the 5th Century, came the Barbarians into Rome, sacking the great city several times and ending the Roman Empire in the west in 476 AD. Barbarians is a name we give to the Visigoth and Ostrogothic tribes that conquered the western Roman Empire. Less than a century later, however, the Emperor Justinian tried to reconquer Rome in what are known as the Gothic Wars. He did not succeed, and instead savaged what is now most of northern Italy. Retreating before Justinian's armies, Goths fled into the high mountains and deep valleys of the southern Alps. And here they stayed; DNA testing shows that today's Italian Swiss are indeed direct descendants of the Gothic tribes as well as the early Celts.

Sometimes the most important thing that happens is nothing. After Justinian, northern Italy was invaded by the Germanic Lombard tribes who give Lombardy its name today. They also established, interestingly, the Italian language, and more importantly the dialects of northern Italy. Eventually, Lombardy became a sleepy outpost of the Holy Roman Empire where it remained largely undisturbed until the 1400s.

This vast empire⁵ began dissolving, and by the 1400s, Lombardy was beset by two squabbling Italian families, the Visconti and the Sforza, that ruled the region from Milan. This invited foreign intervention, mainly the French, and that reality frightened the Swiss Confederation, realizing they could be invaded through the St. Gotthard Pass.

⁵ Voltaire correctly noted that it was not holy, not Roman and not an empire.

In 1440, the Canton of Uri sent a small force over the Pass and took control of the Leventina Valley in northern Ticino. Sixty years later, again fearing French intrusions, Uri, Schwyz, and Nidwalden took the fortress town of Bellinzona, strengthening its three castles. In 1512, the three “forest cantons”⁶ annexed Locarno, the Maggia Valley, Lugano, and Mendrisio.⁷

They found the French threat was very much for real. In the summer of 1515, King Francis I sent an army of 37,000 across the Alps determined to conquer Milan. The Swiss Confederation sent its own army of 200 cavalry and 25,000 infantry south to stop them, and they met at a place called Marignano on September 13 and 14, 1515, where the French Army decisively defeated the Swiss. Only about 3,000 of the Swiss who fought there made it back into Switzerland.⁸ The Confederation Army retreated back across the Alps, never again to venture outside the boundaries of Switzerland. The forest cantons now realized they had to hold the Ticino valleys to protect their homeland from invasion from the south.

Oddly enough, there was never again a threat of invasion of Switzerland from the south. But that did not deter the forest cantons from setting up essentially a colonial administration of the Ticino valleys. Governors known as “*landfogti*” were appointed for two-year terms and installed in the castles in Bellinzona. From there they provided a protective shield against any threat to the Confederation from the south.

The *landfogti* system was both a benefit and a disadvantage for the Ticino peasants. The German Swiss made no attempt to integrate this area into the Confederation; consequently, its Italian culture continued undisturbed. But young men were not drafted into the army, absentee landowners did not absorb the peasant property,

⁶“Forest cantons” is the name given to the three central Swiss cantons that bordered the St. Gotthard Pass from the north. The Pass is actually in Canton Uri. Canton Schwyz is to its northeast. Canton Nidwalden is to the northwest. Initially, along with Obwalden, it was part of the original Canton of Unterwalden, but only Nidwalden had an interest in the Ticino. The three cantons that jointly governed the Ticino were Uri, Schwyz, and Nidwalden.

⁷*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1957 edition, Vol. 22, 190.

⁸*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1957 edition, Vol. 14, 887.

and no attempts were made to suppress the Italian-centered Catholic religion. At the same time, there was also no attempt at economic development in this region; famously, the Torretta Bridge over the Ticino River at Bellinzona washed out in 1515, and was not rebuilt for 300 years.⁹

For the natives, life was changed very little from when they were under the rule from Milan. A system of village governance evolved with the village borders defined by the Catholic Church parish lines. After the Council of Trent (1545-1563),¹⁰ local priests were instructed to give their parishioners surnames and to maintain records of births, marriages, and deaths. The village then became the social and governing unit for the Ticino peasant. To avoid problems with the authorities in Bellinzona and the other large cities, villagers built their homes high up in the protected valleys and mountainsides, always building with stone rather than wood to give their villages permanence, evident even to this day.

Italian Swiss novelist, Plinio Martini, wrote of the Ticino villagers, “They built with neither ruler nor plan. Their art was an immediate response to the problems posed by daily toil: land conformation and periodic changes of pasture. Decoration was rare, and then always modest, simple, and unerring. Only religious sentiment room for provided room for a painting. Building in this way was a product of an ancient civilization, of an age-old experience that was

⁹ This bridge was originally commissioned by Lodovico Maria Sforza, known as Lodovico il Moro, (1452-1508), who was Duke of Milan from 1494 until 1499. The stone bridge consisted of medieval arcades that were too heavy for the rushing winter waters of the Ticino River, leading to its collapse in 1515. The bridge provided easy access from the south to the St. Gotthard Pass, which was not in the interest of the forest cantons and the *landfogti*. They replaced the bridge with a ferry system that remained until a new bridge was built in 1815 at the end of the Napoleonic period. In 2016, a passenger and bicycle bridge was built in the same place using the remaining part of the medieval arcade and a medieval tower.

¹⁰ The Council of Trent met over two decades in the northern Italian town of Trento with the purpose of launching a Counter Reformation to Luther’s Protestant Reformation. This meant reforming the Catholic Church, and among the reforms was insisting that local parish priests know their parishioners. This required assignment of “cognomen,” or last names to parish families, and maintaining the vital statistics on these families.

based in deeply rooted moral values.” Martini called their villages “an architecture that binds man to nature.”¹¹

Life in the village was unchanging. Marriages were generally confined to the village so as not to introduce outside claims on village land and resources. By the 1800s, this meant that a dozen or so village families would have the same last name, and everyone was a cousin to everyone else. The oldest families instituted a system called the “*patriziato*” whereby the village privileges, such as grazing cattle on the village green, or baking bread in the village oven, was limited to the “*patrizi*” (patrician) families.

This splendid isolation from their neighbors, their local government, and the country they were part of lasted 300 years until the coming of Napoleon and his creation of a new Helvetic Republic to replace the Swiss Confederation.

In 1798, French armies overran Switzerland. On April 12, the Helvetic Republic was proclaimed in Zurich by the occupying French who decided the Confederation was too “feudal.” This did not sit well with the Swiss who had spent centuries guarding their independence. Almost immediately, the Helvetic Republic came under attack by Swiss insurgents. In 1803, Napoleon proclaimed the Act of Mediation restoring the Swiss Confederation, but established six new cantons including Ticino as its own self-governing canton and the *landfogti* system was abolished.¹²

For the first time in three centuries, a foreign army, this time the French, appeared in the Ticino valleys. In 1808, Napoleon directed a census of all the males in Ticino, listing them by age within each village.¹³ This provided a useful list for soldiers, and some Ticino men

¹¹ Plinio Martini was born in Cavigno, Canton Ticino, in 1923 and was a school teacher most of his life. He wrote two novels, the best known of which is *Il fondo del sacco* (1970), about harsh peasant life in the Val Bavona in the 1930s and the trauma of villagers abandoning their ancient homes and emigrating to America. He died in 1979. In 1976, he published a short paper for *Modern Architecture in Ticino*, titled “Costruivano senza Metro” from which this quote is taken.

¹² Pierre Cordey, *Focus on Switzerland, the Historical Evolution* (Lausanne, Swiss Office for the Development of Trade, 1982), 53-55.

¹³ Copies of this census, known as the Circolo del Ticino, have survived and provide a very good picture of the population of Ticino at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

were drafted for Napoleon's various campaigns. But their village isolation protected the Ticinese even from marauding French armies. By the time Napoleon was finally defeated in 1815, Ticino was a fully fledged canton, and any thoughts of leaving the restored Swiss Confederation to be reunited with northern Italy were soon abandoned.

However, the changes wrought by the 19th Century brought problems to the Ticino villages that they had not experienced before. The area had been completely passed over by the Industrial Revolution; it was not until 1822 that there was a passable road over the St. Gotthard Pass, and not until 1882 that a train tunnel was cut through the Pass.¹⁴ This did bring German Swiss and others from northern Europe into the Ticino area where they found a Mediterranean climate in Switzerland. For the lakefront cities such as Locarno and Lugano, this meant a new prosperity of tourism. But, this also further isolated the peasant villages from the growing cities and contributed to deepening poverty in the hillsides where the usually illiterate peasants still lived in the ancient stone houses built by their ancestors.

Two events in the nineteenth century made this situation close to intolerable. After 1850, Europe experienced something of a warming trend; this meant more food could be grown. Prosperity brought sanitation even to peasant villages. The Ticino River had long spilled across the Magadino Plain from Bellinzona to Locarno, leaving rancid pools along its banks that were breeding grounds for malaria. Now the Ticino River was channeled and the malaria pools disappeared.¹⁵

But increased food and sanitation had an unexpected side effect, babies born in peasant villages now lived; the traditional pattern may have been to have eight children and expect six to die, but now six lived. As infant mortality fell suddenly in the Ticino, along with elsewhere in Europe, a population boom occurred. In the next century, the search for "living space" would help set off two world wars; in the

¹⁴Until the train tunnel, it was difficult and slow to travel from the German speaking cantons to Ticino. In 1842, the Gotthard Post, a stagecoach drawn by five horses with ten seats, took 23 hours to get from Flüelen in Canton Uri to northern Italy's Lake Como.

¹⁵This was known as the Bonifica del Piano di Magadino and actually lasted from 1888 until 1939.

middle of the nineteenth century it caused a crisis as the villages could not support the sudden increase in population.

There was only one solution: to leave the native village that had been home for 1,000 years and try to find work elsewhere. Fortunately for the Ticinese, their land was covered with chestnut trees and soon enterprising young men figured there was a market for roasted chestnuts in European cities, and so they left their homes to try their luck at selling chestnuts.

An immediate problem became apparent; once north of the St. Gotthard Pass, no one spoke their Italian dialect, and none of the Ticinese spoke German or French. So Zurich and Geneva proved less than fertile markets. But that problem was solved by heading south. Despite the fact that Lombardy and Ticino had been separate politically for more than 300 years, the Lombard dialect was still virtually the same as the Ticino dialect, so selling chestnuts in Milan was no problem.

The Ticinese also marketed another useful skill. Because of decades of village poverty, Ticino men were smaller and less developed than other Europeans. This meant they were better equipped to crawl into confined areas, and the Ticino men developed a new talent, chimney sweeps, called "*spazzacamini*." So successful were they that the *spazzacamini* even developed their own language to communicate with one another.

In the 1840s and early 1850s, several thousand Ticino men went south to work largely as chimney sweeps, but the Lombardy in which they now sought employment was beset with its own problems. After the Congress of Vienna in 1815, the Austrian Empire had taken control of northern Italy from Venice to Milan. Nineteenth century nationalism soon affected the area, and Italian patriots rallied to the call of "*Risorgimento*," the reunification of Italy that had not been a unified country since the fall of Rome.¹⁶

While neither the authorities nor the population of Canton Ticino had any desire to return to Italian control, there was much sym-

¹⁶The effort to reunify Italy dates from the end of the Congress of Vienna in 1815 to the proclamation of an Italian kingdom in 1861 and the capture of Rome from the Papal States and in 1871. Over this time, the French, Spanish, and Austrians who claimed sovereignty over parts of Italy were driven out.

pathy for reunification among the Ticinese who had themselves only recently achieved self rule. And that caused major problems for the Austrians trying to retain control of Lombardy.

In early 1853, an anti-Austrian uprising took place in Milan. The military ruler of northern Italy was one Field Marshall Josef Radetzky, who held the title Viceroy of Lombardy-Venetia.¹⁷ Radetzky determined that the Lombardy-Ticino border was a sieve through which were passing men and money to support the Italian cause, so he ordered the border sealed and on February 16, 1853, he ordered all 6,500 Ticinese living in northern Italy expelled and forced to return to their homes.¹⁸

Although no one knew it at the time, that date would be one of the most important in Ticino's history. The young men, often landless second sons (the patrimony of the Ticino villages allowed inheritance of whatever property the family had by the eldest son and his family) returned home with no money and no work. The unsettled conditions in northern Italy had hurt the Ticino economy which depended on trade across the common border. The poverty of their ancient villages was by now overwhelming, and so these young men, first in a trickle and later in a flood, did what countless millions of other impoverished Europeans did, they left for the New World.

Forced to emigrate north they crossed the St. Gotthard Pass and headed to port cities like Le Havre where they could sail in steerage to America. But where to go? There was a rumor of gold in Australia, and in the mid-1850s, some 3,000 Ticino Swiss sailed there. Most found little gold and settled down as farmers. Few ever returned to Switzerland. Another favorite locale was Argentina which had a large Italian

¹⁷ Josef Radetzky was born in Bohemia in 1766. He fought with the Austrian army in the Napoleonic Wars. In 1836, he was assigned to Italy, and in 1848, he was made Viceroy of Lombardy and Venetia at the age of 82 where he directed all military affairs in Austria's unsuccessful effort to retain its Italian possessions. He died in Milan in 1858 just before Austria was expelled from northern Italy. He is considered a great Austrian hero, and Johan Strauss Sr. wrote his famous "Radetzky March" in his honor. He was married to an Austrian countess with whom he had eight children. He also had another eight children with an Italian mistress.

¹⁸ Joseph Gentilli, *The Settlement of Swiss Ticino Immigrants in Australia* (University of West Australia, August 1988), 2.



Ticino peasant marriage, 1856.

population; some early Ticino immigrants went there, mainly from the Sottoceneri, the area south of the Cereni mountains that divides the canton in two

But it did not take long for the most popular destination to emerge: California. Word of the discovery of gold in 1848 spread quickly throughout Europe, including Ticino, and dreams of easy riches led young men from all parts of Switzerland to embark for the west coast. Small numbers of Ticinese

seem to have arrived in California in 1852 and 1853, but by now the gold rush was over.

That did not stop the emigration. By March 1856, some 948 persons had left the Val Maggia, of which only two were women. While most went to Australia, 146 took passage to California. By the census of 1870, some 3,000 Swiss natives were living in California, and it would appear that probably about half were from Ticino.¹⁹

This immigration would continue for another half century, and it came from a very specific part of Ticino called the Sopraceneri, the north of the canton. Very few immigrants were from the southern part of the canton where Lugano was the dominant city, and where the economy was stronger. The immigrants were from the north, but not from the cities like Bellinzona and Locarno. Instead they were almost entirely rural people, often from the most remote upper valleys such as Val Maggia, Val Verzasca, Centovalli, and Val Morobbia.

¹⁹ H.F. Haup, "The Italian Swiss in California," *California Historical Society*, Vol. 30, December 1951, 306.

For centuries, these villagers had scrapped out a living herding a few goats or making a little wine along mountain streams that cut through the slate and granite of the Alpine foothills. When they arrived in California, they found a similar Mediterranean climate to Ticino with a long growing season and rolling green hills perfect for dairy farming especially along the California coast. Soon word went from village to village in the Sopraceneri about opportunities in California.

The first immigrants were unmarried young men, and if they had a wife or children, these remained in Switzerland. According to Maurice Perret who did a detailed study of the Italian Swiss immigrants in the 1940s, “They came with little money. Only poor people left Ticino. Statistics in the 1890s indicated the amounts of money deposited with the agencies of emigration to be redistributed in America show that the Ticinese had the lowest sums among the Swiss, from two to 20 francs per person (forty cents to four dollars). From other Swiss cantons, the average in 1891 varied between 70 and 600 francs (\$14 to \$120 dollars.)”²⁰

But the opportunity for making money was quickly apparent. California produced little in the way of milk during its Mexican days as that was not part of the Mexican diet. But the influx of post gold rush Americans provided a ready market for milk and cheese. Most Ticino men knew something about dairy farming, and even twelve hours a day milking and chasing cows was better than life had been in Ticino. In 1856, a dairy industry was established in Marin County north of San Francisco and the labor force for the new dairies heavily consisted of Ticinese “milkers,” many of whom quickly established their own dairies.²¹

California’s population growth in the late 19th Century included Italian and other southern Europeans who generally went to the cities, becoming fisherman and grocers. For them, wine was part of a meal, and Ticino immigrants quickly saw an opportunity to make wine in their rural farms for sale in the cities.

²⁰ Maurice Edmond Perret, “The Italian Swiss Colonies in California,” Master of Arts thesis (University of California, Berkeley, 1942), 36-37.

²¹ Haup, 309.

A dairy farm and a vineyard need workers. Once established, the first immigrants gathered a small nest egg and sent off to Ticino for brothers, cousins, fellow villagers, and often for wives. From 1880 on, virtually all the Ticinese coming to California had either a sponsor or a specific ranch in California they were heading for. This eased passage to and across the United States. It also meant that virtually all the Ticino Swiss came to the same place, California.

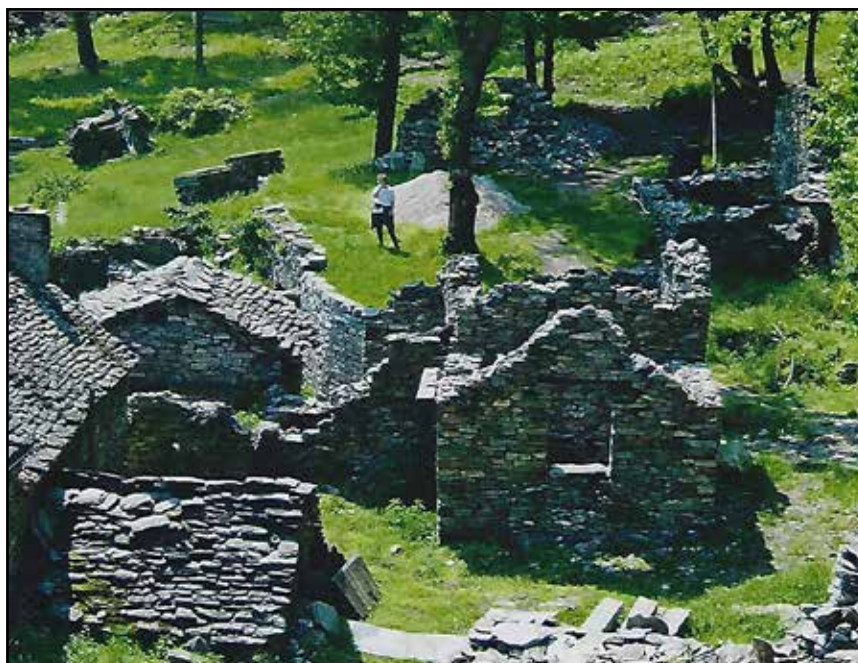
But not to California's already growing cities. From Marin County, Ticino dairymen headed up the north coast toward Humboldt County which provided perfect land for dairy farms. Those with an interest in vineyards, headed for Napa and Sonoma Counties. Others headed down the coast, populating Monterey County's Salinas Valley and establishing dairy farms as far south as Santa Barbara County. Others headed inland to San Joaquin and Stanislaus Counties. But virtually none settled in San Francisco or Oakland, or ventured into Los Angeles or San Diego. These were rural people, and for the first half century of Ticino immigration in California, almost all settled in the rural agricultural counties.

Consider one Ticino village, Monte Carasso, and one California town, St. Helena. Today Monte Carasso is a suburb of the cantonal capital of Bellinzona; in the nineteenth century, it was a typical hillside village. St. Helena in Napa County is today the heart of California's multi-billion dollar wine industry; in the 1880s it was a town of 1,800 people in the upper Napa Valley where some immigrants had noticed the land was especially conducive to growing wine grapes.

Monte Carasso is first mentioned in 1348 as Monte Carassio. From 1430 to 1465, it had its own local government, and in 1440 it was allowed to send representatives to the local council in Bellinzona. The absorption of Bellinzona into the Swiss Confederation in 1500 meant that Monte Carasso became a Confederation possession as well, but the destruction of the Torretta Bridge in 1515 cut Monte Carasso off from Bellinzona, and its population retreated to small enclaves high in the village mountains. The flatland along the Ticino River was occupied by an Augustinian Monastery built there in the 1500s. The monastery had acquired virtually all the agricultural land adjoining the river, leaving the villagers to fend for themselves in the mountains.



Ruins of the ancient stone houses in Monte Carasso.



In 1800, Monte Carasso had a population of about 500 people, and that number doubled in the nineteenth century. They were organized into four “*squadre*,” or hamlets, at various points in the mountainside. The *squadra* of Poncetta consisted of thirty-five families of which fourteen had the last name of Grossi. Farther up the hillside, the *squadra* of Corte di Sotto consisted of thirty-seven families of which eleven were named Guidotti. Pozzeranco consisted of seventeen families, and Montiglione consisted of twelve families, eleven of whom were named Locarnini. In the general area, were another twenty-four families that were not of native Monte Carasso origin. In all, Monte Carasso consisted of 125 family units, almost all interrelated and many sharing their stone houses with other families.²²

The poverty experienced in Canton Ticino throughout the 19th Century also affected Monte Carasso. In 1857, the Augustinian Monastery was suppressed, that is seized by the village following passage of a cantonal law allowing them to do so. Its property was divided among the “*patrizi*” families of Monte Carasso and this did make more farm land available.²³

But also in these years, opportunities overseas beckoned. In 1860, Antonio and Carlo Locarnini and Pietro Pestoni of Monte Carasso sailed for Australia on the ship *Swiftsure*.²⁴ But California had more promise, and in the next two decades, a significant migration of young men from Monte Carasso to California occurred.

It is not clear who was the first to reach California, but several early immigrants settled along California’s central coast. After 1880, a steady stream found their way to the Napa Valley to work in various aspects of the viniculture business. Here they found a small settlement of Ticinese and northern Italians who provided necessary financial help to establish themselves in the vineyard business.

The first Italian Swiss in Napa was Francesco (Frank) Salmina²⁵ who left his small village of Intragna in the remote Centovalli for Cali-

²² Maestro Rinaldo Guidotti, *Notizie Storiche su Monte Carasso* (Istituto Editoriale Ticinese Bellinzona, 1965), 41-42.

²³ Guidotti, 124-184.

²⁴ Gentilli, 62.

²⁵ Virtually all the Ticino immigrants Americanized their first names, which are shown here in parenthesis.

ifornia in 1858. He quickly prospered and in 1864 settled just outside the city of Napa. Here he and a partner farmed more than 700 acres of land, including thirty acres of vineyards with a small winery, and sixty dairy cows.²⁶ In the early 1870s, he was joined by his first cousin from Intragna, Battista Salmina, who had also arrived in California in 1858. Battista returned to Intragna in 1875, and after two years returned to Napa with a wife, Sabina Salmina. However, relations with Frank Salmina had deteriorated and in 1879, Battista and Sabina, with an infant daughter, Katie, went up the Napa Valley to St. Helena where he found a small hotel for sale.

Battista bought the hotel, with a bar and restaurant, and named it William Tell after the great Swiss hero. In 1880, they brought Sabina's brother, Felice (Felix) to St. Helena and he immediately immersed himself into learning the wine business, while helping run the hotel.

Battista formed a partnership with another Ticinese, Angelo Borla, and the two of them began buying property in St. Helena. The William Tell Hotel became the gathering place for recently arrived Swiss workers. The 1880 U.S. Census for St. Helena shows seven Swiss laborers living in the hotel.



²⁶ *Illustrations of Napa Co., Calif., Historical Sketch* (Smith and Elliott, Oakland, 1878), 8.

Alexander and Maria Angelina and their two daughters, taken in St. Helena about 1890.

The first Ticino Swiss from Monte Carasso to arrive in California was not really a Ticinese. He was Alessandro (Alexander) Merga, whose father was from near Lake Como in Italy but whose mother was from Monte Carasso. He was born there in 1846. In 1871, he married Maria (Mary) Angelina Pestoni of a very old Monte Carasso family. They had a daughter, Lucia Merga, born in 1872. The following year, Alessandro departed for America, leaving his family in Monte Carasso. For two years he worked in New York, and then in 1875 took a train to California, finding his way to Sonoma County on California's north coast. Having learned the basics of the vineyard business, he moved to St. Helena in 1883 and decided it was time to bring over his family. But his Pestoni in-laws did not want Maria and Lucia travelling all the way to California alone, so they decided to send her 25-year-old brother, Albino (Albert) Pestoni, to accompany them.

Not surprisingly, Alexander and Albert, as they were now known, decided to go into the vineyard business together and soon were able to buy twenty-five acres in a small valley called Crystal Springs just northeast of St. Helena. Adjoining their property was the 101-acre ranch and vineyard of Carlo and Fulgenzio Rossini, two brothers also from Monte Carasso. They had arrived in 1882 and began working immediately in Napa County vineyards. In 1884, they borrowed \$1,000 to buy the 101-acre ranch and built a small winery on their property.²⁷

The \$1,000 loan came in the form of a mortgage and the mortgagee was Battista Salmina. Battista Salmina, Felix Salmina, and Angelo Borla were now successful enough with their property holdings in St. Helena that they were able to make loans to fellow Ticinese and they ended up essentially being the bankers for the Swiss immigrants. The American banks would probably have refused to extend loans to these immigrants because few of them spoke good English, and so Battista, an astute businessman, realized he could fill the need.

²⁷ In the nineteenth century, Californians paid a property tax based on their real and personal property holdings. The State Board of Equalization assessed each farm annually to determine the tax. This included determining the size of the farm, the acreage in vineyards, any wine the farm had, and mortgages on the property. Microfilm of these Board of Equalization assessments are available at the Napa Valley Genealogical Society. In 1895, Napa County officials mapped the entire county, showing the location of all existing farms and their acreage.

In 1887, Carlo Rossini married Lucia Merga who was living in the adjoining ranch with her parents, thus uniting these two pioneering families. By 1889, the Rossini operation was making 3,000 gallons of wine a year. That same year Fulgenzio Rossini married Giuseppina (Josephine) Poncetta, whose family owned a neighboring ranch of thirty-four acres. Josephine was born in Monte Carasso in 1860 and came to California about 1885 to be with her brother Giovanni (John) Poncetta.

John Poncetta was born in Monte Carasso in 1858. He came to California in 1879 and had attained his citizenship in 1884. By then he too had established himself in the Crustal Springs area, operating vineyard which he ran for the rest of his life. In 1893, the 35-year-old John married 16-year-old Elvezia (Elva) Madonna, whose family also farmed in the Crystal Springs area.

Elva was the second of four daughters born to Giacomo (James) and Marianna Madonna who were natives of Camedo, Switzerland. Camedo was a long distance from Monte Carasso, located at the end of the Centovalli which extended west of Locarno to the Italian border. Giacomo was born there in 1848, his wife was born Marianna Rizzoli in the same village in 1852. They were married in 1872 and had three daughters in Camedo before Giacomo departed for America in 1885.

While Giacomo had no ties to the Monte Carasso immigrants in Switzerland, he had an important connection to the Salmina family when he arrived in California. Camedo is just up the road from Intragna where the Salminas were from, and a part of the Madonna family lived in Intragna. It is very possible that the Salmina and Madonna families knew each other in Ticino; at any rate, in 1888, Felix Salmina and Angelo Borla lent James Madonna \$800 which he used to pay for a twenty-acre plot of land on which he too planted grapes.

He also used some of this money to pay for passage for his family to come to California. In 1889, Mariana Madonna arrived with three daughters: Maria, aged fourteen, Elvezia (Elva), aged twelve, and Giacomina (Ponnie), aged eight. A fourth daughter, Josephine, was born in 1891.

Not only did Elva Madonna marry John Poncetta, but Giacomina Madonna married his brother, Bernardo Poncetta—thus two brothers married two sisters. And in 1891, Maria, the eldest of the

Madonna daughters, married Albert Pestoni. The Ticino marriages did not stop here. John and Bernard's sister, Lodovina Poncetta, born in Monte Carasso in 1871, married Rocco Morisoli, who was born there in 1861. They settled in Rutherford, the next town south from St. Helena and started a vineyard there that still remains in the Morisoli family to the fifth generation.

The inter-Swiss marriages continued into the next century. After the arrival of Mary Angelina Merga in 1883, she and Alexander had a second daughter, Serafina (Sarah), born in December 1883. In 1900, she married Cherubini (Charles) Martinelli who was from Maggia, Ticino. He too worked in the vineyard business.

In 1920, Mary Jennie Rossini, daughter of Carlo and Lucia Rossini, married Joseph Antone Varozza who operated a vineyard and small winery in St. Helena. He was the son of Vincenzo (James) Varozza and Giovannina (Jennie) Dodini. Jennie Dodini, who was born in 1854, had come to San Francisco as an unattached young woman in 1874. In 1877, she married James Varozza, who had come to California in 1870 and they came to St. Helena in late 1879. James quickly mastered the vineyard business, rising to foreman of a major St. Helena vineyard. The Varozza family continues in the wine business today, in the fifth generation.

In 1889, James and Jennie returned to Ticino as she was suffering from health problems. But in 1892, seeing no opportunities in Ticino, they decided to return to St. Helena. Along with their own three children, they brought back with them Jennie's nephew, 16-year-old Fulgenzio (Frank) Morosoli. Fulgenzio was part of the Morisoli family of Monte Carasso, but as he had been born in a different village, the spelling of his last name was changed. In 1898, Frank married Katie Salmina, eldest daughter of Battista and Sabina Salmina, thus giving the Salminas a direct connection to Monte Carasso.²⁸ In 1893, Felix Salmina, Sabina's brother, had married Teresa Borla, the niece of their Ticino business partner, Angelo Borla.

So by the turn of the twentieth century, twelve intermarried Ticino Swiss families, all of whom had a direct or indirect tie to the

²⁸ Fulgenzio Morosoli and Katie Salmina are the author's grandparents.

small Ticino village of Monte Carasso, were working in the vineyards or allied industries in the upper Napa Valley. As the wine industry grew and prospered in the Napa Valley it attracted immigrants from other parts of Europe, especially Italians. The major wine market before the coming of Prohibition in 1920 had been Italian, French, and German families throughout California for whom wine was part of their daily lives. Numerous small wineries shipped wine in barrels via the Southern Pacific Railway to restaurants and private homes up and down the state.

Because wine was, until well into the 20th Century, a “foreign” drink for most Americans, the early California industry was dominated by immigrant families. As late as 1940, the four major Napa Valley wineries were still owned by the immigrant families that had founded them.²⁹

Whether it was picking chestnuts in Ticino, milking cows in rural California, or tending vineyards in Napa, the Ticino Swiss were used to working long hours. Their one day off was Sunday and that was to attend church as the Swiss were strong Roman Catholic. Soon their social life revolved around church socials and picnics, and that brought them into contact with Italian and German Catholics, almost all immigrants as well.

These twelve immigrant Ticino families had forty-five children among them. But the lives of the first and second generations were very much different. Living in a rural community, the initial immigrants had little need to learn English, although most of the men could be understood in heavily accented English.³⁰ While the second generation was raised hearing the dialect at home, once in school they quickly learned English. While they generally married other Roman

²⁹ The wineries were Beringer Brothers, founded in 1876 by two German brothers; Beaulieu Vineyards, founded by Georges De Latour from France in 1900; Inglenook, started by a Finnish sea captain in 1879 and still owned by his descendants; and Larkmead, owned by the Salmina family.

³⁰ The Ticino immigrants had to create new words that combined both Italian and English. They lived on “ranches” which had no Italian word, so they created “i ranceri” to describe where they lived. A dairy farmer with cows would need a fence on his ranch, but there was no Ticino word for “fence,” so if the fence needed repair, it was “*fixa la fenca*.”



Larkmead Winery owned by the Salmina family, in 1910

Catholics, this now included Irish and in many dairy communities Portuguese from the Azores. By the third generation, some of whom lived into the twenty-first century, knowledge of the dialect and of Italian had largely disappeared.

This is not to say that the first generation immigrants did not blend into American society, despite clinging to their Ticino cultural roots. Many were astute businessmen and did very well in a rurally oriented town like St. Helena. In 1895, Battista and Felix Salmina rented a large winery on Larkmead Lane five miles north of St. Helena. In 1902, they bought the winery and soon thereafter built their own large stone cellar that is today on the National Register of Historic Places.

Most of the property adjacent to their winery was owned by George W. Tucker who had come to the Napa Valley with his father Reason P. Tucker in the 1840s. The Tuckers were part of the original Donner Party that crossed the plains in covered wagons in 1846 but had divided from the party before the Donners were trapped in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. In 1847, Reason, accompanied by his son George, led the first rescue party to find the Donner Party. By any measure,

the Tuckers were a pioneering California family, settling near St. Helena even before California became a state.³¹ In 1908, George Tucker's grandson, Robert Eachus, married Mary Salmina, youngest daughter of Battista and Sabina Salmina. It was a major social event in the upper Napa Valley and evidence that within a generation, the Ticino Swiss had advanced to full acceptance in American society.³²

According to Maurice Perret, between 1868 and 1937, a total of 35,558 Ticinese left their homes to emigrate overseas, and four-fifths came to the United States. Of these, virtually all came to California. In the 1930 census, there were 20,063 people born in Switzerland living in California, and 29,635 American born citizens had one or two parents born in Switzerland.³³

These numbers suggest that the total number of Ticino Swiss who came to California between the mid-1850s and World War II was about 30,000. Most seem to have come during the great immigrations of the late nineteenth century. The Ticino Swiss and Italians immigrated in roughly the same time period, driven by the extreme poverty in Europe south of the Alps, but the two groups settled in different parts of the United States and followed different professions.

The Ticino immigration was a small part of overall immigration to America following the Civil War. But it played a unique role in the agricultural history of California, and in the kaleidoscope that is America today.

³¹ Barbara Nichols, Reason P. Tucker, "The Quiet Pioneer," *Gleanings* (Napa County Historical Society, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1989).

³² The sources for the lives of the first generation Ticino Swiss immigrants are varied. For information on the births of the immigrants, the author wishes to thank Antonio Guidotti of Monte Carasso who supplied many of the family records on the Ticinese who immigrated. The U.S. censuses for 1880, 1900, 1910, 1920, and 1930 give a picture of the families as they expanded in Calif., and often included the year of immigration. Finally, the *St. Helena Star*, St. Helena's weekly newspaper founded in 1874, reported the deaths of the Ticino immigrants with detailed obituaries on their lives in St. Helena.

³³ Perret, 25, 33.