

## Portrait of a Ligurian Fishing Colony

By Riccardo Gaudino

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Genova: Few people truly understand the significance of this major Italian port on the Mediterranean. Its greatness lies in the tradition of its seamen. Christopher Columbus, John Cabot (Giovanni Caboto), and even Henry Hudson's navigator were all Genovese seamen. Those Genovese who inhabited the rocky hillsides of the Ligurian Coast (today, sunbathers' "La Riviera") have played an essential role in the expansion of Western Civilization. Hans Palmer writes in *Italian Immigration and Development of California Agriculture*:

*The Italians have long been one of the most mobile groups in Europe. During the classical period of Western history, they migrated as warriors, bureaucrats, and tradesmen over much of the Mediterranean world and Western Europe. During the Renaissance and into the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Italian tradesmen were in great demand. Venetian and Genovese ships brought spices and grains from the Middle East. So ubiquitous did the Italian presence become that the following proverb arose: 'Whenever you crack an egg, a Genovese will pop out.'*

Not just in the port of Genova, but along the entire Ligurian Coast, young boys accompanied their fathers to sea at an age as early as five. From Tuscany to France, in the many seaside villages dotting the coastline, sea trade was a primary activity. Each proud family patriarch owned a boat, maybe two, and sailed the Mediterranean. These lanteen sail boats, schooners, and their captains parallel today's trucks and truckers. Up and down the coast they roamed, carrying products such as Tuscan wine, Sardegnan olive oil, and French cheese, trading in Livorno, Barcelona, Tunisia, and Sicily.

"I went to sea as a cabin boy at thirteen," recalls Marco Carniglia, age 92. "It was a brigantine three-master that sailed between Genova and Argentina."

By the age of eighteen after receiving an education before the mast, a boy was a seasoned sailor.

"I remember my father used to tell me how dangerous it was for them to sometimes fish off the Tunisian Coast. The people there would swim out to his boats and try to capture them when they had their fishing nets out. My father had to club their hands so they wouldn't get into the boat. It was the only way to escape," recalls one Santa Cruzan. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Ligurian sailing tradition was very much alive. Riva Trigoso was no exception. Located eighteen miles southeast of Genova, its beach, like a sardine can, was packed with boats. Women mended nets, helped pull a seine onto the beach for a share of the fish, and peddled their goods through the neighboring hillside towns. The men and young boys came and went. If it were not for Napoleonic, Garibaldi's war for the unification of Italy, or the Italian invasion of Tripoli, the waiting sea would have taken them away again. In the summer, men found jobs in the mercantile trade. During winter, when jobs were scarce, these highly self-sufficient villagers turned to their survival tool, a fish net.

Southern France and Liguria were natural trading partners. They were essentially the same cultural and economic unit, the same food, dialect, and social customs. When the Ligurian Republic was an independent state, its boundaries extended to include parts of what is today modern France. Giuseppe Garibaldi, the Italian George Washington, was born in Nice.

In 1886, when France imposed a trade embargo against Italy, Genovese mercantile prosperity was, in effect, served notice of terminus. Ligurian seaside towns like Riva Trigoso, dependent on this coastal trade, had their economic lifeline severed. The resultant conditions were disastrous. Immigration became the common topic of conversation in osterias (small cafes). Ships had come and gone to America for years. Centuries of seacraft had shaped the Ligurian viewpoint to one that gazed outward. World news was as familiar to the Ligurian ear as news of the daily catch. The worker's tongue in the port of Buenos Aires was, after all, the Genovese dialect.

Many Ligurians had sailed to San Francisco, and when some returned with news of gold, *California* spread like wild fire across the country. In San Francisco Bay, the fleet of abandoned ships grew daily. Some native Californians today can trace their origin to that Ligurian sailor who jumped ship with a high fever. When the gold ran dry, stranded Ligurian sailors returned from the Mother Lode to San Francisco, and found its waters abundant with fish.

As in the old country, fishing became second nature to this Americans *paesani*. With imported Italian twine and hand-carved mending needles, the Ligurians made their nets. San Francisco Bay was so virginal that a day's catch would often include not just fish, but also ducks. The double-ender felucca rigged with a lanteen sail became a common sight. These boats, California cousins of the Ligurian fleet on the Mediterranean, were called "lanteens." It was a small, seaworthy craft whose origin traced back to the

early days of Egypt's Nile River Valley. The lanteens and their captains soon ventured out of San Francisco Bay.

In the 1880's, Ligurian seamen from Riva Trigoso began arriving in Monterey Bay after April first, when the salmon season opened. News of Monterey drifted back to the osterias and piazzas of Ligurian seaside villages. And a young boy, Gottardo Stagnaro, who had jumped ship in California at a place called Santa Cruz, was coming home.

In 1890 Domenico Canepa immigrated and settled in Capitola. He was the first Riva Trigoso to reside permanently in Monterey Bay. Nicoletta, his wife, was a first cousin to Giovanni Bregante. Domenico met and old-time Portugese whaler turned fisherman, Anton Peixoto, who taught him what he knew about the waters and fish of the area. It is perhaps because of Anton's influence that the Chinese-imported long line baskets were called "Portugese trawlers."

The origin of the fishing village at the foot of Capitola's wharf is not exactly known. The 1880s were years of antforeignism, specially against the Chinese. Kearny of San Francisco and his predominately Irish based Workingman's Party had succeeded in passing legislation that discriminated specifically against the traditional work habits of Orientals. By the early 1890s, the Chinese were almost wiped out of the fishing industry picture, after having dominated Monterey Bay for the greater part of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The vacuum created by the With Labor movement drew in the skills and experiences of the Southern European Ligurians. Because they were natural fishermen, these Mediterranean Latins were accepted as the Chinese workers' replacement. Like the Chinese, the Italians were spendthrift, self-sufficient, and clannish. Most importantly, the Italians were eager to work for the same cheap wage as their predecessors. But to the emigrants Ligurians who left severe economic conditions at home, the low wage was a substantial pay rise.

At the turn of the century, the Chinese had been eliminated as a rural work force. Italians and Portugese immigrated in mass to North Beach, San Francisco's traditional "Latin Quarter", which became the Italian capitol of California. Compared to other Italian colonies in the United States, its character was distinctly Northern Italian, or from a Ligurian point of view, Genovese. One of the colony's outstanding progressive leaders from the Alpine Piedmont Region of Italy, Andrea Sbarbaro, was not a Catholic, but a Valdesian Italian Protestant. The most famous member was Amadeo Gianni, the son of a Ligurian truck farmer in San Jose, who founded the Bank of Italy, today the Bank of America. The network of Italian migration was not limited o California and the West, but extended down the Pacific Coast to Latin America. Wherever there were ports along major shipping lanes, a Ligurian could be found.

"When I was shipwrecked on the sailing ship L'Italia of the Chilean Coast," recalls Marco Carniglia, "family from my home town of Riva Trigosa invited me to stay with them. The woman, she'd known my mother in the old country."

San Diego had a large colony of immigrants Riva Trigosans who made major contributions to the development of the United States high-sea tuna fleet.

Mary Stagnaro points out, "When my mother came with m father to this country, he told her that they'd settled in San Diego near her sister. But then he came to Santa Cruz instead, and that was that."

Sa Pedro, Santa Barbara, and Stockton were other communities settled conspicuously. Castagnola and Canepa are probably the most widely known Ligurian surnames throughout California today. San Francisco, though, is where this story begins.

On April 18, 1906 fire and earthquake devastated San Francisco, the Pacific pearl. John Bassano states, "During the 1906 earthquake, my father and his brother-in-law Tomaso Ghio were fishing for herring by Sausalito." Achille Castagnola, a North Beach resident, ran to his fishing boat and began to shuttle his family and friends across to Sausalito. "I had a cousin who was born at that time in my father's boat," says Louie Castagnola.

Nicoletta pushed her children out the front door to safety as her husband, Domenico Canepa, watched the chimney crumbled down. He called to his wife to take the children back inside because it'd probably be safer.

In Capitola, Alberto Gibelli clung to his boat while it shook on the davits.

When news of the disaster reached "Santa Croce," Giovanni Bregante sailed back to San Francisco and days later, the *Zanin Picin* returned, leading a small flotilla of little lanteen sailboats filled with relatives and friends from North Beach.

The North Beach refugees were aided by Red Cross, and temporarily housed in recently constructed homes on Laurel Street.

Domenico Canepa's family and his son Pietro's family had both moved to Santa Cruz after davits were installed on the Southern Pacific's Railroad Wharf. (Davits are a crane-like device used to hoist boats out of the water). The Canpa's settled in the vicinity of Myrtle Street, later called "the flats."

"My mother and I", recalls Edith Canepa Castagnola, age 81, "would go down to the wharf in the afternoon when my father and brother came in with their fish. We'd load up the wagon, and the early the next morning we'd go all the way up to Boulder Creek. To let the Portugese who worked in the lime kilns know we were there, she'd take out a long horn about two feet long and blow on the end of it. Then she'd cry out, 'Fishie! Fishie!'"

Mary Carniglia: "My father didn't want to disturb the town's people with all our nets. So we moved up here to what the Spanish people called *La Baranca* (the hill). No one lived up here except for a few Mexican and Indian families."

*La Baranca* lies to Santa Cruz's west side, up and away from the town's beaten path. Giovanni moved up to the hill, and built a house on National Street. Later, his Stagnaro in-laws settled nearby. News of the established colony of *Rivani* (Riva Trigosans) soon traveled back to North Beach.

Many Ligurian fishing families remaining in San Francisco had lost all their heirlooms and belongings in the 1906 earthquake and fire. The mood of Fisherman's Wharf was also gradually shifting. Sicilian fishermen from Southern Italy were beginning to outnumber and dominate the industry. Slowly, *Rivani* families left North Beach, migrating to where other *paesani* (hometowners) and *parenti* (relatives) had established colonies along the coast.

It was during this time that *La Baranca* flourished. Adjoining Bay Street, from Lighthouse Avenue to Columbia, the neighborhood was nicknamed Santa Cruz's "Little Italy." Not only Ligurians fishing families, but also Italians from the region of Tuscany, Lombarie, and Piedmonte settled on the hill. The *Rivani*, though, had laid first claim to the land. *La Baranca's* identity was distinctly *fishermen*. The hill was only a short walk to the wharf.

The cluster of fishing families in the flats and on the hill had a definite internal organization. Immediate blood ties determined the locations of the different fishing family homes. Domenico Canepa's relations and direct descendents dominated the flats. On the hill, around Laguna Street clustered Gottardo Stagnaro's descendents, his sisters, and their kin. Gottardo's three sisters married Loero, Ghio, and Bregante, and these families were the heartbeat of *La Baranca*. Later, Tomaso Ghio and Marco Carniglia, brother-in-laws, established their clan by Columbia Street. Augustino Olivieri and Giacomo Stagnaro, together with their blood kin, lived on the bluff in full view of the wharf. Bregantes, Canepas, Gibellis, and a few others lived in the old Capitola fishing village. The clan seemed to have duplicated the cliché network that had existed in Riva Trigoso before immigration.

The immigrant fishermen did not find 'gold in the streets', as rumor had it back home. Marco Carniglia recalls, "My sister (Celestrina Ghio) wrote me and told me I should come here because 'there are a lot of fish'. Sure, there were a lot of fish, but you couldn't get the price... maybe one to two cents a pound. The buyers would rob you first in weight, and then in price! At least in the old country, although there wasn't much fish like here, you got a good price. Oh boy, I wanted to go home!"

In the early part of this century fishing was not a respectable profession in the eyes of the established uptowners. Tony Ghio reflects, "When the American boys tried it out, beginning in the 1920s, they found out that there was more to it than they thought!"

Ironically, the Perez brothers, Abbey and Fred, members of one of the most successful families in the town who conducted renowned barbeques for prominent politicians, lived on Lighthouse and Gharkey which baked up to the struggling, immigrant fishing community.

World War I broke out in 1914. Improved war-time economy raised the price of fish for the first time. And fishermen were making "good" money.

"The war was good for us. Some men made enough money that when it finished, they went back to Riva. But for those who stayed, the prices went down again."

On July 1, 1915 the Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf was inaugurated, and the old Southern Pacific Railroad Wharf abandoned. The 1920s brought a burst of activity to the newly established wharf.

Alma Bregante: "My father never moved to the new wharf. He had to stay in the old wharf because the new one was too tall, and he couldn't hoist his boat up. He had arthritis."

Robert "Big Boy" Stagnaro: "My father Cottardo was the first man to have a fish market on the new wharf back in 1916."

When the wharf opened, large California buyers from San Francisco like the International Fish Company, the Western-California Fish Company, Martinelli Fish Company, and Standard Fisheries moved in.

"Sunday" Faraola, the previous leasee of the old railroad wharf and kin to Perez, moved over also and opened a retail market. His father was one of the area's first Italian fishermen, arriving in the 1860s.

In Ligurian culture, marriages were arranged, so occasionally an immigrant or his America-born son would return to Riva Trigoso to marry, and in Santa Cruz, mail order brides came to meet their husbands.

Prohibition added an interesting twist to the lives of the Italians. Louis Martini Winery was bottling juice from wine grapes, and if the top was removed the juice would ferment. Wine was an essential component of an Italian's daily meal. "A meal without wine is like cheese without bread", went the saying. Passing a law forbidding consumption of alcoholic beverages was like declaring it illegal to take milk from a cow. An extra few cents a week from wine made a big difference when a week's catch might only have brought home seven dollars to an entire family.

By the close of the twenties, Giovanni Bregante, Pietro Canepa, and his father Domenico had passed away. Gottardo was crippled; every day he sat in the family's fish market truck and watched as the wharf began to boom. Monterey's sardine canneries got underway, and sardines were celebrated as the fishing industry's king. But west of the canneries, Santa Cruz quietly developed a distinct character of its town. Santa Cruz fishermen were "one-man one-boat" operators- gill netters, bottom fishermen, hook-and-liners. Gill netters traveled out no further than three miles, and hung their nets like curtains into the water. Bottom fishermen baited their hooks with anchovies attached to a "long line". The line was then coiled inside a basket (Portuguese trawler), and the hooks secured to the outside rim. Later at the "spot" the line was uncoiled as each hook was detached and dropped down to the ocean floor. Salmon and albacore fishermen were hook-and-liners.

"We all had our specialty", says Tony Ghio, "but you had to be a jack-of-all-trades to make it in the business".

It wasn't until 1947, when Tony and "Lefty" Ghio leagued up with Gus and Lug Canepa from Capitola, that Santa Cruz began to use the Sicilian lampara net. The lampara was a form of old country technology on which the entire sardine fishery became dependent.

In 1929, the Depression fell upon the industry. Various buyers and retailers went broke. A few non-Italians appeared on the wharf scene, some from Oklahoma. Mike Teshara, a Santa Cruzan, and a few other Americans started to fish "high-line". In contrast to the Italians who were primarily day fishermen, this involved extended periods at sea. The Italians would "go no farther than they could see the light on their porch". They subsequently united to fight the San Francisco buyers.

"I heard Louis Beverino say", exclaimed Mary Carniglia, her fist hitting the table, "'Give them a few cents less. These men are too stupid to know the difference'. That made my blood boil! So I looked up at him and said, 'How can you do this thing Mr. Beverino to these poor innocent men who cannot read or write, how have families to support?' Right then and there I decided I was going to fight for my people the fishermen."

So in October 1931, through the efforts of Mary Carniglia, three Santa Cruz Italian fishermen (Tony Ghio, Giacomo Stagnaro, and Serafino Canepa) drove to San Francisco to buy the Western-California market on the Municipal Wharf. Santa Cruz Fisheries, the fishermen's marketing association, was then established. The association's first president, Tony Ghio, recalls, "They had the idea to sell it to us because they thought we'd go broke. We found out later that their old manager, who said he'd stay and help us out was in cahoots with the previous owners. So we sent him on his way and we didn't go broke. The Western-Cal people thought they'd be able to buy it back from us for a penny on the dollar".

Unfortunately, Santa Cruz Fisheries was never successfully unified. Each individual had his own way of doing things, and by 1937, several fishermen had pulled out and gone their own way, Tony and "Lefty" Ghio among them.

Mary Carniglia, the executive secretary, used her skills to play a background though major role in keeping the association above water, at least during its early days. Although known to her people as "O Placida", Mary was *not* "the calm one". She was the first Italian girl from the colony who could read and write both Italian and English. As a small child, she accompanied the traditionally dressed *Rivane* (Riva Trigosan women) of the colony into town to buy their goods and translate for them. "My mother lived on National Street and never once went down to Pacific Avenue!" exclaims Mary.

In 1940, Mary, who was cooking at the time with Emelia Olivieri at the first Miramar, built herself a new restaurant from a hospital bed with the help of the wharfinger, Al Lozier. As the first woman to open a business on the wharf, Italian or otherwise, she made history. And yet this seemed no great feat to her. Giovanni Stagnaro and his brother Ernie bought out Giuseppe Urbani at the front wharf. Proudly, they hung their sign, "Stagnaro Brothers". Cottardo Stagnaro, nicknamed "Big Stag", had diversified their business before the 1930s by buying out Johnson's fishing barge business for sport fishermen. Using their market's drag boat, Lorenzo Zolezzi, Dante Canepa, or Joe Loero would tow a barge loaded with sport fishermen to a "hole" and anchor it down for the day. During the Depression, the Stagnaro Corporation depended on immediate family ties, and it was their cohesiveness that was the key to their survival. Even first-cousins- Trub, Steve, and Risho Ghio- fished for and kept close contact with the Stagnaro's family business.

"You know", says one waitress at Gilda's, "on many occasions 'Big Stag' would bring EVERYBODY on the wharf home for lunch. Just because there was a depression didn't mean you had to go hungry". By the late 1930s, the scene of unofficial "wharf mayor" Malio Stagnaro greeting sport fisherman as they climbed off the fishing barges was a common sight. But it was Cottardo Stagnaro, who came to America in 1898 with his mother Marie Zolezzi, who was the "brains behind the business".

Symptoms of war spread through Europe and Asia in 1938. After Pearl Harbor was hit, fishermen could sell all they caught for top dollar. Even shark was selling for two thousand dollars a ton! It wasn't long before many old-time immigrant fishermen and their children were cruising about in late model cars. The Ligurian sailors who jumped ship had finally found "the streets that were paved with gold".

"In the two weeks after Pearl Harbor", recalls Robert Stagnaro, his voice big and proud, "over one hundred boys from the Santa Cruz Wharf joined the U.S. Navy".

Six of Dante Canepa's sons were in the navy simultaneously, and all at combat stations. These Santa Cruzans were natural sailors, and advanced rapidly beyond "swabby".

In *La Baranca* though, after Italy's declaration of war against the United States, notices began arriving, notices which ordered all non-citizens to re-settle themselves at least two miles from the ocean.

"Poppa died in 1942", says Louise Bassano, "Not being by the ocean and everything... He'd been by the ocean all his life".

"I was in the Navy", explains John, "and my father couldn't go back home near the water, other than sneak an occasional shower. It used to burn me up. I think what they did to the Japanese was horrible too. How would you like it if someone took you from your home, and all your children were in the Navy!" Mary Carniglia set about teaching English and citizenship classes to registered Italian aliens. Soon enough, they began appearing for naturalization papers. While Malio Stagnaro contacted local Congressman Jack Anderson, Mary Carniglia waged her own battle on the wharf- her aim, to gain permission from the U.S. Army's Regional Command to return the fishermen to their boats, which hung drying on the davits. By the end of 1943, the fishing community had been restored. Children left for the war, some returned. The boats were lowered from the davits. Mary Carniglia, president of the Navy's Mother Club, concerned herself with the Miramar on the wharf.

"The women on the hill used to yell back and forth to each other from house to house. You could always hear someone screaming", "Nino" Giudici chuckles.

Tony Ghio: "Joe Loero, boy you could always hear him. With no radios, you had to yell back and forth between the boats to communicate. It sure ain't like today with all that modern equipment".

John Bassano: "I remember we'd be on the wharf and the tourist would ask, 'What's that guy yelling about? It must be somethin' important'. I'd tell 'em, 'Nothing, they're just talking'".

"I'd do anything for the servicemen during the war", says Louise Canepa. "When I worked at Western Auto, I'd buy them tires, batteries, gas, and feed them. There was never too much I could do for one of our boys in the service".

The social impact of WWII produced some fundamental changes in the outlook of immigrant children. They had been raised on the hill, isolated from the English speaking community, but they had discovered that there were things to do other than fish. Post-war economic conditions accentuated the need to broaden their opportunities. The price of fish had plunged.

Santa Cruz Fisheries had survived the rough times, but in 1947 the market faced collapse, and the Carniglia family through Mary's influence, took control. She had recently sold the Miramar to Parma Castagnola. "Placida" didn't stay calm for long. In 1950, she was on the scene again, cooking up her famous ravioli. The Riviera Hotel, today known as Positively Front Street, opened in march of each year for the tourist and closed the following November. In 1954, "Mama Mary" sold the place and retired.

"My mother should have been Mayor", says Virgil Carniglia. "But she was too afraid".

On the wharf, the currents of time had changed the traditional Italian fishing style. Patterning themselves after the non-Italians high-liners of the 1930s, they began to travel, ranging from Alaska to Mexico. Moss Landing's harbor was far better equipped to serve the growing needs of the industry, as the davits on the Municipal Wharf had always limited vessel size. The industry's mood demanded bigger, more expensive, modern equipment. The International Fish Company changed its name to the General Fish Company, and packed its bags for Moss Landing. "Babe" Canepa from the Luigi Canepa family, with his boat the *Flying Cloud*, became one of the leading fishermen at Moss Landing. And the bustling era of the Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf, its fishermen, and its industry drew to a close.

"When the television came out", recalls Vickie Torchio, "the older Italian woman who didn't speak English started to understand and speak the language for the first time after having lived here for over thirty years". Slowly, the old Ligurian immigrants, the old ways that colored the wharf, disappeared. In the early 1960s, the Santa Cruz Yacht Harbor was built. Trub Ghio will tell you what happened.

"They took the davits off the wharf! They ruined it! Nothing but a parking lot remained".

"I asked the City to leave one davit as a memorial, but they didn't", says Gilda Stagnaro.

Santa Cruz Italian fishermen, whose upbringing, whose education, whose lives were shaped on the Municipal Wharf recall their younger days in what Emo Pieracci said: "My father was Tuscan and he died early. We lived next door to the Olivieris, right there by the wharf in *La Baranca*. There was so much interesting stuff going on down on the wharf, you couldn't keep us kids away. So right after school, I'd go down and pick out fish livers for 25C a bucket. The bucket was as big as a barrel".

The fishermen and their families were closely knit together, devoted to their work and to their community.

"When you came in from fishing, no one went home until all the boats were in", says John Bassano.

Perhaps the Santa Cruz Genovese' love for Monterey Bay's sea and soil, and the pride they carry for their role in its development is best summed up by Attilio Canepa: "First there was the Indian, and then the Italian".