

Varieties of Ethnic Identity and Landscape among Italian Immigrants in Northern California

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Abstract: From the 1850s to the 1930s, immigrants of northern Italian heritage settled throughout Northern California. These individuals and families coalesced in urban neighborhoods and rural outposts and became the predominant foreign-born group in a number of cities and towns in the region. As miners, stonemasons, storekeepers, boardinghouse operators, and laborers they played an important role in creating the region's complex cultural landscape. This paper compares and contrasts the expression of Italian ethnic identity in two Northern California towns. The case studies demonstrate how ethnic landscapes can vary depending on immigrant origins, time of arrival, local economic opportunities, and relations with the host community. The economic and social conditions that shaped—and continue to reshape—the distinctive ethnic landscapes of these two towns have broader implications for society at large.

Introduction

CALIFORNIA HAS LONG BEEN RECOGNIZED as a destination for newcomers from all over the earth, a global meeting ground. In fact, many look to California to get a glimpse of what living in a “global village” will be like. But the phenomenon of immigrants from far-flung homelands remaking the character of communities and creating new regional identities is nothing new. One has only to look back to the peopling of the state since the gold rush era. The northern portion of the state was and continues to be a major immigrant-receiving region and therefore provides an excellent laboratory for the study of immigration, settlement, and ethnicity.

While much scholarly attention has focused on the cultural changes brought about by California's booming Latino and Asian populations, lesser-known immigrant groups have also contributed a great deal to California's complex ethnic landscape. This paper focuses on the spatial expressions of heritage resulting from

Italian immigration and settlement between 1850 and 1930 in two Northern California communities. The main objective of this study is to facilitate an understanding of how Italian immigrants, responding to unique opportunities and constraints, shaped life and landscape in Northern California. Before presenting the vignettes that form the core of this study, however, some background on geographic approaches to studying ethnic landscapes is necessary.

Landscape Study and Ethnic Identity

Landscape study has emerged as central to the analysis of social history and exploration of ethnic identity in America. Of particular interest to cultural geographers is the way in which visible changes to the landscape both reflect and act back upon ethnic identities. Until fairly recently, ethnic “signatures” in the landscape were regarded as innocent imprints of traditional life frozen in time. Such things as vernacular architecture, traditional agricultural practices, and ethnic storefronts were seen as quaint reminders of ways of life long since or soon to be assimilated.

In recent years, geographers have come to see the built environment as a contested landscape, the product of relations among competing groups rather than the product of a unified culture (Groth 1997, 6–8). In this view, multiple, often competing expressions and meanings may be embedded in a single landscape, reflecting the relative power of groups to mold behavior by creating spaces that signify and reproduce social norms. Thus landscapes are “both systems of meaning and systems of social reproduction” (Mitchell 2000, 100). The built environment, argues Dolores Hayden (1997), is just as important as political struggle in understanding how economic production is tied to social reproduction.

Immigrant settlement geographies and landscapes are complex and have implications beyond particular ethnic groups to society at large. They are products of a group’s particular economic niche, time of arrival, relations with the host society, and interrelations among members of the immigrant group, among other factors (Wright and Ellis 2000). Any ethnic landscape is thus the product of a variety of social and economic processes over time—including labor. “Through labor,” argues Don Mitchell (2000, 102–3), “we both create and come to know the worlds we

make." Yet, as he shows, the "work of landscape" (i.e., the labor that goes into shaping the landscape) is often hidden or neutralized.

It is important to remember that how landscapes are used to establish identity, articulate social relations, and derive cultural meaning is always a multi-scale process, impacted by events and circumstances at many levels. California's evolving nineteenth- and early twentieth-century economy provided particular niches for immigrant labor and entrepreneurial activities. The vignettes in this study explore the economic and social conditions that helped shape (and continue to reshape) distinctly different ethnic landscapes associated with Italian settlement.

Italian Immigration and Settlement History in Northern California

Most studies of Italian Americans have tended to focus on the urban experience of southern Italians on the East Coast. By contrast, Italian settlement in rural and small-town America has received little treatment, and even fewer studies document Italian immigrant geographies in the West (Vecoli 1987; Velikonja 1987; Pozzetta 1989, 73) or in California (Cinel 1982; Sensi-Isolani and Martinelli 1993; Lothrop 2000). Recent studies of Italian migration and settlement, however, suggest that closer attention be paid to the contributions of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century immigrant groups in the West and especially in California. While much has been made of the state's early, mission-era colonizers and gold rush pioneers, far less is known about the impact of immigrant groups after the initial gold craze.

The many regions of Italy did not contribute equally to the immigrant flows to Northern California. An investigation of immigrant source areas reveals how, to varying degrees, political, economic, and cultural circumstances played a role in determining which regions of Italy contributed to Northern California immigrant flows (Helzer 1998). In marked contrast to most American cities, where southern Italians formed the bulk of subsequent immigrants, Italians in Northern California came primarily from northern Italy, and even within northern Italy, particular subregions contributed disproportionately (Table 1). Major zones of immigration include the regions of Liguria, Toscana, and Lombardia; the alpine areas of Piemonte; the Veneto; and

Switzerland's Italian-speaking canton, Ticino. Additionally, a cluster of villages in the Sila Mountains of Calabria represents a rare southern immigrant source area. Despite stereotypes, Italian immigrants destined for Northern California were not an undifferentiated mass of impoverished villagers and peasants; they had strong regional loyalties to their homelands and possessed a variety of skills and experiences that would later help shape Northern California landscape and identity.

Table 1.—Regional Origins of Northern California Italians

Region	Number of Individuals (N=1437)	Percentage
Toscana	327	22.8
Piemonte	222	15.4
Lombardia	221	15.4
Liguria	193	13.4
Veneto	145	10.1
Calabria	125	8.7
Sicilia	72	5.0
Canton Ticino	40	2.8
Emilia-Romagna	25	1.7
South America	15	1.0
Other	52	3.6
Northern Italy and Ticino	1203	83.7
Mezzogiorno and Sicily	219	15.2

Sources: Compiled from naturalization records and petitions for naturalization of Italian immigrants in Amador, Mendocino, Siskiyou, and Sonoma counties, and tombstone epitaphs from cemeteries in the Northern California towns of Jackson, Sutter Creek, Fort Bragg, Bodega Bay, Occidental, Sebastopol, Petaluma, McCloud, Mt. Shasta City, Weed, and Colma.

Italians began arriving in California in the 1850s. The earliest official state census (1852) indicates that only 228 Italians resided in the state at this time, although other studies estimate the total was as high as 700 (Palmer 1965, 107). The number of foreign-born Italians grew modestly during the next two decades, but it was not until the 1890s that they became numerically significant. The first three decades of the twentieth century saw the greatest expansion of the Italian community in California. Numerically, Italians began to surpass other foreign-born groups (such as Germans, Irish, and Chinese), particularly along the

coastal regions north and south of San Francisco, the highland valleys in the north of the state, the foothill regions of the Sierra Nevada, and areas in and around the San Joaquin Valley. The northern region of the Central Valley, favored by Germans and later by Japanese immigrants, was for the most part passed over by Italian settlement (Figure 1). By 1924, San Francisco had the nation's sixth largest Italian "colony," and according to the 1930

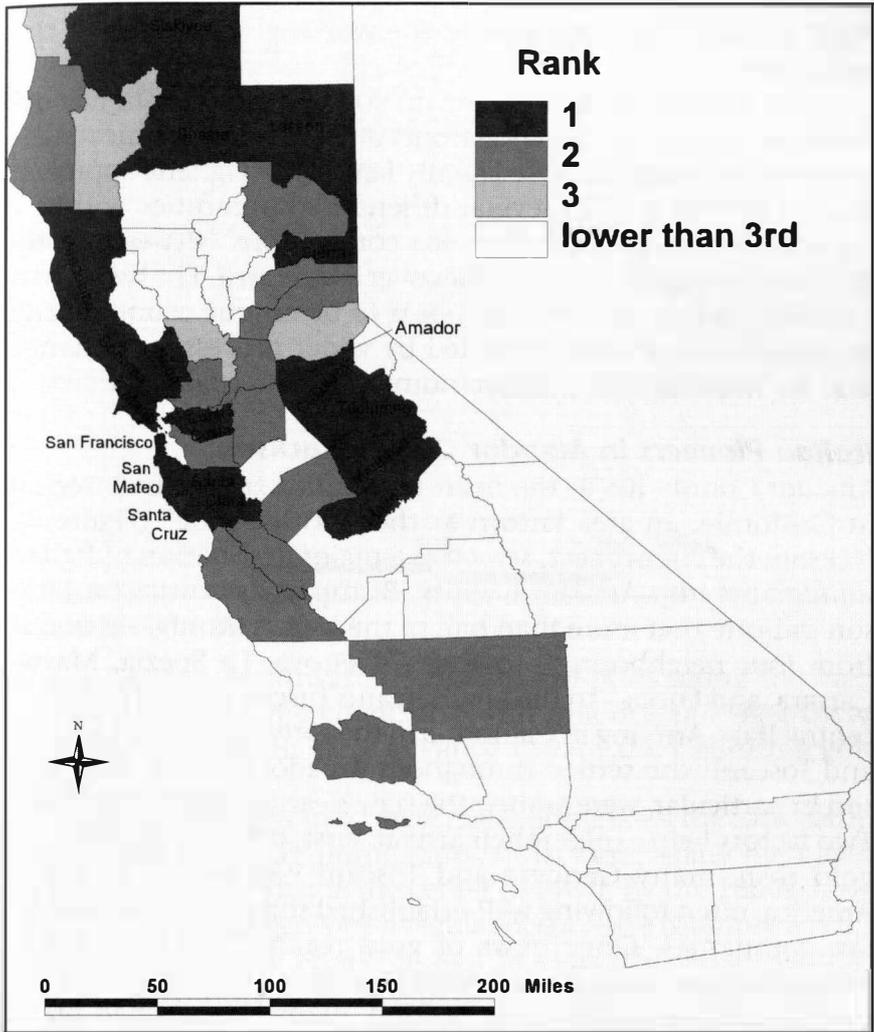


Figure 1.—Rank of number of Italians compared to other foreign-born populations in California counties, 1920. Source: U.S. Census of Population, Bureau of the Census, 1920.

census, Italy was the leading country of origin among the populations of 26 of the state's 58 counties.

Case Studies

The social histories that follow illustrate two very different types of ethnic working landscapes, each the result of a distinct set of opportunities and constraints. Differential power relations, levels of alienation, and degrees of acceptance in each community made for different outcomes in the working landscapes of the two towns.

Italian immigrant settlement in Northern California has occurred at many scales, ranging from compact urban ethnic neighborhoods to widely dispersed family farms. The vignette approach enables one to look at several different communities within a regional framework and thus see connections between vastly different immigrant communities over a wide area. The two towns I studied—while they might appear to be unique economically or socially—were both impacted by wider processes of change that are important to understanding their internal dynamics.

Italian Pioneers in Amador County: Jackson

Amador County lies at the heart of the former gold rush region in California, an area known as the “mother lode” (Figure 2). Jackson, the county seat, served as a major destination of Italian immigrants into Amador County. Birthplace statistics for Jackson indicate that more than half of the Italian immigrants came from four neighboring provinces—Genova, La Spezia, Massa-Carrara, and Lucca—in the Ligurian and Tuscan regions of north-central Italy. Arriving in California in the early 1850s, the Genoese and Toscani who settled throughout Amador County, and Jackson in particular, were among the state's earliest Italian pioneers. Two factors help explain their arrival. First, before the California gold rush, many Genoese and Toscani had settled in South America, often following well-established shipping routes of Italian companies. Once news of gold reached them in South America, many dashed northward by ship to try their luck in the foothills of the mother lode. Second, many Toscani had previous experience with international migration. The highly mobile Toscani were familiar with Northern California through the shipping trade, particularly through the transport of marble from

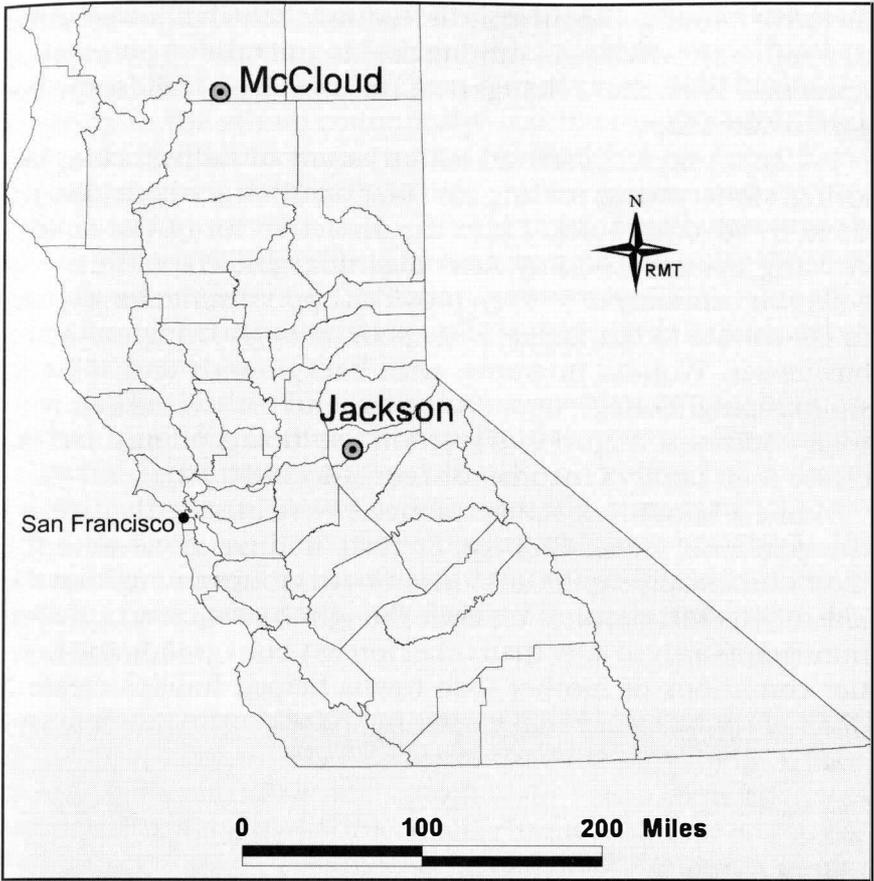


Figure 2.—The study area.

Massa-Carrara (northwestern Toscana) to ports along the West Coast. Many were merchants in South America and were therefore able to make an early advance toward the California gold fields.

Not surprisingly, young single males dominated the early settlement phase of Italian immigrants. In Jackson, many men lived in mining camps outside the center of town. By the 1860s, however, Italian marriages were a regular occurrence (Campbell n.d.), indicating the early establishment of extended Italian families and the beginning of an Italian neighborhood—“Little Italy”—south of the center of Jackson. As more immigrants married or sent for families, changes in the economic structure of the Italian community began to take place. For example, Italians in Jackson, with the aid of extended families, were able to turn toward

lucrative farming and mercantile ventures, which allowed some to weather the decline in mining profits and take up permanent residence. With these changes, an Italian cultural landscape began to take shape.

Italian immigrants arrived with a variety of skills, such as tailoring, stonemasonry, milling, and blacksmithing, which allowed them to advance quickly into the service sector of the rapidly growing Jackson economy. After the initial gold craze, the newly emerging economy of Jackson provided opportunities for women to contribute to the family wage pool through family-operated businesses. Women migrants, with backgrounds and skills in shopkeeping, cottage manufacturing, and artisan and agricultural traditions, helped to transform the local economy and increase their family's income (di Leonardo 1984, 52).

While a handful of Italian pioneers were among the first on the gold rush scene, Chinese, English, and Germans were the most numerically significant foreign-born groups throughout the late nineteenth century. Yet even though the majority of Italian immigrants arrived later than other foreign-born groups, the frontier conditions of mother lode towns helped Italians create a distinct landscape. Spatial clustering in Jackson's Little Italy, especially among Italian businesses that occupied the Water Street District, helped create an ethnic enclave within a typical mining town. The successes of early Italian entrepreneurs—as hotel and saloon operators, merchants, and grocers—bred security and confidence and led others to emulate their example. As the focal point of the community, the Water Street District offered Italians the opportunity to shop and converse with people who spoke the same dialect and who often shared common (village or provincial) roots in Italy.

Although Jackson attracted heterogeneous migrant streams from various northern Italian source regions, the tendency of the new immigrants to cluster and their early economic successes created a spatial solidarity that was later reinforced by intermarriage and by continued immigrant flows. Within the frontier landscape of Jackson, Italians formed distinct social spaces that encouraged community building and long-term settlement. In many instances, through selecting or changing occupations, Italians became members of the business elite, which helped them sustain permanent residence even as other groups left the region.

Early on, Italians from Jackson held local, county, and state offices. A combination of factors helped foster their political aspirations. First, a number of them owned prosperous businesses catering to the ethnic community, and their high social standing promoted access to and interest in local politics. Second, as a consequence of their early arrival, many Italians had become U.S. citizens and were voting in elections. Finally, mutual aid organizations like the Garibaldi Society served to unite the most prominent members of the Italian community. Leadership roles in such organizations often became springboards to political office.

A visit to the town of Jackson today reveals a mining heritage, but with an Italian ethnic overlay. The prominence of businesses with Italian surnames and restaurants promoting Italian home cooking; the location and prominence of Italian markers in the local cemetery; and the public display of ethnic heritage in the form of an annual Italian Picnic demonstrates that as a group, Italians have successfully left their mark on the landscape (Figures 3 and 4).



Figure 3.—Since 1912, the annual Italian Picnic has been held at the Italian Society Park, located between the town of Jackson and nearby Sutter Creek. The first Italian Picnic was held in 1882.

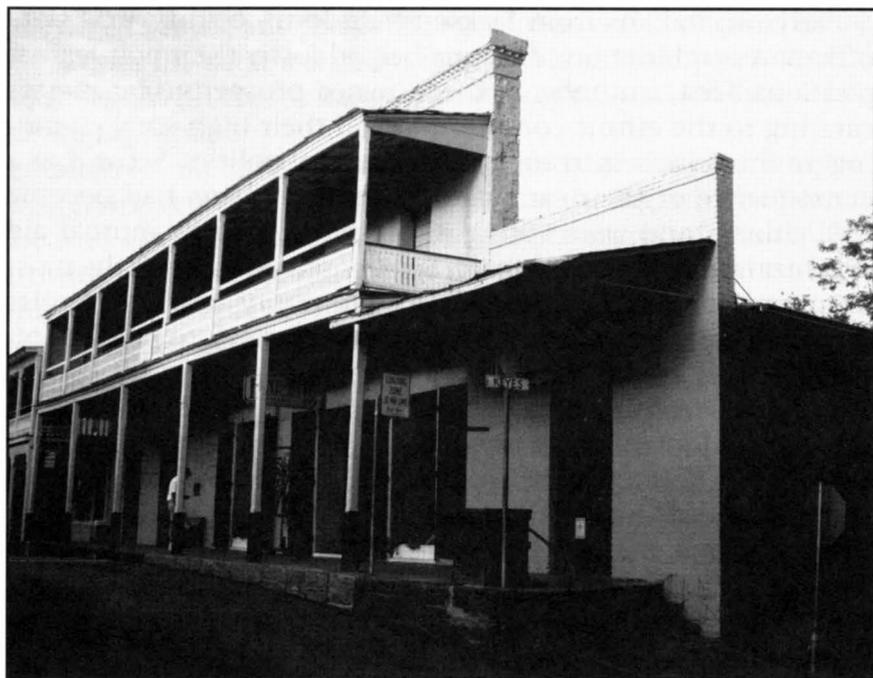


Figure 4.—Jackson's Water Street District. This area was once the center of Italian businesses, including hotel and saloon operators, merchants and grocers. Many of the stone buildings located in the former enclave evidence the talents of Italian stonemasons.

Arguably, the Italian imprint continues to be the most visible expression of Jackson's ethnic heritage, far more durable than that of other ethnic groups. One explanation is that Italians did not encounter discrimination on the level of other immigrants, most notably the Chinese, who were denied citizenship and prevented from owning land. Discriminatory legislation and racial violence against Chinese combined to cleanse the landscape of their cultural contributions. By contrast, Italians rose to elite positions in Amador County and Jackson in particular. They gained power—as local business people, landowners, and city officials—to define the landscape in Jackson, and found a community receptive to preserving and showcasing the accomplishments of their ancestors. The ethnic landscape today thus serves to celebrate Italian heritage while simultaneously minimizing—even neutralizing—the work of Chinese laborers and other ethnic groups.

Italian Working Landscapes in a Company Town: McCloud

By the early 1900s, continued migration to California and the growth of new cities led to new resource demands. The opening up of far northern regions of the state (such as Humboldt and Siskiyou counties) to logging spurred another opportunity for immigration from Italy. Social patterns were markedly different than in Amador County, however, as these newer arrivals included large numbers of southern Italians.

Responding to the labor needs of the McCloud Lumber Company in the company town of McCloud (Figure 2), Italians began arriving in Siskiyou County around the turn of the twentieth century. Given the isolated position of McCloud, its new labor needs, and the strength of connections between McCloud and two villages in Italy, it seems likely that some labor conscription for the lumber company occurred. Naturalization records and interviews with members of the community indicate a loose form of labor recruitment was indeed in place. The Italian colonies that grew up in this lumbering community drew immigrants from two new source villages: Cavaso, in the north-eastern region of Veneto, and Castelsilano, in the southern Italian region of Calabria. These new migrations—of Veneti and Calabrese—reflect changes in the pattern of large-scale emigration from Italy, which shifted from north-central Italy to southern source areas. The numbers of emigrants leaving the Veneto region reached their highest totals during the late 1890s and early 1900s, and emigration from Calabria increased fourfold during this time (Favero and Tassello 1978, 356, 362).

Because the Italian imprint in Siskiyou County was forged within the confines of a company town, however, there are few visible expressions of Italian ethnic heritage. There is little to suggest that McCloud had (and still has) a substantial Italian population. The local museum promotes the benevolence of the McCloud Lumber Company in creating jobs and supporting community development. Images on display of machinery, mills, and timber products celebrate the town's achievements in the lumber industry but tell little of how the landscape was produced. The museum presents McCloud as a quaint and industrious company town but overshadows the actual conditions of work and any hint of the contributions of Italian laborers. Although the

message is one of a productive landscape, little is revealed about the experiences of those whose labor helped create it. However, a trip to the local cemetery and scrutiny of the county censuses reveals that Italians dominated McCloud's labor force for many decades.

This indifference to Italian contributions to the working landscape is even more astounding given that McCloud was once the site of one of the largest labor disputes in the Pacific Coast region. The history of social relations in McCloud is not a happy one. Italians were targeted as the instigators of the strike. The governor sent in state troops to quell the protestors and the town was placed under martial law for a period of time. Newspaper accounts focused on "the Italian strikers" and called for a large-scale removal of the Italian community. The company president, John Queal, proclaimed in newspapers that he intended to employ "Americans" whenever possible and ultimately turn McCloud into an "American" rather than Italian town. Perhaps not surprisingly in view of the need for labor, few Italians were actually forced to leave McCloud, and within a few months company owners were once again encouraging new Italian immigrants—particularly those with families (thought less likely to cause trouble)—to relocate to McCloud (Roman 1993; Carmichael 1994). Census records confirm an increase in the arrival of new Italians shortly after the strike.

Today, with the exception of a few Italian street names, the landscape is devoid of symbols that evidence the community's Italian heritage (Figure 5). The street names in fact demarcate Italian labor camps and serve as reminders of efforts by the company to control movement and potential conflict by enforcing ethnic and racial separation (Figure 6). Residential clustering might seem to have promoted ethnic identity and solidarity among Italians in McCloud, as it did in Jackson. However, the degree of company control over the labor camps reveals a very different set of power relations and social interactions at work. As with all company towns, the development of McCloud was based on planning decisions of executives in the McCloud Lumber Company, to the exclusion of input from Italian and other laborers. Their residential and work spaces, commercial spaces, and social activity spaces—from company-built clubhouses and company-sponsored dances to sports teams and a library—were



Figure 5.—Uniform housing built by the McCloud Lumber Company for its employees.



Figure 6.—Street names like “Tucci” demarcate former labor camps for Italian workers.

created and carefully controlled by the company. Such actions ultimately curtailed efforts by Italians to attain financial and cultural independence.

The cultural landscape of McCloud today presents an image of a pleasant, orderly, "American" company town—an image that belies the struggles and contributions of labor that went into its creation. To more accurately depict the working landscape and the primary ethnic group responsible for its production would require the community to confront a history of labor struggle and corporate control behind the creation of a company town.

Conclusion

How can one make sense of the different trajectories taken by the two towns in relation to their Italian ethnic heritage? As these case studies have shown, the immigrant geographies of Italian settlers were defined by different sets of circumstances and conditions, including source regions, time of arrival, social and economic backgrounds, and opportunities in the host community. In the case of Jackson, immigrants arrived relatively early from neighboring northern Italian source areas. They were able to buy land and establish permanent residence. Very soon, Jackson's Italian enclave became synonymous with an emergent entrepreneurial and political class, able to secure adequate power to maintain a landscape favorable to their ethnic identity and heritage.

By contrast, McCloud's immigrant enclave was made up of individuals who arrived later and originated from both southern and northern Italian source regions. New arrivals were relegated to the class of common laborers and associated with a brief episode of labor unrest. As such, Italians in McCloud lacked the power to shape a landscape that might symbolize their role and recognize their contribution in creating a prosperous lumber community.

As this study reveals, ethnic landscapes—revealed through residential areas, factories, heritage days, place names, or business districts—are more than mere signatures of past ways of life frozen in time. As social constructions they represent competing power relations and can be read for the way they work to solidify a particular view of ethnic identity, an identity that is continually renegotiated and redefined through the landscape. Much

still remains to be learned about immigrant geographies and the contributions of those who worked on buildings, in factories, and as shopkeepers, farmers, and laborers. The two case studies presented here may be regarded as part of the larger story of multiculturalism and ethnic identity in Northern California.

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