

# The Italian Colony at Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario

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By Gerolamo Moroni

[A report written by the Italian royal Attaché of Immigration, Girolamo Moroni, stationed at Montréal, Québec, Canada. The report was published in the *Bolletino dell'Emigrazione* in 1914. The Italian government published the *Bolletino* between 1907 and 1927 to show prospective immigrants what to expect throughout the world if they decided to immigrate. This report provides an in-depth look into the Italian community at Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario and the social and work conditions facing them. Included in this report are the Magpie and Helen iron mines to the north of Sault Ste. Marie. It is translated and edited by Russell M. Magnaghi.]

Sault Ste. Marie is situated in the Algoma District in northern Ontario, between Lakes Huron and Superior. The city has approximately 12,000 inhabitants and including the suburbs of Steelton, Buckley, and Bay View, approximately 18,000. It is a small industrial city, with laborers working on the railroad, steel, paper and mechanized sawmills.

The Italian colony is composed of approximately 3,000 permanent residents and between the spring and autumn 600-800 seasonal residents. The first Italians arrived in 1895, but the great part came with the opening of the metallurgy industry in 1902. Our people come from Calabria, The Marches and Abruzzi, and Veneto, and a small number from other parts of the Kingdom [of Italy].

In the Italian colony there are no professionals; only one Italian [Catholic] priest; two contractors overseeing building, excavation and sewerage laborers. The Italians of this place have demonstrated a desire for an Italian physician, who would have small pharmacy, as they do not have a pharmacy here.

Italian merchants are not prominent, only 10-12 small commercial retail merchants of home-made food provisions, three butchers, four or five bakeries, and a few fruit shops.

The main trades of our immigrants are barbers with three shops, who make \$12 to \$18 weekly; shoemakers with three shops who make \$9 to \$12 weekly; a carpenter making 30 to 35 cents per hour; bricklayer or mason paid 50 to 55 cents per hour. They work eight hour days and the bricklayers or masons belong to a union. Besides, only the Italian iron blacksmiths makes 12 to 15 dollars a week.

The Algoma Steel Plant is part of the Lake Superior Corporation.<sup>1</sup> They employ 2,500 workers, but in the summer they hire about 3,000 people: of this number 440-500 are Italians. The pay is: common laborer 17 ½ cents per hour working ten hours; for those assigned to the furnaces 20 to 22 ½ cents per hour, working 10 hours in the day shift and 12 hours at night, changing every fifteen days, working [that] day 22 consecutive hours; the mechanic 25 cents per hour for 10 hours of work; some working for contract are paid 65 cents per ton and make an

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average of \$3 a day working an eight hour day. The workers are paid monthly and a deduction of 50 cents for insurance, doctor and medical care. In the case of the death of the unfortunate, the parents of the victim receive a direct \$600, but if the Company is responsible due to negligence, the court can make the Company pay between \$1,000 and \$1,500. In general the Italians are treated well, but data shows that the heavy hand work is strong at the Sault Ste. Marie, and there are more claims than the Company pays out.

The Lake Superior Paper Mill Company<sup>2</sup> employs about 500 people of whom half are Italian. The work continues for the day shift for eleven hours and thirteen hours for the night shift, except for specialized workers who are divided into three groups, working only eight hours. The pay varies from 17 1/2 to 22 cents per hour, specialization work at 25 to 29 cents per hour. The greater part of our workers, fall in the class of common workers and are paid base salaries.

About 15 Italians are employed in the local brewery,<sup>3</sup> working nine hours in the winter and 10 in the summer, making to their secondary ability 17 ½ to 22 cents per hour. About a hundred are employed during the work season in the steam sawmill where they are paid 17 ½ to 22 cents per hour. During the work season, one of the brick kilns employs about 30 to 35 Italians who are paid 20 to 22 ½ cents per hour.

A group of about 200 Italians, from the spring through the fall, turn out and are employed by the Algoma Central Railway and another hundred by the Canadian Pacific Railway to load and unload freight and coal and are paid 22 ½ to 25 cents per hour.

Actually at Sault Ste. Marie there are another 200-300 unemployed Italians waiting for work: the construction of a dry dock costing \$2 million and that will help employ 400-500 persons; at the Steel Plant another large furnace will be added at the cost of \$250,000 beginning on February 1<sup>st</sup>; and work on a new water canal for the city of Sault Ste. Marie at the cost of \$1 million which will begin in April.

In progress is the construction of a large canal connecting Lakes Huron and Superior, paid for by the Government at \$20 million and the construction of a new steelworks costing \$10 to \$12 million.<sup>4</sup>

The Italian agricultural colony is composed of about twelve families primarily from Calabria, [located] around the city for a distance of eight miles, possessing around 607 hectares [1,500 acres] of 32 to 202 hectares [80 to 500 acres] per family. The soil near Sault Ste. Marie is partially clay and sand; the soil contains small rocks and allows easy cultivation. The lands acquired by our people are still in a natural state, because they bought these in the last two years. Some Italians have paid for 162 hectare [400 acres] \$12,000; 36 hectares [90 acres] for \$7,000; 32 hectares [80 acres] for \$3,300; and the price varies from \$16 to \$200 per acre at a second location of soil. The payments are made in shares in cash to the acquisition of the land and part in 3 or 4 annual installments at 7 percent interest. Some Italians rent the

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land paying \$3.20 - \$4.00 per year, other workers like day farmers earning \$35 per month pay, food and lodging. All of these lands for the greater part have been cleared of trees, with cut trunks with roots extracted and for this land they pay 22 to \$25 and more per acre.

The cultivation attended by the Italians are oats, forage, potatoes, cabbage and other vegetables. A certain Pietro Manzo cultivated between 10 and 11 acres in oats, taking 508 bushels [a bushel of cereal is 35.242 liters] that he sells for 40 to 45 cents per bushel, making \$21.33 per acre; he asserts that he has gathered 800 bushels of potatoes, that in bad times he has [seen] ruined part of his harvest. The expense for the cultivation of oats per acre is \$3.00 for tillage and ploughing of the soil, \$2 for seed, and \$4 for harvesting, in general \$9 per acre. Good quality hay, perhaps given three tons per acre, selling for \$13 to \$14 per ton. The expense per acre is \$4 to \$5 earning a net of \$34 to \$35 per acre. The optimum harvest data provided by Italians for potatoes: with the expense of \$15 per acre, they harvest 75 to 100 bushels that they sell at a premium price of \$1.75 to \$2.00 per sack, and at the end of the season earning 80 cents per sack. A sack comprises a bushel and a half. They net earn \$50 to \$65 per acre. The yield for vegetables nets around \$100 to \$125 and more. The taxes, state of the land and the distance from the city, costs 30 to 50 cents per acre. All of this data are provided by the Italian farmers at Sault Ste. Marie.

The Italian colony has two Società di Mutua Beneficenza [Mutual Beneficial Society]: "The Duke of Abruzzi" founded in 1912 with 50 members and the "Guglielmo Marconi," founded in 1912 with 65 members; besides there exists a social club for amusements, where the two societies can meet. This social club was established in 1913 and is composed of 80 members. It has a building that cost \$25,000 [to construct].

In Sault Ste. Marie there is an evening school for adults directed by Reverend G. Martinez, where the English language is taught to about 16 compatriots. Besides the reverend, during the summer vacation and on Saturday the Italian language is taught to about a hundred Italian children of both sexes.

Our colony possesses a Catholic church.<sup>5</sup>

The moral and financial conditions of the Italians in Sault Ste. Marie is very satisfactory, the greatest concern is for the family. Home ownership of the colony amounts to about \$700,000. But our Italians live completely separated from the English and Canadians and have a quarter completely their own called "Little Italy."

The cost of living is rather high: a bachelor worker in the Italian pension pays an average of \$18 per month; instead for eating [here] he pays \$10 to \$12 [a month] for food and \$3.00 to \$3.50 for a room; in general the same room is occupied by five or six people.

**Magpie Mine**<sup>6</sup> About 290 km (180 miles) north of Sault Ste. Marie on the Algoma Central Railway is the working of an iron mine called Magpie, which has about a hundred Italians of which 15 are

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miners and the rest are common laborers. They first work on contract and earn \$2.75 to \$3.50 per day, while the others earn 17 ½ cents per hour for a ten hour day. In this mine the miners worked ten hours below ground, but a new Ontario Provincial law restricts the longest work time to eight hours. The greater part of the houses are the property of the Italians. The monthly deductions: \$1 for a doctor and medical care; \$1 for insurance; and 60 cents for school. The mining company—Lake Superior Iron and Steel Company—is known as “*L’Unione*.”

***Helen Mine***<sup>7</sup> Twelve miles from Magpie is the Helen mine, that belongs to the same Company, which employs about forty Italians. Our people do not work on contract but are paid a fixed wage. The helpers earn around \$2.75 a day, the miners \$3.50. They work ten hour days. The Company pays monthly: \$1 per miner for doctor and medical care; \$1 for insurance; and 60 cents for school. The Italians rent houses from the Company and the Italians provide their own food. The Company provides room and board at the cost to the Italians of \$20 to \$25 per month. The Company does not recognize any unions.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The Corporation was founded in 1902 by Francis Clergue, an American businessman who settled in Canada and developed the area. Today the company has been purchased by India’s Essar Group.

<sup>2</sup>The paper mill was founded in 1911 during a business reorganization.

<sup>3</sup> The Soo Falls Brewing Company was established in 1907, closed in 2006.

<sup>4</sup> The Canadian canal was constructed in 1895. This reference is unclear.

<sup>5</sup> The church titled *Madonna di Monte Carmelo*, or Our Lady of Mount Carmel, was founded in 1910 and closed in 2010 due to declining attendance.

<sup>6</sup> The mine property was developed after 1909 and operated until 1921. The town site consisted of 14 duplexes and a bunkhouse for single men with cookery and dining facilities. There was a hospital on site, a company store, and a school. Initially there were 300 people at the site with 200 working in the mine.

<sup>7</sup> The mine began production in 1900 and shipped ore to the Algoma mill creating the Canadian steel industry. The town site consisted of 5 bunkhouses, a school, a large company store and a doctor on site. It closed in 1918 but reopened in the 1930s.