

From Black Diamond (Pittsburg) to Monterey “The Beginning”

by Vince S. Ferrante
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This article is a stroll back in time regarding the “migration” of Sicilian fishermen who began to arrive in Black Diamond in the late 1870’s. While they established a large-scale Sicilian fishing village by the 1880’s that greatly contributed and expanded the fishing industry throughout the Sacramento Delta and Alaska, the next step of the journey takes us to Monterey, in what would become “The Sardine Capitol of the World”.

Pietro Ferrante was a leader among the fisher families, first arriving in Black Diamond about 1888. After experiencing tremendous success over many years he suffered a loss of boats due to a wharf fire in 1905. After giving it much thought Pietro decided to seek a new location to base his fishing operations. William Croxan, the Superintendent of Booth cannery in Pittsburg and a city father, learning that Pietro wanted to seek a new location, told him that Frank Booth (his brother-in-law) also had a small cannery in Monterey and encouraged Pietro to meet with him. The F.E. Booth Cannery in Pittsburg was flourishing at this time on the Sacramento Delta and Booth had many business holdings along the west coast and was attempting to make a go of it in Monterey, purchasing the only cannery there at that time. Pietro eventually took a train to San Diego. On his way back up the coast, he scouted all the fishing ports until he arrived in Monterey where he finally met with Frank Booth. Pietro surveyed the fishing activities in and about Monterey Bay. There were various groups of individuals, including Spanish, Portuguese and Italians, fishing for salmon, often trawling by hook but also utilizing gill net techniques on a small scale. There was also a sizable abalone industry dominated by Japanese immigrants that had been there since the 1890’s. At that time sardines were nothing more than a bait fish for the salmon. Pietro concluded that the sardines could actually be harvested on a large scale, and in the fall of 1905, he began working with his brother-in-law Orazio Enea, his brothers Vincenzo (my great grandfather) and Arasimo, plus a cousin or two, to make up the first crew.

Given their early success, in May of 1906, they and their families permanently moved to Monterey. Upon seeing the large schools of sardines, Pietro felt that new innovations were needed to catch them. He would soon revolutionize the local industry. He sent for the “lampara” or lightning haul or lantern net that was utilized along Sicily in the Mediterranean Sea. Booth initially had his doubts but they were soon to be dispelled. The net was placed in the charge of Orazio Crivello and with modifications it allowed the Sicilian fishermen to harvest large schools of sardines in a “purse” and to offload them faster allowing the net to get back in the water much more quickly than with a standard “gill net”. A certain technique was required to operate this net which the Sicilian fishermen had mastered in their days working in the old country which provided them with a significant competitive advantage for years to come. One set could garner from 5 to 8 tons, a very sizable catch for the day considering catches were typically measured in hundreds of pounds. Power boats were not in wide use at that early time, however, first, the powered double ender lampara boats followed by those with the Monterey Clipper bow were to become staples for the Ferrante crews, another advantage. Pietro also invented the use of a “liter” which was essentially a barge type of craft with a 15-ton hold, which would accept multiple loads of sardines. Upon a full load, the liter could be towed to the cannery and offloaded while the fishing



Lampara nets spread to dry at “Ferrante’s Landing” adjacent to Fisherman’s Wharf, Monterey.

A.C. Heidrick circa 1911 [4]

team set the net for the next catch. These were the days before the large purse seiners, boats which came into play in the late 1920's.

Pietro began recruiting additional crews of relatives and friends from Black Diamond, explaining the commercial possibilities of the "Silver Harvest" and of a profitable livelihood. Soon two crews were operating. One was in the command of Orazio Enea who would be a close business associate of Pietro. The other was in the command of Vincenzo Ferrante, Pietro's youngest brother. Among the original Sicilian pioneer fishermen to migrate from Pittsburg were Frank Bruno, Orazio Crivello, Salvatore (Cavaleri) Cardinale, Pietro Buffo, Salvatore Russo, Erasimo Lucido, 'Big Tony' and "Small Tony" Aiello and Salvatore Rucello. Other pioneers soon to follow included Constantino Balbo, Orazio "Bambino" Cardinale, Paul Giamona, Genaro Riso, Salvatore Colletto Sr., Santo Scardina Sr., Angelo Lucido, Frank Lucido, and Salvatore Melicia. Many of these men would go on to be boat owners, and in some cases, cannery owners. Eventually Pietro began calling directly to Isola delle Femmine and the surrounding villages of the Mother Country for more men to join in.



Booth's cannery in Monterey and its Crescent Brand Sardines proclaimed on its roof sign. [4]

Initially, the families settled along Monterey's Pacific St. Then Pietro purchased land and created a large compound on Van Buren St. providing housing and jobs for many, including the newcomers from Sicily. Pietro would be among those fishermen to become a cannery owner. He also made his mark in organizing the Monterey Boat Owners Association as well as the Fishermen's Association. In 1951, he was honored by the Italian Government and awarded the Italian Congressional Star and Citation for "Great Assistance Rendered Other Italian Immigrants" in settling this country. His bust was dedicated in 1969 and can be found near the Santa Rosalia statue, gazing upon the entrance of the old Fisherman's Wharf.

Together with the men of experience and several revolutionary innovations which were introduced, Booth's Crescent cannery now had the production that he dreamed of and, with the advent of WWI, the demand for a protein source in the form of sardines for our soldiers overseas. The industry took off. In 1914, there were two canneries operating in Monterey, but in the aftermath of WWI, there were 30 canneries and reduction plants! Monterey would then be forever known as the "Sardine Capitol of The World" and it was the Sicilian fishermen, who created the foundation of the famed "Cannery Row", immortalized by John Steinbeck and known the world over. And to think that at it all started due in large part to the efforts of our great and mighty ancestors, the Kings of the Sea!

Sources:

1. Angela Ferrante (daughter of Pietro Ferrante), "Pietro Ferrante Fishing History", letter to John Wolfenden of the *Monterey Herald*, circa 1968.
2. "The Sister Cities of Monterey and Pittsburg", *Monterey Herald*, 1975.
3. Angelo J. Ghio and Earl Hohlmayer, *The Story of the Beautiful Monterey Fishing Boats and the Story of one of the survivors: An Illustrated History*, aka *The Saga of the Monteys*, 2004.
4. Michael Kenneth Hemp, *Cannery Row: The History of John Steinbeck's Old Ocean View Avenue and Its Connections to the Pacific Northwest*, 2009.