

Our Isola Beginnings

by Vince S. Ferrante
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Based on historical records in the Pittsburg Historical Society museum, the men who are credited with being the first from Isola delle Femmine to settle in Black Diamond (present day Pittsburg) were Pietro and Rosario Aiello. The brothers first emigrated to New Orleans about 1868 and found work in the oyster beds. During this period Sicily was experiencing turmoil during the Great Unification. It is also noteworthy to mention that in 1868 Louisiana was readmitted into the Union after the Civil War. At that early time, the Louisiana Bureau of Immigration was advertising for workers in Sicily to fulfill their labor needs. The Aiello brothers made their way aboard a freighter with a cargo of lemons bound for New Orleans. Sicilians would play a vital role in the development of New Orleans. Pietro and Rosario worked in the local oyster beds until a Yellow Fever epidemic broke out in 1870. Local archives indicate they became alarmed and left, making their way to Astoria, Oregon where the salmon run had begun in October on the Columbia River.

After a short period of time, the brothers became very successful fishermen there. Their next stop was San Francisco. It was there where the brothers learned of the fertile fishing grounds of the Sacramento Delta and of a fishing village that was developing at New York Landing in what would become the town of Black Diamond. So, they boarded a train bound for Black Diamond. As it approached, the train slowed down allowing the brothers to literally “jump off” to their new destination. Such was life back in the “old days”. We know that Southern Pacific built their railroad line through Black Diamond in 1878. There likely was no stop established for some time in the still developing Black Diamond requiring their jump off the train. Perhaps, then, the Aiellos arrived at or shortly after 1878. Black Diamond was the name of the predominant company of the coal mining industry that was in full swing in the local foothills.

After establishing himself, as was the custom, Pietro returned to Isola delle Femmine to prepare his family to accompany him to Black Diamond. While in Isola he again made a concerted effort to notify his fellow villagers of the great opportunities that lie ahead in the fishing industry on the Sacramento Delta in a small village known as Black Diamond. This was to augment the letters he had been sending home while in California. His descriptions would sound very appealing during a time of economic difficulties for Sicilians, especially for the local villagers of Isola.

As we consult the 1882 *History of Contra Costa County* we learn that at that time there were 10 canneries along the banks of the Suisun Bay and Sacramento Delta. We also know that, during the decade of the 1880s, census records indicate a large influx of Southern Italians, chiefly from Isola delle Femmine, that made their way to present day Pittsburg. By 1903 the village of Black Diamond conducted a census that was filed with Contra Costa County Clerk’s Office for proposed incorporation. The data indicated that of the little more than 1100 persons that were counted approximately 85% were of Sicilian/Italian surnames. Clearly the message from Pietro Aiello was well received by his fellow paisanos who heeded the call and changed the landscape of Black Diamond and beyond...Next, our Isolani beginnings in Martinez and Monterey.

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1. “Fishing gave a boost to Pittsburg economy”, Pittsburg Post-Dispatch, ~1925.
 2. Pittsburg Historical Museum archive, Pittsburg, CA.
 3. Munro-Fraser, Ed., *History of Contra Cost County, California*, J.P. W.A. Slocum & Co., San Francisco, 1882.
 4. R.A. Chavez, *A City By Any Other Name... A History of Pittsburg, California*, self-published, 2005.
 5. “Italians in New Orleans”, *Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia*, Retrieved 31 May 2020.