

Migration to
Massachusetts:
Economic
Opportunity for
Italians in
Southbridge,
1910-1945.



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- **S. Baily’s “village outward approach”** understand factors drove chain migration **from Palestrina, Italy.**
- **Michael Best on Massachusetts economy 1900-60:** skill development and training made for success.
- American Optical in Southbridge an example, trained immigrants in technical skills and English.

Palestrina, Italy.

- Population 6,000, mountainside community.
- Home to ancient Colonna and Barberini nobility.
- Museum and Sanctuary of Temple of Fortune archeological site.
- Musician Giovanni da Palestrina, as Vatican choir director and composer.
- Links to Rome = stable economy and opportunity up to the 1880s.
- Economy: mix of tourism and agriculture.

Emigration from Lazio early 1900s



Migration: pushed or pulled?

- 1880's rising tensions: farm price collapse, small land owners converted to day labor, wages drop.
- 1910's: farm labor unrest across Lazio region, government suppressed with violence.
- Rise of socialist organizations: *La Difesa di Contadini*. Italy had lowest wages in Europe.
- 1910, 1911, 1915: repeated earthquakes in region, significant damage, 1915 a 7.0 magnitude.

“The Palestrina Connection”

- Interviews in 1970s by anthropologist Robert E. Brown: three couples.
- Beginning in 1913 groups left Palestrina for Southbridge. Waves continued into 1920s.
- 15 day transatlantic voyage to NY, Providence RI then train to Southbridge
- 1916 – return of 30 men to join Italian army.

Chain migration: “pull” factors.
job opportunity at AO.

- Initial migrants wrote home: job opportunities.
- AO expanding to 3,000 labor force in 1920s.
- Largest optical facility in the world and doubled workforce by 1930s.
- “No Depression at AO.”
- Late 1930’s and 1940’s: military contracts expanded production by 600%

American Optical marketing – 1920s

WELLSWORTH MERCHANTISER

1928



Published by
American Optical Company Southbridge, Massachusetts, U.S.A.

AO's school for immigrants:

- 1920 – AO fired 37 employees because they could not understand “technical English.”
- Established immigrant school – “*Learn English Better*” program and citizenship.
- Language instruction: 7 teachers, twice a week, four sessions, “School Board” of immigrant liaisons.
- Success = promotion. Higher level of English to understand technical instruction.

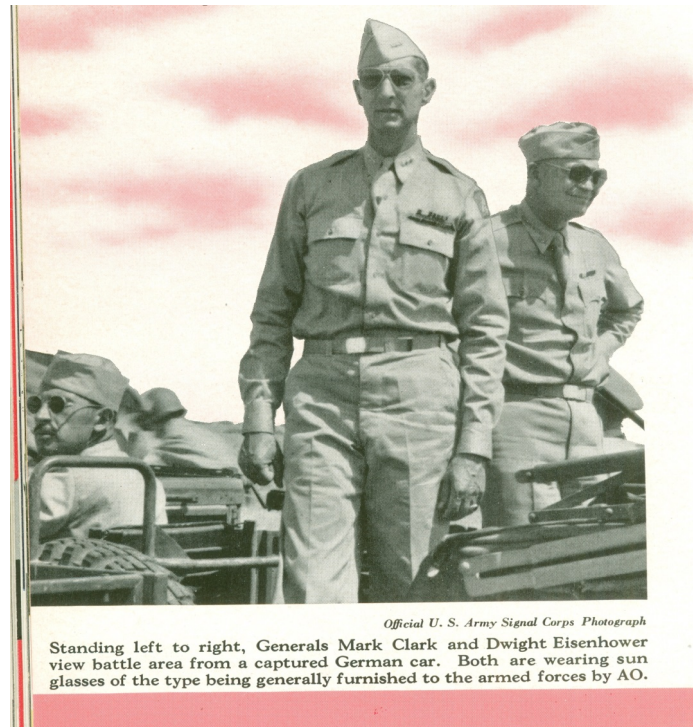
AO production boom 1941-42

- Recruited high schools for afternoon work
- Hired retirees
- Trained handicapped
- Women in War Production program
- Full time sales staff worked 4 hour night shift



“*Vision for Victory*” - AO at war

- Optics for Norden bombsight, gunsights, sub periscopes
- Gunnery sights
- Manhattan Project glass
- Aviator sunglasses
- Eyeglasses for soldiers.
- AO had 32 Gold Stars and 3,264 in service.



Second generation success: an Italian community

- Triangle of settlement near AO
- Measurably higher income levels on US Census.
- Second generation in high school.
- Italian Club – social gatherings, bocce.
- Italian Citizens Club to encourage naturalization.



