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BY JOE SANO

An Arkansas Italian - American Story



Colonia Italiana, Tontitown, Arkansas, U. S. A.

REV P BANDINI



Austin Corbin, a successful New York industrialist, had an idea. Buy cheap land in the South and use prison or immigrant labor to cultivate and harvest the crops for huge profits. His plan progressed as he purchased the Sunnyside Plantation, over 10,000 acres in Chicot County, Arkansas. When his convict labor plan failed due to inmate deaths due to the heat and malaria, he had a brainstorm- Immigrant labor!

In New York City he witnessed Italian immigrants working for little and still being grateful. He made his move. He contacted his niece's husband, the Mayor of Rome, Prince Francesco Rispoli and a deal was made to have 100 families annually come to the plantation for the

next five years. They would each receive 12.5 acres of land with housing. They would then work the land, and a portion of their crops would be used to pay off their mortgage of 21 years at 5%, and the remainder would go to the corporation. Given the harsh economic conditions in post-unification Italy, this looked like a good deal when compared with total poverty. However growing cotton was unknown to most of the immigrants, so they struggled in the heat and mosquito filled land. They remembered the special Papal blessing they received when they left for America. Establishing a Catholic church and school became an important goal but their requests for help were ignored by most. In order to survive, many of the men left to work in Oklahoma



Bandini as the first mayor. Soon after, the railroads ran through the area, with the first depot complete in 1912.

Today Tontitown is the fastest growing city per capita in Arkansas and to celebrate its Italian heritage it is developing a downtown heritage area complete with a piazza, outdoor amphitheater and a lake. I'm not surprised that at their annual heritage celebration they feature spaghetti with fried chicken. Sounds like a good time. ☐



mines, leaving their wives and children to work the land. When Corbin died in 1898 the new owners altered the terms of the immigrants' agreement. The Italians were basically told, "If you don't like it here, then move". They did. They left Sunnyside, now called Lake Village, for new challenges.

Enter Father Bandini. He heard the unanswered pleas for a church from these Italian immigrants in Arkansas. He resigned from his position as the secretary of the Society for the Protection of Italian Immigrants in New York to serve as a chaplain for these Italian families in Arkansas. Seeing and experiencing the difficult life at the Sunnyside Plantation, he searched for a more desirable location for his countrymen. He found a suitable area in the Ozark Mountains in the northwest part of the state, an area that would become known as Tontitown.

The new Italian-American Arkansans managed to build small log cabins, surviving on rabbits that first winter. When spring finally arrived, the immigrants went to work at what they knew best: farming. Vegetables, strawberries, apples and grapes began to yield both food and cash. The first Tontitowners renovated an old schoolhouse, and quickly followed that by building a church, St. Joseph's. That fall of 1899 they celebrated a successful harvest with the first Grape Festival. The Tontitown Grape Festival is still celebrated here every year, on the grounds of St. Joseph's.

By 1922, grapes had replaced apples as the main crop of the area, and the Welch Company built a plant here to process the fruit of the vine into grape juice. Tontitown was incorporated in 1909, with Father



Plans to design downtown area that honors its Italian history.

