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Death in a Strange Land: Burial Practices and Memorials in *Il Cimitero l’Unione Italiana*, Tampa’s c. 1900 Italian Immigrant Cemetery

Maureen J. Patrick

**The Italian immigrant community in Tampa**

Ybor City, a planned community founded by cigar manufacturers in 1886, relied on immigrant laborers from its outset. The first and largest group of these came from Cuba, where the tobacco trade was well-established. Ethnic Spaniards (natives of Cuba or Spain) made up the transplanted trade’s "white collar" workforce, holding (as they did in Cuba) the more highly paid administrative and salaried positions. However, labor agents and word of mouth very quickly enticed large numbers of rank-and-file workers from countries other than Spain and Cuba. The industry solicited and acquired thousands of Italians, nearly all directly from Sicily or from U.S. communities to which Sicilians had already emigrated. Some of the earliest to reach the area came from New Orleans, Louisiana and St. Cloud, Florida, where the sugar cane industry had attracted significant numbers of Sicilian workers. Back-breaking labor conditions and nativist violence in those settlements caused many Sicilians to look elsewhere for work, and the tiny but ballooning community of Ybor City attracted their attention. Through communication with relatives and friends still in Sicily (who were further stimulated by the efforts of labor agents), these early Sicilian immigrants initiated a "chain migration" to Tampa. At first a trickle, the stream of Sicilians to Tampa reached several hundred per year by 1895, providing some of the 4,683 workers in the 120 cigar factories of Ybor City, as well as laborers in the other trades and enterprises that Italians practiced in the area.

Initially shut out by Cuban and Spanish *tabaqueros*, the Sicilian workers persisted in their efforts to gain jobs in Ybor City’s tobacco industry. By apprenticing themselves for little or no remuneration in *chinchales* (small independent cigar manufactories, sometimes located in private homes) for as long as a year, Sicilian workers acquired and gained speed at the complex skills necessary to meet high production quotas in the large factories. Some Sicilians took the menial positions (such as sweeping the *galerias* or workrooms) available to them in the industry’s early decades and, through close observation of cigar workers on the job, achieved enough familiarity with the trade to merit more remunerative employment. By 1920, Sicilians made up the second largest group of rank-and-file workers in Tampa’s tobacco trade. That trade, by 1900, was producing 20 million cigars a year.

Considering the difficulties that confronted them when immigrant Italian workers first tried to penetrate the cigar industry locally, it is fortunate that many had the resourcefulness and skills to find other occupations. Averse to public welfare, Tampa’s immigrant Sicilians made *pane e labore* (bread and work) their rallying cry, and formed a large and diverse labor community. Many Sicilians started farms and in short order became Ybor City’s chief suppliers of dairy products, vegetables, and meat. Sicilians also established marine...
product ventures; Tampa's oldest seafood suppliers are Sicilian. Sicilian pasta factories produced that specialty foodstuff for the local community and for shipping out of the area. Ybor City's Mortellaro Macaroni Factory, founded in 1908, was one of the first enterprises of its kind in the Southeast. Groceries, restaurants, saloons, and bakeries were founded by Sicilian families and thrived for decades. Many of those early family names are still encountered in Tampa's and the Southeast's food merchant community: Demmi, Castellano, Pizzo, Ficarotta, Midulla, Greco, Licata, Spoto, Guagliardo, Valenti, Alessi, Ferlita, Geraei, Cacciatore, Pardo. The import trade in Italian olive oil was, predictably, started and dominated by Italians, as was wine import.

Apart from food-related industries, an array of trades and professions in early Tampa reflected Sicilian industry and resourcefulness. The barbering, tailoring, and dry cleaning trades, as well as wrought iron, masonry, decorative stucco, and woodwork were dominated by Sicilians within the first few decades of the ethnic population's installment locally. Venues for theater and opera provided work for Italian singers, musicians, actors, and arts educators; some visited the locale seasonally but others took up residence permanently, leading to a strong Italian artistic presence that persisted well into the 1930s. Even the business of birthing babies showed Sicilian influence: Ybor City's most popular practitioner was “Doña Pepina” (Giuseppina Valenti), an immigrant from Sicily who held a degree in midwifery from the University of Palermo.

Even as they acculturated to their New World environment, many of these early Italians clung to Old World ways. As late as 1905, the Tampa Morning Tribune noted that Sicilian immigrants living in Ybor City "still wear native garb." Clothing was not the only manifestation of immigrants' reluctance to abandon native outlooks and...
practices. Social organization, courtship and marriage, food ways, language, political ideologies, religion and superstition, funerary practices; in these as in other behaviors, Si-
cilians in Ybor City retained outlooks and practices that preserved their cultural her-
itage and provided a sense of security in a strange and often hostile environment. De-
spite large numbers, gainful employment, and their collective growth and develop-
ment as an ethnic enclave within the larger Tampa community, the Sicilians of Ybor City retained a sense of cultural insularity. Historian Gary Mormino has described the phenomenon thusly: “Primitive conditions and physical isolation intensified ethnic identities from within, while racial and nat-
tivist hostility imposed a sense of shared community from without.”

The dynamics of “shared community” were implemented by vigorous and protec-
tive social organizations. For the Italians of Ybor City, the most stable and influential of
these was L’Unione Italiana.

**L’Unione Italiana (The Italian Club)**

Like all the immigrant populations of early Ybor City, Sicilians organized mutual aid societies. For the Italians – as for other
groups – these societies supplied more than a locus for paesani affiliation. The Centro Español, Centro Asturiano, German-Amer-
ican Society, the Young Men’s Hebrew As-
sociation, the Union Marti-Macé, L’Unione Italiana: these organizations provided re-
sources (material, informational, social) to both assist immigrants’ acculturation and
preserve/promote their ethnic heritage. Over time, the club buildings that housed these societies became cultural documents
in their own right, grand architectural statements that bespoke cultural distinct-
iveness and the achievements of immi-
grant populations in Tampa.

The Italian social club’s vernacular his-
tory asserts that in 1894 five young men met at a grocery store at Fourteenth Street and Sixth Avenue in Ybor City. The society
they formed became known as L’Unione Italiana, or the Italian Club. Club records date this initial meeting to April 4, 1894, while a lengthy public notice in the August 22, 1894 *Tampa Daily Times* records L’Uni-
one’s organizational protocols in detail.

L’Unione raised $40,000 in 1910 to
build its first clubhouse, a three-story building on Seventh Avenue between Seventeenth and Eighteenth Streets. This was an impressive sum for the time and represented the prodigious industry and soaring ambitions of the local Italian community. In 1915, when the building was destroyed by fire, members wasted no time in drafting plans for a new and even grander clubhouse. Without doubt the most elegant of the surviving social club buildings in Ybor City, the c.1918 L’Unione Italiana, located at 1731 East Seventh Avenue, is designated a National Historic Landmark and contributed to the nomination of Ybor City as a Landmark Historic District. The serene elegance of the three and a half story neoclassical structure belies its historically crowded docket of member events and services; local historian Anthony Pizzo described the club in its heyday as “a beehive of activity.”

From the outset, L’Unione Italiana included eight committees: Recreation, Benefit, Sports, Dispensary, Finance, Purchasing, and Cemetery. Of these, the Benefit and Cemetery committees are the most pertinent to this study, since their activities sprang from and empowered traditional Sicilian practices surrounding death, burial, and memorialization.

Funerary practices in the Italian immigrant community of Tampa, 1886 - 1921

The Old World customs and beliefs that accompanied Sicilian immigrants to Ybor City addressed many areas of their lives, but none so markedly and durably as death, burial, and memorialization. Gary Mormino has posited that the displacement from friends, family, and patria was most wrenching for immigrants when they considered the consequences of death far from the comforting social context of home. “Immigrants,” Mormino suggests, “terrified of dying unattended and unnoticed in a strange land and concerned about the uncertainties facing them, banded together to formalize the rituals of life and death.”

In Ybor City’s Italian immigrant community, the “rituals of life and death” included elaborate funerals. In 1893, the Tampa Morning Tribune described one such funeral, displaying “a corpse carried by four large men with uplifted hats, followed by a brass band, then an empty hearse and carriage preceding the regular concourse of sorrowing relatives and sobbing friends.”

Longtime Italian residents of Ybor City recalled other funerary protocols for immigrant families. Ybor City had no mortuaries until the 1940s and so corpses were usually laid out at home (on ice, to prevent decomposition in the intense heat.) As in the 1893 funeral described by the Tampa Morning Tribune, funeral processions might include hundreds of mourners. Members of L’Unione Italiana were required to attend and the procession invariably paused before both the deceased’s home and the clubhouse, where American and Italian flags carried in the procession were dipped in respect. In 1911, the Tampa Morning Tribune noted that the funeral cortège of Pasquale Lazzara had “300 members [of L’Unione]...costumed according to the rules of the society.” Workers in the cigar factories routinely left work for these funerary events, which might last for some hours.

As was true for other immigrant mutual aid societies in Ybor City, L’Unione Italiana was expected, from its inception, to address members’ death and burial needs by providing monetary benefits, not just marchers in funeral corteges. L’Unione’s initial charter asserts that the club shall “aid such members of the social association as may become sick and to provide for the paying of the burial expenses of such members as may die.” The original death benefit fund allotment to members was one dollar apiece; this rose by the 1930s to three hundred dollars. In addition to paying death benefits, the society provided what Anthony Pizzo described as “burial services in the magnificent and up to date cemetery that the Society owns, without cost to the family.” That cemetery was and is Il Cimitero L’Unione Italiana.

Il Cimitero L’Unione Italiana (The Italian Club Cemetery)

Any study that addresses death and burial in Tampa’s early Italian immigrant community encounters a paucity of evidentiary material culture from the years 1850 to 1893, when the first burials took place in Il Cimitero L’Unione Italiana. Only a tiny handful of graves identifiable as those of Italian immigrants appear in the St. Louis
(Catholic) section of Oaklawn Cemetery, the c.1850 public burying ground located on the outskirts of Tampa, some two miles from the immigrant enclave of Ybor City. Nearly all of the Oaklawn Italian graves are of prominent, important and/or well-to-do persons from the early Italian community in Tampa. There are provocative and unanswered questions regarding the whereabouts of Tampa Italians' graves, especially those of ordinary immigrants who came in numbers to Ybor City after its 1886 founding and who died prior to the founding of the Italian Club Cemetery. One speculation is that there were few Italian deaths in that period, since most very early immigrants were young adult males. (A U.S. manuscript census from 1900 revealed only one Ybor City Italian—Annetta Vencento—over the age of sixty five.) This speculation overlooks the high local incidence of diseases that killed age-indiscriminately—typhus, tuberculosis, malaria, cholera, dengue fever, and yellow fever—and deaths by accident. To date, no satisfactory information has come to light that might locate more Italian immigrant burials from this period.

In 1896, the Italian Club purchased a plot of land two miles north of Ybor City from the Armwood family, who farmed in the vicinity and had other enterprises in Tampa's early African American community. (Blanche Armwood, a prominent educator, is buried at the site, along with other members of the family.) A later donation of land by the Armwoods expanded the burial ground. The property, the main gate to which is located at Twenty-sixth Street and Twenty-third Avenue, was formally dedicated as a cemetery in 1900 (though numerous burials took place at the site between 1893 and 1900.)

The Italian Club Cemetery is both densely and democratically populated. There are grand family mausoleums, final testaments to immigrant families who arrived in the region with very little and gained, over time, very much, both socially and materially. There are also (in greater numbers), the graves of very humble Tampa Italians: workers in cigar factories, groceries, iron foundries, dry cleaners, barbershops. Men and women are represented in near equal numbers, and—as in all cemeteries dating to the late nineteenth century—there are many graves of children and infants. The famous and infamous lie side by side in the graveyard; mafiosi sleep undisturbed in the same ground as professional baseball players, mass murder victims, and WWII combat dead.

In terms of aesthetics, *Il Cimitero L'Unione Italiana* presents a startling visual contrast to mainstream American burying grounds of the region and era. It is quite crowded, not by accident but by design, with even the earliest burials placed in almost claustrophobic proximity to one another. Low railings of stone or masonry separate the gravesites, sometimes by only a few inches. Imported cypresses—features of European burial grounds—dot the landscape. There are very few signs of the rural cemetery aesthetic so prevalent in American burying grounds at the time the Italian Club Cemetery was created: no winding pathways, virtually no decorative iron plot enclosures, no memorial plantings or artful landscaping, minimal statuary of the sleeping lamb, broken column, and weeping willow variety. One notes, now and then, a Masonic emblem or Knights of Columbus shield on a grave marker, but they are sparse in comparison to mainstream American graveyards where fraternal symbolism is prolific and varied. While *Il Cimitero Unione Italiana* contains some elegant family tombs with statuary, stained glass windows, and wrought iron gates (and one large modern multiple-vault mausoleum), many more of the tightly packed graves are modest, with markers of granite or marble, while a sizeable number carry masonry markers decorated with stylized floral or geometric motifs in glazed tile. Inscriptions (especially of early graves) are almost invariably in Italian or in Sicilian dialect. Ceramic photographs of the deceased are frequently embedded in grave markers or vault doors. Regarding these photographic images and their use in Spanish and Italian memorials, one researcher notes: "Pioneer Spanish and Italian settlers say that this custom was followed in their youth in their own countries." The assertion is supported by one aged Italian immigrant's explanation.

It is probably because he [the Italian] loves life and animation...When we visit a relative's grave and see his lifelike picture gazing at us from his monument, it obscures the memory of his death.

There is no question that the Italian
Club Cemetery in Ybor City resembles a burying ground in late nineteenth or early twentieth century Italy, rather than any contemporary model among American cemeteries. Nevertheless, the resemblance is not exact. The L'Unione Italiana Cemetery is a singular and highly charged cultural document, one that displays both similarities to and differences from the graveyards in Italian immigrants’ homeland. What are the implications for a cultural historian of these similarities and differences? To answer that question, an examination of the cemetery as material culture must be essayed. As with other studies of the aesthetic, literary, and iconographic content of cemeteries, *Il Cimitero L'Unione Italiana* – silent for so long – will then speak eloquently of its past.

**Illustrations**

The front entrance, with ornamental iron arch, of *Il Cimitero L'Unione Italiana*. (All photographs of the cemetery are courtesy of John McEwen.)
This gravestone for Adela Ferlita, like most in the Italian Club Cemetery, bears an inscription in Italian. Translated into English, it reads: “Like a beautiful flower wilted in the best part of your life, your sweet image will be forever present in the broken hearts of your parents.” The epitaph is highly interesting in that it conforms to a prevalent main-stream American cultural trend of the period: the “domestication of death,” in which death is depicted in pastoral terms and the departed – often characterized as a bloom or flower – is separated in body but not memory from loved ones. American examples are: “Budded on earth to bloom in Heaven,” and “Gone from our home, but not from our hearts.” That this contemporary American epitaph style should be couched in Sicilian dialect is a marker of the cross-cultural exchanges at work in Ybor City’s Italian community.

An angel surmounts the mausoleum of Francesco Ferlita and Maria, his wife. The Ferlita family came to Ybor City in the 1890s and built a bakery at Nineteenth Street and Ninth Avenue. The business thrived until the early 1970s, when urban blight marginalized the neighborhood.

This enameled portrait of Maria Ferlita, wife of Francesco, is affixed to her vault (below that of her husband) in the family mausoleum. It displays the photographic realism and permanence that made such memorial images popular with Italian mourners.
Filippo Cagnina mausoleum. Sicilian society was strongly patriarchal. A common practice was to designate family tombs with the full name of the male head of the household, in this case Filippo Cagnina. His social and familial primacy is reinforced by a portrait bust in marble, which surmounts the mausoleum.

As this enameled photograph of Filippo Cagnina (affixed to the door of Cagnina’s vault) attests, the portrait bust in stone atop the Cagnina mausoleum is highly lifelike. The dapper Italian in a nonchalant pose conveys the essence of immigrant success.
The grave marker of Maria Micheli combines several characteristic elements of “ordinary” gravesites at the Italian Club Cemetery: an enameled portrait of the deceased, decorative tile mosaics, and urns for floral tributes. The grave marker bears a curious error: Micheli’s birthdate, 1988, is surely 1898. At this gravesite, as at many others, the adjacent graves are almost touching, with masonry and stone railings only an inch or two apart.

At l’Unione Italiana Cemetery, the widespread American late nineteenth and early twentieth century cemetery aesthetic that produced forests of memorial statuary is far less evident. Nevertheless, there are some striking and iconographic examples, such as this angel scattering daisies. In grave art of the period, daisies often marked the graves of children or young people, whose lives, like the daisy’s, were brief and fragile. The daisy is also a symbol of the Virgin Mary, whose love, like the ubiquitous flower, can grow nearly everywhere.

The grave of Carmela Ruvolo (b. 1838 - d. 1922), like that of Maria Micheli and countless others, combines a photographic enameled portrait and decorative colored tiles.

This stone grave angel holds a palm leaf. Used by Romans as a symbol of victory, the palm leaf came to symbolize, among early Christians, a martyr’s triumphant sacrifice. Nineteenth and early twentieth century grave art borrowed the motif to symbolize victory over death.
One of the most highly charged nineteenth and early twentieth century gravestone motifs is this figure, Hope, often materialized as a comely young woman and always featuring an anchor. The Biblical source is the Epistle to the Hebrews 6:19: *Which hope we have an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast*. The single star in the figure's diadem crown suggests the light of Heaven, to which the figure gazes, while the wreath of flowers in her hand symbolizes the putting aside of earthly laurels in deference to a heavenly crown, as well as Life's fragility.

While most burial sites at the Italian Club Cemetery are unprepossessing, a number – perhaps five percent – are elegant and even grand mausoleums. The Midulla tomb, with its baroque roofline, marble facings, and copper doors with raised floral designs, is one of the most appealing.

Unlike mainstream American cemeteries of the period, which prized winding pathways and garden-like arrangements of graves, the rule at *Il Cimitero Unione Italiana* is rectilinear order. Here a row of mausoleums marches in tight formation, with benches arrayed in front for mourners. While benches of this sort in mainstream Anglo cemeteries are usually installed facing away from the tomb, they are here resolutely turned inward, expressing both an intense focus on loss and the centrality of *famiglia* in Sicilian life.
One of the rare Anglo graves at the cemetery, that of Annie Holloman (b. 1886 – d. 1901), is one of only two to display an ornamental iron enclosure. Such enclosures were the norm in American cemeteries of the period, but were unknown in the European burial sites that served as the inspiration for immigrant cemeteries such as Il Cimitero L'Unione Italiana.

The Family Licata mausoleum is serene and dignified, but houses a shocking piece of Ybor City history. Within are interred five victims of the family, parents and three children, murdered in their sleep by an older son, a paranoid schizophrenic, on October 17, 1933.

Recurrent vandalism at the cemetery has damaged or destroyed many monuments and grave art. This fine statue of Cor Jesu (denoted by the heart encircled by thorns) has lost an arm, hand, and head.
ENDNOTES


2. In addition to large numbers of Cubans and Sicilians and a lesser number of Spaniards, Jews (mostly from Germany, Russia, and Romania) were significant contributors to both the ethnic make-up and economic base of the community. While some did work in the cigar industry (as laborers or owners), many of Ybor City’s Jews founded mercantile firms, some so durable and successful that Ybor’s Jews were called “the Princes of Seventh Avenue.” Two late nineteenth/early twentieth century Jewish cemeteries north of Tampa proper await study by cultural historians.

3. Mormino, 69. An interesting characteristic of Ybor City’s tobacco trade labor force is that it included large numbers of women who, by and large, earned equal pay for equal work alongside men and were highly activist in labor disputes. The prominence and militancy of Ybor City’s women workers made the community unique in the South.

4. The Mortellaro Macaroni Factory, c. 1908, was started by two Sicilian brothers. The firm became one of several food-related businesses in the area to provide employment outside the cigar trade for early Italian immigrants. It also represented a progressive marketing trend: the mechanization of food production, with regional and, eventually, national suppliers replacing the home kitchen or neighborhood vendor.

5. When the Federal Theatre Project came to Ybor City in 1936, it found that theater of various sorts was already thriving in the neighborhood. Most of the activity was housed at the e.1914 Centro Asturiano, home of the (Asturian) Spanish mutual aid society. An Italian opera company – absorbed into the WPAS Federal Music Project – threw in the building for decades.


7. Mormino, 90.


11. Letter from Paul Longo, prev. cited.

12. L’Unione Italiana informational brochure, undated (L’Unione Italiana, Tampa.)


14. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, October 13, 1893. It is noteworthy that the procession described by the *Morning Tribune* took place months before the founding of L’Unione Italiana. Clearly, funerary protocols were established in the Italian immigrant community before their absorption into the cultural agenda of the mutual aid society. In 1895, ten mutual aid societies sent delegates to the funeral cortège of V.M. Ybor. The *Tampa Daily Times* reported that “a new ethnic element, Sicilians, also joined in the procession.” (Tampa Daily Times, December 17, 1895.)

15. A 1946 advertisement for the Taylor Funeral Home in Ybor City states that the facility has a “Ladie’s private room.” Public mourning – like many social affairs – was segregated by gender in Sicilian society; the ad is a nod to this custom. (Annual bulletin, L’Unione Italiana, 1946. Tampa: Ybor City Museum Society Collection.)


19. In Mormino, 84.

20. It is interesting that the only two decorative iron plot enclosures at the site surround graves with non-Italian names.