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TW0 HUNDRED ITALIANS CAME TO FLORIDA TO GROW GRAPES

By TONY PIZZO

This is a little known story of Italian immigration to Central Florida on a grape-growing project in 1885. From among this group several families moved to the environs of Tampa to make significant contributions in the betterment of Tampa life. Some of them are the Toffalettis, Pasettis, Ghiottos, and Gulianos.

The Toffaletti brothers, Rinaldo, Joseph and Antonio, settled in Port Tampa City. For many years they ran a grocery store in the magnificent building of the defunct Port Tampa Bank. Two of Rinaldo’s daughters served in World War II. Edith, a graduate of the first class of the Women’s Auxiliary Corps (WACS), became a lieutenant colonel. She was assigned to the Filter Center charting flights in Florida. Lillian served in the Ordnance Department as a lieutenant in the Far East. She followed General MacArthur on his return to the Philippines.

The notable offspring of the Pasetti family are Victor, who served as secretary of the Cuban Club for many years, and Louis, a dentist, who has received national recognition by his profession and has rendered many years of service to the civic life of Tampa through the Civitan Club.

The Ghiotto family for years was involved in an automobile agency. Jim Ghiotto has served as an executive of the Florida State Fair and in other premier firms of Tampa.

Descendants of the Guliano family are Manuel Tuero, general manager of Tampa Wholesale Liquor Co., and a member of the Rotary Club of Ybor City. His uncle, Manuel Diaz, was the president of Wesson Tool Companies, headquartered in Detroit.

Here is the genesis of these Italian grape growers, as it appears in "Catholics of Marion County," an excellent history of the oldest Catholic community in Central Florida, by Jan Quinn.
"In December, 1885, an immigration agent brought two hundred Italians directly from Italy to Welshton, to attempt to grow grapes. A small wooden chapel was built for them and a diocesan priest was sent to Welshton. He was Dominique Andre Gaetan Bottolaccio, born at Bonifacio, Corsica, France, on March 22, 1844. He was destined later to become the Catholic priest of the horse and buggy days in Ocala. But during his first venture into Marion County, Father Bottolaccio served mainly the Italian-speaking parishioners of the Welshton station. After accepting the early hospitality of Captain Welsh’s family, the priest left their house and lived in Ocala near the new chapel that Father Kenny had erected. The agricultural venture for the Italians failed and the colony dispersed, with families moving on to Green Cove Springs, Palatka, Mandarin and Ocala.

"Among those who went to Ocala to become parish pioneers were Giuseppe and Maria Ghiotto, who lived to be elderly residents, and the Toffaletti family. Father Bottolaccio returned to St. Augustine in 1886.

"Louis Toffaletti and Victoria Ghiotto Toffaletti were born in Santo Stefano in northern Italy. In 1885, when they decided
to go to America to buy farm land, they crossed the Alps to board a German ship that sailed out the English channel across the Atlantic. The ship landed passengers at Philadelphia, and then they took a ship to Green Cove Springs in Florida. The two hundred people gave the captain their money and valuables to turn into American currency, but he never returned and they were left destitute. The men had to cut trees to make shelters for the nineteen families who lived in Green Cove Springs for a while. The children attended school while there."

Several of the families moved to Marion County, where they bought property in Marti City. Some farmed, and a number of the young men worked building railroads in parts of the state.

Marti City was a cigar making community established by Tampa cigar workers on the outskirts of Ocala. Joe Marti, the Cuban revolutionist, had visited the cigar community in the early 1890s, and the Cuban tobacco workers honored him by naming the little cigar center in his honor.

After the devastating freeze of 1895, the cigar making enterprise came to an end. The cigar makers packed up their worldly belongings and headed back to Tampa, being joined by several of the Italian families who had come to Florida to cultivate grapes.