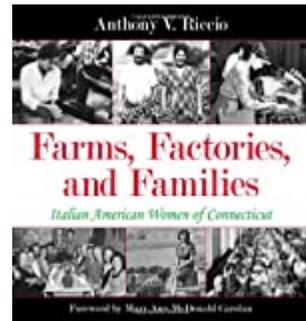


**Anthony V. Riccio.** *Farms, Factories, and Families: Italian American Women of Connecticut.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014. 421 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4384-5231-9.



**Reviewed by** Catherine Murtagh (Texas Christian University)

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## “From the ancient storytelling tradition to the written word of the pen”: A Collection of Italian-American Women’s Personal Stories

Anthony V. Riccio’s *Farms, Factories, and Families: Italian American Women of Connecticut* (2014) is a valuable primary source containing oral interviews with Italian women immigrants and their daughters and granddaughters as well as sons and grandsons. Riccio, the stacks manager at the Sterling Memorial Library at Yale University, adds this latest volume to two previously published books that also drew on oral histories, *The Italian American Experience in New Haven: Images and Oral Histories* (2006) and *Boston’s North End: Images and Recollections of an Italian American Neighborhood* (2006). In the foreword, Mary Ann McDonald Carolan of Fairfield University writes that “in the private sphere of the home or in public arenas such as factories or shops,” Riccio reveals “that women wielded the real power in Italian American families, creating a situation that was at odds with the supposedly patriarchal society in which they lived” (p. xvi). Riccio’s book weaves a story of change over time and makes an argument for the influ-

ence women exerted despite living in highly patriarchal households and communities.

From 2006 through 2012, Riccio traveled the state of Connecticut collecting interviews for this book. He also incorporated stories and details derived from oral history interviews located in the collection of the Naugatuck Historical Society, researcher Jennifer Knoll’s private collection of interviews with women garment workers collected in the 1990s, and interviews of Italian American women from an unspecified period of time conducted by Professor Stephen Lassonde of Harvard University. Interviewees also gave Riccio access to a variety of additional sources such as autobiographical narratives, letters, and photographs from family collections. In this work Riccio uses the voices of approximately sixty women, many in their nineties, and at least two women over one hundred years old. The women’s stories date from the end of the nineteenth century into the twenty-first. An unspecified number of interviews were recorded

in the women's native regional Italian dialects. Evidence of this is often found in the introductory paragraphs which precede the speaker's story.

Chronological in nature, the book has fifteen chapters, and at the beginning of each Riccio sets the scene for the interviews that follow. In the first chapter he provides information on women's lives and work in southern Italy and the traditions that shaped their character and family life. Riccio limited this work to immigrant women from the Southern Italian regions of Campania, Puglia, and Basilicata, and the islands of Sicily and Sardinia. The women from this part of Italy had cultural similarities, having come from poor rural communities mired in a "feudal cast system" (p. xx). Citing Victoria De Grazia's *How Fascism Ruled Women* (1992), Riccio contrasts the patriarchal family of the South and the western islands of Sicily and Sardinia, an "Islamicized" society where "women lived in cloistered domesticity," to industrialized northern Italy, an area reflecting Celtic and Germanic influences (p. 5). Marriages were arranged by parents and brides were required to bring dowries of home-woven linens to the marriage. In America as in Italy, the domain of Italian women immigrants was known as the "domus," the center of the family (p. 2). Riccio uses the term "cultural heredity" to illustrate the perpetuation of patriarchal values and the traditional arts of cooking and needle skills, spinning and weaving, and folk medicine (p. 1).

Riccio's interviews give deeper insight into the term "birds of passage." Italian men, unable to advance financially or socially at home, left their wives and families in Italy. Many traveled home to Italy and back to America repeatedly, and some occasionally sent money home to their wives. The women who remained in Italy fended for themselves and their children until arrangements were made for them to depart for America. Married women who had never left home or traveled beyond the region in which they grew up, recalled the month-long voyage across the ocean to a strange new land. Although most readers might associate the term "pioneer" with the nineteenth-century migration of Americans to the western regions of the United States, Riccio, in the chapter entitled "Italian Pioneer Women: A New Life in Connecticut," offers new perspective on migration as Italian women traveled westward from Italy to America, colonizing ethnic neighborhoods in Connecticut cities. Immigrants settled in Italian communities, or "Little Italies," in the cities of Hartford, Waterbury, Middletown, Bridgeport, and Stamford, in the small factory towns of Pawtucket and Naugatuck, and on farms in Woodville

and Windsor, to start a new life.

An important focus in Riccio's book is the Italian woman's work ethic, both in and outside of the home, and what it meant for the family. For the women interviewed—immigrant, first, second, and third generations—work was not a matter of choice. At young ages girls worked at assigned jobs in the home, baking the week's bread or doing laundry, and when old enough they went to work in sweatshops. Girls on the family farm worked the fields as children, before and after school. One woman elaborated on the gendered nature of work, stating, "We worked harder than the men. My brothers hoed, they did a little work and then they slept during the day" (p. 194). Another commented, "They didn't do much work, my brothers, really" (p. 228).

When the family experienced financial difficulties the deeply ingrained female work ethic brought teenage girls and their mothers into sweatshops. Women often found work outside the home in line with their traditional roles, particularly dressmaking. Women workers told stories of joining unions, becoming union organizers, participating in strikes, and assuming leadership positions in the union. Riccio points out that "the successful union movement ... signaled a transformation in Italian American women's self-image; it also changed the public perception of them as submissive to patriarchal authority" (p. 261). Working outside the home also signaled the end of the traditional patriarchal power, and one daughter even boasted that she made more money than her father (p. 336). Movement out of the home continued as demand for female workers increased during World War II. Not all women worked for pay. Some expanded their caring activities outside the home by volunteering for religious and philanthropic societies. Italian women also entered the business world as entrepreneurs, starting their own dress-making, retail, or restaurant businesses.

Italian girls, unlike their brothers, frequently left school in their teenage years to go to work in factories in order to supplement the family income. On the farm or in the city, young girls' education was secondary to the family economy. The women in Riccio's book often spoke of their strong academic achievements or desire for higher education, only to have to leave school to work in sweatshops. Riccio captures the tensions between traditional patriarchal controls over the farm family's economic resources, the children, and the changing social circumstances, such as the passage of compulsory education and child labor laws. One farm woman discussed a truant officer's visit to the farm to enforce the school

attendance law, quoting her father: “If you think I am breaking the law to keep the kids home from school, you better give it to me in writing that you will feed my family all year long, pay for any doctor bills we incur” (p. 221). The economic difficulties of the 1920s and 1930s meant many wives became wage-earners in order to meet family expenses and “altered the Southern Italian code of female deference to patriarchal authority” by overcoming “male opposition to women working outside the home” (p. 51).

The women Riccio interviewed often controlled the pocketbook. Family members working in factories—husbands, daughters, and to a lesser degree, sons—and farmers turned the proceeds from their work over to their wives and mothers. Unbeknownst to their husbands, women often saved large sums of money, enough to purchase property or a home. Interviews with their children and grandchildren repeatedly reinforce the fact that Italian women wielded great power in family affairs. Sons and daughters noted that their mothers “ruled the house” as “the matriarch, the center, the glue, and that their role was not an inferior one” but rather “a complementary one” (pp. 69, 361).

Changes were not limited to women’s work outside the home. Riccio also offers many valuable insights in chapters dedicated to dating and marriage practices, birthing, and working conditions in factories. Woven throughout are insights into racial and ethnic dynamics in the workplace and the community. The book concludes with stories of the successes of Italian immigrants’ daughters in graduating high school, going to college, and entering professions.

Riccio provides the requisite notes and bibliography and states in his acknowledgements that some of the oral interviews he relied upon are in a private collection and that another set is located at the Naugatuck Historical Society, but he fails to specify where his own interviews and the donated tapes are stored. The single drawback to this work is Riccio’s silence with regard to the present location of this valuable resource and its availability to future researchers. Riccio’s book is attractively presented, deceptively so, and could easily be mistaken for a coffee-table book. But for the historian these interviews are a valuable primary source.

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