

4-1-1959

## The Italians in New Mexico

Frederick G. Bohme

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr>

---

### Recommended Citation

Bohme, Frederick G.. "The Italians in New Mexico." *New Mexico Historical Review* 34, 2 (1959).  
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol34/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexico Historical Review by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [amywinter@unm.edu](mailto:amywinter@unm.edu), [lsloane@salud.unm.edu](mailto:lsloane@salud.unm.edu), [sarahrk@unm.edu](mailto:sarahrk@unm.edu).



retired, his grazing land extended over some ten thousand acres north of the town of Folsom, in Union County.

The real development of Italian settlement here began about 1900, when Colfax County coal fields were opened extensively. Some *abruzzesi* came directly to the little mining towns of Brilliant and Gardiner, near Raton, and began the pattern followed elsewhere in New Mexico: working in the mines for several years, returning to Italy, and then locating once more in New Mexico. Still others worked in Van Houten, where one section of this mining village was named "Cunico Town," after that Venetian family. The Cunicos eventually homesteaded land southeast of Raton, and contributed "Mike" Cunico to the annals of championship bronc riders of the Southwest. The Federici family of Cimarron had a similar background, and is now represented by a district judge and a prominent attorney. The coal mining towns of Dawson and Koehler, both twentieth century developments, also had their quota of Italians; around World War I Dawson reportedly had one of the largest groups from the Province of Lucca to be found west of Chicago. Not only were the Italians the most numerous of all foreign groups there, but they held the "elite" jobs in the mines, including those of foreman and engineer. Most of these people moved to Raton, Trinidad, and northward as mining operations declined.

While many ex-miners opened businesses in Raton and nearby towns, probably the outstanding "success" story in northern New Mexico is that of Joe Di Lisio. He was born in Pacentro, Province of Aquila (central Italy), in 1885, and received an elementary education there. In 1904 he came to the United States, spending two months in Hartford, Connecticut, before coming west. His uncle, Mike Sebastiani, had a store at El Morro, near Trinidad, Colorado, and Di Lisio worked a year and a half there. After accumulating a small amount of capital working for his uncle, he took over a saloon in Gardiner. His success led to an offer from the St. Louis, Rocky Mountain and Pacific Coal Company to run their store, the Blossburg Mercantile Company, in addition to his saloon. This he did from 1907 to 1910, when the coke plant at Gardiner was shut down.



Di Lisio then operated a saloon at Brilliant for about three years, taking time out only for a quick trip to Italy to get his bride. He became a citizen of the United States and a member of the Elks' Lodge during this time also. In 1913 he moved to Suffield, near Ludlow, Colorado, where he bought a saloon. The violent strike at Ludlow caused all of the miners to leave, and Di Lisio was broken financially. In 1914, however, he managed to borrow sufficient capital to open a saloon in Raton, and this was followed in short order by a small department store, the Raton Mercantile Company. His affairs prospered, and in 1917 he founded the International State Bank of Raton, with himself as president. In 1929 he built the Swastika Hotel, and used this name until World War II, when for obvious reasons it was changed to "Yucca." He continues as president of the corporation which owns the hotel, and he has been chairman of the board of the bank since 1956. Although he is now 73 years of age (1958), he still operates the department store, called "Di Lisio's" since 1922, and only sold his interest in the Raton Wholesale Liquor Company (established on the repeal of Prohibition in 1933) in 1955.

Always active in civic affairs, Di Lisio has been a director of the Raton Chamber of Commerce, is a past president of the local Kiwanis Club, a member of the Knights of Columbus, and an honorary member of the Foresters (*forestieri*). In World War I he spearheaded a subscription drive for the Italian Red Cross, for which he subsequently received a gold medal, and in the mid-1920's he was made a Knight of the Order of the Crown of Italy. He and his wife, the former Cristina Ponne, have eight children, all of whom are now grown.

The town of Gallup, in western New Mexico, was also a focal point for Italian settlement, dating from its establishment as a coal mining center in the early 1880's. At that time about a hundred Piedmontese and Tyrolese farmers were brought from Colorado, where they had received their first experience in the mines. Among these the Brentari, Rollie, Vidal, Baudino, Noce, Casna, Cavaggio, Martinelli, and Zuccal families are but a few of those now represented in the area. This first group moved into the business world after its