

## IN THE VICINITY OF HULL-HOUSE AND THE MAXWELL STREET MARKET: CHICAGO 1889-1935



### VARIETIES OF ETHNICITY AND RACE ON URBAN STREETS

#### ITALIAN-AMERICANS ON TAYLOR STREET

#### PAESANS, PASTA AND PROGRESSIVES: CHICAGO ITALIANS AND THEIR FOOD

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#### PEDDLERS

Early Italian immigrants initially entered food retailing through peddling, made feasible by the ease of starting up in business and made profitable by the concentrations of Italian families into distinctive communities with a desire for their wares. The number of Italian peddlers in the city grew along with the population. An 1871 business directory showed only three Italian peddlers in the city. By 1900, only manual laborers outnumbered the 801 male peddlers and 20 women peddlers among Chicago's Italians. In addition to essential items such as coal, milk, bread, and beer, Italian peddlers' preferred product was fruit and they were believed to dominate the fruit vending business before the turn-of-the-century. Peddlers also brought a wide variety of ready-to-eat foods. Anthony Sorrentino recalled the Neapolitan pizza man as well as other vendors on the Near West Side,

On warm summer nights he would stroll through the streets with a large tub on his head, knife in hand, and with a musical chant announce, "A pizza, calda, calda." When a customer beckoned, he would ceremoniously place the tub on the sidewalk and cut the desired piece for 5 or 10¢, using the cover of the tub for cutting and his apron to wipe the knife. Not very sanitary, perhaps, but the aroma was terrific!

Another unusual vendor was the passatempo [pass time] vendor with his pushcart laden with lupini, ceci, pumpkin seeds, and a dozen varieties of roast Italian beans. These tasty morsels were munched by the Italians as they sat in front of their houses on warm evenings. They added a glass of homemade wine. Another popular snack in our neighborhood was the five-cent "nutti sandwich," an earlier version of the hero or submarine sandwich. Actually, it often served as a meal, since it consisted of a large chunk of fresh Italian

bread served with Italian cold cuts. When we did not go home for lunch during the school period, hundreds of kids would run to the Nuti bakery; but we were also influenced by that other famous sandwich, the hot dog. We had a vendor who made it seem imperative that you buy a hot dog, especially after a swim at the Sheridan Park Pool. "Che mangia muore mai," Bruno would repeat endlessly [he who eats never dies], and besides, to add to its already tantalizing appeal, Bruno put in an Italian flourish--little hot peppers. Yes, sir, he who eats never dies! [78]

The life of a peddler was not easy. Income from peddling was low and dependent on the weather and the seasons. In 1893, peddlers earned an average of about \$4.33 per week while manual laborers were earning about \$7.06 a week. They worked between 48 to 60 hours per week, with 60 most common, thus matching manual laborers. Peddling was prohibited on Sundays, despite the fact that many women needed to shop daily, and peddlers could be arrested and fined for this offense. Street vendors were the recipients of taunting and attacks on the street and a branch of the Chicago Legal Aid Society was established with the partial goal of protecting peddlers and vendors. [79]

Street thugs were not the only threat to peddlers. Grocery owners, who resented the inroads made on their trade, conducted periodic campaigns to convince the city to rid itself of peddling by raising licensing fees or banning peddling altogether. The city was generally sympathetic to grocers' demands. License fees for grocers were only \$12.50, while they were \$50.00 for a horse and wagon. In 1891, the city tried to drive fruit vendors from the downtown but their efforts were stymied by the rents the vendors had paid to downtown store owners for the privilege of setting up their stands in front of their shops--in space that was actually public property. [80]

Yet, peddling had a variety of occupational appeals. All that was necessary to enter the business was the capital to purchase a daily stock of goods, the fee for a license from the city, and a method of transporting goods from home to home. The poorest peddlers purchased a small amount of fruits or vegetables and carried their wares on their back. In 1918, a basket peddler's whole stock of goods might not amount to more than five or ten dollars. Pushcarts could be inexpensively handmade and allowed peddlers to carry a greater amount of goods. [81]



**Boys by Peddler's Fruit Cart**

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A horse and wagon necessitated more of an investment, since upkeep of the animal was necessary. It was common to stable horses in city neighborhoods and many tenement homes had stables on the ground floor with peddlers living above. Horse and wagon peddlers might spend one day purchasing and assembling their load and the next, selling. Peddlers often had their own territory, which other peddlers were expected to honor. The owner of the Auriemma Grocery on the Near West Side peddled produce from a horse and wagon in neighborhoods other than the one in which his store was located. Sam, another peddler, already claimed that territory as his own. Peddlers could cooperate, however, to increase sales. Julio Fabrizio, who sharpened knives from his own homemade cart in the 1930s, traveled with other peddlers in groups of two or three down the alleys so that housewives going out for one peddler might be tempted by the wares of another. [82]

Most importantly, pushing a fruit cart offered one over-riding advantage over other occupations. It gave a feeling of independence and of "being your own boss." For some, the advantages were clear. In the late nineteenth century, Rosa Casettari's husband was employed on the construction of a new church on Chicago Avenue. She recalled,

My husband he was many months carrying the bricks and the mud for that new church. But then those other Toscana people--that little bunch of Toscani were all very friends together--they said to him, "Oh, you're foolish, Gionin. Why you don't get the horse and wagon and sell the bananas like us?" So he did it--he got the horse and the wagon and he used to peddle the bananas. And when the cranberries came he sold the cranberries too. [83]

While the city worried about the cleanliness of its streets and shopkeepers worried over their sales, Italian women patronized the peddlers who brought both goods and local news directly to their doors. No store counter provided a barrier between the consumer and the produce. [ Women could pinch, prod, poke, smell, and jiggle the fruits and vegetables as an expected aspect of the exchange. Price was negotiable, and bargaining was made easier by being able to haggle in one's native language. Prices were often low, since many peddlers bought up goods when the market was over-stocked or when wholesalers had over-ripe produce to unload. The advantages for both peddler and consumer ensured the trade's continued importance as a vital part of the city's food supply system until 1927, when a City Council ordinance finally forbade the sale of food on the streets. [84]

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