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Chicago's Little Sicily

Robert M. Lombardo

Nostalgic descriptions of Italian-American communities have become part of the American cultural landscape. From Mulberry Street in New York to India Street in San Diego, America's "Little Italies" have become artifacts of an earlier period that celebrate the culture and contributions of Italian Americans. While most people are aware of the restaurants, specialty shops, and festivals that are located in these communities, few, outside of academic circles, are aware of the contributions that many of these areas have made to social science. Studies conducted in New York, Boston, and Chicago, detailing the immigrant experience, have become mainstays of the sociological literature. One of the earliest such studies was Harvey Zorbaugh's 1929 classic book, *The Social Order of the Slum*. Chapter 8 of Zorbaugh's book is entitled "Little Hell," referring to Chicago's "Little Sicily" neighborhood. This article is the story of Little Sicily. Little Sicily does not exist today. It was replaced in the 1950s by public housing, but the community lives on in the hearts and minds of former residents and their children who have stubbornly held on to their memories.

There have been a number of articles written about Chicago's Italian communities. Scholars including Humbert Nelli, Rudolph Vecoli, and Dominick Candeloro have greatly added to our knowledge of Italian immigration and settlement in Chicago, including Little Sicily.¹ No essay, however, has provided a history of Little Sicily after its initial settlement. This article tells the rest of the story. It not only describes the backgrounds of the people and how they came to settle in the area, but also informs the reader of the struggles that they faced in their efforts at assimilation—many of which, are still being shared by immigrants today. In particular, this essay highlights the often adverse effects that public housing has had on Illinois communities.

Zorbaugh described Little Sicily as the greatest concentration of poverty in Chicago.² Zorbaugh was a student of the Chicago School of Sociology, which argued that communities with the highest rates of criminal behavior were occupied by the most disadvantaged segments of the population. In spite of the strength of the relationship between

disadvantage and crime, sociologists have come to realize that not all distressed communities are crime ridden. This fact was established for the Chicago School in Little Sicily. It was in Little Sicily that social disorganization theory was challenged by arguing that distressed communities can have a social organization of their own; one that differed from that of the larger society, but one that was effective, nevertheless, in controlling aberrant behavior. Following the tradition of the Chicago School, this article begins with a review of the ecological, social, and cultural conditions that led to the formation of the Little Sicily community. The discussion then centers on the efforts of community residents to establish a socially organized, functioning community in the midst of an urban slum; one that truly provided for the establishment of social order and the needs of its residents. Finally, this article will describe the government efforts that led to the end of the Little Sicily neighborhood and their implication for the larger Italian community in Chicago.

Little Sicily was located in the Near North Side community area of Chicago. The Near North Side was included in the original incorporation of the city in 1837. In 1856, a bridge was constructed across the Chicago River at Erie Street bringing settlers to the district.³ By 1860, large numbers of German and Irish immigrants had settled in the Near North Side. They were soon followed by Swedes and other Scandinavians. Although most of the Near North Side was destroyed by the Chicago Fire, the area quickly rebuilt. Immediately after the fire, destitute and homeless families moved back into the district and built small wooden cottages in spite of a new ordinance defining "fire limits" where only brick and stone buildings were allowed.⁴

The turn of the century brought additional settlers to the Near North Side. Large numbers of Italians and, in particular, Sicilians moved into the community. The "dark people," as they were called, soon dominated the area.⁵ By 1910, the Sicilian community extended as far north as Division Street. Over 13,000 Sicilians and other Italians lived in the area.⁶ By 1920, Little Sicily or "Little Hell," as the Sicilian community was known, stretched from Sedgwick Street west to the Chicago River and north from Chicago Avenue to North Avenue.

The name Little Hell was derived from the gas house at Crosby and Hobbie streets whose belching flames filled the sky at night. Residents

recall how the heavens lit up like a satanic specter when flames from the furnaces producing “water gas” soared upward into the sky.⁷ The roaring thunder of the furnaces could be heard for blocks around as coal was poured into the ovens and moistened with water from the Chicago River to chemically create gas that was used for heating, cooking, and lighting. Enormous tanks stored the gas during the day. These gigantic cylinders raised many floors as they filled. During the night, the cylinders would descend back into their wells, as the gas was dispersed throughout the neighborhood. The Little Sicily plant was eventually dismantled as natural gas was made available in Chicago. Much to the dismay of neighborhood residents, the name Little Hell remained. Both the press and other social commentators continued to use the name Little Hell to refer to the area.

Little Sicily was an area of first settlement, an area where immigrants came directly from Europe, bringing with them their Old World



Women and Children in Little Sicily.

(Source: *Chicago Daily News*. 22 September 1902, courtesy of the Chicago History Museum).

language, dress, and customs.⁸ Those that came to Little Sicily were *contadini* (peasants) from the *Mezzogiorno* (land of the midday sun), as Sicily and the south of Italy were called. Most had worked in the fields as fruit and table gardeners, cultivators of grains and cereals, and sheep herders.⁹ The *contadini* often immigrated as a group and, once in America, settled among others from their native Sicilian towns. People from Alta Villa Milicia settled on Larrabee Street.¹⁰ Those on Cambridge came from Alimenia, Cuisa, and Caccamo. On Milton were immigrants from Sambuca. Those on Townsend migrated from Bagheria and Burgio; those on Hobbie and Elm from Corelone. The attachment to others from their native village was termed *campanilismo*, the spirit of dwelling under one's own church tower.¹¹

Although the Sicilians exhibited a sense of association with those from their native towns, the interests of the family took precedence over those of the village.¹² Intense family pride was their outstanding characteristic. The family unit not only included those related by blood, but also those related by ritual bonds such as godmother and godfather as well. One social observer noted that: "The extent to which family loyalty goes is beyond belief; no matter how disgraced or how disgraceful a member may be, he is never cast off; the unsuccessful are assisted; the selfish are indulged; the erratic patiently borne with. Old age is respected, and babies are objects of adoration."¹³

The community that the Sicilian immigrant inherited was in a desperate state.¹⁴ Many of the houses in the district were two and three story frame cottages and the grade of the yards was often below street level. The streets had earlier been raised three to six feet above the lot line to accommodate a new sewer system.¹⁵ This caused ground-floor apartments to become basement or cellar dwellings. These apartments were often damp, especially during the winter and spring months. In addition, the buildings in the district covered a large percentage of the available land and often more than one building was erected on each city lot, resulting in a large number of rear cottages.¹⁶ These rear cottages were often older frame buildings that were moved back from the street. With the dilapidation of the buildings, came a general lack of cleanliness in the yards and alleys.

Sicilians, like many other immigrant groups, came to Chicago to find work. The legend grew that if a man could not "make it" in Chicago, he

could not make it anywhere.¹⁷ The establishment of Little Sicily and other immigrant colonies was not haphazard, but was determined by the socio-economic ecology of the city. The Chicago River with its north and south branches provided the basis for the industrial topography of Chicago. The river's twenty-four miles of shoreline provided access to both water transportation and waste disposal for the city's emerging industries. As a result, an industrial belt emerged hugging the course of the river. So many industries located along the north branch of the Chicago River that the smoke from the factories, and the railway built to service them, caused the area to be referred to as Smoky Hollow.¹⁸ With these new factories came a demand for labor, which was filled by the rising tide of immigration. While the economic advances of earlier immigrants, including Northern Italians, allowed them to move to newer areas of the city, Sicilians and other immigrant groups settled in the working class slums that had sprung up adjacent to the factories surrounding the Chicago River. These inner-city communities were commonly referred to as the "River Wards."

Sociologists referred to this semi-circular belt between the downtown business area and the more desirable neighborhoods of Chicago as the "zone in transition."¹⁹ It was here that the poor settled to gain a foothold in American society. And it was here that social conditions were the worst in the city. Sociologists at the University of Chicago described these areas as disorganized. They were disorganized to the extent that local families suffered from poverty, sickness, poor housing, crime, and the difficulties of adjustment to urban life. Although people came to Chicago to better their lot through the prospect of finding work, periods of unemployment were not uncommon. A report by the City of Chicago indicated that nearly one-quarter of the Italian immigrant population worked seasonal jobs that left them unemployed for several months each year.²⁰ Responding to questions about conditions in the area, Lenora Midler, the Commissioner of Public Welfare stated: "How can anything different be expected from the poor people, crowded as they are into miserable habituation in districts where the smoke hangs a large part of the time like a pall over gray broken-down houses and unkempt streets; where constantly recurring unemployment makes it impossible for them to obtain the basest necessities of life; where ignorance is unenlightened and despair seizes on many a heart?"²¹

In spite of the difficulties encountered, the residents of

Little Sicily sought to build a better life. Although many lived in run-down housing, the interior of their homes was conspicuous for its cleanliness and orderliness.²² There were fewer cases of family desertion among Chicago's Italians than any other ethnic group. Few Italians were street beggars and Italian immigrants were unusually sober. Work was often a family affair. Sicilian women took in sewing so they could earn money while caring for their young children.²³ Older children sold nuts after school and were sent to near-by factories and railroad yards to gather coal, and it was not uncommon for boys and girls to leave school at age fourteen to find jobs in local shops and industries. Responding to the plight of the people of Little Sicily, one local resident commented: "But after all I wonder if there is as much happiness on the Gold Coast as over in these basement rooms. When the father comes home at night, six or seven children run to meet him, and a warm supper is always ready; and summer nights—the streets—you would go a long way to hear the concertinas."²⁴

The heart of Little Sicily was Saint Philip Benizi Church. In 1904, Servite fathers from Assumption Parish at Illinois and Orleans streets opened a mission at Oak Street and Gault Court to administer to the needs of the growing Italian and Sicilian community north of Chicago Avenue.²⁵ The cornerstone of the new mission was laid in August of that year. The occasion was turned into what was described as an "Italian festival," as a parade of religious Societies, a Company of Polish Cavalry, the Daily News Boy's Band, and a large number of carriages marched in procession from Assumption parish to the site of the new church.²⁶ In 1910, a young Servite named Father Luigi Giambastiani established a Sunday school in the basement of the building. It was not until 1915 that Saint Philip Benizi became its own parish and in 1916 Father Giambastiani became pastor. In 1920 the Sisters of Saint Dominic opened Saint Philip Benizi School at 515 West Oak. By 1927, because of the continued growth of the Sicilian community, Saint Philip Benizi opened its own satellite church, the San Marcello Mission at 517 West Evergreen.

Probably the most popular parish activity was the "feast." The feast was a religious occasion celebrating the life of a favorite saint. The feast traditionally began with a mass and procession in which members of various religious societies marched through the streets of Little Sicily carrying a statue of the Blessed Mother or their patron saint. At least seven

60th Annual Religious Feast

GIVEN BY THE

Deputazione Fratellanza, Sorellanza & Young Ladies of
Maria SS. Lauretana
di ALTAVILLA MILICIA

Fri., Sat., Sun. & Mon., **SEPTEMBER 2-3-4-5, 1960**
ST. PHILIP BENIZI CHURCH, Oak St. and Cambridge Ave.

The Feast in honor of MARIA SS. LAURETANA di Altavilla Milicia will be held FRIDAY, SATURDAY, SUNDAY and MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 2-3-4-5, 1960. She, the Saint, will bring about sure and lasting Peace to this ailing world. Your prayer and faith in Her are requested with a full heart. At no other time than this are your prayers needed to urge her to bring contentment to the human race. Pray with soul and faith for the sick and orphans.

Su, sito fra gli ulivi e gli agrumenti che attorniano abbondanti di potabili ed irrigatorie 150 metri di
altitudine dal Mare Tirreno, sorge Altavilla Milicia, dove fin dall'undicesimo secolo, il granario di Maria
SS.ma Lauretana dimora. Dove per tanti anni concorrono da tutte le parti del mondo, ai suoi piedi chiedono
le sue grazie quando al suo trono arrivano. Re, Principi, Duchi e migliaia di persone di tutte le nazioni
incurabili hanno chiesto il suo aiuto, mai negato.
Qui in nostra patria adottiva, da più di 50 anni continua il suo festeggiamento con grande interesse.
Richiediamo la vostra assistenza, le vostre preghiere, nell'urgire Essa per una vita di pace e concordia.
di disturbi e confusione. **FATO**

PROGRAM OF FEAST

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 2nd — The Feast will be opened with the playing of the Star Spangled Banner and sung by a well known Artist at 5:00 P. M. — The STROCCHIA CONCERT BAND (Maestro Raffaele Strocchia, director) will march in GRAND PARADE, up and down the streets of the neighborhood, which will be decorated for the occasion. — Fireworks at 11:30 P. M.

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 3rd — At 5:00 P. M., the STROCCHIA CONCERT BAND and the GUGGINO VICTORY BAND will march along the streets of the neighborhood. At 8:00 P. M., a special Musical Program will be given for your listening pleasure. — Fireworks at 11:30 P. M.

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 4th — In the early morning THREE BANDS, composed of musicians of long standing will again delight the people with spirited marches, along the streets of the neighborhood. — Those wishing to carry torches during the Procession must come to the religious headquarters of the Madonna at 542 W. Hobbie Street at 9:00 A. M. sharp where the Procession will start for the collection of the faithful. — At 11:00 A. M. Solemn High Mass in honor of Maria SS. Lauretana with Panegyric by Rev. Father Louis Giambastiani O.S.M., with Grand Concert directed by Prof. Lino Nucci and Company. — At end of Solemn High Mass, 4000 Ft. String Bombs four blocks long and others. — At 2:30 P. M. Procession of the Sacred Image accompanied by the Priests of St. Philip Benizi Church and by the members of the Deputazione Fratellanza, Sorellanza and Young Ladies and several Catholic Societies of the North Side at Oak St. and Cambridge Ave. Angels will salute the Image at 2:30 P. M. in front of the Church; again at 6:30 P. M. at Larrabee and Hobbie Sts., and again in front of the Church at 10:30 P. M.

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 5th — In the early evening the GUGGINO VICTORY BAND will march along the streets of the neighborhood playing well known marches. At 11:30 P.M., the Feast will end with a Fireworks Display.

NOTICE

That the Offerings made in Church will not be toward the benefit of the Congregation who has had a lot of expenses in making this Feast.

THOSE WISHING TO GET CANDLES, MAY GET THEM AT THE HEADQUARTERS OF THE MADONNA, 542 HOBIE STREET EVERY EVENING FROM 7:00 TO 9:30 P. M.

POSITIONS FOR CONCESSIONS CAN BE OBTAINED AT THE HEADQUARTERS, HOBIE ST. FROM 7:00 TO 9:30 P. M.

NOTICE

We will commence to receive Offerings four weeks prior to the Feast at the Headquarters of the Madonna at 542 Hobbie Street.

Meet the Committee at 7:00 P. M.

Shrine Bldg., housing the Blessed Virgin Maria SS.

Hobbie Street (600 West, 1100 North)



Poster of the Maria SS Lauretana Society Feast.

(Source: Dominic Candeloro, American Italian Historical Association.)

different groups held yearly events from May to October.²⁷ Each feast was an occasion for the religious and social reunion of the families from a particular Sicilian town. The feasts were often a carry-over of a religious event celebrating the patron saint of the member's home town. The societies that held the annual processions included: The Society of Maria Santissima Lauretana, the Society of the Crocifisso di Ciminna, The Society of Maria dell'Udienza, The Society of Saint Joseph of Bagheria, The Society of Saint Rosalie of Vicari, the Society of Saint Lucy, the Society of the Immacolata of Termini Imerese, The Society of Maria SS della Cava, and the Society of Santa Fortunata di Baucina.

For several weeks before the feast, a drummer and sometimes a flute player would march up and down the streets of Little Sicily on Saturday and Sunday to announce the upcoming event.²⁸ The group responsible for the feast put up posters announcing the day and the program, electric lights were strung across streets, and concession booths and bandstands were built.²⁹ The bandstands were erected at Oak and Cambridge and at Oak and Townsend streets where Society marching bands gave concerts during the celebration.³⁰ Oak Street was lined with vending stands where hot dogs, hamburgers, beef sandwiches, oysters, and snails were sold, in addition to such Italian favorites as cannolis, Italian ice, and chickpeas. The feast often ended with the "flight of the angels." When the procession returned to Saint Philip Benizi Church, two children were lowered by ropes so that they would be suspended over the figure of the saint where they would sway back-and-forth while reciting a prayer.³¹

There was some debate between the Catholic Church and the religious societies about the appropriateness of these events.³² Some clergy felt that the feasts were medieval and should be abolished. They were, however, popular with the Sicilian community. The yearly feasts were a great source of ethnic and religious pride. Some even claim that the feasts were a source of miraculous healings. One witness reported that a deaf mute girl was cured during the Maria Santissima Lauretana procession.³³ As the marchers exited from Saint Philip Benizi Church, the girl, who reportedly could not speak or hear, turned to her mother and said "Mommy" upon seeing the statue of the Blessed Mother.

Like other inner-city Chicago communities, Little Sicily had its share of crime. On 15 March 1911 an article appeared in the *Chicago Tribune*

describing five murders that had occurred in a two year period at Oak and Milton in the heart of Little Sicily. Headlines read "Two Years Toll at 'Death Corner.'" Like the term Little Hell, the name Death Corner captured the imagination of newspaper reporters who began to repeatedly use the term when referring to crime in the area. The murders at Death Corner were attributed to the "Black Hand." The Black Hand was not a criminal organization, but a crude method of extortion, by which wealthy Italians and others were extorted for money.³⁴ Intended victims were simply sent a letter stating that they would come to violence if they did not pay a particular sum. The term Black Hand came into use because the extortion letters often contained a drawing of a black hand and other evil symbols. Because of newspaper publicity, almost every crime in the Italian community was soon attributed to the Black Hand. There, undoubtedly, had been a disproportionate number of killings near the corner of Oak and Milton, but they were probably due more to personal quarrels than any single criminal organization.

Black Hand crimes began to disappear after 1915. By 1920, Black Hand activities had virtually vanished. Strong action by the White Hand Society, a group of Italian-American businessmen, and the Chicago Police Black Hand Squad, a group of Italian-American police officers, ended Black Hand extortion in Chicago. No sooner than the end of the Black Hand menace, the residents of Little Sicily were confronted with yet another crime problem. On 1 February 1920 the Volstead Act ended the sale of alcoholic beverages in the United States. Although illegal, there was still a public demand for alcohol. This demand was filled by various bootlegging gangs around Chicago. In Little Sicily, bootlegging was under the control of the Aiello brothers. The Aiello's owned a bakery at 473 West Division Street in the heart of Little Sicily.³⁵ They were a large and extensive family of nine brothers and numerous cousins. Joey Aiello was the kingpin of the group. The Aiellos were fiercely independent and spurned the advances of the Capone mob, who were attempting to consolidate all illegal liquor traffic in Chicago. Eventually war broke out between the competing factions. Within a year a dozen men were killed in Chicago's Little Sicily neighborhood and \$75,000 worth of property was firebombed, as the Aiello and Capone forces battled for control of the liquor business. Father Luigi Giambastiani, troubled by the killings, posted a sign on the front door of the

Saint Philip Benizi Church, which read: "Brothers! For the honor you owe to God, for the respect of your American Country and humanity; pray that this ferocious manslaughter, which disgraces the Italian name before the civilized world, may come to an end."³⁶

The Depression also hit Little Sicily hard; but like other communities throughout the country, the people persevered. In spite of difficult economic conditions and the community's tough reputation, positive things were happening in Little Sicily. A group of young men known as the Owl-Indians Social Athletic Club were working to prepare young people to participate in community life through recreational programs and social events.³⁷ The Owl-Indians began as a boy gang at Seward Park in the heart of Little Sicily during the early 1920s. They were named after the park's lightweight boy's basketball team. The Seward Park Indians were the bigger boys. The president of the Owl-Indians was a dentist named Angelo Lendino. In September 1935, the Owl-Indians were invited by Joseph Lohman (who later became sheriff of Cook County) of the Illinois Institute for Juvenile Research, to join the Chicago Area Project. The Chicago Area Project was begun by Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay to fight juvenile delinquency in Chicago. The program focused on using community members to fight delinquency through improved educational and recreational programs for youth and the improvement of the physical and social conditions of the community. One month later, at Doctor Lendino's request, seventy-five men gathered at the boy's gymnasium in Seward Park. They were lawyers, policemen, machinists, physicians, truck drivers, carpenters, storekeepers, barbers, public officials, ditch-diggers, and tailors. The Chicago Area Project offered them a chance to make things better in their neighborhood and they accepted the challenge. As a result, the North Side Civic Committee was formed with Doctor Lendino as its president.

Little Sicily was chosen as the first community in the Near North Side to participate in the Chicago Area Project on the assumption that the social life of the community and groups like the Owl-Indians could support such a program. This social life is best described in the words of Doctor Lendino himself. Referring to Little Sicily, Lendino wrote:

Perhaps nowhere else in the city is there to be
found a neighborhood where as many people know each

other as they do in our district. We have to a very great extent the same kind of warmth, friendliness and intimacy in our community life that was to be found in the small towns of Sicily from whence our parents came.³⁸

Lendino's words led to the realization by social scientists that cultural traits were an important bulwark against the stresses of urbanization and assimilation that plagued many ethnic communities; a trait that had been overlooked by early theorists.

The North Side Civic Committee wasted no time in setting up programs throughout the community. Seventeen subcommittees were formed to improve conditions in the area including committees on delinquency, health and sanitation, civic responsibility, recreation, and camping.³⁹ A study by the Chicago Recreation Commission in 1938 reported that 3,100 boys, girls, and young men were participating in the programs sponsored by the North Side Civic Committee. Committee members worked with Chicago Park District officials to remodel Seward Park; they worked with the Chicago Police Department to open a game room and craft shop on the third floor of the Hudson Avenue police station; they worked with the Chicago Board of Education to improve conditions at Jenner School; and they worked with Immaculate Conception Church to build a playground at 1500 North Park Avenue. In addition, the North Side Civic Committee created a summer camp program for local children in cooperation with the Salvation Army and the Italian Welfare Council. Boy Scout and Cub Scout troops were established, softball and basketball leagues formed, and educational trips were taken to Chicago museums and zoos. The North Side Civic Committee also sponsored an eleven day carnival at Saint Philip Benizi to raise money to redecorate the church.

So successful was the work of the North Side Civic Committee that it had a major impact on the field of sociology. Zorbaugh's study of Little Sicily supported social disorganization theory and the emerging Chicago School of Sociology that viewed crime as the result of the failure of social control in community areas. This lack of control was brought about because community institutions such as the church, school, family, and local government ceased to function effectively.⁴⁰ William Foote Whyte, a noted sociologist from the University of Oklahoma, challenged this position after

observing the work of Doctor Lendino and the North Side Civic Committee.⁴¹ Whyte concluded that no one who reads of the activities of this group can help but conclude that Zorbaugh neglected to see some of the most significant features of life in the area. This statement had a profound effect on the field of sociology and has led to the recognition that even distressed neighborhoods can have an effective social organization of their own.

In 1940, the City of Chicago approved plans to demolish an area between Chicago Avenue and Oak Street, from Larrabee to Townsend, and replace the homes there with low-rise public housing. Only Saint Philip Benizi Church was to be spared. The initial plan was received with some enthusiasm by residents of the area.⁴² Only a small section of the community was to be raised, and jobs and new housing would be created for local residents. Due to Father Giambastiani's efforts, the new housing development would even be named for an Italian, Mother Frances Cabrini, the Italian-born nun who became America's first saint of the Catholic Church. In addition, many of the families who would eventually move into the public housing units would be Italian.

Fred A. Romano, chairman of the Civic Improvement Subcommittee expressed some hesitation at a North Side Civic Committee meeting on 17 June 1940.⁴³ Romano reported that the committee, made up of three hundred resident property owners, was working to improve existing housing in the district and that they would enthusiastically support any project that would provide for the welfare of neighborhood residents. However, the proposed public housing was planned without their input in spite of their having submitted detailed recommendations for the modification of the project to better serve the needs of the local community. Romano concluded that they would oppose any project that would destroy their social life, scatter their people, and drive them out into worse living quarters than they were already occupying. In spite of the protests of local citizens, the City of Chicago went ahead with its plans and the first residents moved into the low-rise Cabrini homes in 1943.

In the early 1950s, the Chicago Housing Authority decided to expand public housing in Little Sicily.⁴⁴ The construction was to be in two phases. Phase one, the Cabrini Extension, completed in 1955, consisted of fifteen seven, ten, and nineteen story buildings. Phase two, the William

Green Homes (named for the president of the American Federation of Labor), completed in 1962, added an additional eight buildings to the housing complex now known as Cabrini-Green. The people of Little Sicily felt deceived. Much had been done to rehabilitate the area. Doctor Lendino, as spokesman for the Near North Civic Committee, stated that seventy-five percent of the residents of the community were home owners who had done much to improve their property.⁴⁵ Although well intended, the new public housing complex permanently altered the character of the neighborhood. It not only destroyed much of Little Sicily, but also allowed large numbers of African Americans to move into the newly opened Cabrini-Green housing complex. Although the community had been integrated for many years, blacks did not become the predominant group until the opening of the high-rise public housing units.

African Americans had been living in the area as early as 1890 when a black doctor and his family moved into the 800 block of North Franklin Street.⁴⁶ Just like the Sicilians, African Americans were drawn to the area by the promise of employment. Additional Blacks came to the Near North Side during the first term of Mayor William Hale Thompson (1915-1919) to work in the coal yards on nearby Goose Island and to serve as janitors and servants in the mansions of Chicago's Gold Coast. In addition, labor recruiters were sent to Louisville, Kentucky to find black laborers to work at a copper factory at 1600 West North Avenue during World War I. Blacks generally had good relations with the residents of Little Sicily. The Chicago Commission on race relations reported that during the 1919 race riots, conditions in Little Sicily were not serious and that immediately after the disturbance, the Blacks and Italians were again on good terms and that friendly relations generally existed between the Sicilians and their black neighbors.⁴⁷

The destruction of Little Sicily has been viewed as no less than a betrayal of the Sicilian community under the guise of progress.⁴⁸ Some believe that the area's reputation for lawlessness led to the demise of the community. As Doctor Lendino stated to federal housing officials: "We did have a reputation for crime and delinquency and at one time had the name of Little Hell, but our north side civic committee has been cleaning things up. We now have seven Boy Scout Troops."⁴⁹ The development of Cabrini-Green, the construction of the Chicago expressway system, and the building

of the Chicago campus of the University of Illinois has led many to conclude that it is doubtful that any Chicago ethnic group, other than African Americans, was damaged as greatly by government policies as was the Italian American.⁵⁰ As a result of the dispersion of the Sicilian and Italian populations, there has never been an Italian-American candidate for mayor of Chicago or any other major city office.

Little Sicily does not exist today. Most of the members of the original Sicilian community moved away when the neighborhood was demolished between 1941 and 1962 during the successive stages of the construction of the Cabrini-Green housing complex. In 1965, Saint Philip Benizi was consolidated with Saint Joseph Parish at 1108 North Orleans and the church was razed.⁵¹ During its first fifty years, over 35,000 people were baptized at Saint Philip Benizi Church.⁵² Another 6,273 couples were married and 10,854 funerals were performed. Father Giambastiani continued to work among the Black and Latino families, who moved into the Cabrini-Green complex after the demise of Little Sicily. Upon his retirement in 1961, he moved to the Servite Priory in Hillside, Illinois where he remained until his death in 1975 at age 89.⁵³ Although Little Sicily and Saint Philip Benizi Church are gone, their memory is kept alive by a yearly event. The Feast of Maria Santissima Laetana is still held every year in the Chicago suburb of Berwyn. Former residents, their children, and those who are just curious attend. During the one-hundredth anniversary celebration in 2000, the crowd was stirred when a bust of Father Giambastiani appeared to have a tear running out of its left eye.⁵⁴ Even in death, Father Gaimbastiani appeared to be saddened by the loss of Little Sicily.

Although, intended to improve the area, the development that replaced Little Sicily came to symbolize all that has gone wrong with public housing. The "hot-house" atmosphere of social problems concentrated in high-rise buildings led to an epidemic of gangs, drugs, and violence. The name Cabrini-Green has become synonymous with crime and violence, an example of misguided public policy. The Chicago Housing Authority began to demolish the Cabrini-Green homes in 1995. They are being replaced by luxury town-homes and condominiums. The only building left from the Little Sicily era is Saint Philip Benizi School, which can still be seen at 515 West Oak Street. It is now the Chicago Fellowship of Hope Christian Ministry. Few people have any idea about the history of the area and that the study of sociology was forever changed by the people who once lived there.

Notes

- 1 Humbert Nelli, *Italians in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Chicago, 1970); Rudolph J. Vecoli, "The Formation of Chicago's Little Italies," *Journal of American Ethnic History* II, (1983), 7-20; Dominick Candeloro, "The Little Italies of Chicago," *Chicago's Italians: Immigrants, Ethnics, Americans* (Mount Pleasant SC, 2003).
- 2 Harvey Zorbaugh, *The Gold Coast and the Slum* (Chicago, [1929] 1983), 5.
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