“Canoli in the Cream City”

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Abstract

The Padrone system is a symbol of immigration in the United States, particularly among Southern Italians, though not exclusively, and historians have analyzed its benefits and consequences for decades. Research on Padrone systems has rarely served as the primary topic of a historical monograph. Historians acknowledge the Padrone system as an element of the ethnic community, but ignore the complexity, variety and magnitude of Padrone networks. The influence of the Padrone system, though initially limited to the Italian community, gradually affected the greater Milwaukee area. Thus, while the Padrone system adapted to changes occurring in Milwaukee, it also influenced the development and character of the city.

The Padrone system has become a symbol of immigration in the United States, particularly among Southern Italians, though not exclusively, and historians have analyzed its benefits and consequences for decades. The nineteenth century global labor market stimulated European migration, particularly from the Southern and Eastern portions of Europe. These migrants supplied workforces all around the world, especially in American industries.¹ Southern Italian males began to respond to the global labor market’s demand for workers in 1880. Between 1880 and 1910, young employment-seeking males from Southern provinces characterized Italian migration to the United States.² These migrants, alone, foreign, and often illiterate, were perfect targets for private labor recruiters.

Research on Padrone systems has rarely served as the primary topic of a historical monograph. More commonly, historians acknowledge the Padrone system as an element of the ethnic community but ignore the complexity, variety, and magnitude of Padrone networks. Since the 1970s, the goal for immigration historians has been to highlight immigrants’ mobility and agency often at the risk of studying the ethnic community in isolation. Currently, however, historians have begun broadening their scope through comparative studies. For instance, Gunther Peck focuses on Padroni among different ethnic groups in *Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West, 1880-1930*. This recent and unique piece of research compares Padrone systems within the broad context of the American west. Peck emphasizes the transitory nature of immigrants and thus does not confine his study to one ethnic community.

This study, while focusing on the Italian community in Milwaukee, is unique in that it highlights the function of Italian Padroni. An investigation into Milwaukee’s Italian Padrone system indicates that the roles of the Padroni were complex and continually altering according to demographic and societal changes within the city. Thus, this study indicates that Padrone systems cannot be defined in simple terms. They affected ethnic communities both positively and negatively. They provided services, aid, and financial assistance but also issued threats, engaged in illegal activities, and physically exerted power.

Furthermore, the influence of Padroni, though initially limited to the Italian community, gradually affected the greater Milwaukee area. Thus, while the Padrone system adapted to changes occurring in Milwaukee, it also influenced the development and character of the city. More research needs to be done in order to completely demonstrate the relationship between the Italian community and Milwaukee; however, it is clear that studies on ethnic communities must broaden their focus outside the immediate parameters of the ethnic ward or neighborhood. For example, sociological studies have shown how immigrant businesses must eventually provide service to customers outside of the ethnic community in order to be prosperous.³ In Milwaukee, businesses such as Sendik’s, Balistreri’s, Maglio & Co., and the Catalano Produce Company are evidence of the proliferation and persistence of the earliest

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Italian businessmen. No longer viewed as businesses catering to the Italian population, Milwaukee residents consider these names and establishments an important economic component of Milwaukee.

For this reason, the immigrant Padrone network is a topic not only relevant to historical studies. Being that cities were primary locations of industry, Padrone networks took root in urban areas. While early historians have viewed Padroni as a product of pre-industrial society, Peck and other recent historians, contend that Padroni are an urban phenomenon.\(^4\) Immigration resulting from global market pressures provided ample opportunities for labor recruiters in urban environments. Therefore, research on Padrone networks is not only useful for ethnic and immigration studies but also for analyzing the way American cities became areas of global activity. Furthermore, the impact of immigrant networks and communities are visible in urban centers to this day, including Milwaukee, thus emphasizing the importance of such research to urban studies.

**Historical Focus**

Despite relevance to urban studies, research on Padroni has taken a historical focus. Traditionally historians defined the Padrone system as a network of labor agents that worked with railroad or construction companies needing temporary laborers. Padroni collected commission from the immigrants who sought employment through the Padrone system. Therefore, historians viewed Padroni as middlemen, those who provided links between the employer and immigrant laborers.\(^5\) As history progressed, immigration historians began to consider that the Padrone system was more than a system of labor agents and, as a result, broadened its definition. They discovered that the duties and characteristics of Padroni varied according to context. For example in Italian communities, Padroni were not only labor recruiters but also leaders in the immigrant community. They provided banking, funeral, grocery, and postal services to newly arrived immigrants.\(^6\)


To concisely define the term Padrone is a difficult task, especially because there are few parallels between Italian and American uses of the term. In Italian culture a Padrone is a godparent, one chosen by a child’s parents to serve as the child’s patron. Though there are often patron-client relationships in the American form of Padroni, the use of the term in the United States does not have Italian roots. Nonetheless, there are common characteristics among historical descriptions of Italian Padroni in American urban areas. For example, Padroni were nearly always prominent members of the community and viewed by fellow immigrants as leaders and benefactors. Acting as a labor recruiter was common but not necessary to be considered a Padrone. Private enterprise appears to have been a better indicator of Padrone status. Padroni were frequently owners, either of labor or business. The Padroni, or prominent members of Milwaukee’s Italian community, formed a network, or system, composed of individuals with mutual economic and social interests. This network operated secretively and served two main purposes. First it allowed the Padroni, by working together, to engage in multiple business ventures. Second, it provided a financial base which Padroni utilized to assist the development of the Italian community.

Historiographical interpretations of the Padrone system have become more favorable over time. The earliest interpretations depict Padroni as ruthless, taking every opportunity to exploit their fellow immigrants for their own monetary benefit. The immigrants, then, were passive victims trapped in the oppressive system of contract labor. These initial analyses believed immigrants transplanted the Padrone system from the Old World. Recently, historians discovered evidence that contrasts those previous notions in three ways. First, immigrants were not passive victims of the Padroni. Modern works provide examples of immigrants breaking away from the Padrone system in Chicago and Montreal, Canada. Secondly, the Padrone system was a product of capitalism, not a product of the Italian village or town. Padroni took advantage of American capital by supplying immigrant labor to railroad and construction industries. Finally, though some Padroni were exploitative, they were prominent members of

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8 Peter Pizzino and Tom Montag, *Peter’s Story: Growing up in Milwaukee’s Third Ward during the 1920s & 1930s* (Fairwater, WI: MWPH Books, 2007), 47, 97.
the Italian community who provided important services and helped organize fests and mutual aid associations. Therefore, they were an integral part of the Italian immigrant society.

Few historical studies have analyzed the Italian Padrone system in average sized cities; most investigate immigrant labor recruiting in New York and Chicago, both cities with massive infrastructural and industrial projects. Memoirs, oral histories, newspapers, and journal articles, however, prove that Italian Padroni were present in Milwaukee, thereby making this study unique. The fact that Padroni existed in an average sized mid-west city, provides new evidence for historical interpretation. It is even more astonishing that a significant Italian presence existed in a city dominated by German and Polish heritage. Moreover, the Padroni in Milwaukee did not merely exist as labor recruiters but were a fundamental element of the Italian neighborhood. They utilized the urban environment, capitalism, and their Italian culture to promote their own economic success and the success of the community, albeit, at times, through illegal means.

Researching Padroni is often difficult due to the lack of sources available. Often memoirs or oral histories are the only way to gain a perspective on the Padroni’s covert operations. Fortunately, Peter Pizzino, an Italian immigrant who grew up in Milwaukee’s Italian neighborhood, provides an account of his experience working with Padroni in his memoir, *Peter’s Story: Growing up in Milwaukee’s Third Ward in the 1920s & 1930s*. His story is important for several reasons. First, his experience asserts that a network of Padroni existed in Milwaukee in the 1920s and 1930s. Most historians contend the Padroni existed prior to that period. Second, Peter was still a child when he began working for the Padroni. Most knowledge regarding children and Padroni involves the indentured apprentices of child musicians by labor recruiters. Even these contracts nearly ceased in 1890. Finally, Pizzino’s account portrays a change in the Padroni system. While Milwaukee Padroni were never completely honest or innocent, their criminal and illegal activity became more violent and frequent.

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12 Gabaccia, *Italy’s Many Diasporas*, 63-64; Pizzino and Montag, *Peter’s Story*. 
Migration to Milwaukee

Southern Italian migration to Milwaukee began as early as 1886, but in very small numbers; Northern Italian migration dominated this early period. In the 1910s, the quantity of Southern Italians significantly increased. By 1915, nearly sixty-five percent of the Italian population was Sicilian and twenty percent was Southern Italian. The Third Ward, which became the domain of this Italian community, was originally the location of Irish immigrants. However, a disastrous fire in 1892 took a toll on the Irish population living in Milwaukee’s Third Ward. As many Irish moved out due to fire damage, Italians seized the opportunity to claim a neighborhood of their own.13

Characteristic of the general pattern of Southern Italian migration, young Italian males were the first to seek employment and housing in Milwaukee. Several of these initial migrants wanted temporary work with immediate monetary reward; they then took their earnings back to their families in Italy. Most took seasonal jobs such as construction, railroad maintenance, or mining. As a result, they made several trips back and forth from the United States to Italy, departing for home during the winter season and returning for the peak work period.14 For example, Guiseppe Balistrieri migrated to Milwaukee in 1890 and made approximately thirty trips back and forth before finally settling his family in the mid-west.15 It was this type of migrant who relied on labor recruiters for seasonal employment.

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14 Gabaccia, Italy’s Many Diasporas, 64-65.
15 Guiseppe Balistrieri, interview by Larry Baldassaro, 23 March 1991, box 1, folder 3, transcript, Oral History of Italians in Milwaukee, Archives Department, University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee Libraries.

Map Collection. UWM Libraries. 1927.
During the initial stages of Italian immigration in Milwaukee, Padroni served as labor recruiters for the North Western railroad. In 1864, the Galena and Chicago Union railroad consolidated with the Chicago and North Western railway to become the most important railroad system in the West. The consolidated railway took the name of the latter, the Chicago and North Western railroad. It was extremely prosperous and quickly began expanding its lines throughout the western portion of the United States. By 1920, the popular railway had over 8,000 miles of track in nine western states and $200,000,000 in $100 shares. Such a company required an extensive labor force to not only lay new track, but also to maintain and repair existing lines.\textsuperscript{16} Thus, it is not surprising that in the 1890s and 1900s some Italian immigrants came to Milwaukee for railroad work.

Giuseppe Balistrieri’s son remembers a man in charge of Milwaukee’s Sicilians who was tall and handsome with white hair and a commanding personality. He spoke English well and used his capabilities to help Italian immigrants find jobs. The man was Vito Guardalabene, belonging to one of the first Italian families in Milwaukee. He spread word of employment to Sicily through a network of paesani and found Guiseppe Balistrieri a job with the North Western railroad company.\textsuperscript{17} The earliest migrants who worked for the railroad were typically young males like Balistrieri. Therefore, some of them lived in boarding houses offered through the Padrone. For instance, Vito Dicristo lived in a boarding house until he was able to save enough money to pay for his wife’s migration.\textsuperscript{18} With the arrival of wives or families, Italian men often sought more stable employment and housing.

Unlike New York or Chicago, where Italian immigrants predominated in railroad and construction work, Milwaukee’s Italian immigrants did not overshadow other ethnic groups on the railroad. Oral histories determine that peddling fruits and vegetables was more common for Milwaukee’s Italians, and it was that type of work that allowed Italians to branch out of the Third Ward. Italian employment in the railroad industry appeared to be less frequent in

\textsuperscript{16} Bruce, *History of Milwaukee*, 836-837.
\textsuperscript{17} Guiseppe Balistrieri, interview by Larry Baldassaro, Oral History of Italians in Milwaukee.
\textsuperscript{18} Anthony Dicristo, interview by Diane Vecchio, 16 March 1991, box 1, folder 9, transcript, Oral History of Italians in Milwaukee.
Milwaukee than in other American cities; yet, there were Padroni who recruited laborers for the North Western railway. Perhaps the demographics of the Italian community influenced the extent of railroad employment. Italians first began arriving in Milwaukee in small numbers. The 1900 census recorded an Italian population of only 726. However, by 1910 the Italian population soared to 4,788. Therefore, there would have been a greater demand for employment from Italian immigrants in 1910 than 1900.

During the peak of Italian immigration in Milwaukee, the number of residents in the Third Ward also increased. It was around this period that the Third Ward began to develop its character as an Italian community. Some of the earliest Italian families, such as the Guardalabenes, the Vituccis, and the Catalanos began establishing businesses. Between 1910 and 1920, the Third Ward became a hub of entrepreneurial activity. The Padroni of this period were characterized as leaders and business owners. Italians admired and respected them as benefactors of the community. Vincent Emanuele recalls the time:

I remember in the Third Ward, people helped each other. It seemed that in this area there were certain leaders. The local mortician, some people thought he was the mayor of Milwaukee. Mr. Guardalabene. And then there were some other leaders, the Vitucci family. These people who were brilliant and successful business people, had the command of the language and always helped those who didn’t. They helped if they needed citizenship papers or they had to go someplace.

There have been three different individuals dubbed the “king” of Milwaukee’s Little Italy. Initially there was Dominic Barone, the first Italian to open a tavern in the Third Ward. He was also one of four Italians responsible for the success of the first water carnival at the Lake Front in 1888. Other notable accomplishments included organizing the mutual aid society Galilei-Galileo and serving as Italian consulate. Peter Guardalabene succeeded Barone’s reign as the “king” of the Third Ward. Guardalabene owned a barbershop before starting a funeral business in 1915. As indicated in the city directory, the children of Guardalabene maintained the business after his retirement. The last unofficial “king” of the Italian community was

20 Vincent B. Emanuele, interview by Diane Vecchio, 13 April 1991, box 1, folder 10, transcript, Oral History of Italians in Milwaukee.
Looking up East Water from Buffalo Street

Mario Carini, *Milwaukee’s Italians: The Early Years* (Milwaukee: The Italian Community Center of Milwaukee, 1999).

Michael Vitucci. Vitucci owned a real estate business, Cesaro & Vitucci. In 1933, his employment also included the ownership of a tavern. Guardabene and Vitucci had one important element in common; they were both owners of businesses that catered to the demands of the Italian community. Italians may not have relied on these individuals for employment, but they did rely on them for certain services. Thus new immigrants overwhelmed by the ambiguity of American culture looked to these leaders for assistance.

As stated by Vincent Emanuele, Italians in the Third Ward respected and admired the leaders of their community. Approximately 3,000 Italians attended the funeral of Tony Bellanti. He was one of the most highly admired leaders of the neighborhood and viewed as a patron of the Third Ward. Furthermore, he was the President of Colombia Savings Bank and a member of Our Lady of Pompeii Church, the Italian Catholic Church of the Third Ward. The *Milwaukee Journal* reported that Italian women, men and children mourned as if a member of their own family had passed away.

By the 1910s, some of the first Italian families to arrive in Milwaukee established themselves on Commission Row, an area around Broadway Street where wholesale fruit

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23 “20,000 Italians in Milwaukee; All are Known as Music Lovers; They Gave Color to ‘the Ward,’” *Milwaukee Journal*, April 4, 1928.
distributors set up stalls with fresh produce. The Catalanos, Cianciolos, Maglios, and Pastorinos are examples of families who established businesses on Commission Row. These men loaded up flat crates with produce for peddlers who paid for a day’s supply and then went around the entire city selling the produce in their wagons. Each peddler had his own route, but before setting out on the day’s course, all the peddlers went to breakfast together at a local restaurant. Prior to working for the Padroni, Pizzino peddled fruit with Joe Renello. They went to Wauwatosa on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. On Tuesdays and Thursday they went up Humboldt Avenue where several wealthy families lived. They walked up and down the street yelling, “fruits and vegetables” in Italian.

Italians businesses owners on Commission Row provided peddling jobs to new immigrants and assisted fellow members of the Italian community. I. Gagliano & Schmidt Johnson was one of the wholesale fruit distributor companies on Commission Row that offered employment to paesani. Nick Gagliano worked for I. Gagliano upon his arrival in Milwaukee but eventually opened his own business and became successful. He developed business connections with Kohl’s, Sendik’s, Hass & Mueller, and Crystal Market. Known as the “banana king” of the Third Ward, Gagliano was also an active member of Our Lady of Pompeii Church and a contributor to the community. During the Great Depression, he purchased a head stone for an Italian family that could not afford to buy it themselves.

Like Nick Gagliano, several Italians found employment as fruit and vegetable peddlers. They usually heard about peddling opportunities in Milwaukee through paesani and felt comfortable working on Commission Row because of its strong Italian presence. Involvement in the peddling business eased the transition for the immigrants because they were surrounded by paesani in their work environment. Thus, those who went into peddling first learned about American culture from fellow countrymen. Commission Row and the Third Ward provided a

\[24\] Wright’s Milwaukee City Directory (Milwaukee, WI: Wright Directory Co., 1932), 2379.
\[25\] Pizzino and Montag, Peter’s Story, 51, 55-57, 61.
\[26\] Grace M. Falbo, interview by Larry Baldassaro, 5 April 1991, box 1, folder 12, transcript, Oral History of Italians in Milwaukee.
network of support for newly arrived immigrants.\textsuperscript{27} Italian men relied on the network of support until they felt financially and socially secure in the American environment.

Mario Carini, \textit{Milwaukee’s Italians: The Early Years} (Milwaukee: The Italian Community Center of Milwaukee, 1999).

\textsuperscript{27} Sam Purpero, interview by Diane Vecchio, 13 April 1991, box 2, folder 6, transcript, Oral History of Italians in Milwaukee.
The Milwaukee Network Grows

Adding to the network of support were dozens of taverns, groceries, and import stores owned by Italian immigrant families. There were approximately forty-five grocery stores owned by Italian entrepreneurs, thirty-eight of which were in the Third Ward. Several of those interviewed in the oral histories mentioned their grandparents opening groceries. One individual had a store called Corti’s located near the railroad station, which sold cigars, tobacco, candy, and fruit to individuals taking the train. Other groceries sold Italian foods such as salami, imported olives, and several types of Italian cheeses. These foods provided comfort to Italian families. Taverns, such as the Alamo and Max Maglio’s, were always places for food, drinks, and games on Sundays. Men played bocci and briscola. Pizzino remembers the Padroni walking from one bar to another and remembered them at Max Maglio’s tavern.

Pizzino lived just down the street from Max Maglio; it was there that Peter noticed the Padroni watching him. Pizzino had seen the Padroni around the ward before, but at Maglio’s,

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29 LeRoy Bertocnici, interview by Diane Vecchio, 9 March 1991, box 1, folder 5, transcript, Oral History of Italians in Milwaukee.
30 Pizzino and Montag, Peter’s Story, 90-91.
he felt as though they were keeping an eye on him. Pizzino and some other kids from the neighborhood were spying on men drinking and playing briscola at Maglio’s. After the gentlemen left, the remaining food enticed the young boys, who ran into the tavern and stole the platters of meatballs, sausage, and pasta. The next day, the boys, including Pizzino, returned to Maglio’s and replaced the platters they had stolen the day before. Pizzino recalls seeing the Padroni there. He states in his memoir, “They were the padrones, the bosses, the Italian bosses. They ran Little Italy in the Third Ward. The First Ward had to get permission to come do errands there. These were nice-looking men. They had jowls on them, little bellies. They were always dressed immaculately.”

Basilio Pizzino, Peter Pizzino’s father, was a single parent who worked as a watchman for the Milwaukee Electric Railway & Light Company. He worked second shift and made approximately thirteen dollars a week. Thus, the Third Ward practically raised Peter Pizzino and his siblings. Furthermore, Pizzino felt obligated to help his father financially and was more interested in work than attending school. Besides peddling fruit with Renello during the summer months, Pizzino cleaned horse stalls. It was in the horse stalls that the Padroni offered Pizzino an employment opportunity. The Padroni noticed Pizzino’s toughness and his loyalty to the Sicilian people. They offered him a job working in the butcher shops and running errands. Before Pizzino began work, the Padroni took him to a tailor and purchased a new suit for him. They paid him five cents an hour. Pizzino was approximately ten years old.

Pizzino described the Padroni in Milwaukee as “the men who ran an organization and all parts of it – tobacco, imports, Commission Row, places where they had vegetables and where they had bootlegging, you name it. These were the owners, well-to-do men, the padrones.” As business owners and prominent members of the Italian community, the Padroni loaned money to other taverns and restaurants managed by Italians. The Padroni paid the immediate cost for repairs or upkeep, and the business owners gradually reimbursed them with interest. Besides working in the butcher shops, one of Pizzino’s first jobs was to pick up envelopes from

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31 Pizzino and Montag, Peter’s Story, 90-91; Milwaukee City Directory.
32 Pizzino and Montag, Peter’s Story, 18; Wright’s Milwaukee City Directory (Milwaukee, WI: Wright Directory Co., 1935), 937, 1384.
33 Pizzino and Montag, Peter’s Story, 95-98, 127.
34 Pizzino and Montag, Peter’s Story, 97.
businesses that owed Padroni money. The Padroni were generous until someone failed to make their payment. Then, Pizzino recalled, the Padroni took the fellow for a ride, and he was never seen again. Italians knew not to ask what happened; silence and trust were part of Italian culture.35

Intelligent men who profited from the American system of free enterprise composed the Milwaukee Padrone network. However, unlike Americans, Southern Italian and Sicilian immigrants created a business network that functioned on Italian rules of behavior. Thus, these immigrants developed a business culture of their own that combined American and Italian elements. Sicilians and Southern Italians migrated from an area characterized by centuries of foreign and often abusive rule that failed to improve after Italian unification. Poverty and rural exploitation promoted an environment of corruption, superstition, and violence in Southern Italy and Sicily.36 Thus, immigrants from that area brought to the United States certain perceptions regarding trust, respect, family, and friends. For Sicilians, blood ties formed the strongest bond. Neighbors and friends were considered valuable in some situations but untrustworthy in others. Southern Italians often, but not always, established relationships with friends and neighbors for material gain. Thus, if a friend interfered with one’s ability to obtain wealth, he was not a friend to keep.37

Deriving from that Italian custom, respect was the cardinal rule of the Padrone system and the Third Ward. Italian parents taught their children respect, love, and honor. They were strict and Italian children held as much respect for their friends’ parents as their own. The parents in the ward took responsibility for the discipline of all children. Italians also paid respect to elders. It was a Sicilian tradition to kiss the hand of an elder as a greeting.38 More importantly, Italians did not take disrespect lightly. Pizzino recalled what happened in the Third Ward as a result of disrespect. “Coming into Little Italy in the Third Ward, you had to remember

35 Pizzino and Montag, Peter’s Story, 99-100, 116.
38 Sam Purpero, interview by Diane Vecchio; Anthony Guardalabene, interview by Diane Vecchio, 9 March 1991, box 2, folder 2; Mary Ann Sarsfield Koerner, interview by Diane Vecchio, 10 April 1991, box 2, folder 3, transcripts, Oral History of Italians in Milwaukee.
to show respect. If you screwed around with the girls there, you were dead. If you stole from the syndicate, you were dead.”

According to Pizzino’s memory, illegal activities occurred frequently in the Third Ward. However, Pizzino was only born around 1923, after the onset of prohibition, when bootlegging was popular. It is difficult to determine details regarding criminal activity in the ward prior to the 1920s. Most of the Italians in the oral histories remember the ward as a safe place, where there was a sense of community and individuals relied on each other for support. However, those living outside of the Third Ward had different perceptions. A crime in 1897 heightened fears and suspicions that Italians were criminal and unsanitary. Still, those fears seem to be groundless, since the literature on Milwaukee’s Italians portrays them as law-abiding citizens. The Milwaukee Journal provided a glowing review of the Italian community in 1928, stating that little was heard of the ward until prohibition and prior to that one murder, possibly the crime in 1897, brought publicity. Italians were honest, hard working, and prompt on payments.

Likely, crime characterized the Padrone system in the Third Ward prior to Pizzino’s involvement; however, it is evident through Pizzino’s memoir that illegal activity typified not only the Padrone system but the ward in the 1920s and 1930s. The Eighteenth Amendment, which prohibited the production and sale of alcohol, passed in 1920 significantly affected Milwaukee, a city that relied on beer production. Saloons tried to stay in business by serving soft drinks but were unsuccessful. Milwaukeeans never imagined prohibition would last fourteen years. What began as readiness to follow the new law, quickly turned into creative efforts to disguise locations that produced illegal beverages.

Before prohibition, some Italians engaged in small-scale wine production. The wine produced was not so much for sale but enjoyed by family, neighbors, and friends. Anthony Dicristo’s father made about 200 gallons of wine a year. After the wine was ready, the Dicristo family had paesani over to the house for food and wine. Dicristo remembered the house

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39 Pizzino and Montag, *Peter’s Story*, 47.
40 Pizzino and Montag, *Peter’s Story*, 1.
41 Antoinette Carini, interview by Diane Vecchio, 20 April 1991, box 1, folder 7; Anthony Guardalabene, interview by Diane Vecchio; Guiseppe Balistrieri, interview by Larry Baldassaro, Oral History of Italians.
42 Meloni, “Italy Invades the Bloody Third,” 52-53.
bursting with friends and family, all over to enjoy the homemade wine.\textsuperscript{45} Wine making was part of the Italian immigrant culture that promoted family and kin relationships. It provided a reason for neighbors to gather. The production of alcohol during prohibition had a different intent. Several Italian families recognized the economic opportunity associated with producing and selling alcohol. During the 1920s, alcohol was in even greater demand than before the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment.\textsuperscript{46}

In the early summer Italian bootleggers made mash for alcohol out of potatoes, apples, or cherries. They worked at night when less people were around, but the smell permeated the whole ward. Neighbors sitting on porches did not seem to mind the odor. Dicristo remembers the smell of the stills and knew which houses made alcohol. However, as part of Sicilian tradition, he kept it to himself. Bootleggers bottled the freshly made alcohol and put it into baskets, paying teenagers fifty cents for each container delivered. Initially, Pizzino merely watched as the moon shiners made the alcohol; however, when he was about twelve or thirteen years old, he began making liquor deliveries. To disguise the alcohol, the bootleggers placed the bottles at the bottom of a basket, covered the bottles with a handkerchief, and then placed cartons of eggs on top. The teenage boys made their rounds to different speakeasies under the guise of egg peddlers. Pizzino made these deliveries for the bootleggers in the ward; it was separate work from his employment with the Padroni.\textsuperscript{47}

During prohibition, it was not unusual to make and sell moonshine. Several Italian families did so. As a result, the Third Ward gained a reputation as being one of the most colorful and entertaining locations in the city. According to the \textit{Milwaukee Journal},

After prohibition came the real ‘third ward,’ the ward of hilarious temples of revelry, where gin, dago red, needle beer and plain ‘moon’ were sold openly to all comers, where jazz music and alcoholic dancing gave a sumptuous air to dingy saloons, where food meant spaghetti or ravioli and where the diamonds and furs of the rich gleamed among the soiled garments of common laborers.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{45} Anthony Dicristo, interview by Diane Vecchio, Oral History of Italians.
\textsuperscript{46} Wells, \textit{This is Milwaukee}, 191.
\textsuperscript{47} Anthony Dicristo, interview by Diane Vecchio, Oral History of Italians; Pizzino and Montag, \textit{Peter’s Story}, 141-143.
\textsuperscript{48} “20,000 Italians in Milwaukee,” \textit{Milwaukee Journal}, April 4, 1928.
Gradually, the Third Ward lost some of its popularity and glitter as saloons and taverns in other parts of Milwaukee began to offer a greater variety of drinks at lower prices. Consequently, some, but not all, of the ward’s saloons and taverns closed. Those that were still open no longer attracted the large, diverse crowd of the early prohibition days.\(^4^9\)

The Padroni, as men of economic enterprise, did not miss the opportunity to make a profit during prohibition. Unlike the small scale moonshiners that Pizzino delivered baskets of alcohol for, the Padroni were involved in bootlegging on a larger scale. They had markets for alcohol in Ontario and Lafayette, Indiana. Perhaps, the decline in customers frequenting Third Ward saloons influenced the Padroni to expand their own business market. At approximately fourteen years old, Pizzino began hauling alcohol in a Lincoln, furnished with hidden containers in the back to hold the alcohol. The Padroni purchased moonshine from an outfit in Lafayette and sold it in Milwaukee. Pizzino drove to Lafayette in the Lincoln, where the moonshine producers there filled the vehicle with alcohol. Then, Pizzino returned to Milwaukee with a car full of moonshine. He usually completed his hauling at night. At one point, he was making four to five trips a week.\(^5^0\) The frequency of Pizzino’s trips indicates that the Padroni’s bootlegging enterprise was productive.

The Padroni were involved in other business ventures besides bootlegging; they participated in various enterprises ranging from produce to stolen furs. Pizzino quickly gained their trust and became aware of the extent of the Padroni’s dealings. By the time Pizzino began picking up moonshine he was also still collecting envelopes, working in the butcher shop, and delivering fruits and vegetables. Eventually, Pizzino’s tasks became more dangerous and complicated. They were also consuming more of his time. The Padroni sent Pizzino to Chicago for training as a wheeler, one who drove the Padroni where they needed to be. Pizzino already had some training in Milwaukee where he learned how to fight and use weapons as a means of self-defense in case operations did not go smoothly. It is at this point, when he goes to Chicago for training, that Pizzino noticed changes in the system.\(^5^1\)

\(^{4^9}\) “20,000 Italians in Milwaukee,” \textit{Milwaukee Journal}, April 4, 1928.  
\(^{5^0}\) Pizzino and Montag, \textit{Peter’s Story}, 160-165.  
\(^{5^1}\) Pizzino and Montag, \textit{Peter’s Story}, 103-115, 173, 179.
As the Padroni’s business ventures became more extensive, pressures increased. The Padroni highly valued trust, and as the stakes became higher were less willing to tolerate dishonesty in the network. The Padroni had a highly lucrative business going to New York and seizing trailers full of Scotch or furs. They took the stolen material to Chicago and Milwaukee for sale. One of Pizzino’s friends in the network took some of the Scotch hauled from New York. The Padroni discovered his error, and Pizzino never heard from his friend again. The loss of his friend hurt Pizzino, who was by now entrusted with hunting down those who disobeyed the Padroni.52

Crime and Violence

Criminality and violence characterized the Padrone system as early as Pizzino can remember; although, he was only born in the early 1920s. He grew up during the era of prohibition and bootlegging. Though considered illegal, many individuals made and sold alcohol during this time. Bootlegging became a commonplace activity; those arrested for breaking the Eighteenth Amendment viewed it as a temporary nuisance. The disgrace typically directed at criminals by law-abiding Milwaukeeans did not apply to arrested bootleggers. Those sentenced to the workhouse for violating the Eighteenth Amendment, established Bootlegger’s Row. There prisoners enjoyed parties, steak dinners, and smuggled whiskey. Eventually, a prison employee reported the corruption of Bootlegger’s Row to the Superintendent. The subsequent official investigation into the activities on Bootlegger’s Row brought an end to the easy life on the workhouse grounds. From that point on, bootleggers “were not the sort you’d invite to a party.”53

Unlike the early days of bootlegging, the type of crime engaged in by the Padroni was dark, serious, and violent. Yet, the Padroni that Pizzino worked with did not seek aggression. They resorted to violence when someone broke the code of honor, when they failed to pay the Padroni or other Italians proper respect. Padroni provided assistance to the Italians in the Third Ward. Their own economic success allowed them to serve as benefactors for the Italian community. However, they never hesitated to show off their power and strength. When Pizzino was about seven years old he remembered the Padroni hanging an Italian man for raping an

52 Pizzino and Montag, Peter’s Story, 215-220.
53 Wells, This is Milwaukee, 191-193.
Italian girl. People saw it but everyone knew not to say anything. Snitching on your neighbor was against Italian culture.\textsuperscript{54} The change that occurred in the system in the 1930s was not that Padroni suddenly became criminal. Rather, it appears that new members were in less control of their power and fighting for control over markets with Chicago. The individuals in the network were in charge of an extensive and lucrative business. The intent of the Padroni was no longer to help the community or engage in private enterprise. It was to increase their power, prestige, and territory.

Pizzino was always interested in learning about different vocations and at various times in his life watched auto repairmen, bakers, or butchers go about their work. During his trips to Chicago and New York, Pizzino met tailors who taught him the trade. Pizzino practiced under these tailors and quickly became skilled at cutting designs for suits and evening gowns. He enjoyed tailoring and wanted to establish himself in the business. Pizzino’s interest in tailoring, combined with changes in the system, caused him to assess his life. He no longer wanted to be part of an organization that was becoming more violent and the members more careless. Padroni were exploiting their power over others more than ever. Before he reached the age of eighteen, Pizzino asked permission to leave the organization. The Padroni granted him his desire and wished him a full and happy life. That quickly, Pizzino left the system.\textsuperscript{55}

**Milwaukee’s Demographics Begin to Change**

At the same time that Pizzino described a transformation occurring in the system, the Italian community in the Third Ward was undergoing demographic changes. Beginning around 1926, some Italian families began moving out of the ward to other areas such as Bay View, West Allis, and Wauwatosa. For most families, moving out of the ward indicated financial security and economic mobility. A 1912 report from the Wisconsin Bureau of Labor indicated that the Third Ward suffered from congestion and poor housing. The inferior housing was in many cases due to the fact that little to no renovations occurred in the ward after the 1892 fire. From the 1910s on, the residential capacity of the ward shrunk.\textsuperscript{56} Thus, Italian families left in search of more space and a better home.

\textsuperscript{54} Pizzino and Montag, *Peter’s Story*, 46-47.
\textsuperscript{55} Pizzino and Montag, *Peter’s Story*, 220-225.
A decrease in membership at Our Lady of Pompeii Church was another indicator of the demographic changes occurring in the Third Ward. The number of registered families fell from 1,180 in 1930 to 350 in 1945. St. Rita’s, located in the First Ward, was the second Italian church in Milwaukee. It celebrated its first mass in 1939 and since then drew members from Our Lady of Pompeii. In 1955, the City Housing Authority conducted a study on the Third Ward and discovered that it was no longer appropriate for residential purposes. The study found 194 housing units with no heat and 192 with no running water. Population in the ward decreased nearly fifty-six percent from 1920 to 1950. The Third Ward became part of a redevelopment plan under the Urban Renewal Administration in 1955.  

A Padrone system based on owning businesses that cater to the demands of the Italian community loses effectiveness if the neighborhood dissipates. It is possible that as the demographics of the Third Ward changed, the Padrone system adjusted and began expanding business ventures to New York, Chicago, Lafayette, and Ontario. Though some of these endeavors began in the 1920s, when the Third Ward was still a thriving community, Padroni continued to search for more markets in the 1930s. Expanding into other markets compensates for the portions of business not doing well. Fewer Italians living in the neighborhood would likely result in fewer customers frequenting the butcher shops and groceries, leaving the Padroni to find business elsewhere.

Thus, it appears as though the Padrone system in Milwaukee endured three general phases. The first phase occurred shortly before and around the turn of the century when the first Italian immigrants began arriving. The Padroni of this period found jobs for Italian men on the North Western railway and offered boarding houses for immigrant men since many migrated alone. The second phase took place around the 1910s and 1920s during the height of Italian habitation in the Third Ward. During this phase Padroni were the prominent members of the Italian neighborhood who owned businesses in the ward and on Commission Row. Those on Commission Row supplied new immigrants with jobs, as fruit and vegetable peddlers. Padroni owned businesses in the ward, provided services, and assisted new immigrants. Italians viewed them as leaders of the community who deserved respect. The last phase transpired in the

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1930s as the population in the Third Ward declined. Increased violence, extensive illegal markets, and the rapid expansion of new members into the system characterized this phase.

The Padroni in Milwaukee were beneficent, criminal, protective, destructive, and powerful. Those in the Third Ward respected them, looked up to them, and feared them. Thus, the Padrone system was a paradoxical combination of Italian and American culture. It functioned on the code of honor, an Italian policy that emphasized trust, silence, and respect. Yet, it was characterized as a network of private enterprise, which was clearly an American tradition. It also appears that the criminal aspects of Milwaukee’s Padroni did not hinder the success of the Italian community. Those interviewed for the Italian oral history collection remember the unity of the Third Ward. They proudly discuss their accomplishments, such as opening businesses or attending college and are proud of their Italian heritage. Evidence of the success is present in the construction of the Italian Community Center in 1981, which still serves as a gathering place for Italian-Americans living in Milwaukee. 58 Certainly, the Italian population has ironically played a vital role in the growth of Milwaukee, a city known for its German and Polish heritage. Further study on the Padroni within that community will only broaden the knowledge of immigration and ethnicity in Milwaukee and other parts of the urban mid-west.

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