

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

THE HILLSIDE PARADISE OF ARKANSAS'S OTHER ITALIANS

BY KATHERINE WHITWORTH | PHOTO BY ARSHIA KHAN

Ahh, yes — *this looks a lot like Italy*. Probably not what most people are thinking when they pause to admire the scenery in the foothills of the Ouachita Mountains. But that's exactly what three Italian immigrants thought when first they surveyed a clear-cut expanse of land that straddles Perry and Pulaski counties. It was 1915, and the men had traveled from Chicago in response to a newspaper advertisement for cheap acreage with the hope that they could escape the crowded tenements and harsh working conditions they'd found in that city after moving there from Northern Italy a decade previous. Just as America had meant the promise of freedom from economically depressed Italy and a chance to better their lives and those of their families through steady work at decent wages, so Arkansas meant the possibility of independence, of freedom from dismal city life, and of a chance to recreate for their own children the pastoral childhood they'd known in the home country.

So the three men (names: Belotti, Perrini, and Segalla) bought up as much land as they could afford, and a house was ordered to be built. They returned to Chicago to collect their families, and came back to Arkansas with them and two more (Busato, Granato). The five men, their wives, and a total of seventeen children arrived just before Christmas of 1915 and moved into one house, where they lived together for months as the individual families waited for their own houses to be completed. They named their mountaintop community "Alta Villa" — "the high place" in Italian.

It was a hard winter in Alta Villa. They had no privacy and little food. But when the spring came, work began on the construction of four more houses. When the earth thawed, food crops



This sign is found not in New York but in an unincorporated village on Wye Mountain.

were sown and grapevines were planted. As word spread of this hilltop land reminiscent of home, a second wave of Italian families moved to Alta Villa; by the end of 1916, fifteen families from Chicago and northern Michigan had settled the area that would soon come to be called Little Italy.

Olga (Vaccari) Dal Santo is the oldest remaining born-and-raised resident of Little Italy. Her family was part of the second wave, and she was born in Little Italy in 1925. She remembers a youth filled with simple pastimes like picnics and dances, bonfires and roasts. Oftentimes, the adults would sit around talking

and drinking wine in the evenings and the young people would be left to their own devices in finding something to do. One such night, a family friend brought by for a visit a young Italian man who was en route from Chicago to California. When John Dal Santo first saw Olga Vaccari, he says, she was on the porch with her parents. He took her across the street to a dance hall where there was a nickelodeon that she had rigged to play without a nickel, and that's where they got acquainted. "Trouble is," says John, "she didn't want to kiss me that first day."

John fared better on his second visit. This time, when he arrived the family was busy picking grapes — Little Italy had two hundred acres of vines and four bonded wineries during its peak winemaking years — and Olga and John found a row all to themselves. "This I'll never forget," says John: "A deer came running across." He must have taken it as a sign, because not long after that John came back to Little Italy to marry Olga. Of not kissing John that first day, Olga says, "That was a big mistake, because in October we'll be married sixty-nine years. I didn't expect to stay so long."

And it's not just those born and raised here who find it so appealing.

In fact, it's not even just Italians: Local historian Christopher Dorer, who considers himself an adopted Italian ("He's *our* Italian," says Olga, who calls residents "members"), "couldn't live anywhere else" — he's even written a book about the place. What is it about this mountaintop village, where most of the streets are Italian surnames, that has so charmed its residents? Marianne Langston, whose grandmother was part of the second wave (a Balsam) and who moved to Little Italy when she was seven years old, puts it this way: "My grandmother used to say that being in Little Rock was like being in hell and it was paradise out here in Little Italy."