

Italian Immigrant Workers in Powell River, B.C. A Case Study of Settlement Before World War II

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Volume 16, 1985

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/ilt16rr01>

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Scardellato, G. P. (1985). Italian Immigrant Workers in Powell River, B.C. A Case Study of Settlement Before World War II. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 16, 145-166.

RESEARCH REPORT/ NOTE DE RECHERCHE

Italian Immigrant Workers in Powell River, B.C.:

A Case Study of Settlement Before World War II

Gabriele P. Scardellato

THE FOLLOWING STUDY IS the beginning of what the author hopes will be a comprehensive survey of Italian migration and immigration to British Columbia before World War II.¹ As a first step in this survey the present discussion of the history of the community of Powell River and of its Italian enclave post-dates the little that is known about the first sizeable movements of Italian labourers to the province. Railroad construction at the end of the nineteenth century, together with the first mining and similar enterprises that it made possible, in particular in the province's south-central and southeastern interior regions, appear to have been the first important labour markets for Italian migrants and immigrants.² However, Powell River's foundation occurred as a result of a later development in the province's economy: namely, the "phenomenal growth" experienced in its coastal forest industry in the second decade of this century.³ The history of Powell River is closely tied to this development

¹ Some of the research for this study was made possible by summer research grants awarded by the government of British Columbia. The author would like to express his thanks here to Professor J.M. Bak, UBC, who supervised the early stages of research and to Dr. Roberto Perin, York University and the Canadian Academic Centre in Italy, for his support and learned advice. The author is also indebted to the comments of the anonymous readers who reviewed this paper prior to publication.

² This is suggested by the community histories in the chapter on Italians in British Columbia in A. Spada, *The Italians in Canada* (Ottawa 1968), 358-85. There is a briefer account of Italians in the province in J. Norris, ed., *Strangers Entertained: A History of the Ethnic Groups of British Columbia* (Vancouver 1971), 141-4. Italian railroad and other workers in British Columbia are mentioned briefly in R.F. Harney, "Montreal's King of Italian Labour: A Case Study of Padronism," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 4, (1979), 57-84, at 68 and 76.

³ Robert A.J. McDonald, "Victoria, Vancouver, and the Economic Development of British Columbia, 1886-1914," in W. Peter Ward and Robert A.J. McDonald, eds., *British Columbia: Historical Readings* (Vancouver 1981), 369-95, and 381.

Gabriele P. Scardellato, "Italian Immigrant Workers in Powell River, B.C.: A Case Study of Settlement Before World War II," *Labour/Le Travail*, 16 (Fall 1985), 145-163.

and it is also quintessentially the history of a "first generation" resource town of the "single enterprise" type. Known more generally as a company town it was, and remains, a small community closely attached to one industry's operation.⁴

The Powell River Company which built the town was formed in 1909 as the result of the merger of several logging companies active in the Powell River area. Construction of the pulp, paper, and lumber mill, and of a dam across Powell River to provide hydroelectric power, began in the same year. The new town which emerged as a result of this activity was an "intrusion" into a largely uninhabited area on the British Columbia coast approximately 130 kilometres northwest of Vancouver, and in building its town the company was concerned to attract and hold a stable work force. To this end it did not have to contend so much with a harsh climate as with the rugged terrain and isolation of its millsite. The town was built on a narrow strip of land on the coast with the mountains of the Coast Range to the east and the Strait of Georgia and Vancouver Island to the west. As recently as 1954 the only access between the community and Vancouver, notwithstanding their relative geographical proximity, was a six-hour journey by steamship.

Until the "early days of 1910" the great majority of workers in the area were transients drawn by the lure of construction.⁵ By 1911, however, the company had completed 21 permanent houses and it produced its first newspaper in 1912. Two years later the paper mill was operating at full capacity with four paper machines in production, using the 25,000 horsepower produced by the hydroelectric plant on Powell River. It is in these years, at the beginning of both the company's and municipality's history, that we begin to find the presence of Italian migrants or immigrants in the area.

The first of these were construction workers and part of the transient and multi-ethnic labour force which formed the bulk of Powell River's population at least until 1910. The company's payroll ledgers survive from 1912 and in that year it paid salaries to a total of 84 Italian-origin workers for periods of employment that varied from one month to an entire year.⁶ The total number of

⁴ G.A. Stelter and Alan F.J. Artibise, "Canadian Resource Towns in Historical Perspective," in Stelter and Artibise, eds., *Shaping the Urban Landscape: Aspects of the Canadian City-Building Process* (Ottawa 1982), 413-34.

⁵ J.A. Lundie, "An Outline of the History and Development of the Powell River Company," in *Powell River's First 50 Years*, Harry Taylor, comp. (Powell River 1960), not paginated. The volume was published to commemorate Powell River's "Golden Jubilee" and will be cited hereafter as PRGJ.

⁶ The author is indebted to Macmillan Bloedel Ltd. (Powell River), for granting access to their employment records, described in greater detail below, at their company offices in Powell River in 1976 and 1977. These records will be cited here as PRCoER for worker's employment files, and where an individual is named, the relevant record in this collection can be found alphabetically according to surname. Payroll records will be cited as PRCoPL together with the dates of relevant volumes, in this case 1912 and 1913.

Italians who collected a salary from the company decreased in 1913 to 54 and only 16 of these had also been on the company's payroll in the previous year. This decline, which coincides with the end of the first phase of mill construction, suggests that the majority of the Italians in Powell River at this relatively early date were migrant or temporary labourers. In this group, however, there was also the beginning of a more permanent settlement.

As early as 1911 a Roman Catholic church was established overlooking the mill site and the first marriage recorded in its parish records occurred in 1913. Both bride and groom were Italian, as were their two witnesses.⁷ At about the same time that the Catholic church was established, the community was experiencing the need for a school for its children. The first classes were held in a poolhall and a 1911 photograph of the first enrollment, the teacher and her 13 pupils, includes the daughter of a Friulian family. The latter lived for some time in a canvas tent, the only accommodation then available in the very new settlement. A four-room school building was completed in 1913 and enrollment increased to 183 students who were served by five teachers. In a 1914 photograph of some of these students at least three can be identified as the children of Italians.⁸

The Powell River Company employed approximately 600 male workers in 1914 and it continued to expand its townsite housing facilities for its employees. Life under canvas slowly changed to one that was lived, if not in purpose built, single-family dwellings, then at least in company bunkhouses. These were built originally for construction workers and later became housing for Italian and other families.⁹ The name "Balkan Village," given to one of these construction campsites, may reflect the south European background of its residents and the probable nativist sentiments of other members of the community. Local tradition associates the name in a puzzling fashion with the Russian workers who were probably the campsite's earliest residents.¹⁰

The service industry in the district developed with the growth of the company and of its town and eventually some residents were able to earn a living outside of the "mill gates." The community's isolation from either urban or rural settlements insured a demand for supplies of fresh vegetables and milk.

⁷ Father V. Gallo, rector of St. Joseph's parish, Powell River, in 1976 very kindly placed the parish's pre-World War II records at the author's disposal. Father Gallo's parents, from Galeriano, Udine, Italy settled in Powell River in 1922 and his childhood memories of life in Powell River have also proven useful for the present study. A brief history of the parish can be found in PRGJ, "Churches of the District. . . The Roman Catholic Church" and see also the employment record for Enrico Gallo in PRCoER.

⁸ PRGJ, "Schools" and *ibid.*, *passim*, for the photographs mentioned here and elsewhere in the course of this study.

⁹ Arthur C. Dunn, "An Old-timer Looks Back," extract from *The Town Crier*, Powell River, 1945, reproduced in PRGJ, where Italian families are described as living in bunkhouses which had been "converted into two residences each."

¹⁰ PRGJ, "An Old-timer Looks Back," and *ibid.*, "Out of the Mists of Time;" the Russians were construction workers who left the district in 1912.

Some of these staples came to be provided by a number of small-scale farmers or market gardeners. Giuseppe (Joe) Errico, a Calabrian immigrant, had arrived in the district with the first construction workers and he remained to farm five acres of land on which he kept milk cows and developed a market garden.

The next major phase in the town's growth occurred in the mid-1920s. In 1923, just before the company decided to increase its productive capacity, a census showed a total Powell River district population, including men, women, and children, of just over 2,100. In the following year the Italians in the community formed their first Benevolent Society with a membership of 300.¹¹ The two new paper machines which were in production by 1926 doubled the mill's output. The town also grew in an effort to keep up with the needs of already settled workers and with those of new arrivals who were temporary construction workers or longer-term employees of the mill itself. The company built a further 114 houses in the townsite and it also increased its stock of more temporary housing in the Balkan Village area and at a similar site nearby called "Riverside." On Labour Day 1927, a group of fifteen Italian men posed for the camera with the Benevolent Society's choices of Labour Day princess, the daughter of one of the men in the portrait.¹²

The last industrial expansion for Powell River for the period covered by this study occurred, somewhat ironically, during the early years of the Depression. On its eve the Powell River Company had already planned to construct another paper machine and it proceeded with this and further hydroelectric work in 1929-30. Through 1930 the company maintained operations at "close to maximum capacity" and over the following three years, according to the company historian, it "was able to operate on an average of four days a week or better." Consequently, "the effects of the depression were far less severe in Powell River than in most areas of Canada."¹³ However, this relative success might be attributed also to a severe cutback in the company's labour force. By the end of 1934 it had dispensed with, among others, over half of those Italian-origin employees who can be traced in company employment records. For at least this component of the company's work force, therefore, the effects of the Depression appear to have been far from benign. Before pursuing this and other aspects of the pre-World War II history of the Powell River Italian enclave, however, an attempt should be made to reconstruct its development in

¹¹ PRGJ, "Out of the Mists of Time," where the 1923 census figures for the district are given as 987 men, 549 women, and 603 children for a total population of 2,139. The Benevolent Society membership figure is taken from Spada, *Italians in Canada*, 374, but he does not say whether it included men, women, and children. The author has not been able to consult society records to verify this figure.

¹² PRGJ, for the 1927 Labour Day photograph, and Spada, *Italians in Canada*, 374, for a description of the choice of another Italian girl as "Queen of Powell River" for the 1927 Dominion Day Jubilee celebrations.

¹³ J.A. Lundie, "An Outline of the History and Development of the Powell River Company," in PRGJ.

a more rigorous manner than has been possible in this introductory overview. The sources for this reconstruction are employment, payroll, and similar records produced by the Powell River Company, records produced by the Roman Catholic parish of the district of Powell River, and provincial directories.

The employment records, compiled on standardized, three inch by five inch cards, provide a short biography as well as a work history of company employees. In these records a worker's ethnic background was noted by recording nationality: whether Italian, Italian-Canadian, British, Polish, and so forth; and also by recording relevant naturalization data. This information was supplemented with birthdate, place of birth, and data about an individual's next of kin, including their whereabouts or address. The employer also recorded marital status, education, military service, last employment and employer together with length of employment, and if possible, similar information about an individual's second-to-last period of employment.

When these records were examined they had been arranged in two groups. One group was labelled "Depression Records" and was composed mainly of the files of company workers who had been employed in the 1920s and 1930s and whose employment ended in the latter decade. The other, larger, group of records was not titled and consisted of files for employees who had worked for the Powell River Company for any length of time in the period 1912-63. Ideally, the latter group should include all the employment files of any workers who were hired as early as 1912 and whose employment ended in or before 1963, always provided that when hired they were old enough to have retired by the latter date. The latter is obviously an important qualification on the usefulness of these files for providing a comprehensive account of all pre-World War II company employees and will be considered in greater detail below. For the moment it is important to note that any twenty-year-olds, for example, who may have been hired in 1920 and who worked until their retirement in 1965 at 65 years of age, would not be included in these files.

The records of 374 Italian-origin company employees were found in the entire collection, and 189 of these began their careers before 1940 and ended them as recently as 1963. Because of the retirement-age qualification already noted, however, it seems likely that these figures underestimate the total number of Italian-origin workers in either the pre- or the post-World War II period. Over two-thirds (67 per cent) of the records for workers hired before World War II, for example, are derived from the "Depression Records" group. The total number of workers hired annually by the company peaked in the years 1926-9 but it is also in these years, and in particular from 1928, that the records show a decline in the number of workers hired who then worked to retirement age.¹⁴ Other sources, in particular provincial directories and parish

¹⁴ For a more precise tally of the increase of the number of Italian-origin workers employed by the company see below, 13.

records, suggest that at least part of this decline is a fiction caused by the employment records themselves.

The 1919 directory listed Powell River residents generally by their surnames and first name initial, and by their occupation. The 1925 edition of the same directory provided more information: residents' surnames and first names, their occupation, and their address in the district. According to employment records the company had hired a total of 23 men of Italian origin by 1919 but the directory for that year recorded some 85 adult-male residents of Powell River who were of Italian origin. Only ten of these individuals appear in both sources. Six years later the directory listed approximately 135 Powell River residents who were of Italian origin and 133 of these were adult males and two were females, one was listed as a clerk and the other as a widow. The company's employment records, however, show that it had employed only 92 Italian-origin males by the end of 1925. Only 61 of these can be matched with names, and occasionally occupations, in the directory.

Some of the discrepancies between these sources obviously occurred because residents were not company employees when directories were compiled. This is true for Giuseppe Errico who, as noted, became a market gardener and whose occupation in the 1919 directory was given as "farming." It is also true for someone like Claud[io] Zorzi, "rancher" in 1925 or Sam [Salvatore] Spartari, "tailor," in the same year.¹⁵ Other district residents and company employees may have been listed incorrectly by the directory compilers so that "L. Cuccato, screens" in 1919 is in reality the "Luis Zuccato, mech[anic]" of the 1925 directory or the Luigi Zuccato of the company's employment records for the period 1917-60.¹⁶ The directories also appear to exclude a small number of individuals because of their age while others may have been omitted because they were settled too recently in Powell River to come to the attention of the directory. The latter possibility might explain why only one of ten workers hired by the company by the end of 1925, for example, appears both in that year's directory and in company employment records.¹⁷ When all allowances of these types are made, however, there is still a total of

¹⁵ *Wrigley's B.C. Directory, 1919* (hereafter WD 1919), 519, for "Errico Jos[eph] farming" and *Wrigley's B.C. Directory, 1925* (hereafter WD 1925), 269, for "Zorzi Claud[io] rancher" and "Spartari Salvatore tailor."

¹⁶ WD 1919, 510, for "Cuccato L," incorrectly entered among the "F" listings and WD 1925, 269, for "Zuccato Luigi mech[anic]." In PRCoER Mr. Zuccato is described as a worker on the "screens" in the company's "sulphite division," see below, 17. A more serious spelling mistake may have been made in WD 1919, 510, and WD 1925, 266, for Mr. Giombata Mattiusi, a company worker from 1913 to 1934 according to PRCoER, "Depression Records," but who appears to have been listed in the directories as "Gambetti M" or "Gambetti Mattiossi."

¹⁷ WD 1925, 268, for example, lists "Peloso M lab[ourer]" and PRCoER, "Depression Records" shows that Mario Attilio Peloso was hired in December 1925 and laid off in 1934. However, his brother, Giovanni, hired in June of the same year and laid off in 1931, was not listed in the directory.

88 Italians named in 1919 and 103 named in 1925 who appear only in directories or company employment records but not in both sources. A third type of record, produced by Powell River's Roman Catholic parish, can be used to identify some of these individuals as probable community residents. This suggests a higher figure for the company's Italian-origin workers than can be derived from its employment records alone.

Parish records are extremely useful because of the information they provide for important religious and social events, like marriages, births and baptisms, *first communions and so forth, in the life of a parish*. However, because of factors like immigration to, and emigration from, the parish, they must be used with care for census or similar demographic purposes. A family might choose to baptize a child in Powell River, for example, but they need not have resided there for very long in order to accomplish this. Still, by noting the appearances over time of individuals or families in these records it is possible to assume their residence in the community and especially if they were listed in directories.

From all of the names recorded in parish records it is possible to isolate a total of approximately 70 men of Italian origin who were in Powell River before World War II but who do not appear in company employment records.¹⁸ Ten of these were listed in the 1919 directory and sixteen were listed in that compiled in 1925 but of this total only four men appear in both directories. The latter group includes someone like Sebastiano Artico who was recorded in the 1919 directory as a "wooden head maker" and who, together with his wife, Luigia, baptized a daughter in the parish in 1921. Mr. Artico was listed again in the 1925 directory, as a labourer, and Luigia Artico became a godparent to a child baptized in 1929. She and her husband confirmed their daughter in the Roman Catholic faith in 1932 and she was married in the parish in 1940.¹⁹ This type of parish career, typical for the four who appear in both directories and parish records, suggests a permanent residence in Powell River before World War II. The same is true for another seven men who, although they only appear in the 1925 directory, nonetheless can be traced through parish records for periods which vary between five and fifteen years.²⁰ Other individuals named in parish records also appear to have been permanent residents in Powell River in our period even though their presence was not noted in either the directories or employment records. This category is formed by a group of eight men who

¹⁸ Another 83 of the names derived from parish records also appear in company employment records.

¹⁹ WD 1919, 509, and WD 1925, 265, for "Artico S" and "Artico Sebastiano" respectively and see also St. Joseph's Parish Records, Powell River (hereafter PRPR), "Baptisms" and "Confirmations" and "Marriage Register, St. Joseph's Church, Powell River, (1921-1945)."

²⁰ This figure includes someone like Guido Vizzutti who was listed in WD 1925, 269, as a labourer and who appears in parish records from 1925 to 1940 but excludes someone like "Pihen [sic Pighin] Umberto lab[ourer]" in WD 1925, 268, as a probable short-term resident of Powell River. Mr. Pighin and his wife, Madalina, appear in parish records from 1921 to 1924.

only appear in parish records after 1925 but who do so for periods which vary between three and twelve years.

The parish career of someone like Albino Stradiotto is typical of the men in this group. Mr. Stradiotto was one of the men who posed for the 1927 Labour Day photograph described above. He and his wife Rosina baptized a daughter in Powell River in December of the same year and she was confirmed in 1935. The Stradiottos were resident in Powell River until the 1970s, after Mr. Stradiotto's retirement from company employment, which had begun in 1927.²¹ Mr. Stradiotto's brother, Andrea, also worked for the Powell River Company, but for a shorter period, from October 1927 to February 1934.²²

Thus parish records, sometimes in conjunction with directories, can be used to add a total of approximately 19 men who were Italian-origin residents of Powell River and probable company employees, to the list of 189 pre-World War II male workers for whom employment records survive.²³ The remaining 51 individual men identified through parish records can be divided into two groups. One of these is formed by a total of fourteen who appear to have resided in Powell River for relatively short periods which varied between two and six years. Judging by their participation in parish ceremonies, their residence in the community and probable company employment, ended in or before the early 1920s.²⁴ The other group is formed by 37 men whose names were noted only once, as godparents, marriage witnesses, and so forth, in parish records. Six of these appeared before 1925 although two were listed in that year's directory and another two were listed in that for 1919. The remainder appeared in 1925 or later and this includes a small number, a total of five, who were also listed in that directory even though they were noted in parish records anywhere between one and seven years after its compilation.

Only one of the men in this group of 37 can be identified as having established himself in the community outside the "mill gates," as a barber.²⁵ Some of the others may have visited the community solely to participate in a

²¹ PRPR, "Baptisms," records the birth of the Stradiotto's daughter in Vancouver some four months before her baptism in Powell River, and see also PRPR, "Confirmations." The author is personally acquainted with the Stradiotto family and Mr. Stradiotto recounted his memories of life in Powell River before World War II in conversations held before 1982, the year of his death.

²² PRCoER, "Depression Records" for Mr. Andrea Stradiotto's company employment and PRPR, "Baptisms" noted that he became a godparent for his niece at her 1927 christening.

²³ Company payroll ledgers, to be discussed below, 11, confirm its employment of at least those individuals who were active in the parish through 1921.

²⁴ Mr. Virginio Toso is an exception in this group. He and his wife, Mary, appear in parish records from 1913 to 1924 and he was also listed in WD 1919, 513. In WD 1925, 269, however, Mary Toso was listed as a "wid[ow]" and she subsequently appeared in parish records as a godparent in 1926 and participated in the confirmations held in 1929, see PRPR, "Baptisms" and "Confirmations."

²⁵ PRPR, "Marriage Register, St. Joseph's Church, Powell River, (1921-1945)," where Mr. Joseph Derton's occupation was given as "barber" when he was married in

wedding or similar function and those who also appear in directories might have done the same either before or after a relatively short term in the community as sojourning or temporary labourers.²⁶ It is not possible to determine how many of these men were in fact long-term company workers for whom no employment records are available and who simply were not very active in parish life.²⁷

Parish records, as suggested by this analysis, are extremely useful sources. They contain valuable information about some individuals who otherwise would be little more than names in directories and sometimes not even that. With regard to employment records, those produced by the parish help to verify their retirement-age qualification described above and illustrated by the career of a company worker like Albino Stradiotto, and they also suggest another limitation on their reliability. As noted, some individuals appear over considerable lengths of time in parish records, usually through the 1910s and 1920s but no company employment records have been found for them.²⁸ Assuming that they were in fact company employees, it seems likely that their records were discarded, perhaps because they were felt to be out of date. Records for those individuals whose names appear only once in parish affairs, again assuming that they were company employees, may have met with a similar fate or, in the case of workers who retired after 1963, they may still survive in company files. Any suppositions made about names which were recorded infrequently in parish records or those which appear only in directories, however, should include the likelihood that Powell River was host to temporary as well as more long-term workers.

The company could have employed these workers through most of the period covered by this study during its various expansion programmes, during its fairly continuous house-building and similar townsite construction projects, or perhaps as temporary labourers in the mill itself. The existence of a component of temporary workers in the company's work force is recorded in its payroll ledgers but these can be considered only briefly here because of the limited amount of research accomplished in them. The ledgers begin in 1912

1926, his only appearance in parish records. See also below, 20, for the barbershop that he built.

²⁶ The 1912-45 marriage register provides considerable biographical information for brides and grooms as well as the addresses of their marriage witnesses. Only one such witness, at a 1921 wedding, had a Vancouver address. None of the other parish records are this detailed. Baptism records, for example, record the date and place of birth of the baptized child but only the names of its parents and godparents.

²⁷ Mr. Giovanni Piccinin, for example, only appears once in parish records, as a marriage witness to a 1945 marriage recorded in the 1921-45 register. According to Mr. Piccinin's own conversations with the author, however, he began his company employment in the late 1920s and retired in the late 1960s.

²⁸ The career of Mr. Virginio Toso above, note 24, is included in this category as are the careers of approximately nineteen other men.

but only those for the years 1912-3, 1916, and 1921 have been surveyed to date.²⁹

These records were compiled in bound volumes which contain monthly handwritten entries where workers were usually noted only by their surnames and first name initials together with their salaries and salary deductions. Paging through them is time consuming and either the handwriting or spelling variations of surnames complicates the task of identifying employees and their ethnic origin.³⁰ Because these records were compiled in bound volumes in a month-by-month and year-by-year format they promise to be complete records of all company workers and an important complement to employment records where, as noted, some files appear to have been discarded. The ledgers which have been surveyed confirm the suspected employment by the company of many individuals who appear in parish records or directories but not in its employment records.³¹ They also show that some individuals, although noted infrequently in other sources were, in fact, on the company payroll for relatively long periods.³² It is equally important to note that for any of the years surveyed in payroll ledgers it is possible to identify a group of workers who appear in none of the other sources discussed and that there was a high turnover in the membership of this group either from year to year or over longer periods.

As noted above, only 16 of a total of 138 workers of Italian origin were paid a salary by the company in both 1912 and 1913. Only 9 of these apparently temporary employees remained on the company's payroll in 1916, although they formed part of a total of approximately 108 Italian-origin workers employed in that year. This total decreased to 75 by 1921 but only 19 of these had also earned company salaries in 1916.

A comprehensive analysis of these payroll ledgers is needed before the figures quoted here can be placed in perspective and any conclusions attempted. It is important to note, however, that the company employed sizeable numbers of workers of Italian (and other) origins as temporary labourers at least until 1921 and perhaps much later. We cannot establish here whether these workers fit the portrait of sojourning labourers who worked for a season

²⁹ When the author carried out the research described here, the company's records were housed in a storage room in its Powell River offices and there were no guides or inventories for available records. The author only became aware of the existence of payroll ledgers at the end of his last research term.

³⁰ Mr. Vittorio Bazzani, for example, active in the parish from 1913 to 1919, also appears in the payroll ledgers surveyed from 1912 to 1916. In the first six months of 1912 he was variously referred to as "V. Bazzani," "T. Bazzani," "V. Bazzanin," and "L. Bazzini" in PRCoPL, 1912.

³¹ This includes men like Mr. V. Bazzani, note 30 above, Mr. Sebastiano Artico, Mr. Virginio Toso, and so forth.

³² Mr. Pietro Avoledo and his wife, Maria, for example, baptized a daughter in Powell River in 1926 according to PRPR, "Baptisms," but he appears in payroll ledgers in 1916 and 1921. Without further research it is not possible to establish how many others who appear infrequently in parish records were also company employees.

in the "bush" of Ontario or Quebec before returning to Italy or wintering in the "Little Italies" of Toronto or Montreal.³³ Further research is needed to determine whether this type of sojourning continued unaltered in the west coast hinterland of Canada well after its heyday elsewhere in the country and if so, whether the *padroni* and similar agents in the "commerce of migration" continued to supply Canadian capital with its labour needs. For the moment we can only note that temporary, or perhaps sojourning Italian-origin workers, form a background against which employment and other records show the growth of an enclave of permanent Italian-origin Powell River Company employees and community residents.

The most obvious fact to emerge from an analysis of the company's employment records is the homogeneity of region-of-origin in Italy of its Italian employees. Seventy-five per cent of the total were from northeastern Italy: more precisely, 63 per cent were born in the provinces of Udine and Pordenone while another 12 per cent came from the adjacent provinces of Treviso and Belluno. Southern Italy provided only 17 per cent of the total, and of these slightly less than half were from Reggio Calabria while the remainder were from the provinces of Cosenza, Salerno, Caserta, and Campobasso. Those from the south overshadowed the remaining 8 per cent of the total sample who were from the Piedmont.

From 1919 there was a fairly constant intake of Italian-origin labourers by the Powell River Company. Until 1928 the intake averaged approximately fourteen new hirings annually with the peak occurring in 1926 when 22 Italians were hired. This figure was almost equalled in the following year with an intake of 19 but it is at this point that the company's growth, at least in terms of new hirings, came to an end. This is reflected in the Italian employment figures for 1929 when eighteen workers were hired but a total of fourteen were released. Six of those hired were laid off in the same year as were another two who had been hired in the previous year. The remainder of those laid off had worked for the company between two and six years.

The year 1929, therefore, appears to have been the peak for Italian employment in the mill between the two world wars. One hundred and fifty-three men were then employed by the company but in 1930, the number of those laid off, twelve, equalled the total number of those hired. A more serious decline occurred the following year. The company was still able to hire two Italian-origin workers in 1931 but these were easily surpassed by the total of 37 men who were laid off. This decline continued until the end of 1936 by which time 59 more Italian-origin employees had been let go and the total number of those still employed, approximately 62 men, had been reduced to a level similar to that achieved in the early 1920s.³⁴

³³ R.F. Hamey, "Men Without Women: Italian Migrants in Canada, 1885-1930," in B.B. Caroli, R.F. Hamey, and L.F. Tomasi, eds., *The Italian Immigrant Woman in North America* (Toronto 1978), 79-101.

³⁴ This figure may underestimate by approximately twenty, if not more, the total

These figures show that the effects of the Depression were strongly felt by at least the Italian-origin component of the company's work force. Those who retained their jobs were no doubt grateful that the mill continued to operate, if only on a reduced work week, but these were not necessarily well-established or long-term employees. The company appears to have followed a policy of "last hired, first fired" through the six years of high layoffs. Even so, this usually included layoffs for men who had been employed for considerable lengths of time.

The average length of employment for the entire group of 189 workers hired before World War II was 13.8 years. Those who ended their employment after 1940 had worked for an average 28 years while those who were laid off earlier had worked for an average 6.7 years. However, the latter figure to some extent obscures the trend over the 6 years of high layoffs. Thus, in 1929 the average length of employment among those laid off was 2.4 years; in 1930 it was 4.5 years; in 1931 4.7 years; in 1932 9.0 years; in 1933 10.5 years; and in 1934 the average was 9.3 years.

The company appears to have been unconcerned with such factors as workers' age or marital status when it carried out its layoffs. Nineteen-twenty-nine was the only year in which more single men, a total of nine, than married men, a total of four, were laid off, together with one widower. These men were 28 years old on average at the end of their company employment. From 1930 through 1934 the average calculated for each group of laid-off workers varied between a low of 34 in 1934 and a high of 43 in 1932. These length-of-employment data, in particular, suggest that most of the Friulian and other Italians whose company careers can be followed in detail, were not sojourners in the sense described by Harney and others.³⁵ However, these workers appear to have formed part of a different type of migrant labour force: a labour force that was already established in *Canada*.

Only a small proportion, approximately 15 per cent, of those interviewed for employment by the company described themselves as "just out from Italy" and did not name a previous North American (or other) employer or employment experience. This figure does not include the labourer interviewed and subsequently hired in 1928 who was described as "just out from Italy" but who added in this interview that he had been in Canada for eighteen months but hadn't held "any steady jobs" in that period.³⁶ Some 146 of those interviewed, however, were much more specific about their employment history or had had better luck in their attempts to find work in "America." In this group a

number of Italian-origin company workers through the mid-1930s because it does not include men like Mr. Albino Stratdiotto, Mr. Sebastiano Artico, and others already discussed.

³⁵ Harney, "Men Without Women."

³⁶ Employment experience described by Mr. Luigi Pistor of Valvasoni, Udine, Italy when he was interviewed for Powell River Company employment in August, 1928, PRCoER, "Depression Records."

few previously had been employed in locales as far away from Powell River as Newfoundland, Montreal, or California but 80 per cent had been employed previously in British Columbia and another 11 per cent had worked in Alberta. More specifically, a quarter of those interviewed gave their last place of employment as having been in or near Vancouver while the others had worked in small towns in southern British Columbia, from Vancouver Island to the East Kootenays.

The Vancouver area was obviously the most important source for the Powell River Company's Italian-origin workers but neither the province's largest city nor other locales appear to have been temporary or sojourning stops for most of the labourers who passed through them. Thirty and 23 per cent of company employees of Italian origin had worked respectively in the forestry and mining industries in their previous employment. Those who had worked in the forest industry had done so for an average of one-and-one-half years while those who had worked in mining had done so for an average of almost three-and-one-half years. Clearly, these men had not laboured for single seasons before moving on to Powell River nor had they returned to Italy after a season's work in Canada.³⁷ A non-sojourning Italian immigrant labour force from approximately 1910 concurs with the findings of studies on those Italians who laboured in central Canada but it is interesting to be able to postulate the existence of an intermediate stage, a stage wherein an immigrant laboured at one or more jobs or work sites before attempting to settle in a particular community. Whether such careers were voluntary or forced because of economic or other constraints is a question for further study.

Farming was the third most common, because most readily defined or categorized, experience in last employment by the company's Italian-origin employees.³⁸ The total number of men who claimed this as their last work

³⁷ Only two workers described their last "employment" as a "holiday in Italy." Naturalization data derived from PRCoER show that 46 per cent of the company's Italian-origin employees were naturalized while employed by the company, another 5 per cent were naturalized before they began their employment, and 6 per cent were said to have been naturalized through their fathers. These figures suggest a settler as opposed to a sojourning mentality among the majority of these Italian-origin company employees. For comparable naturalization data see R.F. Harney, "Italians in Canada," *Multicultural History Society of Ontario, Occasional Papers on Ethnic and Immigration Studies* (October 1978), No. 1.

³⁸ Work experience as a farm labourer before employment by the Powell River Company was claimed by 15 per cent of the total number of respondents. Cf. PRCoER, "Depression Records," for Mr. Giuseppe Fabris of San Giovanni di Casarsa, Udine, Italy who was employed as a farmhand for two years by Mr. Anthony Culos of Cranberry Lake, Powell River before his employment by the Powell River Company. His brother, Gioachino Fabris, on the other hand, worked as a farm labourer for Mission Fruit Products of Kelowna, B.C. for seven months before his move to Powell River and company employment in 1926. As a category this type of work experience is easily superseded in extant records by the category of more miscellaneous occupations like truckdriving, gardening, odd-jobbing and so forth, which prospective company

experience was small but it is nonetheless significant that this type of response appears in available records from 1921. The Canadian Department of Immigration and Colonization after 1921 "enforced an occupation test by which . . . [European] emigrants were generally able to enter Canada only if they were farmers, farm labourers or domestic servants. Of these, [Italian] immigrants claiming to be labourers were by far the most numerous."³⁹ Approximately half of the company's Italian-origin workers who had worked as farm-labourers had done so in British Columbia or in Manitoba and Alberta. The other half had come directly to Powell River to work for the few farmers in the area. Three of these local farmers were Italians and the fourth was a Scot.

These men were part of what has been described as the "farm labour system" for immigration to Canada which was developed as a probable means for sidestepping restrictions in Canadian immigration policy. Labourers were required to find not only a farmer who would employ them in Canada but also to sign on as farmhands for a minimum of one year. Few of those who later applied for employment by the Powell River Company appear to have fulfilled the second half of this requirement. On average those who had been farm-labourers only remained in this occupation for ten months. Deception may not have been the original intent of this category of immigrant but the attractions of mill employment might easily have outweighed those of farm-labouring.

Where the "farm labour system" functioned near major urban centres like Toronto, it served would-be Italian immigrants as a difficult but necessary step for eventual settlement, usually in the centre itself. The Powell River version of this immigration route, however, shows that it could involve much longer geographical moves: from Italy to a farm in the Powell River district, for example; or from Italy to a farm on the Prairies and then to Powell River. These journeys, together with those of other workers who made their way to Powell River, suggest that by the 1920s Canada's hinterland had become better known by Italian-Canadians and perhaps through them, by would-be immigrants in Italy. Thus, they were able to bypass those older centres which had flourished at the beginning of the century as staging-posts for sojourning labourers.

The employment histories summarized above reveal a homogeneity in the work experiences of those Italians who obtained employment in Powell River. Almost without exception they had been employed as unskilled, or at best semi-skilled labourers. They had been the "section hands" in the logging and construction sites: those who wielded pick, shovel, and axe and whose main selling-point was their capacity for physical labour. The same was true after

employees described in their interviews. Cf. PRCoER, for Mr. Giuseppe Piccoli, hired by the company in October 1914. He had previously been employed as a CPR "section hand" at Spence's Bridge, B.C. For Mr. Culos' farm in the Powell River district see below, 19.

³⁹ F. Sturino, "Italian Immigration to Canada and the Farm Labour System Through the 1920s," paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Italian Historical Association, St. Paul, Mn. (30-31 October 1981), 5.

they entered the company's mill gates in Powell River. Many of them were employed at the labouring end of the papermaking process. This might involve work in the sawmill where logs were cut up into lumber or into sizeable blocks of wood which were then passed on to the "grinder-rooms" in the mill's "groundwood division," Italians were also employed in this division as "grinder-men," to use the quasi-technical term, where they spent their 60-hour work weeks feeding blocks of wood into the mouths of their wood "grinders." This produced the raw woodpulp from which the company's newsprint was eventually manufactured. Before reaching the paper machines, however, the pulp needed further treatment, and we find Italians employed as "sulphite workers" where they unloaded scows of raw sulphur and mixed it and other materials to produce the chemicals used for bleaching the pulp. Italian labourers were also employed by the company at the other end of the papermaking process, in the "finishing rooms" where enormous rolls of newsprint had to be handled and also in "shipping and storage" where these rolls of newsprint had to be loaded onto ships waiting at the company's docks.⁴⁰ Finally, Italians were also employed as labourers in the company's ground maintenance crew. The work carried out by these workers included road maintenance, gardening, clearing up various types of spills, and similar activities. A subdivision of this crew, again mostly Italians, was responsible for work that is readily explained by its name, the "cement gang."

In the early years of the company's history, life outside of its mill gates cannot have afforded much relief from this type of labour. The powerful image evoked by Harney in his description of migrant-Italian "men without women" labouring in the Canadian "bush" can be transferred readily to Powell River. As has been shown, however, the "bush" was gradually cleared in this instance and replaced by a prosperous small town. In an urban setting with a sufficient concentration of Italian migrants and immigrants the growth of a specifically Italian *ambiente* or Little Italy would seem likely over a period of time similar to that covered by this study.⁴¹ This type of development cannot be shown to have occurred in Powell River prior to World War II although an argument can be made for an emerging *ambiente*.

A reconstruction of addresses recorded in the 1925 directory reveals two concentrations of Italian-origin residents within the Powell River district. Both of these were within the company's townsite, the area immediately around the mill on its eastern and southern sides where it built its housing. The bunk-

⁴⁰ See the photographs reproduced in PRGJ which show how these rolls of newsprint were handled.

⁴¹ J. Zucchi, "The Italian Immigrants of St. John's Ward, 1875-1915: Patterns of Settlement and Neighbourhood Formation," Multicultural History Society of Ontario, Occasional Papers in Ethnic and Immigration Studies (Toronto, March 1981); B. Ramirez and M. Del Balso, "The Italians of Montreal: From Sojourning to Settlement, 1900-1921," (Quebec 1980); and B. Ramirez, "Montreal's Italians and the Socioeconomy of Settlement, 1900-1930: Some Historical Hypotheses," *Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire Urbain*, X, 1 (1980), 29-48.

houses of Balkan Village and the adjacent Riverside site housed over half of the Italian-origin Powell River residents listed in the directory.⁴² The directory names only adult males as dwelling in this part of the townsite but other sources show that this housing also served as accommodation for workers' families. At number nine, Riverside, for example, the directory recorded three Italian-origin workers as residents. According to employment records two of these men were married when hired and they were both resident in Powell River with their wives. The daughter of one of these men was married in 1930. She was described as resident in Riverside and one of the witnesses to her marriage was the bachelor resident of number nine, Riverside.⁴³

The other concentration of Italian-origin residents in the townsite was settled in an area to the east of the Roman Catholic church. Here the directory records eleven different addresses, situated on five adjacent streets, for Italian-origin residents. One of these streets was composed of higher-density housing than the others and housed, at three different addresses, nine, four, and five Italians respectively.⁴⁴ These residences may have been boarding-houses and their existence is important to note given the role attributed to such establishments for the growth of an Italian *ambiente* in larger urban settings. However, in its Powell River version, this housing does not fit the norm of one nuclear family augmented by a number of boarders but even with the presence of these establishments this Italian enclave in the townsite cannot be described as a Little Italy.⁴⁵ The number of Italians in the neighbourhood was probably too small and other facilities like ethnic grocery stores, barber shops, and so forth, which have been deemed necessary features for the growth of an Italian

⁴² Based on directory listings the average density per bunkhouse among Italians in Balkan Village was 3.5 while that among other nationalities was 2.4. There was very little ethnic mixing within bunkhouses: only three appear to have been shared between Italians and other nationals, cf. WD 1925, 265-9.

⁴³ WD 1925, 266, for Marco Diana and 269 for Mario Venuti and Giovanni Verin, all described as resident at number nine, Riverside. Mr. Venuti's daughter was married in 1930 and Mr. Marco Diana acted as one of the two witnesses, see "Marriage Register, St. Joseph's Church, Powell River, (1921-1945)." Mr. Venuti was hired by the Powell River Company in 1914 where he was described as married and resident in Powell River with his wife, cf. PRCoER and PRPR, "First Communions" for their arrival in Powell River with their young daughter.

⁴⁴ According to WD 1925 there were 15 residences on Cedar Street with an average of 3.1, usually adult male, residents per dwelling. On Oak Street, one street west of Cedar and running parallel to it, the directory lists 33 residences and an average of 1.4 residents per address.

⁴⁵ For Toronto this norm is described in greater detail by Zucchi, "Italian Immigrants," and for Montreal by Ramirez and Del Balso, "Italians of Montreal." Only one of the three Cedar Street residences appears to have been of the type described by these authors and we should also note that these townsite dwellings were not privately owned but rather rented from the Powell River Company which may also have exercised some control over who dwelt in them. The other two dwellings on Cedar Street each housed two Italian families as well as a number of probable boarders.

ambiente, also were missing.⁴⁶ Instead, these two Italian clusters in the townsite appear to have been temporary residential areas.

There was a gradual migration from the townsite to more peripheral but nearby settlements where individuals could build their own houses. At about the time that the 1925 directory was compiled, for example, one of the Italian households from a townsite residence was relocating itself in the nearby settlement of Cranberry Lake.⁴⁷ There they developed a farm and dairy which was able to provide employment for at least three Italian farm-labourers who were hired later by the Powell River Company. Another Italian family also moved at a somewhat later date from the townsite to the same settlement where they successfully established a grocery store. Cranberry Lake was also the site chosen in the late 1920s by another Italian for his combined barbershop and poolhall building.⁴⁸ Other evidence for this migration of settlement is more scattered but it is significant that in the parish marriage register, for example, Cranberry Lake begins to appear as a bride or groom's residential area from the mid-1920s. A similar development can be seen in the addresses recorded by the company for its employees in this period.

This migration from townsite housing to nearby settlements, where Italians tended to cluster their houses and where they could avail themselves of such facilities as an ethnic grocery store, marks the beginning of the Powell River equivalent of a Little Italy. Not surprisingly, the Benevolent Society established itself with its *boccia* lanes in one of these settlements and its existence also may be indicative of an emerging *ambiente* as well as an impetus for its further growth. This growth may also have been fostered by the demographic characteristics of Powell River's Italian-origin residents.

For most of the period covered by this study the town was a mixture of bunkhouse life and more civilized, or normal, living arrangements. The presence of workers' wives and families no doubt provided a strong impetus for the transition from one environment to the other. Approximately 60 per cent of the Italian-origin workers hired by the company in our period were married.

⁴⁶ R.F. Hamey, "Ambiente and Social Class in North American Little Italies," *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism*, II, 2, (1975), 208-24.

⁴⁷ The settlements on the periphery of the townsite predated it. They had begun with the logging operations in the Powell River area prior to the construction of the company's mill. Spada, *Italians in Canada*, 374 for a brief history of the Culos family, and see also WD 1925, 266, where six Culos's including Antonio Culos, are listed as residents of 141 Cedar Street and PRGJ, "Cranberry Lake," for the house-building and farming activities of Mr. and Mrs. Anthony Culos.

⁴⁸ Spada, *Italians in Canada*, for the grocery store founded by Pietro Micheluzzi in partnership with "another Italian Augusto Posa [sic Bosa]." Mr. Bosa appears briefly in PRCoER, "Depression Records" and see also WD 1925, 267, for "Peter Michelus" of 171 Cedar Street. The family name was later changed to "Mitchell" and appeared in the grocery store name "Bosa and Mitchell Bros." See also Spada, *Italians in Canada*, and PRGJ, "Cranberry Lake" for Mr. Joseph Derton's barbershop and poolhall building.

Most of them had moved to Powell River with their families or had been followed by them to the district. When first employed, these individuals on average were in their early thirties and just beginning their own families.⁴⁹ Family growth continued after their arrival in Powell River and the parish records show that approximately one-third of 318 children baptized were the offspring of Italian-origin parents. A similar proportion of those children who were confirmed in the Roman Catholic faith in the parish were also the offspring of Italians.⁵⁰ Parish records also show that some of the single men who arrived in Powell River began their married lives there. Of a total of 95 Roman Catholic marriages on record in our period approximately one-quarter united an Italian-origin bride and groom while in another 11 per cent of the marriages performed one of the couple was of Italian-origin.⁵¹

The presence of Italian families in the Powell River district may have prompted desires for a comfortable and civilized social environment or a suitable *ambiente* wherein residents could maintain aspects of their cultural heritage but these desires have more far-reaching implications. By the mid- to late 1920s, the Italian residents of Powell River formed the largest non-anglophone group within the community. A simple tally, based solely on surnames in the 1925 directory, for example, shows that they readily outnumbered all other similar groups combined.⁵² The enclave had become large enough to create and support its own institutions and facilities and the *ambiente* which began to emerge made possible a relatively self-contained social and cultural life. This development implies a degree of isolation from the life of the larger community for which evidence is not difficult to find.

Only five of approximately 200 godparents for the baptisms of Italian-

⁴⁹ Mr. Enrico Gallo, for example, arrived in Powell River in 1922 with his wife, Antonia, and son, Vittorio, later rector of St. Joseph's Parish. Mr. Gallo began his employment with the Powell River Company in the same year at 38 years of age. cf. PRCoER. In 1925 he and his family were resident at number 23, Riverside according to WD 1925, 266, and a second son was born in the following year according to PRPR, "Baptisms."

⁵⁰ Parish confirmation records show a considerable increase in the parish's population of Italian-origin children. From 1919 to 1929 confirmations were performed every five years and of 69 children confirmed in this period a total of 19 (28 per cent) were Italian-origin. Confirmations were performed again in 1932 and 1935 and 76 (46 per cent) of the total of 167 children confirmed were of Italian origin. The increase in the 1930s parallels to some extent the increase already noted above in the number of Italian-origin employees hired by the company. cf. PRPR, "Confirmations" and Baptisms."

⁵¹ "Marriage Register, St. Joseph's Church, Powell River, (1921-1945)," supplemented by PRPR, "Marriages" for the period 1911-21.

⁵² Italian surnames totalled approximately 12 per cent of those recorded in WD 1925 while the other non-British or Irish groups combined totalled approximately 8 per cent. The author has not been able to consult Benevolent Society records but according to Spada, *Italians in Canada*, 374, society membership in 1924 was 300 or approximately 14 per cent of the total district population recorded for Powell River in 1923, see above, 4.

origin children, for example, were not themselves Italians and only two Italians acted as godparents among a total of approximately 200 other baptisms recorded. Similar figures are provided by an analysis of confirmation sponsors.⁵³ Italians also appear to have had little participation in the life of the larger "host" community beyond the parish. The Labour and Dominion Day celebrations of 1927, for example, appear to have been exceptions.⁵⁴ In the available accounts of other aspects of the cultural and social life of the community, its sports teams, for example, and social clubs, there is no mention of Italian participation. *Boccia* tournaments do not figure among memories of lawn bowling and golf clubs, baseball leagues, and basketball teams. The Italian Benevolent Society itself appears in the publication to celebrate Powell River's fiftieth anniversary only in the 1927 Labour Day photograph. When signs of acculturation do appear they do so at the end of the period covered by this study when the Italian enclave had been reduced considerably in size because of lay-offs among company workers.⁵⁵ Further research is necessary before any conclusions can be attempted from these observations.

For the moment, an attempt has been made to expand the description by other authors of the pre-World War II Italian enclave in Powell River as a long-established "small nucleus" which served as the basis for "the only substantial new groups [of Italians] established recently" in British Columbia. The origins and growth of this nucleus have been traced from a briefly-glimpsed sojourning period to its peak in the late 1920s when a small town version of a Little Italy began to flourish. The evidence suggests that the nucleus would have been much larger despite such obstacles as the decline of Italian immigration to Canada in the 1920s and its end under Mussolini in the 1930s.⁵⁶ The growth of Powell River's Little Italy was not entirely dependent on more far-reaching events like changes in Canadian immigration or Italian emigration policy. Given sufficient impetus, perhaps the lure of permanent employment in an increasingly congenial social environment, the district could and did attract individuals from other locales in British Columbia, Canada, or even the United States. Ironically, the economic attraction, in this instance employment by the Powell River Company, disappeared just as the *ambiente* created by its Italian workers was beginning to flourish.

⁵³ For the 95 Italian-origin children confirmed in our period only 5 had non-Italian sponsors and only 1 Italian acted as sponsor for a non-Italian child.

⁵⁴ Moreover, these appear to have been exceptions at a group as opposed to individual level. A high group visibility for Italians in the community might be reflected in the company's newspaper report in 1924 which remarked on the "great harmony reigning among our cousins and friends from sunny Italy" apropos the creation of the Benevolent Society. cf. Spada, *Italians in Canada*, 374.

⁵⁵ Over half of the marriages which united an Italian and non-Italian, for example, occurred in 1933 or later.

⁵⁶ J. Norris, ed., *Strangers Entertained*, 143-4, for the pre-World War II "small nucleus" of Italians in Powell River and for obstacles to Italian immigration to Canada in the 1920s and 1930s.

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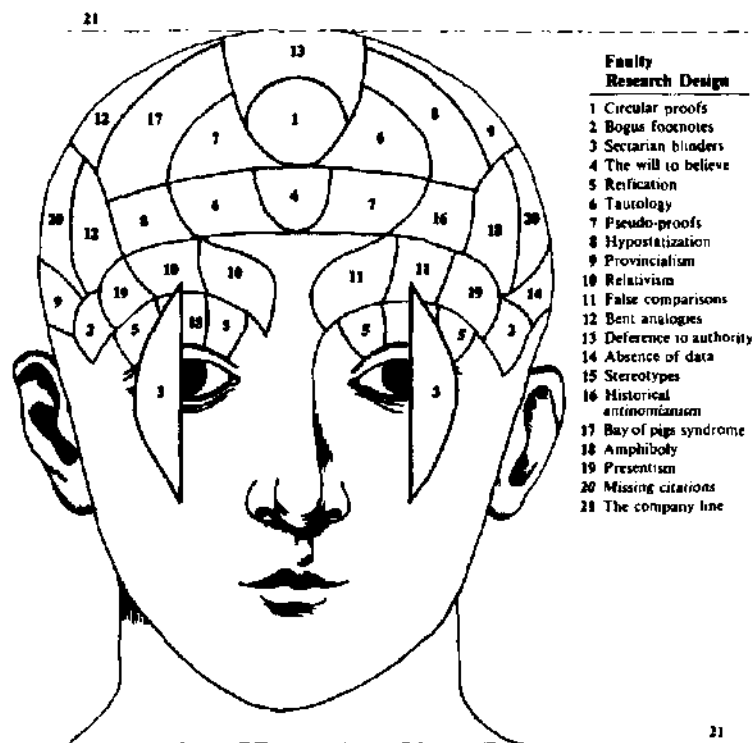


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ISBN 0-88835-014-7

240pp

\$45.00

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