

American Italian Historical Association

WESTERN REGIONAL CHAPTER

NEWSLETTER

A people without a past is a people without a future

Bolinas, California

Summer 2005

President's Message

Our Fall season will be ushered in by the annual WRC general membership meeting, followed by readings from personal memoirs (see Upcoming). All members and potential new members--anyone interested in the work of our chapter--are invited to attend both the meeting and the readings. It is our tradition at this annual event to gather ideas and comments from our members to help shape the focus of our work and programs. We strongly encourage your input.

We are pleased and grateful to be holding this event at the Italian American Heritage Foundation Cultural Center in San Jose. I was impressed with their facilities recently when I attended the festivities in celebration of the 59th anniversary of the Italian Republic in June. Since then we have been in touch with several IAHF officers and members, and we look forward to the possibility of working together on future programs.

As we have discovered through co-sponsored programs in the past, such endeavors have been particularly successful in enriching the content of our programs and expanding the reach of the participating groups. Occasionally, it becomes very useful to exchange organizational mailing lists, not for purposes of solicitation, but to broaden our outreach regarding specific events, or to disseminate important information among our constituents. For example, it has been requested by Bill Cerruti, executive director of the Italian Cultural Society in Sacramento, and chair of the California Italian American Task Force (see Member Activities), that we make our mailing list available to the Task Force so that WRC members and readers can receive information about Assembly Bill 390, a significant piece of legislation "to Amend the Education Code to Include Italian Americans." However, if any of our members do not want their addresses released for such purposes, please contact the WRC. We will otherwise assume that such list sharing meets with your approval. In the future, we will add a box on member renewal or new member forms where this can be indicated.

Finally, I would like to announce that by the end of this year, we must find another member willing to assume the second year of a two-year term of office as WRC secretary, currently held by Laura Ruberto. Laura has received a Fulbright Fellowship (see Member Activities) and will be unable to continue in the office after December. A requisite for the office is dues-paying membership in the WRC for at least one year. I encourage anyone able and willing to step in to contact me at (831) 641-9762 for further information and copious expressions of gratitude.

- Adele Negro

Upcoming

The Italian American Memoir

Readings by Lorraine Macchello, Ivano Comelli & Brian Bianchini

Place: Italian American Heritage Foundation of San Jose, 425 N. 4th St., San Jose, CA 95112

Date: Sunday, September 18—2:00 PM to 4:30 PM

The Memoir has always been a crucial document for historians, providing personal details and intimate reflections of times and places that more general documents such as newspapers cannot. While the immigrant generation rarely had the time or the language to pen memoirs, subsequent generations are increasingly equipped with both. We are fortunate to have three second-generation members who have recently taken on the task of recording their memories of growing up in immigrant households. Lorraine Macchello was born in San Francisco to immigrant parents from the Marche region. Her recently published book, *The Dowry*, tells of the emigration of both parents, first to North Beach, then to the Excelsior district of San Francisco, and finally to Menlo Park. A review of her book can be found in the Book Review section inside. Ivano Comelli's parents emigrated to California and settled as ranchers on the coast north of Santa Cruz. He recounts their adventures "*su per la costa*" in a memoir he will soon publish. Hugo Bianchini's family, hailing from a village in Tuscany, settled in Roseville where his father ran a series of restaurants and bars—a business he learned first working at Fior d'Italia in San Francisco. Hugo set out with no intention to seek publication but to simply record his memories of his growing up as a document to hand down to his children.

For this program, Lorraine Macchello and Ivano Comelli will each read from their memoirs, while Brian Bianchini will read a section of his father's account and provide the next generation's response to a parent's memoir. Time will be reserved for audience members to ask questions about various aspects of the memoir process—how to begin, where to find documents and other information, how to deal with the sensitivities of 'family secrets,' what route to take for publication, distribution, etc—with the three writers.

The WRC's General Membership Meeting—where all members are encouraged to offer opinions/suggestions about our chapter—will precede the formal program. Light refreshments will be served. For more information, call (415)868-0538. The IAHF Cultural Center is located at 425 N. 4th Street, San Jose, CA 95112; tel: (408)293-7122.

AIHA in L.A. - 38th National AIHA conference

*Speaking Memory: Oral History, Oral Culture and
Italians in America*

Los Angeles, California -- November 3-6, 2005

Doubletree Hotel Westwood, 10740 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90024, Tel. (310) 475-8711.

The AIHA's national conference will be held this year in Los Angeles. Anyone not yet registered at the Doubletree should do so immediately, as space is at a premium. WRC members will be represented on several panels and readings and the chapter will host a social lunch on Friday at noon in the Doubletree Lounge. All members are invited to attend.

Among the panels featuring WRC members/officers:

Roundtable Discussion: "*Community/Academic Bridges: Promise and Problems*," with panelists Adele Negro, Dr. Teri Ann Bengiveno, Richard Vannucci, William Cerruti.

Panel: "*The California Italian American Project: A Plan for an Educational Website Documenting the Original Italian Communities in California*," chair Dr. Kenneth Scambray; presenters Lawrence DiStasi on Richmond, John Buffo on Pittsburg, and Dr. Kimber Quinney on San Diego.

Panel: "*Women: Omissions, Transmissions, Transformations*," chair, Dr. Laura Ruberto.

Panel: "*Italians and Italian Americans: Perceptions and Misperceptions*," presenter Dr. Laura Ruberto: "The Return dello Zio d'America."

Applications for presentations have been particularly heavy this year, with the result that the program covers four days and concludes with a tour on Sunday morning of Italian Los Angeles led by Dr. Gloria Ricci Lothrop.

Una Storia Segreta

Though it has been traveling for more than 11 years and though its crate and some panels are showing signs of wear and tear, requests for *Una Storia Segreta* continue. On September 23-25, the WWII exhibit will be shown at one of the largest Italian festas in the nation—the one in Mercer County, New Jersey which attracts upwards of 100,000 visitors each year. Following that, the exhibit will be transported to Montclair State University where it will be displayed in November. Its appearance will be used in conjunction with an Oral History course prepared by Dr. Susan Douglass entitled, "WWII At Home and Abroad—Case Study—The Italian American Community of New Jersey." In a May article in *The Italian Tribune*, Dr. Douglass described the range of the course and her appeal for subjects for oral interviews, including Italian Americans who served in the Armed Forces, those who were living in Italy, and those who were affected by the wartime restrictions. If funds are available, Lawrence DiStasi will make a presentation to Dr. Douglass' class in conjunction with the exhibit opening on November 14. The Italian American Cultural Foundation of Cleveland is also considering hosting the exhibit this spring.

Member Activities

Kudos to WRC Secretary Laura Ruberto, who has received a Fulbright grant to study in Italy in 2006. She will be studying the contemporary influx of new immigrants in the province of

Avellino, especially in relation to the region's history of emigration and the recent return of many to their home towns. Dr. Ruberto has also recently been named Humanities Professor at Vista Community College, where she will teach Italian and Italian American studies.

As if that were not enough to keep anyone busy, Ruberto's project, *Mondo Bambini: Italian for Kids*, has been launched for the Fall semester with a grant from NIAF. Italian lessons for children from 2 to 5 are scheduled each Friday morning in Berkeley at Finnish Hall. The semester will run from Sept. 9 to Dec. 16. Co-directors are Ruberto and Dr. Angelo Del Priore. For information, email EastBayBimbi@yahoo.com.

Lawrence DiStasi's article summarizing the results of the WRC's Textbook Project will appear in the Fall issue of *Italian Americana*. A shorter version was run in NIAF's *Ambassador Magazine* and will be picked up by *Fra Noi*. The project has also been the impetus for the plan to document California's original Italian communities noted in the panel scheduled for the AIHA Conference in LA, and has played a key role in the California legislation noted below.

William Cerruti, WRC member and chair of the California Italian American Task Force has been working for years on legislation that would mandate the teaching of the Italian American experience in California textbooks. This year, that work has come to fruition. Assembly bill 390, sponsored by Assemblymember Joe Canciamilla (D-Pittsburg) passed the Assembly and has now passed both the Senate Education Committee and the Senate Appropriations Committee. The bill goes to the Senate floor for final passage soon and, with the Governor's signature, is expected to become law to take effect in January. The bill would require the Board of Education to include the Italian American experience in the next curriculum cycle. This will represent a major accomplishment, ending the neglect of the Italian contribution to California which has been so notable in textbooks till now.

WRC member Cathe Cornello Smeland this year is sending her daughter, Cendahl, off to Seton Hall University. Cendahl, who wrote her senior essay on the wartime story, became one of 30 Italian American students selected to participate in NIAF's "Student to Leaders" program, with a summer of public policy workshops in Washington, DC.

The *Con Le Nostre Mani* exhibit continued its amazing run with appearances at the Amici Club, The Temescal Street Fair, the Buon Tempo Club, the Pleasanton Public Library (with Richard Vannucci and Dr. Teri Ann Bengiveno giving an opening lecture), and at the Festa Italiana held this year at Oakland's Dunsmuir Historic Estate. The exhibit will next be on display at St. Louis Bertrand Church in Oakland from October 7-15. A fundraising dinner will be held October 15, at 6PM at St. Bertrand's, with proceeds split evenly between St. Bertrand's and the exhibit. Tickets are \$8 for adults and \$5 for children. For further information, contact Richard Vannucci at (510)581-9139.

Maria Mazziotti Gillan's drawings and collages, "Through One Woman's Eyes," will be on display at Northlight Books and Cafe, in Cotati, from September 1 through October 31, 2005. Poet and anthologist Gillan, who runs the Poetry Center

at Paterson Community College, will give a poetry reading at the reception on September 17, beginning at 2 PM.

Book Reviews

The Fabulous Fior: Over 100 Years in an Italian Kitchen, by Francine Brevetti, San Francisco Bay Books: 2004. \$27.50.

Anyone who saw Francine Brevetti's presentation about Fior d'Italia in the WRC program two years ago would have anticipated that her book would be fascinating. It is. Beautifully published in a hardcover 10"x11" format, its glossy pages are filled with vintage photos, old menus from the Fior, countless portraits of those who owned and worked there, and a text that tells the history not only of this oldest of Italian restaurants but much of North Beach's Little Italy as well. We learn of how the earliest Italian immigrants—including founder Angelo Del Monte—usually came to the West hoping to strike it rich in the gold fields but ended up concluding that they'd do better servicing the food and housing needs of the miners. They were right. Like Ghirardelli and countless others, Del Monte bought his restaurant from its prior Mexican owners, brought in several other families and workers as partners, and turned his little eatery servicing a bordello upstairs into one of San Francisco's most enduring and beloved institutions. The list of prominent Italians, civic leaders and celebrities who visited Fior is a who's who of nearly every era: Marconi, A.P. Giannini, Caruso, Pavarotti, DiMaggio, Lasorda, Montana, Bennett, Alioto, Moscone, and countless others. But it's not so much the list that impresses here; it is what Brevetti does with them. Each is given a little vignette featuring a history of his or her renown and habitual trips to the restaurant. We learn, for example, about George Moscone's casual attitude about security, which would haunt all who knew him the night the mayor was due to eat at the Fior on November 27, 1978. He never arrived; he was assassinated that day by Dan White.

Among the most fascinating items in the book are the old menus, including the original menu from 1886. It features items like Calfs Brains for 5 cents, Risotto with Clams for 10 cents, Frog Legs for 40 cents and Special Dinner with Wine for the grand sum of 35 cents. To make us lament inflation even more, a 1955 menu features dinner with soup, salad, ravioli and a main course for \$2.50 for Chicken, \$2.85 for Sweetbreads, \$4. for Squab Casserole and \$3.85 for Filet Mignon. On the ala carte menu, you could feast on antipasto for \$1., Risotto Milanese for \$1.25 or Pot Roast with Ravioli for \$1.50. Zabaione for dessert was \$.60. No wonder that when, in 1986, the hundredth anniversary celebration offered the original menu at the original prices, customers were lined up around the block to sample prices from another era.

There is much more here, enough to satisfy anyone interested in the Fior or North Beach. A photo of one of the first shares offered to waiters, for example, made out to A. Vannucci (our Treasurer's forebear). A news article from 1959 noting that the Fior introduced America to numerous dishes like Veal Scallopine, Risotto with Clams and Saltimbocca. But my personal favorite is Angelo Pellegrini's stirring tribute to Fior in his book *Americans By Choice*. It says, in part: *Men of his (Louis Martini) generation, Italian immigrants who came directly west...feel a proprietary interest in it. They grew up and became a part of America together. It is their restaurant.*

It has never betrayed them, nor they it. There is much more; to read it, check out *The Fabulous Fior*. (NB: the recent fire has mandated yet another address change for the Fior. Brevetti is preparing a new edition to include the latest in the saga. She can be contacted at: francineb@earthlink.net)

The Dowry: Legacies to an Italian American Daughter, by Lorraine Paolucci Macchello, Tramondi Publishing: 2004.

Without formal training as a writer, Lorraine Macchello has achieved something rare: she has written a memoir about her life with her immigrant parents that manages to convey both a novelistic sense of affection for the characters she describes, while at the same time portraying the times and places they lived in as they really were, without embellishment. Along the way, she has created a valuable document of Italian life in both the Italian village from which her mother derived and the 1920s through 1990s Bay Area to which she emigrated. We learn of the actual dowry—the linens and lace, all hand-done from fabric to embroidery—which her mother passed down to her. We learn of the courtship in the village of Pesaro where her parents met and became engaged. We learn of their first trying days in San Francisco, the house in the Excelsior district they were able to buy and maintain, the close and sometimes trying relations with Italian neighbors, the move to Menlo Park and the securing of a future without financial worry, the last years of caring for a mother who grew increasingly frail and disoriented. Nothing is overstated or over-dramatized. Nothing is papered over. The story is lucid and satisfying, the saga of a displacement in time and place of thousands of miles and nearly incompatible cultures that somehow manages to work for several generations. It is a story repeated millions of times in the 20th century yet here it is told with a grace and truth and courage that are unusual indeed. In the end, it is a story of repayment, in care of her mother, for that physical and cultural dowry, but even moreso, repayment in words like these: *Janeth [the live-in caregiver for a mother no longer able to care for herself] worked an extra day on some weekends, otherwise I went there early on Saturday morning, laden with their grocery supplies and our meals for the weekend. I came home in the evening, when Paula arrived to relieve me for the night. On Sunday morning I went back to my mother's house, no longer the sheltering, warm place it once was, the house my father built after I was married; the house where I spent summers with my babies; where, after we moved to the Peninsula, we could always find a meal or a snack and Mac a cold beer. It was no longer Mom's kitchen, where she and I canned countless jars of summer fruit and cooked meals together. It had become Janeth's kitchen now. I didn't begrudge it to her, but she was a stranger to it; she had no acquaintance with its ghosts.*

There is much more like this, a remarkable performance in every respect. Come listen to Lorraine Macchello reading from *The Dowry* in San Jose. It can be purchased by contacting the author at Tramondi Publishing, P.O. Box 7805, Menlo Park, CA 94026. Email: Tramondi@juno.com.

Also new and noted: Sandra Gilbert, *Belongings: Poems*, W.W. Norton: 2004. New poems by one of the best. Camille Cusumano, ed., *Italy, a Love Story: Women Write about the Italian Experience*, Seal Press: 2005.

