

American Italian Historical Association WESTERN REGIONAL CHAPTER

NEWSLETTER

A people without a past is a people without a future

Bolinas, California

www.aiha-wrc.org

Summer 2011

President's Message

Upcoming

The AIHA membership voted this summer to change the name (as of Jan. 2012) of the 45-year-old organization to the Italian American Studies Association (IASA). It's a change that has been in the making since at least the mid-1990s. In fact, a similar initiative was voted down in 1997, right around the time I started getting involved in AIHA as a graduate student. But as AIHA's current president, George Guida, so nicely summed up in a recent missive, "since then...the membership itself has changed"—the name IASA better reflects what happens in the field today. Although the organization was founded mainly by historians, today's membership reflects a broader array of disciplinary backgrounds. Members today are active across various fields in the social sciences and in the liberal and creative arts; uniting the work done in these multi-disciplinary approaches is an over-arching interest in the cultural practices, representations, and lived experiences (past and present) of Italian Americans. Further, this name parallels movements across related academic disciplines in ethnic studies and American studies and suggests the kind of shift in intellectual and cultural thought that we as scholars and teachers encourage and support.

It's a good time to remind you that you should renew your chapter dues if you haven't already done so and you should join (or renew your membership to) the national AIHA as well. The AIHA-WRC continues to organize public programs and support scholarly work that reflect the contemporary field of Italian American Studies and that intersect with the efforts of our national parent organization. So even if you can't attend AIHA's yearly conference (this year in Tampa, Florida), your membership in both organizations reinforces the relationship.

If you are close to the Bay Area, where most of our activities occur (although we are always open to collaborating on programs up and down the Pacific Coast), then we look forward to seeing you at one of our programs.

Please attend our October 1 event at the African American Museum and Library of Oakland, where we'll recognize the public installation of Ralph Fasanella's painting "Welcome Home, Boys." Bring your students, colleagues, friends, and neighbors! This is a deeply important piece of midcentury American art made by the son of Italian immigrants; an artist who learned to paint in his thirties and went on to create pieces which reflected his working class and ethnic experiences. Don't miss it!

Alla prossima!

~ Laura E. Ruberto

Reception Honoring Ralph Fasanella's Painting, "Welcome Home, Boys"

Date: Saturday, October 1, 2011

Place: African American Museum and Library of Oakland, 659 14th St., Oakland, CA

Time: 1pm to 4 pm

In 1953 Ralph Fasanella painted "Welcome Home, Boys," a painting which depicts a post-World War II strike. Its title reflects the artist's concern for the fair treatment of American workers and U. S. veterans returning to working life after the war. Fasanella spent his entire fifty-year painting career commemorating labor activism and progressive politics while passionately advocating for racial and gender equality.

The son of immigrants from Southern Italy, Fasanella was a self-taught painter who held jobs as a truck driver, a textile worker, a machinist, and a union organizer before beginning to paint in 1945. His paintings, with their striking use of color and bold images that often evoke his Italian and working-class background, are recognized today as significant examples of mid-century folk art and are increasingly viewed as integral to the story of American painting.

In 1990 the painting was purchased through a collaboration between a local union and the public art fund of the city of Oakland in order to be hung in a public space in the city of Oakland. Having the painting displayed in Oakland honored the diverse, working-class citizens throughout the Bay area who fought for a piece of post-World War II prosperity after fighting the war or working for years under a no-strike pledge to help the war effort.

In 2003 the African American Museum and Library of Oakland took over custodial care of the painting where it still hangs today.

This program, co-sponsored by the AIHA/WRC, the African American Museum and Library of Oakland, and Berkeley City College, will include a speaker-and-discussion period from 2 to 3pm, followed by a tour of the library's collection. Speakers will include poet and scholar Ishmael Reed, former Oakland City Attorney John Russo and WRC President Laura Ruberto. A reception and viewing of the painting will precede the formal program. For more information, contact lruberto@peralta.edu or phone (510) 981-2922.

Italian Folk: Vernacular Culture in Italian American Lives

Joseph Sciorra will talk about his new edited collection, *Italian Folk*, at UC Berkeley on February 9, 2012, at 5 PM. The program is co-sponsored by the AIHA/WRC and the UC Department of Italian Studies. More details will be forthcoming in our next newsletter. Save the date.

Una Storia Segreta

The *Una Storia Segreta* exhibit has made its way back to California to be permanently housed (except when it is on tour) at the Pittsburg Historical Society Museum. The exhibit was displayed twice this spring, once at the MLK Jr Library in San Jose during the month of April, and in May-June at the Pittsburg Historical Society Museum in Pittsburg CA. Along with the library showing, San Jose's Italian American Heritage Foundation hosted a packed house for an Open Forum on April 10. Thanks to the work of IAHF president Ken Borelli and event chair Tony Zerbo, the Forum was attended by an impressive group of politicians including U.S. Reps. Mike Honda and Zoe Lofgren, CA Senator Joe Simitian, former Assemblyman Dominic Cortese, and several members of San Jose's City Council. After most of these dignitaries offered congratulations and support for the Segreta project's role in making this story public, and a keynote speech by Lawrence DiStasi, a lively open discussion ensued. In all, this was an impressive indication that interest in *Una Storia Segreta* remains strong, even after 17 years on the road.

Member Activities

Bill Cerruti and Assemblyman Anthony **Portantino** have completed a project to search out and honor the many Italian Americans who have served in the California Legislature over the years, starting with Dr. Alfred Taliaferro of San Rafael, who served from 1852 to 1858. The project has resulted in a Resolution calling for California to honor these men and women, as well as an exhibit that will be hosted in the Capitol, opening in October. Some of the legislators still living were honored at a special reception in Sacramento on August 22. Among those contributing information on the legislators were Marianna Gatto of the IA Museum of L.A., and the WRC's Lawrence DiStasi.

Vincenza Scarpaci is continuing her tour of the Bay Area to publicize her *Journey of Italians in America*. Among her stops in the area will be: Petaluma Library, Oct. 8; Italian Cultural Society of Sacramento, Oct. 9; Gruppo Lonatese of San Rafael, Oct. 11. For more information, go online to: www.italianamericanjourney.org. Scarpaci was the featured guest on Fred Gardaphe's *Nota Bene* show on July 27. The show streams live on *Italics*, The Italian American TV Magazine. See www.livestream.com/italics.

Sam Fumosa, WRC member and tireless supporter of *Una Storia Segreta*, has been awarded the Sellaro Award by the Order Sons of Italy in America. It is a well deserved recognition for his years of service to Italian America. *Auguri*.

Lucia Birnbaum was honored on May 19 by her students and admirers upon her retirement from teaching at the California Institute of Integral Studies. Tributes ranged from speeches and dances to artworks and videos of some of her research trips in Sicily with students. Ample food and drink rounded off the evening. There will also be a Roundtable discussion and tribute, "Global Healing," by some of the many scholars who have profited from Lucia's work at this year's AIHA Conference in Tampa FL, Oct. 20-22. For more information, see the AIHA website at: www.aihaweb.org.

Marianna Gatto's leadership of the Italian American Museum of Los Angeles continues to thrive. On June 11, the Museum held a fund-raiser called "Vintage," featuring live music, fashions and costumes from the 1940s. The Museum is housed in the 1908 Italian Hall, the oldest remaining structure from the city's once thriving Little Italy.

Mary Bucci Bush's new novel, *Sweet Hope*, is due out from Guernica Publications this fall. The novel treats the story of Italians imported illegally to the Mississippi Delta in the early 1900s to work as contract laborers/indentured servants alongside African American sharecroppers—sometimes known as the "Italian Colony Experiment."

Ivano Comelli, author of the memoir *La Nostra Costa*, has initiated an active Facebook page in addition to his "blogga" site. Italian Americans who lived and farmed the coast north of Santa Cruz send in fascinating photos and memories of their growing-up years. A Davenport North Coast Reunion is scheduled for Sunday, September 18, at the Harvey West Park in Santa Cruz. Details at www.nostra-costa.blogspot.com.

Nickolas Marinelli of the Italian Cemetery in Colma has been producing *Il Notiziario*, the online Newsletter of the Italian Cemetery. It contains news of the activities sponsored by the cemetery as well as historical nuggets about many of the pioneer immigrants to San Francisco (Marinelli publishes these nuggets in *L'Italo Americano* as well.) For info about *Il Notiziario*, email nickolas@italiancemetery.com.

Italian American Activities

The Calandra Institute has issued a 'call for papers' for its upcoming conference, *Reconfiguring White Ethnicity*, to take place in New York City April 27-28, 2012. The deadline for submissions is September 16, 2011. Go to calandra@qc.edu for information and to submit abstracts.

Your last newsletter?

In trying to maintain our services for those who value them, our treasurer has sent out membership renewal notices. If you wish to continue receiving this newsletter, indicate your interest by joining the AIHA/WRC and paying our modest dues. A membership form is printed on the back cover, with the email option being both most economical and fastest.

Book Review

Undermining Race: Ethnic Identities in Arizona Copper Camps, 1880-1920, by Phylis Cancilla Martinelli, (University of Arizona Press, 2009).

Phylis Martinelli's aim in this book is no less than to change the assumptions readers have about race. Far from being a category fixed by skin color, that is, race in the conception Martinelli employs is a "social construct," a racial designation that involves a struggle among competing groups about labels and status, and one whose outcome depends on the conditions that prevail at a given time. Three mining camps in Arizona's eastern mountains become the focus of Martinelli's study, each with a different social structure, and thus each with a slightly different level of "racialization" for the Italian immigrants who worked there. Like the Mexicans with whom they often labored, Italian workers faced a "moving frontier of race" from one context to another. In some towns, Italians were considered *almost* white, and were able to work as miners underground alongside skilled white miners. In others, they were considered *almost* Mexican, and could only perform menial jobs above ground. In most cases, they were what Martinelli calls an 'in-between' race, not quite white, but not quite Latino either (in fact, they were often labeled EuroLatin, a 'lower' race of Europeans, like the Spanish and French).

The three mining camps (camps became towns when their populations increased and their dwellings and social spaces became more permanent) Martinelli examines are Globe, Bisbee and Clifton-Morenci, all in eastern Arizona. All were dominated by whites with whom the newly hired immigrant miners had to compete, not just for jobs and wages, but also for social space and status. But the white dominance varied: Clifton-Morenci was largely Mexican, and hence more congenial to Italians; Bisbee fiercely protected its white privilege, denying living space to all Chinese, and barely tolerating foreigners (in 1917, Bisbee was the site of an infamous deportation of about 1200 "foreign" workers shipped to New Mexico in cattle cars.) The racial category, and hence the wages earned and the conditions endured, for Italian immigrants, therefore, differed in each town, and according to the time of their immigration.

Globe, settled earliest by Italians from Piemonte, had its own Little Italy, known as Canun Salè after the town in Piemonte many came from (and known as 'Wop Alley' by whites). Though definitely not 'white' (one resident remembered a teacher who informed her class that Italians were *not* Caucasian), Italians in Globe were allowed to join white unions, and establish a branch of a mutual benefit society—the Lega Fratellanza Lodge. Bisbee, by contrast, made sure that Italians and other foreigners lived in Brewery Gulch, the "sinful place" where saloons and bawdy houses were located. An Italian was nearly lynched there as a result of a quarrel which left two white men dead (Martinelli explains how these "avoided lynchings" were nearly as threatening a means of social control as actual ones). A Mexican had been lynched in Bisbee in 1884, and Bisbee's "sundown law" meant that no Chinese person could be in town after dark. Being at the receiving end of white racism inclined Italians in Bisbee to adapt to the more congenial Hispanic culture, with many learning Spanish rather than English. This eventually cost them, for though early on they were allowed to work underground and earn more pay, by 1910, many were shifted to above ground labor earning only \$1.25 per day like their Mexican comrades, compared to the \$3.50 a day for whites and north Europeans. By 1920, most Italians had left the town.

The third camp, Clifton-Morenci (which became two towns) was known as the Latin Camp. Though whites controlled the

overall power structure, the majority were Mexicans and other Latins. This not only led to Mexicans and Italians being able to work underground (for higher wages), but also to historic cooperation between Mexican and Italian miners, first in demanding compensation from Phelps Dodge for building a railroad through mining claims, and then in a wildcat strike in 1903 protesting a wage cut. And here, too, Italians assimilated more to Mexican than to Anglo culture, with their Festa di San Giovanni in Morenci called the 'Fiesta de San Juan.' As Jeanette Monsegur Frick (mother Piemontese, father Basque) explained to Martinelli, "We fell into a gray area. We identified more with Mexican, Hispanic, and Italian than Anglo."

In short, Martinelli provides ample evidence to support her claim that race in America is not a fixed category, especially for 'in-between' groups like Italians. She also provides a critical counternarrative to Andrew Rolle's view that Italians in the West were uniformly successful. While many families in Arizona's mining camps *did* succeed, especially those that left the mines to establish businesses like saloons, groceries and bakeries, many did not. This was due to the racialized categories Italian miners were forced into. Without real social acceptance, most had to work at the low wage scales given to all Latins. The result is that the Italian population declined by 12% in Arizona after 1920 and another 35% after 1930. Though a few of their buildings and businesses remain, especially in Globe, they are mostly a forgotten presence.

When Hearts Outlive Minds, poems by Ed Coletti, (Conflux Press, 2011).

Ed Coletti is a poet from Santa Rosa (originally New York) who has run two poetry-reading series, *SoCoCo* and *Poetry Azul* there. Like most poets, his life has varied widely from service in Vietnam to the Summer of Love in San Francisco to advanced degrees at SF State and Sonoma State to teaching to publishing to counseling. These days he also derives great enjoyment from painting—samples of which can be seen on www.flickr.com/photos/edcolettipaintings.

In this collection of his poetry, Coletti tends to concentrate on elegy, probably because the book is shot through with memories of his father's decline and death. The poems are contemplative but not heavy, sad but not saddening as they mull over the inevitable passage of time, our power and us with a lightness of touch that reminds in some ways of his paintings. Coletti's is a way of thinking and writing that can lament loss while simultaneously reminding us of its defining role in the rhythm of life. Here, for one example, is the poem, "Befriending Death."

As with death himself
I too sit close
to my father—
death all too close
I breathe hot to his cold
jealous we must share
my father, me exhaling,
death inhaling
No contest,
just a rhythm

Coletti also runs two blogs: <http://edcolettip3.blogspot.com>, and his 'No Money in Poetry' blog. Worth checking out.

Lawrence DiStasi

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Members with items for the next
newsletter should send them to:

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The American Italian Historical Association

Western Regional Chapter

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AIHA National Conference – Oct. 20-22, 2011
Tampa, FL
“Italian American Body Politics: Private Lives and
Public Sphere”