

American Italian Historical Association

WESTERN REGIONAL CHAPTER

NEWSLETTER

A people without a past is a people without a future

Bolinas, California

Spring 2006

President's Message

I wish you all another round of Happy New Year as the Year of the Dog is ushered in this month by our Chinese American friends. And we are pleased to usher in a new year for the Western Regional Chapter with a hearty membership count—our highest ever! In large part, we have our indefatigable treasurer, Richard Vannucci, to thank for this increase. He has lost no opportunity at our programs and at other events to talk up our work and draw in new and old members alike. As of December 31, 2005, we boasted 116 paying members, of which 92 are renewing and 24 are first-timers. We welcome all of you and look forward to seeing a number of you at our first and subsequent programs of the year (outlined in this issue). We hope to continue our efforts to vary the venues and locations of our programs in order to make them accessible to a wider circle of new members.

We are very pleased to launch our schedule of programs this year with Marco Zecchin's talk and slide presentation based on his beautiful book of architectural photography and text inspired by a return to his father's region of the Veneto (please see Upcoming). On display will be some of his photographic prints, as well as signed copies of his book for purchase. We encourage all who are drawn by this visual medium and by story-telling of personal journeys and landscapes, to come join us that afternoon. Please RSVP at the phone number given, since space may be limited.

Plans are also in the making for the WRC to host a focus group discussion on a topic of crucial importance raised by longtime member Dr. Vincenza Scarpaci during the recent AIHA national conference in Los Angeles, namely the necessity of collecting and preserving materials that document the Italian American experience, including genealogical sources and community-based projects. Central to this endeavor are questions of how to do it and how to decide what to collect and preserve. We welcome indications of interest from any potential participants.

Last but not least, I would like to thank Rita DeSales French for her willingness to step in as WRC Secretary for the next six months while officer Laura Ruberto is in Italy doing research on a Fulbright Fellowship. Since Rita is based in Palo Alto, we will also explore further the possibilities of expanding our activities to the South Bay and beyond. Once again, I cannot overstate the importance of our volunteer officers, whose work sustains this organization, and I encourage other members, new and renewing, to become active in developing and furthering that work with your skills and interest. *Distinti saluti tutti.*

-Adele Negro

Upcoming

Marco Zecchin: The Italian Landscape in the Italian American Psyche

Place: Oakland Public Library, Rockridge Branch, 5366 College Ave., Oakland CA

Date: Saturday, March 4, 2006. 2 PM to 4 PM.

Marco Zecchin is an Italian American who has worked in the Bay Area as an architectural photographer for many years. The son of an immigrant, he shares many of the same feelings for the old country that many do, but with a difference: his father brought his family back to Italy to live not once but twice. As a result, Zecchin's trips to photograph in Italy are compounded of both family memory derived from his father's stories, and his own past as a child there.

In his book, *The Spirit of Northern Italy*, Zecchin has published photographs he took on several trips back to Italy in the 1990s. The photos include shots of his family's home in Maniago, sixty miles east of Venice, photographs of Venice where his father was born, and photographs of notable buildings and monuments in the surrounding countryside. All are shot with a 4x5 wooden camera, producing stunning detail. Each photograph has a story behind it, often relating to someone in Zecchin's family, but sometimes simply the account of how a given image caught his eye and he felt an obligation to catch it on film.

For example, Zecchin describes an image called "Per I Caduti" this way: "This monument, Per I Caduti Alipini in San Leonardo, is about 10 km from Maniago. I had been driving between the house and Zio Gino's permanent home in Pordenone when I saw these large wings above the cornfields. I questioned my eyes since at that distance this bird, if it were real, had to be huge. I have never been shy about traveling on farm roads and as soon as I was able to pull off the highway and track this bird, I did. Tall dried stalks of corn lined the roads and in my rented Fiat I worked my way through the maze and mud in the direction of the bird. A couple of times I had to stop, get out of the car and stand on the bumper to get my bearings but I finally found this monument and its mirroring pine in among the fields...."

Zecchin will show slides of his photographs as he describes his photographic process. He will also speak about the place of Italy in his personal imagination and how it may function for others as well. Copies of his book will be on hand for purchase. To RSVP, please call (831) 641-9762.

Future Programs: Plans are in motion for several future programs. Among them are a program on the Italian concept of “La Bella Figura” to be presented later this year. We have two presenters thus far; if anyone knows of another who could speak with some authority on the subject, please contact Adele Negro. We are also planning a literary program featuring two or more local authors, to be presented in the Fall. For next year, Laura Ruberto will be making a presentation on the Italian POWs during World War II. Any members who have ideas for these or other programs (including a planned conference on Italians in California) are urged to contact Adele Negro with their suggestions.

Una Storia Segreta

Dr. Susan Douglass of Monmouth University not only arranged to display the wartime exhibit in the library of her institution. She also made the exhibit a centerpiece of her oral history course, with students interviewing Italian Americans in central New Jersey, several of whom remembered the wartime restrictions. Dr. Douglass was able to contact Sam Fumosa and Tony Martignetti as well, with the latter giving the keynote speech at the exhibit opening. Dr. Douglass then invited Lawrence DiStasi to New Jersey to make presentations both to her class and before the assembled members of the faculty and student body. All in all, this showing was a model of the excitement and living history *Una Storia Segreta* can generate in a university setting.

Barbara Viale of Cuneo set out a year ago to find out what had happened to her uncle, whose fate and fortune had been lost when he emigrated to America in the 1920s. She wrote to Lawrence DiStasi to find out if perhaps he had been interned. After some searching, DiStasi found a record showing that Ferdinando Ghibaudo had in fact been detained at Sharp Park and then released. With that information, Viale then filed a FOIA request with the Justice Department asking for her uncle’s records. After several further inquiries, her search met with a bonanza: she received over 350 pages of records relating to her uncle’s dealings with the INS. This is a lesson to all those interested in the wartime story: a huge body of information still has not been searched; until it is, the true story of what really happened to Italian Americans during WWII will remain only partially known.

Jenni Holm is a Newberry-Award winning writer of young-adult novels. When she found out about the wartime story, she decided to set a story in that time, calling upon her family’s Italian background for setting. She has now finished the novel, called *Penny from Heaven*, which is to be published by Random House this summer. As a sign of her appreciation for the historical help given her, she has made two generous contributions to the Una Storia Exhibit Fund. Random House has also made a contribution. In an age when TV producers and writers take this kind of help for granted, such generosity is both uncommon and deserving of recognition. Mille grazie.

LA 2005 – AIHA Conference in Los Angeles 2005

As noted in our last newsletter, several WRC members attended the national AIHA conference in Los Angeles in November. The conference was a signal success, with

attendance so high that an additional round of programs had to be scheduled for Thursday evening. Among the highlights were a spectacular concert by the Italian folk duo, *Musicantica*, and a report by Geoffrey Simcox of UCLA on the monumental *Repertorium Colombianum*, a 15-volume set of original documents on Columbus and his discoveries.

The conference itself was part of another monumental effort, that of Luisa del Giudice and her Italian Oral History Institute in presenting a two-month festival called *Italian Los Angeles: Celebrating Italian Life, Local History, and the Arts in Southern California*. Among the presentations were an exhibit of the paintings and murals of Leo Politti, a series featuring Italian American writers, lectures on the Watts Towers, presentations of Italian folk dance, and more.

New WRC Website

Thanks to Jennifer Lagier, the WRC now has a new website that will combine all of its web projects. The site will host the WRC materials previously on the national’s site, and will also include the *Una Storia Segreta* site and the CIAP (California Italian American Project) site as well. Make a note and check it out at: www.aiha-wrc.org/

Member Activities

Carol McKibben’s study of the Sicilian women of Monterey, *Beyond Cannery Row*, was published in January by Illinois University Press. The study documents the Sicilians in the fishing industry, and the little-known role played by Sicilian women in forming and preserving the culture. As McKibben notes in a recent article, “Sicilian Monterey was economically dependent on women from the start. The work included both reproductive and productive labor as a matter of course...” McKibben is currently director of the Monterey Regional Oral History and Immigration Project.

Maria Sakovich’s book, *La Nostra Storia: Italian Americans in Richmond*, based on her exhibit on the same subject, was published recently by the Richmond Museum. The book is now in its second printing and is available from the Richmond Museum for \$20.

On March 14, Lawrence DiStasi will speak about the wartime restrictions to Stockton’s Italian school at St. Mary’s High School in Stockton. Part of downtown Stockton was designated a prohibited zone during the war, and records show that numerous Stockton Italians were detained. The Stockton community is working to have the *Una Storia Segreta* exhibit displayed at the Haggis Museum there in the coming year. Then on Thursday May 4, DiStasi will again talk about Una Storia Segreta at the Marin History Museum in San Rafael. The talk will begin at 6 PM.

Fred Marrazzo, who videotaped our Fall memoir-writers’ program, showed that tape recently on his cable program, *Cronaca*. Marrazzo is now planning an oral history project to chronicle the lives and experiences of several Italian immigrant families in California.

Michael Parenti’s new book, *The Culture Struggle*, has just been released by Seven Stories Press. In this slim volume

(140 pages), Parenti applies his analytical skills to the use of culture as an instrument of social power and control. Chapters such as “Ethnocentrism and Cultural Imperialism,” “The Myth of Individuality,” “The Politics of Culture” and “Objectivity and the Dominant Paradigm” suggest that readers used to Parenti’s politically trenchant analyses of accepted notions will not be disappointed.

In Memoriam – Gloria Girolami

After a long illness, longtime WRC supporter Gloria Girolami passed away recently. As president of the Italian Federation of the East Bay, Gloria worked with the WRC on some of our most successful programs: The Tribute to Harry Warren and the Colombo Club celebration for the passage of Public Law #106-451, the Wartime Violation of Italian American Civil Liberties Act. Her seemingly inexhaustible fund of energy and good cheer will be greatly missed.

Book Reviews

Giovanna’s 86 Circles and Other Stories, by Paola Corso, University of Wisconsin Press: 2005.

Paola Corso is one of the more promising young Italian American writers, having received awards for both her poetry and fiction. Originally from the Pittsburgh area, she now lives in Brooklyn, writing and teaching fiction.

This collection of short stories demonstrates both her penchant for a kind of magical realism and her devotion to her Italian American roots in a small “rust-belt” town near Pittsburgh. In story after story, we get the sense of something unique in the Italian American community she calls Tarentum, unique enough to somehow stave off the inevitable waning of that once-vital community. Whether this stems from her desperation to salvage what once was, or her conviction that so vivid a past cannot simply disappear, we are drawn into her world and come to share her desire to keep it alive.

This keeping it alive takes several forms. In the title story, “Giovanna’s 86 Circles,” we join a young girl finding out about first kisses at the same time she is initiated into the secret of Giovanna Calderone’s magical world—a world where every plant she touched grew to fantastic size: peaches big as grapefruits, chard and rhubarb as tall as cornstalks. The secret seems to be in the 86 circles still remaining in her sunroom and left by her planting pots. As the story concludes, we see that, magically, the wreckers’ ball is staved off by an astonishing growth of old Giovanna’s plants, including a huge gardenia that pushes right through the house’s roof. The story ends with preservation: “Rumors would spread that Giovanna’s spirit was taking back her land. Homeowners would say the place was haunted and threaten to get their money back.”

My favorite is the story “Raw Egg in Beer,” perhaps because I remember my own father drinking egg and beer this way and proclaiming its health benefits. In her story, Corso focuses on the supremely successful Mayor, Salvatore Taviani. A self-made millionaire, the Mayor is aging but in supreme health, apparently due to his daily stop at the local tavern where he treats himself and everyone else to raw egg in beer. Still, he has predicted the day of his death and the protagonist, a reporter, has been assigned to question him for a story. Will he die on the day he predicted? Will he go to heaven? The story

takes place mainly in the tavern, where all display total faith in the Mayor, his health, and his good word. He tells the reporter that his faith in raw egg in beer derives, in turn, from his father’s commitment to the same folk remedy, one that revitalized him in spite of the toxic effects of working in a coal mine. Finally, this becomes the story’s motif: “Life ain’t a profession, and faith ain’t a science.”

Subtly, and without overt tributes to immigrant pluck and courage, Paola Corso evokes a world that has passed, and makes us believe in the magic of her fiction to preserve it.

The Teammates, by David Halberstam, Hyperion: 2003.

The teammates of this title are four Boston Red Sox from the era when teams stayed together and players were not yet millionaires. One of the great ballclubs of all time, the team included Ted Williams—probably the greatest hitter in the modern era—and Dom DiMaggio, Joe’s brother and generally considered the smartest player in the game. But this book is not about great ball games per se. It’s about a friendship that lasted a lifetime, even unto death. As the book states on its opening page: “Ted was dying, and the idea for the final trip, driving down to Florida to see him one last time, was Dominic’s.” In this way Ted Williams forms the center of the story, as he did the team, but Dominic DiMaggio plays the anchor role, the teammate whose devotion to his friends trumps virtually all other considerations.

And so the journey begins, with DiMaggio, Johnny Pesky and radio announcer Dick Flavin making the drive, Bobby Doerr—the fourth teammate—unable to make it because of his wife’s illness. In the course of the drive, we learn about the four when they were teammates, and about each player in turn. We learn about their great moments. We learn about their relationship with Ted Williams—always tempestuous, outspoken, arrogant, critical of others, but loyal to his friends. We learn about them as human beings, dealing with the troubles that strike everyone, regardless of celebrity status.

Probably my favorite parts are those about Dom DiMaggio whom I met in Washington at the Judiciary Committee hearings for the WWII legislation. What Halberstam writes about him accords with my impressions in 1999: Dominic DiMaggio is one of those people whom the Italians would call *un’ galantuomo*. In the book, we learn that the “little professor” was not only a great ballplayer, someone Johnny Pesky called “the almost perfect ballplayer: so smart and talented.” He was also a friend who, when his friends were down about having made a mess of their lives, as Ted Williams was occasionally toward the end, would buoy their spirits: “Stop this Teddy! I never want to hear you talk like this again! You’re Ted Williams! An American hero!”

And so, when Ted Williams is dying, DiMaggio engineers the trip. In the end, the teammates visited for two days. On the last visit, Dominic said: “‘Teddy, I’m going to sing you a song.’ It was an Italian love song, the story of two men who were best friends, but one of whom was in love with a girl. But he was afraid to tell her, so he did it through his friend, who then stole her....Dominic began to sing and the house was filled with the sound of his baritone voice. Ted loved it.” The inevitable occurs, but we are grateful to know that such friends still exist. If you get a chance, read and savor this book.

Lawrence DiStasi

