

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

Spring 2007

President's Message

Let me begin by thanking all members who exercised their right to vote in last Fall's election. The WRC's new slate of officers includes: Dr. Laura Ruberto, Vice President; Rita deSales French, Secretary; Richard Vannucci, Treasurer; Lawrence DiStasi, Curator/Newsletter Editor. I am quite honored to serve with all of them. Our Chapter is indebted to the past leadership of Adele Negro. I know each of you join me in thanking Adele for her last sixteen years of service.

Our Chapter has enjoyed success co-sponsoring several past programs including the most recent programs in San Jose and San Rafael. Co-sponsorship is an excellent way for organizations to pool resources and reach larger audiences. This Spring we are delighted to be co-sponsoring two intriguing programs featured in greater detail later in this newsletter. Visit our website for more information and downloadable flyers on both events.

I am excited to announce a couple of programs to look for in the future including presentations on Italian Prisoners of War, Italians in Agriculture, and Oral History Training. Anyone interested in planning future programs, or with relevant information regarding these programs should contact us.

I know for many of you it may be too early to think about Fall 2007; however, mark your calendars for the 40th Annual American Italian Historical Association's Conference in Denver, Colorado, November 1-3, 2007. Denver was chosen as the host city to coincide with the yearlong exhibit on "Italians in Colorado," by AIHA member Alisa Zahller, curator of the Colorado Historical Society.

An organization is only as strong as the members it serves. We are currently 153 members strong and growing daily. We welcome the following new members: David Cerruti; David & Denna Faloni; Paul & Vanessa Grazzini; the North Bay Italian Cultural Foundation; Capt. Lawrence Soletti, SC, USNR, RET; and Fr. Efreim Trettel, OFM. A special thank you to member Jennifer Lagier Fellguth, who is invaluable as our website specialist.

We continue to welcome volunteers and could use a volunteer with computer expertise to take charge of email correspondence, including sending the newsletter to members who will accept an electronic copy. In that regard, anyone who receives this newsletter by post and is willing to receive subsequent ones electronically should email Lawrence DiStasi at lwdistasi@sbcglobal.net. Interested volunteers, please feel free to call me at home, (925) 833-9194, or at work (925) 424-1287.

Ciao e a presto,
Upcoming

Teri Ann Bengiveno, PhD

This spring the WRC will be co-sponsoring two separate events as outlined below.

Lisa Venditelli's Pasta Art

Place: Berkeley City College Auditorium

2050 Center Street, Berkeley CA

Date: Saturday, March 10, 11 AM – Noon

This event, co-sponsored by the WRC and hosted by Berkeley City College, will feature an exhibit of art works by Lisa Venditelli, and her slide-show lecture to be given as part of BCC's International Women's Day event. Venditelli's talk will be followed by a reception with light refreshments.

Venditelli, who lives in San Diego, works with bio-degradable materials such as pasta, Elmer's glue, and everyday found objects such as clothespins and dishes commonly associated with women. She thus deconstructs domestic roles for women while making a strong statement about everyday life, creativity and sustainability. As she notes on her website, "My recent body of work incorporates Feminism, themes of domesticity, body image, and female experience. Added to them is the quirky twist of my Italian American background. In my work liquid soap bottles become angels, clothespins become musical notes, lasagna becomes wallpaper and a bikini, and fusilli pasta becomes a dress form." Commenting further on pasta as an artistic medium, she says, "The use of pasta mimics the ephemerality of domestic maintenance, such as cooking and cleaning, which take hours of preparation only to be immediately dirtied or eaten. The ephemeral pasta also critiques the myth of beauty. The pasta objects are laboriously created, but will eventually break down." The result is artwork that exploits the everyday in a humorous way.

Berkeley City College is located in downtown Berkeley, 100 yards west of the downtown Berkeley Bart station. Public parking lots are located adjacent to BCC. For more information, contact Joan Berezin at BCC, (510)981-2884 or by emailing Laura Ruberto at lruberto@peralta.edu.

Hidden Stories of World War II

A Conference on Enemy Alien Restrictions and Internment

Place: San Mateo Public Library, 55 W. 3rd Ave.

Date: Saturday, April 28, 1 to 4 PM

This conference will be held in conjunction with two other related events: the *Enemy Alien Files* exhibit to be displayed at

the new San Mateo Public Library during May, and **“Freedom Lost: Three One-Act Plays on Enemy Aliens in WWII”** by John Christgau, to take place at 7:30 PM in the Little Theatre of Hillsdale High School, 3115 Del Monte, San Mateo. All three events are supported by a California Civil Liberties Public Education Program grant to Christgau and the Enemy Alien Files consortium.

The conference will feature a keynote address by historian Steven Fox, as well as presentations by Lawrence DiStasi on the Italian WWII experience. Expert speakers will also address the Latin American WWII experience, the German WWII experience, and the Japanese WWII experience, as well as a historical comparison between WWII and today. Curriculum packets for teachers will be distributed in the second half of the conference, with teachers encouraged to engage in a dialogue about how to present this material, lacking in most public school textbooks, to their students.

The three evening dramatizations will address the experiences of the three ethnic groups targeted during WWII.

For further information, contact John Christgau, project director, at 650-591-4045, or jchristgau@aol.com.

Una Storia Segreta

After twelve years of travel, the Una Storia Segreta exhibit requires upgrading badly. At their most recent meeting, WRC officers voted to begin the process of repairing and upgrading the exhibit to the degree current funds make that possible. Lawrence DiStasi and President Bengiveno will be meeting with a designer to plot out what repairs and upgrades will be feasible. Officers voted to use funds from the Rose Scherini Memorial Fund, which have gone unused due to a lack of applicants for scholarships, to finance the first part of the upgrade. The results of the current initiative to petition Congress for funds to upgrade the exhibit will determine how far the upgrade can go. Anyone with experience in fundraising and/or exhibit design would be welcome to aid in this project.

As to the original exhibit, it has been offered a permanent home in the Pittsburg Historical Society’s new museum facility in Pittsburg. Such a home would be apt, given the devastating effect in Pittsburg of the WWII evacuation.

Member Activities

Jenni Holm’s book inspired by the wartime experience of Italian Americans, *Penny From Heaven* (Random House: 2006) continues to garner praise. Recently, the book for young adults received the Newbery Award, the most prestigious award given to books of its kind. As noted in the last newsletter, the book tells how Penny uncovers the family mystery, one involving her Italian uncle and father, and the latter’s puzzling death in the internment camps. It’s a riveting story which promises to educate a whole generation of young Americans about the Italian wartime story still missing from most textbooks.

Dante Negro recently capped a remarkable career with the celebration of his 100th birthday. Having begun teaching Italian and French at the Brooklyn branch of City College at age 20, Negro entered wartime service by heading the Italian

desk of the U.S. Information Service, Office of War Information. Then, following the Allied Invasion of Italy, Negro was sent to Italy by the State Department as head of USIS, his mission being to contact artists throughout Italy, help to rebuild the arts there, and to restore cultural relations with the United States. The contacts he made during the war led to his next career, as General Manager of the renowned performing arts series at Brooklyn College, which he developed. Following his retirement in 1974, Negro was coaxed out of retirement to chair the new Fine Arts Center at the State University at Stony Brook, launching its inaugural season in 1979. For the last 10 years, Negro and his wife Ardemia (whom he met and married in Italy during the war) have spent winters in California with their family—including Adele Negro, past president of the WRC. We in the WRC join in the cascade of wishes for his continuing health and happiness.

Dr. Laura Ruberto will be featured at a May 3rd book party at the Istituto Italiano di Cultura in San Francisco to celebrate her new book, *Italian Neorealism and Global Cinema*, due to be released by Wayne State University Press in April. Ruberto co-edited the book with Kristi Wilson of Stanford, who will also be on the program, along with some of the contributors to the volume. The collection of essays examines the impact of Italian neorealism in contemporary cinema, especially as it treats social issues and redefines national identity.

Lawrence DiStasi continues to write mainly political blogs on a website hosted by George Giacoppe. Giacoppe is retired military, having graduated from West Point. He now teaches and is active in the democratic party in Orange County. The blog is at www.splinters-splinters.blogspot.com. New bloggers and comments are welcome.

Ken Scambray’s recent contretemps with the *Fresno Bee* over its omission of Italians from its putative history has yielded its first fruits. According to Scambray:

“Since my letter to the Fresno Bee and my review of “Fresno County: 150 Years” published by the Bee, the newspaper has run two articles on Italian Americans. Breaking its long-standing policy of not reviewing books, it reviewed Silvio Mano’s recent photographic work on Baldassare Forestiere’s *Underground Gardens*. It was a full-page article with color photographs. Some weeks later, the Bee dispatched a reporter to go out to a local cafe where a group of older Italian Americans who once lived in the immigrant community meet for coffee and reminisce about the old neighborhood. The reporter did a lengthy article on the men and their lives in West Fresno before World War II.

“I think that we can say that it is possible to raise awareness about Italian American history. I believe that all of us who wrote to the Bee have succeeded in educating the editors. I don’t think that we will have a repeat of what happened in ‘Fresno County.’”

Richard Vannucci has completed an emotional and life-changing return to Vietnam with several other veterans of that conflict. The 13-day trip, both to make peace with the past and to deliver 560 wheelchairs and other aid to Vietnamese wounded in the war, was chronicled in *The Argus* on November 24, 2006. Vannucci was stationed in Vietnam in

1959 aboard the aircraft carrier USS Ranger. He is quoted as saying, "I want to see how Gen. Giap was able to bring down the French and essentially bring down the United States." Going back to a former enemy on a mission of peace was described by the vets as "something special."

Book Reviews

Feeling Italian: The Art of Ethnicity in America, by Thomas Ferraro, New York University Press: 2005.

In this book—winner of a Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award—Thomas Ferraro has argued something that few other Italian American writers would attempt: he has shown how the apparently negative stereotypes that have always bedeviled Italian ethnicity have been transformed, in our time, into positively appealing universals. The agents of this transformation have been what Ferraro calls the 'artifacts of aesthetic media': books, movies, paintings, recordings, video. In examining a selection of the most prominent of these artifacts, he makes his case: from its humble and humiliating origins in southern Italy and early twentieth century America, the art of *feeling Italian* has become a desired way of life open to anyone. From Frank Stella to Frank Sinatra, from *Moonstruck* to Madonna, from *The Godfather* to the *Sopranos*, Ferraro guides us through the means whereby the Italian way of being in America has, in his opinion, ascended to a kind of idealized mode of life to which millions aspire. As he writes in his introduction:

I am interested in pursuing the interplay between ethos (lived values) and ethnos (sense of belonging) in our age of transnationalism. On the one side of the dialectic is a highly particular version of Catholicism (paganish, domesticated, sensualized), in which it is the extended family and later the intersections among food, sex, and art that make for shadow faith. On the other side are certain globalizing presentations of that sensibility, in which feeling Italian is not by birthright so much as it is by choice, a map for educating desire and (re)conceiving relatedness. The two sides of the dialectic—the secularizing Catholicism among the Italians versus the Italian Catholicizing of secular America—come together not as a righteous xenophobia, the guido-style parochialism of which we have had more than enough, but as a demanding, even consequential mode of culture-based cohesion: acting Italian, finally, as an art for America.

This is heady stuff, particularly for those of us who have grown up in an America where "feeling Italian" seemed anything but desirable and far from art. What's fascinating is that Ferraro—at least in regard to the art and artists he examines—manages to be both erudite, accessible, and persuasive. "Feeling Italian is now a chosen identity," he says at one point. At another, he says this about that *bete noir* of Italian American activists, the *Sopranos*: "The *Sopranos* sweetly shocks the greater American public into recognizing the contemporary crime-family crisis as its true inner self."

Ferraro explores this and other art and artifacts as real icons of Americana. In his conclusion to his piece on the *Godfather* movies, he writes: *Italian Americans, in short, saw their histories, their hopes, their foibles, their worries, their strengths, their beauty, and their ugliness reflected on the national screen—yes, but not just that...here, with the Corleones, they were able to take the solace of an intelligence bordering upon true wisdom in the national discovery of*

Italian criminality as a mirror into America's heart of darkness, and they were soon granted the special joy of seeing key forms of Italian American noncriminality—Brooklyn femininity in Moonstruck, power feminism in Madonna, gustatory sacramentality in Big Night, working-class masculinity in Springsteen—taken up as antidotes to what ails the heart.

"Antidotes to what ails the heart": that's Ferraro's thesis in a nutshell—that the art of feeling Italian is what America has come to need *and want*. The election of Nancy Pelosi as the first woman Speaker of the House suggests he may be right.

Queen Calafia's Paradise: California and the Italian American Novel, by Kenneth Scambray, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press: 2007.

It probably comes as a surprise to many that there is such a thing as the Italian American novel in California. And though it is true that the novels of John Fante rightly loom very large in this book, it is also true that several other California writers of Italian descent sufficiently balance out the Fante opus to make us realize that Italian American fiction in California weighs large and will weigh larger still in the future. Thus we find in-depth analyses of classics like Jo Pagano's *Golden Wedding* and Lorenzo Madalena's *Confetti for Gino*, as well as lesser known, more contemporary novels like Dorothy Bryant's *Miss Giardino* and Steven Varni's *The Inland Sea*.

Confetti for Gino may illustrate Scambray's gift for analysis best. Its author, Lorenzo Madalena, was a product of San Deigo's fishing community, an origin that heavily informs the novel. But Scambray (as revealed in a lecture he gave before the WRC two years ago) has ferreted out Madalena's lesser known novel, *The Invisible Glass*, written under the pen name Loren Wahl, to disguise Madalena's closeted homosexuality. Thus, when Scambray analyzes *Confetti for Gino*, he perceives that beneath the alienation of the Italian Americans in the novel caught between Old World and New World values, there is the added weight of Madalena's own sympathy and empathy for outsiders based on his homosexuality, and on his sensitivity to the more extreme alienation of African Americans. As Scambray puts it:

Madalena's detailed descriptions of the food and folkways of the Sicilian community are intended to be his resistance to the overriding themes of assimilation and conformity of the 1950s. As a student of African American history and as a gay Italian American, Madalena was acutely aware that social policy makers at the time refused to acknowledge the reality of Americans' diverse ethnic and sexual identity.

Thus, even though Madalena has his hero, Gino, try to rebel against his Sicilian heritage by defiantly proposing to an 'American' woman named Vicky, in the end Gino pairs up with the woman his mother has been proposing all along, the Sicilian Teresa. Though this might seem to be a surrender to sentimentality, Scambray insists it is not. Madalena, he says, was "not so willing just yet to give in to the prevailing social consensus that demanded the erasure of a personal identity" constructed so laboriously in Italian homes and streets and neighborhoods.

If it is the critic's job to direct us to overlooked classics, then *Queen Calafia's Paradise* does precisely that, and more.

WE NEED YOUR SUPPORT: BECOME A MEMBER OF THE AIHA/WRC...TODAY!

Send WRC dues (Individual: \$15; Family: \$20)

to: AIHA/WRC Treasurer

5072 Elrod Dr.
Castro Valley, CA 94546

From:

(name)

(address)

(city, state)

(phone)

(email address)

(volunteer skills—events, computers, mailings, etc.)

Send AIHA National Dues (Individual: \$40; Student: \$20; Senior: \$25) to:

Dominic Caneloro, AIHA Membership
169 Country Club Rd.
Chicago Heights, IL 60411

(NB: Please DO NOT send National dues to us.

Send them only to the above address.)

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

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