

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 2009

President's Message

One year ago, the WRC held the successful conference on Italian Farming in the Central Valley, at Las Positas College. This spring we are delighted to announce the 1st Italian Film Festival, also at Las Positas College (LPC). The inaugural festival theme is *Ciao Italia, Ciao America*. Two feature films will be screened: *Lamerica* (Gianni Amelio, 1994) and *Nuovomondo* (Emanuele Crialesi, 2006). In *Lamerica*, the hopeful emigrants are Albanians, who attempt to arrive in Italy, their "promised land." *Nuovomondo* (*The Golden Door* in English) follows impoverished Sicilians making their way to the United States in the early 1900s. The WRC is one of several sponsors of the festival, and Vice President Laura Ruberto will introduce Saturday evening's films: *A Pena do Pane* (short film) and *Nuovomondo*. For those of you who missed the standing room only showing of the documentary *Prisoners in Paradise* last Fall in Pittsburg, it will be screened on May 2. Don't miss this chance to see this amazing film. The complete film schedule is featured in this newsletter. The film screenings are free and open to the public. Parking permits are available for purchase in the campus parking lots.

The photographic exhibit *Con le nostre mani* (Italian Americans at work in the East Bay 1890-1960) will be on display at Las Positas College from April 27-May 2 in conjunction with the film festival.

Benvenuti to new members Mark D. Schiavenza, Attorney at Law, Theresa A. Wilde and the Buon Tempo Club.

Volunteers, we continue to welcome your efforts to help in producing our programs, and in distribution of mail and publicity for our events. Many thanks to Joanne Parenti for her assistance with every newsletter. Interested volunteers please feel free to contact me at home (925)833-9194 or at work (925) 424-1287 until August, if you would like to help out in this way.

Once again, anyone who receives this newsletter by post and is willing to receive subsequent ones electronically, please email Lawrence DiStasi at lwdistasi@sbcglobal.net with your email address. Sending our newsletter by email saves us a considerable amount in postage.

I wish you peace for the rest of this spring season, and will see you at the movies.

Ciao e a presto.

—Teri Ann Bengiveno

Ciao Italia, Ciao America Las Positas College Italian Film Festival

Place: Las Positas College, 3000 Campus Hill Dr.
Livermore, California, 94551

Dates: April 30 thru May 2, 2009

The Las Positas Italian Film Festival's theme in its inaugural year is immigration and Italians in the United States. The two Italian feature films shown, *Lamerica* and *Nuovomondo* were successful films dealing with people on the move. The festival also features several short films by Italian-American directors as well as two documentaries, *I Build the Tower* (about the Watts Tower in Los Angeles) and *Prisoners in Paradise* (about Italians in American POW camps in WWII who marry American women.) The schedule of films is as follows:

Thursday, April 30

Opening Reception - 6 pm

Films - 7 pm

Bust a Move (short, dir. Philip Botti)

I Build the Tower (documentary, dir. Edward Landler and Brad Byer)

Friday, May 1 - Films - 7:30 PM

Fifty Cents (short, dir. Philip Botti)

True Love Waits (short, dir. Dina Fiasconaro)

Lamerica (dir. Gianni Amerlio)

Saturday, May 2

First Screening - 3pm

Prisoners in Paradise (documentary, dir. Camilla Calamandrei)

Closing Reception - 5 pm

Films - 6:30 pm

A Pena do Pane (short, dir. Lucia Grillo)

Nuovomondo (dir. Emanuele Crialesi)

All films will be shown in Building 2400, Room 2420, which is wheelchair accessible.

The film festival is co-sponsored by the Las Positas Foreign Language Department, the AIHA/WRC, the Campus Change Network, and the Las Positas College Foundation.

For more information, call Teri Ann Bengiveno at (925)424-1287 or email TBengiveno@laspositascollege.edu.

WRC Elections

Upcoming

The results in the Western Regional Chapter election, held in November, are now official, thanks to the efforts of Christine Vota. The returning slate of officers is:

President: Dr. Teri Ann Bengiveno
Vice President: Dr. Laura Ruberto
Treasurer: Richard Vannucci
Secretary: Dr. Rita DeSales French
Curator/Newsletter Editor: Lawrence DiStasi

Una Storia Segreta

The *Una Storia Segreta* exhibit will be finishing up its three-month run in the new Snug Harbor facility on Staten Island this month. An application for a grant to upgrade the exhibit, and provide funds for a long-delayed documentary film by Judith Ehrlich, was filed with the Federal Government. The application, made through the offices of Congressman William Pascrell, seeks the funding that was specifically recommended by the Wartime Violation of Italian American Civil Liberties Act of 2000. Though such funding is long overdue, the dire economic situation may make it a difficult appropriation. In that regard, yet another donation from author Jenni Holm (*Penny from Heaven*) is deeply appreciated.

Wartime Treatment Study Act

In a related effort, a 4th attempt to introduce and pass the *European Americans and Refugees Wartime Treatment Study Act*, sponsored by the German American Internee Coalition, resulted in hearings before the Judiciary Committee on March 19. The bill calls for, among other things, a Commission to review US government policies directed against European "enemy" ethnic groups during WWII in the US and Latin America. It would also review the US government's denial of asylum to European (primarily Jewish) refugees seeking safety in the US. Testifying at the hearing were several members of the Enemy Alien Files Consortium, of which the AIHA/WRC is a member. Lawrence DiStasi submitted a statement in support of the measure, which would include Italian Americans in its study of government policies and actions. The text of the bill, HR 1425, can be viewed on <http://thomas.loc.gov/> by keying in the bill number.

Member Activities

As noted in the President's Message, *Con Le Nostre Mani*, the photographic exhibit of Italian Americans at work in the East Bay, will be displayed at Las Positas College the week of April 27 through May 2 in conjunction with the Italian Film Festival. It will be set up in Building 2400 thanks, as always, to the efforts of **Richard Vannucci**.

Maria Gillan's latest book of poetry, *All That Lies Between Us*, reviewed here recently, has been awarded a Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award. Gillan was in Berkeley on December 28 to receive the award and read from her book. Offering congratulations was Fred Gardaphe, in town for the MLA Convention in San Francisco.

Diane diPrima, received her own literary award on Dec. 10, this one the 2008 PEN Oakland Lifetime Achievement Award, recently named after Reginald Lockett, the African American poet. A new edition of diPrima's pathbreaking *Revolutionary Letters* was recently issued by Last Gasp Press.

Yet another literary award was given to **Dorothy Calvelli Bryant**. On April 9, 2008, the Northern California Book Reviewers awarded Bryant the Fred Cody Award for lifetime literary achievement. Among her books are *Miss Giardino* and *Anita Anita* (about Anita Garibaldi).

Luisa del Giudice was a presenter at the Southwest Oral History Association Conference held in Los Angeles at the University of Southern California on March 26-29, 2009. In a forum entitled "New Destinations in Space and the Built Environment," del Giudice spoke on "Sabato Rodia's Watts Towers Between Continents." Del Giudice, as well as Ken Scambray and Gloria Ricci Lothrop, also made presentations at the "Art and Migration: Sabato Rodia and the Watts Towers Conference" at the University of Genova on April 2-4.

Laura Ruberto will be the Digital Media Review Editor of the newly re-launched annual journal of the Calandra Italian American Institute, the *Italian American Review*. The Review features articles about the history and culture of Italian Americans, including those about migration, politics, labor, race and ethnicity, urban studies, gender studies, etc. It does not publish literary criticism, poetry or fiction. For more information, see: <http://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/calandra/italrev/iarcont.html>.

Richard Cimino has notified us that the renowned drummer, Louis Bellson, who played with such greats as Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, Harry James, Count Basie and Dizzie Gillespie, died on February 19. From Rock Falls, IL, Bellson was born Luigi Alfredo Francesco Antonio Ballasoni.

Rick Malaspina began a cross-country trip from Oakland CA to Winston-Salem NC (his wife's home) on February 19, writing about people, places, encounters, and the mood of the country. His only companion was Stella the Springer Spaniel. See his "Hope and change on the Interstate" observations on www.rmalaspina.wordpress.com.

Giovanna Capone's research project about the Colombo Club of Oakland culminated on January 17, 2009 with a moving video she made of some of her interviews with club members. Also speaking at the program was Ray Raineri.

Anthony Riccio of New Haven, author of oral histories on The Italians of New Haven and of Boston, has started a new radio program on WPKN 89.5 FM, Bridgeport, CT, called "Immigrant Voices." The show, from 8:30 to 10 am starting Jan. 15, 2009 broadcasts interviews Riccio did for his two books, plus more recent oral histories. The show can also be heard on WPKN.org, under "listen to show."

Lawrence DiStasi, speaking about "Mal Occhio and the Italian Psyche," visited the new center of Sacramento's Italian Cultural Society on March 22. Located in Carmichael, the center is impressive for its size, its facilities, and its ambitious program of Italian language classes and cultural events. It boasts perhaps the largest library of Italian and Italian American books in the West.

Book Reviews

Gramsci, Migration, and the Representation of Woman's Work in Italy and the U.S., by Laura Ruberto, Lexington Books: 2007.

Taking the work of Antonio Gramsci as her theoretical base, Laura Ruberto focuses her scholarly attention on the work of "subaltern" or working/peasant class women as it is represented in films, literary works, and scholarly studies. In so doing, she is able to bring into mainstream discourse the type of work—in rice paddies, in canneries, in the domestic kitchen—that has traditionally been either invisible or dismissed as of no account. One aim of such an illumination is to do what Gramsci recommended in his writings: reconfigure what is commonly meant by "culture" and, indeed, what is meant by history. In this way, women, in their most neglected forms as domestic workers, migrant laborers, and factory workers, take on new life, voice, dignity and power as producers of what Gramsci called national popular culture.

Ruberto directs her study to representations of four different groups: Italian women who work in rice paddies, as portrayed most famously in the 1949 film *Bitter Rice*, but also in rice-work songs, such as the now-famous *Bella Ciao*; Italian domestic servants, as described in Renata Viganò's novel *The Story of Girls*; Italian American women in the kitchen as portrayed in films like *The Godfather* and *Household Saints*; and San Diego cannery workers as presented in the photography of Thomas Martinez.

In the case of rice workers, for example, Ruberto's analysis points out that the songs sung during strikes or during their exhausting field work brought what had always been a disdained and invisible labor into the popular cultural mainstream, i.e. as folklore. And here, it is the songs sung by the women themselves that function as the kind of self-representation all too rare in such lowly work sites. This is the point. Ruberto quotes Gramsci: "Song is at once an encouraging rhythm to work, a declaration of struggle and relief, but it is also a concrete demonstration of country women's often-ignored capacity to produce culture." Thus, as the *mondine* (rice workers) represent themselves in song, they also represent "other exploited groups in Italy" and, in a Gramscian sense, allow this manifestation of peasant culture to both challenge the dominance of more conventional views of what culture is, and more broadly of national identity itself.

Ruberto applies this type of analysis and theoretical lens to unexpected works and workers in unexpected ways. The power of this kind of attention makes us look at and consider that which has long been neglected, and the fact of its neglect, in a new light. While such a study is not a quick or easy read, it seems certain to remain a work that will influence scholarly discussion wherever the labor and culture of marginalized groups is at issue.

Reviewed by Lawrence DiStasi

The Journey of the Italians in America, by Vincenza Scarpaci, Pelican: 2008.

Italian Americans are so much a part of American culture today that we tend to forget how difficult were the critical roles they played earlier in our history, as they helped make our country what it is today. Their success in Americanizing rapidly and thoroughly has led to the false assumption that somehow it was an easy task.

We also know a great deal about the Italian American politicians and luminaries who have risen to the level of national love and respect. But for every Italian American politician and luminary we know about, there were scores of ordinary people who led extraordinary lives of valiant effort and hard work. Their contributions made it possible for the famous ones we are familiar with to succeed. These were the ordinary workmen and women who toiled in the fields, founded wineries, delivered fruit, worked in factories and coal mines, sewed our garments, served in our World Wars, sang to their children, and instilled in them a love of this country. It is now time for their story to be told.

Vincenza Scarpaci tells that story very well. She has chronicled in photographs a century and a half of Italian American hard work and struggle, compiling a rich history of the Italian Americans who had the will to make something of their lives and in so doing made something great of the country that has become their own. Graphically and succinctly, she tells the stories of many people who came from Italy and met the challenges of emigration with very little education or preparation for such an endeavor. In *Journey of the Italians In America*, Vincenza Scarpaci has given all of us a gift. This book, in its breadth and scope, provides superior historical scholarship while presenting a multiplicity of brief biographies to accompany photos from disparate parts of our country that tie the Italian American story together.

Pick up this beautiful book and read about the diverse contributions of such people as Joe Amendola, the New Haven, Connecticut-born founder of the New Haven Restaurant Institute, which later became the Culinary Institute of America, Rosalie the Welder (Rosalie Taggi), who worked from 1943 to 1945 in Richmond, California, welding rivets in an awkward overhead position (something she could do because of her small size), Edward Villella from Bayside, New York who starred as a principal dancer in Balanchine's *The Prodigal Son*, and Architect-sculptor Angelo Zari, who designed the state seal of Oklahoma in 1951. These and many other well-selected, well-told stories represent the multitude of successes of Italians in America, many of whom were among the original entrepreneurs in their fields, making lasting imprints on our country.

Scarpaci also includes stories of the many Italians who went back to their country in despair, as well as the more difficult life stories of some who remained -- such as Artillio Rossi, who abandoned his family, or Maria Robotti and Luigi Ravizza, who were diagnosed with schizophrenia. Scarpaci does not flinch in presenting the full picture of tragedy as well as triumph in her narratives.

Vincenza Scarpaci's *Journey of the Italians in America* is an historical tour de force and, at the same time, an intimate visual rendering of real people who led lives worthy of emulation and respect. Even though *Journey of the Italians in America* is about the Italian American immigrant experience, it captures the immigrant experience *per se*. It is filled with "primary sources" of photos and stories never before published. In large 8-1/2" x 11" format, the book is available at bookstores and at online sources such as Amazon.com.

Reviewed by Rita DeSales French

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

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