

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 2006

President's Message

In a record-breaking summer of heat and humidity, I wish you all "salute!" with the hope that our readers have managed to find ways of keeping cool and enjoying the season. Like the temperatures, but more pleasantly, our membership rolls have been higher than ever—our chapter now boasts 131 dues-paying members, a number of whom have offered to volunteer time and skills on behalf of our work. We look forward to your contributions. I encourage anyone else with skills, or that precious commodity of time, to consider volunteering as well. Our wish list includes help with mailings (dues renewals, newsletters, events announcements), membership development, volunteer coordination, hospitality at events, video filming/photography at events, website work, and refurbishing the *Una Storia Segreta* exhibit, which continues to travel. In this regard, anyone able to volunteer skills in graphic arts or museum training would be greatly welcome.

I would like to direct your attention in this issue to our website, which, for the first time, is included in the masthead of the newsletter. Those who are "electronically connected" are encouraged to give it a look. With the help of our invaluable webmaster, we are continuing to expand the contents of the website, where we will also now put the WRC newsletter for those with Internet access. If you haven't yet sent us your email address, or indicated your interest in receiving the newsletter electronically, please do so by sending a brief email with your address to our secretary, rita@aol.com. We will also create an email file of online members—for WRC purposes exclusively—in order to alert our readers quickly and efficiently about events and issues of possible interest to you. Unless we hear from members, we will assume you have no objections to being on that list.

In November we will again hold elections for a new slate of officers, whose two-year terms will begin in January 2007. Nominations for president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer and curator should be sent to me at afn@redshift.com, or by phone at (831) 641-9762, no later than September 30. Anyone nominated must have been a dues-paying member for at least one year. After serving as a WRC officer for 15 years, I will step down at the end of my term in December to devote my energies to several back-burner projects of great interest to me, and which I hope may also benefit the work of the chapter. As I do so, I know that the WRC can rely on some excellent newer officers and other potential candidates to carry forward our projects and expand the scope of our work.

In the meanwhile, please join us at our upcoming August program and for the annual membership meeting in September (described further on). *Ci vedremo!* - Adele Negro

Upcoming

The Italians of Marin County

Place: Marin History Museum. Boyd Gate House: 1125 B St. San Rafael, CA 94901. Ph: (415) 485-0164.

Date: Saturday, August 26, 2-4 PM.

Oral historian Marilyn Longinotti Geary and WRC Treasurer Richard Vannucci will collaborate on this event to be held at the historic Boyd Gate House in San Rafael.

Marilyn Longinotti Geary has been gathering oral histories on Marin County's Italian immigrants for several years. She has recorded some informants herself, and has also consulted previously recorded oral histories in the historical record. The result is an on-screen presentation combining the two, and includes both aural and video recordings of some of the early Italian residents of Marin County. Longinotti Geary will also provide a historical overview to provide context for the recorded testimonies.

Richard Vannucci will add his personal vision of summer life in Fairfax when he was a child. His family would travel to predominantly Italian Fairfax each summer and spend idyllic days there when Fairfax was a sleepy town reachable from Oakland by ferry. Vannucci will supplement his recollections with various artifacts of daily life—mortars, pestles (for making pesto we assume), winemaking equipment, and family photos.

Italian Americans still living in Fairfax, San Rafael, and other parts of Marin County are especially encouraged to attend, and to add their memories of Italian life there. Members may recall that several years ago, the WRC sponsored a walking tour of San Rafael's Italian neighborhood once occupied almost exclusively by immigrants from Lonate Pozzuolo. We look forward to seeing our Lonatesi friends at this event.

RSVP to (415)868-0538. For Parking: use the WestAmerica Bank lot (across from Boyd Gate House) or the public parking lot on Mission St. (one street down from the museum).

Annual Members Meeting & Program

with presentations by Dr. Carol McKibben
& Nick Scianna

Place: Italian American Heritage Foundation of San Jose, 425 N. 4th St., San Jose, CA 95112 (408)293-7122

Date: Sunday, September 17, 2-5 PM

The WRC's General Membership Meeting—where all members are encouraged to offer opinions and suggestions

about our chapter—will be held from 2-3 pm in the IAHF boardroom, followed by a co-sponsored program in the main IAHF hall.

Carol McKibben's just-published study, *Beyond Cannery Row: Sicilian Women, Immigration, and Community in Monterey, California, 1915-99* (University of Illinois Press: 2006), will be the focus of this program. The result of several years of research, McKibben's pioneering study uses personal interviews and archival research to investigate the fishing networks that linked Sicily, California and Alaska, focusing on the role of Sicilian women in both the fishing economy and in community and family decision-making. What she has found is that Sicilian women wielded the type of power in all areas of life which upsets conventional stereotypes about the role of Italian women. McKibben, a public historian and independent scholar who currently directs the Monterey Bay Regional Oral History and Immigration Project, will talk about her research and its relevance in other communities.

Filling out the program will be a presentation by IAHF member Nick Scianna, author of an Italian-English-Sicilian dictionary. Scianna will speak about his dictionary as well as his work on Italian immigration worldwide.

Refreshments will be served. **RSVP** & for more information, please call (831) 641-9762. Off-street parking is available.

Una Storia Segreta

The *Una Storia Segreta* exhibit will once again be traveling this fall, to Marist College in Poughkeepsie, NY. The exhibit will be featured there for the month of October. Lawrence DiStasi will travel to Poughkeepsie for the opening ceremonies. Following that, plans are for the exhibit to receive some minimal repairs, mostly to the two wooden crates which are wearing rather badly. In that regard, Judith Erlich and Lawrence DiStasi recently made an effort to persuade the U.S. Congress to supply funding, as mandated in Public Law #106-451, both to fully upgrade the exhibit and to complete the documentary already started by Erlich. Congressman Pascrell of New Jersey, head of the Italian American Caucus, agreed to spearhead the effort, one which fell short because the appropriations request was too late. Congressman Pascrell has committed himself to renewing this critical request in the next session. Members and Italian American organizations will be notified when constituent pressure will be needed, especially for senators like Pete Domenici, whose mother, he recently revealed, was arrested as an enemy alien during the wartime.

Also, we are looking for volunteers who might be able to help in refurbishing parts of the exhibit when it returns to California later this year. We need a) a place to store the exhibit; b) workers to help with replacing some panels and adding one or two new ones. Please call (415)868-0538 if you have museum skills and/or available space.

Member Activities

Maria Sakovich, who curated the successful La Nostra Storia exhibit at the Richmond Museum documenting Richmond's Italian community, has been awarded this year's Scholastic/Authorship Award by the Conference of California Museums for her book on the subject, also titled *La Nostra Storia*. The book has sold out two printings, with a third being considered by the Museum.

Richard Vannucci, whose indefatigable efforts to increase WRC membership has resulted in more than tripling our membership list, continues his work at this year's Italian Festas. He hosted the WRC presence at the San Mateo Festa on July 23; then on to the Festa in Sacramento on August 5/6, to Santa Rosa on Oct. 15, and possibly San Jose on Sept. 30.

Ken Borelli has recently been honored with the Volunteer of the Year Award by the Italian American Heritage Foundation of San Jose. As chair of the Cultural Committee for twenty years, Borelli has been key to producing the successful Opera Night, as well as facilitating co-sponsorship with the WRC.

Andrew Canepa, longtime WRC member and curator of the Italian Collection at the SF Public Library, has been honored as Man of the Year by *Il Cenacolo*. In addition to his work as *Il Cenacolo* historian, Canepa has taught history and Italian at both UCLA and USF, and was a co-founder of the Northern California chapter of *Piemontesi nel mondo*, still serving as its newsletter editor. He currently works as assistant manager at the Italian Cemetery in Colma.

Lawrence DiStasi's article summarizing the results of the WRC's Italian American Textbook Project has appeared in the Summer 2006 issue of *Italian Americana*. The article publicizes the dismal state of most accounts of Italians in America in both college and high school textbooks, and calls for action at both the state and national level to correct the situation. DiStasi's reminiscence of his last meeting with San Francisco poet Philip Lamantia, who died in March 2005, will appear in the upcoming issue of Maria Gillan's *Paterson Literary Review*. The title: "In the City of St. Francis."

Also regarding the Italian American Textbook Project, the California Italian American Project (CIAP) is now available on our WRC website: www.aiha-wrc.org. Plans are in progress to add two or three more communities, and then apply for a grant to fund research and writing for other major Italian American communities in California. In this regard, the WRC recently joined the California Council for the Social Studies, and plans to have an information table there to alert social studies teachers to our work and the CIAP website. If possible, *Una Storia Segreta* will be displayed there as well. The WRC website now includes the most recent issues of our WRC newsletter, the CIAP project, and the *Una Storia Segreta* website—the latter also being available at www.segreta.org.

Luisa Del Giudice has announced that she will close the Italian Oral History Institute by summer's end. The IOHI was the host for the 2005 AIHA National Conference in Los Angeles and for the many associated programs in the project Italian Los Angeles: Celebrating Italian Life, Local History, and the Arts in Southern California. IOHI has also sponsored numerous programs in folklore and music, with exhibits, concerts, tours and lectures. Fortunately, the archival materials will be transferred to the UCLA Ethnomusicology Archive where they can be consulted by the public. Del Giudice herself will pursue her interest in peace and justice work. We wish her well in all her new endeavors.

Book Reviews:

The Sugar's at the Bottom of the Cup, by Elda DelBino Willits & Patricia Lynn Henley, Zuccherro Press: 2004.

Elda Del Bino Willits arrived with her family in San Francisco in 1916, a time when the city still had gaslights and horse-drawn wagons. In a memoir that she narrated in her kitchen to a tape recorder, and that was then transcribed, edited and organized by Sonoma County writer Lynn Henley, she tells us how it was to live the immigrant's life through the Depression, the fears of WWII, and a marriage that took her to a business in Marin County that left her wealthier than she could have imagined. Despite several illnesses, she was then able to return several times to her Italian village, be interviewed for the Ellis Island Oral History Project, meet WRC member Will Parrinello and be featured in his documentary *Little Italy*, and move from that to her memoir. Through it all, she seems to have maintained the buoyant spirit natural to her, which she then pours into her more than 90-year life story. The result is a book full of historical interest, courage, joy and sorrow, and a kind of generous familial wisdom encapsulated in her title: *The Sugar is at the Bottom*. One item of particular interest to WRC members at this moment is her story of the annual Italian Athletic Club picnic—held each summer in a public park in Fairfax. “We would get up early and—lugging all our picnic supplies—take a streetcar to the ferry building, a ferry to Sausalito, and then a train to Fairfax. All this to arrive by noon at a huge gathering, where there was constant music, dancing, and plenty of Italian food.” This is the same Fairfax to be remembered at our Marin event (see above).

One caveat: some conspicuous errors in the Italian jar anyone who knows the language. The book is available from Zuccherro Press, P.O. Box 529, Sonoma, CA 95476.

Buried Caesars, and other Secrets of Italian American Writing, by Robert Viscusi, SUNY Press: 2006

Robert Viscusi is surely one of Italian America's most provocative scholars. In his latest book, he has assembled perhaps his most articulate expression of what it means to be Italian American. Analyzing both literary and artistic works, plumbing the depths of Italian and Italian American history, he takes us through a journey meant to encompass the entire culture from Columbus to the Sopranos. In so doing, he maps for us our secrets, our desires, our preoccupations, our denials, our dreams and dreads and tragedies and triumphs in a way never before done. As such, this is a difficult work to summarize, but one thing is clear: Viscusi sees Italian American culture, especially literary culture, as a subject worthy, on its own, of intense scrutiny, analysis, and debate. For that alone, we owe him our gratitude.

As to his title, with its reference to Shakespeare's line in *Julius Caesar*, “I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him,” Viscusi applies it as a common world-view: “Buried Caesars provide Italian Americans with a shared historical and cultural point of view.” Deriving from their past in Italy—a heritage that cannot be discarded, yet cannot be simply used as cover—the concept of Caesarism expresses, Viscusi says (following Gramsci), a conflict that cannot be resolved. America has had many of these, the most famous being the gangsters Italian Americans have tried and still try so hard to repudiate. “The gangsters,” Viscusi maintains, “express the conflict between the class identities of Italian Americans. No matter how

successful they are, they live under the shadow of the Mafia.” Other buried Caesars, both real and imaginary, are Columbus, Vespucci, the fatherland immigrants left behind, the fathers they left behind both in Italy and in America, and so on. This mindset is both complex and ubiquitous, and Viscusi applies it, along with a whole armory of other analytic tools, to decipher most of the main artifacts of Italian literary culture. About Jerre Mangione's “double competence” in *Mount Allegro*, for example, Viscusi says it “gives a distinct flavor of self-contradiction to the irony in Mangione's voice: it flows from his attitude of American superiority to his own Italian self, an attitude that battles with his attitude of Italian superiority to his American self.” In short, the conflict of Caesarism.

Buried Caesars: must reading for anyone interested in understanding not just literature, but the Italian American self.

Death's Door: Modern Dying and the Ways we Grieve, by Sandra Gilbert, W.W. Norton: 2006.

“A paradox: the days that really live in our public memories aren't birthdays, they're death days.” Thus begins Sandra Gilbert's monumental study of the human response (and most particularly, *her* response) to the death of those we love. This is not a book for the faint of heart. It requires, as its writing required, great courage in the face of what we, as humans, most often and most tenaciously try to deny. But as Gilbert says near the end of her study: “the truism that death's door is always open has been the argument of this book.”

The question that Gilbert poses for us, and for herself, is: how do we as modern humans cope with this realization? To answer, she begins with her own experience—the sudden and unexpected death of her husband, Elliot Gilbert, in a hospital where the surgery had been “successful.” Then, she explains, “death suddenly seemed plausible, not a far-off threat but urgently close, as if the walls between this world and the “other” had indeed become transparent or as if a door between the two realms had swung open.” The first part of her book is devoted to analyzing and conveying this “strangeness,” of one bereft, of one who grieves in a society where grief is shameful, where the widow is, if not shunned, at least kept at arm's length. And urged, always, to get over it.

But always, Gilbert, a recognized literary scholar and poet, is after more than simply a memoir. Her aim is to investigate how death is dealt with in the modern era, after the traditional consolations that have always formed the armor of those who survive, no longer pertain. What do modern poets do—and in so doing lead the rest of us—with the unadorned materiality of a body that simply “stops”? When the traditional pastoral elegy with which Shelley and Milton and Whitman consoled themselves in the face of death no longer makes sense, what does the elegist do? And what, following them, do we do?

For nearly 500 pages, Gilbert looks into this problem. And her investigation, the brilliance of her insight and the elegance of her prose, comes to no final conclusions except this: having the courage to look this nothingness we all face in the eye, is perhaps all we can do, is perhaps victory enough.

NB: Space prevents me from really giving such books the attention they deserve. I intend to post longer reviews of these and other books on our WRC website. Look for them. LDS.

