

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 2007

President's Message

I hope all of you are enjoying summer, perhaps spending time with family and friends or traveling. Congratulations to Vice President Laura Ruberto and her husband Matthew Goldstein on the birth of their daughter, Alma. Maybe Alma will become our youngest member. Speaking of members, congratulations to longtime member Bill Cerruti and the Italian Cultural Society of Sacramento. They celebrated the Gala Opening of the Italian Center of Northern California on May 20—as advertised *Un Sogno Realizzato*. The dream began over ten years ago, and the Center will be fully operational by September.

June 2 marked the 61st Anniversary of the Italian Republic, and several WRC officers participated in the Festa della Repubblica at the Italian American Heritage Foundation in San Jose. The Foundation holds a flag-raising celebration and luncheon every year to celebrate this historic date.

My husband and I just returned from a three-week road trip that covered five states. Our drive from Glacier National Park, Montana to Yellowstone, Wyoming took us through Missoula, Montana. As an historian, I am familiar with Fort Missoula. I show the History's Mysteries special on *Una Storia Segreta* to my students every semester, and the documentary includes the internment camp at Fort Missoula. We stopped to tour the historic Fort. It is one thing to watch the film and quite another to walk the grounds of the Fort. I also purchased Umberto Benedetti's *Italian Boys at Fort Missoula, Montana 1941-1943*. The book was originally titled *Che Bella Vista* because that is what many of the Italians said when they arrived in Missoula. The book is a collection of photos, poems, letters, and government documents. It is the story of their experience as internees. In the introduction, Benedetti who was the first Italian to arrive at Fort Missoula, said "The Fort Missoula camp was the best of all camps in the United States, and was a model because the Italians organized themselves in such a way that the citizens of Missoula came often to see all the activities and theatrical performances that we had." In their free time the Italians formed soccer teams, wrote poetry, studied, and built boats. Alfredo Cipolato even built a gondola. After World War II some of these internees went on to serve in the US military, work on the railroads, open their own markets and teach in America, and some of them died at Fort Missoula. Benedetti's book ends with this quote from George Santayana: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Our goal in this organization is to learn from the past so that we may better understand the present.

Ciao e a presto,

Teri Ann Bengiveno

Upcoming

Olives & Olive Oil: Production and Pleasures

Place: North Bay Italian Cultural Foundation –
64 Brookwood Ave. Santa Rosa CA 95404

Date: Sunday, August 19, 2007; 2-5 PM

Olive oil, once scorned as greasy food for greasy people, has become one of the boutique foods of our time, with physicians extolling its health-giving properties. What has received less attention are the methods of growing olives, and the extraordinary range of uses for the oil of this ancient fruit.

Our program, co-sponsored by the North Bay Italian Cultural Foundation, will address both of these aspects.

David Bertoli, of Santa Rosa, will speak about his decision, a few years ago, to return to land originally farmed by his great grandfather, to become an olive grower. This phenomenon—of Italian Americans returning to the land—is of intense interest in our time. A just-published book by Paul Hawken states: "Living within the biological constraints of the earth may be the most civilized activity a person can pursue." Locally grown olives for locally produced olive oil must certainly qualify as civilized in this sense. When we visited Bertoli recently at his acreage in Mark West Springs, he exemplified precisely this notion. He had spent 4 years experimenting with different olive varieties to see which ones would thrive in the terrain, temperature, and rainfall of his hilly farmland. His talk, about his plants and his plans, should be fascinating.

Carol Firenze Anglin, author of *The Passionate Olive*, will talk about *the 101 Things to do With Olive Oil*. Firenze Anglin has worked for the Olive Oil Association, and has written a book that details both the olive's ancient history, and its myriad uses—including its use in divination from ancient times. Her book will be on sale.

Between them, Bertoli and Firenze should present all you have ever wanted to know about the care, feeding and eating of olives and olive oil. Some light tastings and two local wines will be offered. For directions and reservations, call NBICF, (707) 591-9696. RSVP is a must.

Brokers of Culture: Italian Jesuits in the American West

Place: University of San Francisco – Lone Mountain #100
2130 Fulton St. San Francisco CA

Date: Saturday, October 6, 2007: 2 – 4 PM

Gerald McKeivitt is a historian and Professor of Jesuit Studies at the University of Santa Clara. In a program co-

sponsored by the WRC and the *Piemontesi nel Mondo*, Prof. McKeivitt will speak about his new book featuring the pioneering Italian Jesuits who emigrated to the United States after the revolutionary events in Italy in 1848. Fleeing hostile conditions in both Torino and Naples, they founded not only the University of Santa Clara, but also the University of San Francisco, Gonzaga University in Washington, and numerous missions throughout the West devoted to immigrants and Native Americans alike. In so doing, they had an enormous impact on the culture of eleven western states and were central in shaping the educational curricula in the major universities and schools of the entire region. That urban and urbane Jesuits from Italy were able to adapt themselves and their high culture to a rough, sparsely-populated frontier is one of the remarkable aspects of this tale. So is their noble (but failed) attempt to teach Indians enough of white culture to enable them to save their lands. It is a story not to be missed.

NB: Before the program, at 1 PM, the WRC will hold its Annual Membership Meeting. All are encouraged to attend.

Room 100 in the Lone Mountain campus is centrally located. For more information, go to the USF website, or call (415) 868-0538.

Una Storia Segreta

This Fall, PBS stations will be broadcasting a new, 7-part series on WWII by Ken Burns. Many PBS stations will run programs on WWII events in their areas. It appears that KCET in Los Angeles will include a line or two about the West Coast evacuation of Italian Americans in their segment. KQED is also scheduling something on Enemy Aliens. WRC members should monitor the series, and the local programs to make sure that, once again, our *Storia Segreta* doesn't remain the elephantine secret in the room.

Hidden Stories of WWII

It is not just that the recent program in San Mateo, both the conference and the plays, was so conspicuous a success. Nor is it just that the Enemy Alien Files Exhibit will travel to Hawaii next year, while the conference and the plays will be repeated. It is also that new legislation to create a commission to examine the internments and restrictions on European Americans was approved by the Senate as part of the Immigration Bill. The latter ultimately failed, of course, but Senator Feingold's bill on WWII has passed one great hurdle. With enough pressure, perhaps it can also pass the House.

Membership Activities

Benvenuti to our new members: The Central School of Italian Language & Culture (Stockton); Italian American Community Services Agency (San Francisco); Lois Battuello; Maria Checchi; David Cerruti; Ivano Franco Comelli; Diane di Prima; Chris and Paul Furlong; Rudy Grasseschi; Loretta Guiliano; Dan Nocera; James Parenti; Maria T. Pizzicari and Gary Paul Vannucci.

Benvenuta, also, to VP Laura Ruberto's new daughter, Alma. We look forward to seeing her at upcoming meetings.

Sacramento's New Italian Cultural Center

After years of hard work, and an ability to skillfully work the political system for funding, Sacramento's Italian Cultural

Center has succeeded in its project to construct a brand new Center for its activities. Under the drive and direction of Bill Cerruti, the Center was able to raise the funds necessary to provide a place to host the cultural activities and historical preservation that mark the current phase of the Italian presence in America. We look forward to seeing and working with this new manifestation of what can be done with enough energy and the right focus.

Italian Farmers in the Central Valley

Plans continue for an upcoming program on Italians in Central Valley agriculture, with important contacts already made in Fresno, Madera, Modesto, Stockton and Los Banos. Enthusiasm for such a program appears to be growing, not least because most recent information about farming in these areas omits almost entirely the fact that Italians have long been major players in the farming industry. WRC member Ninette Latronica, who grew up in Modesto, was appalled when a TV special on farming there referred to her old neighborhood with never a mention of its predominantly Italian population. Ninette is now organizing her many friends and relatives to help correct such historical omissions, not least that her husband Phil can testify to the fact that Italians (his father) worked as cowboys in Los Banos. Our hope is that a one-day conference in the Spring will begin to set the historical record straight. Those with information should contact Lawrence DiStasi at (415)868-0538.

Lawrence DiStasi has been asked to speak at the meeting of the Italian section of the American Psychological Association, convening in San Francisco in August. The Italian section will gather at the Istituto Italiano di Cultura in SF. DiStasi's talk will sketch a history of Italians in San Francisco, including the WWII events that so deeply affected that community.

Ken Borelli, of the Italian American Heritage Foundation of San Jose, has inaugurated a new Summer Jazz Series. Local jazz groups will play each Wednesday from 5:30PM on, during July, August and early September. For information about "Happy Hour Jazz," call (408)293-7122.

In Memoriam

A longtime friend and Monterey activist, Frank Brogno, died on June 25. Frank was one of the first people to attest to his family's experiences during WWII in an area outside California—Frank grew up in Gary, IN. He remembered how local firemen came to take his family's radio, even though, "My Papa, my Mamma and I were, all three, naturalized citizens of the United States." Frank, a practicing psychologist, remarked often about how these events affected him: the shame it elicited in a young boy who, at one time, seriously considered changing his name to *Brogne* to make himself appear French. Fortunately, he never did, and played a key role in trying to instigate pride and greater use of the Italian language in those he served in the Monterey Italian American community. For his intelligence, his courage, and his sheer joy in being Italian, he will be greatly missed. Our deepest condolences go to Frank's wife Helen and their family.

Book Reviews

My Father Il Duce, by Romano Mussolini, (Kales Press: 2006)

Romano Mussolini was a well-known jazz pianist, the last surviving child of Benito Mussolini, and the father of the still politically active Alessandra Mussolini. His memoir provides what his publisher calls “never before publicly shared memories and feelings, including the memories of his mother, Donna Rachele, who lived until 1979.” As such, it promises a glimpse into the private life and doings of a man whose public image was always carefully crafted to suggest an iron man, a man whom “even his own family referred to as *Il Duce*.” The book quickly became a best-seller in Italy, attesting to the fact (if it needed attesting to) that the cult of Mussolini in Italy lives on.

The book does deliver on some of its promises, offering intimate glimpses of Mussolini as Italian father, coming home for lunch each day, eating modest meals of pasta and soup. It also narrates the fear and trembling of Mussolini’s last days, his repudiation by the Italian Council that included his son-in-law, Count Galeano, his capture and imprisonment by Italian forces, and his daring rescue by German forces who reached him by means of gliders. It tells us how Mussolini loved to watch films at home, usually of American comedians, including his favorite, Charlie Chaplin. Other chapters detail such things as “My Mother Meets Clara Petacci,” “Edda, My Father, and Count Galeano,” and “Bruno’s Death Shatters My Father.” And underlying it all lies our knowledge of what a disaster *Il Duce* led the Italian people and himself into, including his ignominious hanging at the end.

Clearly, Romano Mussolini intends for us to see his father in a new light: as a father, as a sympathetic, even kindly leader whose actions were all done “as the servant of the Italian people,” a man who “seemed to live more for others than for himself.”

The problem is that, in this edition at least, Romano’s memoir is prefaced with a critical essay by Alexander Stille, well-known essayist on all things Italian, biographer of Silvio Berlusconi, and professor of journalism at Columbia University. Stille does not let Mussolini, or his son, off so easily. He points out the subtle and not-so-subtle rhetorical tricks by which Romano Mussolini seeks to characterize his father as essentially a victim—of history, of misunderstanding, of Nazi barbarism. Instead of confronting head-on the fact that Mussolini left ample testimony regarding his love for war, his belief that he intended to forge a “warrior people” from Italians gone soft, and his refusal to go along with those who believed by 1943 that the war had been lost, we are constantly served passive statements: “I felt that we Mussolinis were a family at the mercy of the winds in a wretched Italy overwhelmed by war;” or, “As for Italy, she would be drawn into Germany’s crushing defeat;” or, “they (Mussolini and Rachele) found themselves together in the middle of a war that no one wanted and whose catastrophic developments no one expected.”

In short, Romano Mussolini, whether by filial accident or by clever design, tries to leave us with the impression of a Mussolini who truly meant well, and somehow got caught up in a world gone mad. He tries to give us a man who, if we could just have met him at home, with his family, would have impressed us as a gentle, caring, sensitive father: a fan of jazz; a man not afraid to display surprising moments of affection—arranging to have Romano’s phonograph and

favorite wicker chair transported from Romagna to their Roman palace; or, noticing his son’s interest in star-gazing, quietly placing in his hideaway in the attic, a brand new telescope. As Romano concludes, “My father was capable of such sensitivity.”

Perhaps this is true of all dictators. Even Hitler and Stalin and Pol Pot no doubt had their intimates, people with whom they could be gentle and kind. What they also had, however, was a ruthlessness that allowed them to consign whole peoples to an inferno of pain and suffering and catastrophe. Stille insists that we remember this: “the final results of Mussolin’s recklessness, vanity, and poor judgment: 306,000 Italian soldiers killed; 145,000 Italian civilians dead; 8,000 Italian Jews deported and killed, for a grand total of 459,000 deaths.”

So while *My Father Il Duce* is a valuable document for what it tells us about the domestic side of one of the seminal figures of the 20th Century, it deserves to be read with caution. In this regard, Kales Press does get credit not just for publishing, but for having had the courage to preface the American edition with Stille’s essay. Available from www.kalespress.com.

From the Horse’s Mouth, by Marilyn Pearsol Giorgetti, (Xlibris: 2005).

This “memoir of San Francisco’s legendary Iron Horse restaurant, its charismatic owner, and the Giorgetti family” tells the story of Leo Giorgetti, whom we met for the first time at the *Hidden Stories of WWII* conference in San Mateo. Leo grew up on a coastal ranch near Half Moon Bay. During WWII, his mother, a non-citizen, had to move from her home to the east side of Highway 1. When Leo came home on leave from the Coast Guard, he found her exiled. Outraged, he stormed up to San Francisco and demanded to see General DeWitt, commander of the Western Defense Command. He got as far as a Colonel, explained what had happened while he was serving his country, and shouted: “I’ll make a deal with you. I’m in the military. You have me. You know where I am. Let my mother go home and if she turns out to be an enemy, you can shoot me.” Within a few weeks, the evacuation order was rescinded—an action that Leo’s adoring mother Maria always attributed to the power and influence of her son.

Having been Chief Commissary Steward aboard his ship during the war, Leo re-entered civilian life in the food business. Soon he partnered with a Navy buddy, Sam, who ran a chain of industrial cafeterias, one at the Bank of America. There they met Carl Wente, then the BofA president. When Solari’s Restaurant in Maiden Lane went out of business, Leo and Sam made plans to start a new one, and asked Wente if he could help. He made sure they got a loan, and the Iron Horse Restaurant opened for business on April 6, 1954. Right in the heart of the business district, it was an immediate sensation, a gathering place for San Francisco’s movers and shakers like columnist Herb Caen and Mayor George Christopher. Among the greats who patronized the Iron Horse were Joe DiMaggio, Maria Callas, Liberace, Willy Brown, and many more.

The restaurant ran for more than 50 years, closing in 2002. The story of its owner, his friends and family and associates, is available from Xlibris, at www.Xlibris.com.

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(NB: Please DO NOT send National dues to us. Send only to the above address.)

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

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The American Italian Historical Association
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AIHA 40th Annual Conference
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