

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 2010

President's Message

I hope this newsletter finds you enjoying the summer months wherever your travels may take you. I would like to take a moment to tell you about a project of the California Council for the Humanities entitled *We are California. Stories of Immigration and Change*. Take a moment to visit the website at <http://www.weareca.org> and perhaps share your story. Dr. Martin Meeker, lead scholar of the project states it is "the goal of this website to inform Californians, or those studying California, about both the broad sweep of movements to California and the lives and contributions of the people who came and continue to settle here." The project allows you to tell your story and even to include images and video clips, and it is also an excellent on-line tool for educators.

Benvenuti to new members: Anthony Bothwell, Mike d'Augelli, Italic Institute of America, Phil Pruski, the Ramella Family, and Joe Vanni. Currently we are 138 members strong, and we have 124 members who follow us on Facebook: American Italian Historical Association-Western Regional Chapter (AIHA-WRC).

In an attempt to lower our costs, we are going to make every effort possible to reduce our snail mail. Anyone who receives this newsletter by post and is willing to receive subsequent ones electronically, please email Lawrence DiStasi at lwdistasi@sbcglobl.net. If you still prefer a hard copy of the newsletter, we will accommodate your wishes, but would appreciate the opportunity to reach you by email for renewal letters and reminder notices. The internet provides us much more flexibility with the amount of information and photographs we can share with you, and it is much more instantaneous. Please email me at TBengiveno@laspositascollege.edu or call me at (925) 833-9194 to provide me with your email.

The 30th Italian American Heritage Foundation Festa is August 28th and 29th at the Guadalupe River Park in San Jose, my hometown. This year's location allows visitors to view the area for Little Italy San Jose. For more information about the Festa visit: <http://festa.iahfsj.org/>.

The 43rd Annual Conference of The American Italian Historical Association will be November 11-13, 2010 in New York City. The theme of this year's conference is Advocacy and Activism: Italian Heritage and Cultural Change.

Enjoy the rest of the summer.

Ciao e a presto,

-Teri Ann Bengiveno

Upcoming

Sustainable Agriculture & Slow Food

Place: Italian American Heritage Foundation, 425 N. Fourth St., San Jose, CA 95112

Date: Sunday, September 26 – 2 PM

This event will bring together two aspects of the growing movement for a more human, sustainable agriculture. Both have an Italian connection.

The *Slow Food Movement* was originated in 1989 in Italy by Carlo Petrini to "counteract fast food and fast life, the disappearance of local food traditions, and people's dwindling interest in the food they eat, where it comes from and how our food choices affect the rest of the world." The movement, which tries to bring together "pleasure and responsibility," now claims over 100,000 members in 132 countries. Speaking at this event will be representatives from the South Bay chapter of the Slow Food movement.

Calabria to California is a video project conceived by Jennifer Kendzior of San Francisco State University and Vincenzo Candido of Calabria to trace and compare stories from two different communities that share a passion for food, similar climates and crops, and a sense of loss in modern livelihoods and values. So far, two short segments have been produced: one on a farmer in Candido's village of Castelsilano, Calabria, and the other on several farmers (including a Calabrian immigrant, Tommaso La Manna) in California. Both will be shown.

The program is co-sponsored by the WRC and the Italian American Heritage Foundation of San Jose. Refreshments will be served—slowly, of course. A \$12 donation to cover expenses will be requested.

For more information and directions to IAHF, call Teri Ann Bengiveno at (925) 833-9194 or IAHF at (408)293-7122.

Living the Revolution: Italian American Women's Resistance and Activism

Place: St Mary's College, Moraga, CA 94556

Date: Tuesday, October 12, 5:30 to 7:30 PM

Jennifer Guglielmo, historian and professor at Smith College, will speak about the almost-unknown history of

activism by Italian immigrant women in the first half of the 20th century. Her new book, *Living the Revolution: Italian Women's Resistance and Radicalism in New York City, 1880-1945* (U of North Carolina Press: 2010) exploring this history, focuses on the lives of many women who worked in the needle and textile trades, and charts their informal, everyday resistance as well as more formal styles of activism that gave shape to the emerging union movement. It also shows how the rise of fascism, the Red Scare and the deprivations of the Great Depression led many to reduce their commitment to transnational social movements and to seek social justice and dignity in nationalism, racism, and acceptable identities as white Americans instead.

Co-sponsored by the AIHA/WRC and St. Mary's College, the talk will be followed by a small reception. For more information and directions, contact Laura Ruberto at LRuberto@Peralta.edu, or go to www.stmarys-ca.edu/.

Feste & Other Events

Feste: Among the many *feste* around the nation and state celebrating Italian American culture, those in the Bay Area include the following:

Sacramento: The Italian Cultural Society's *Festa Italiana*, August 7, 11AM to 10PM, August 8, 11AM to 6 PM, Croatian Park, 3730 Auburn Blvd., Sacramento CA.

San Jose: The Italian American Heritage Foundation's *Family Festa*, August 28, 11 AM to 8 PM and August 29, 11AM to 6 PM, Guadalupe River Park, San Jose CA.

Santa Rosa: The North Bay Italian Cultural Foundation's *Festa Italiana*, October 10, 11AM to 6PM, Santa Rosa Veteran's Memorial Bldg, Santa Rosa, CA.

Eighth Annual *Avanti Popolo* Event

The eighth annual *fete* for the Italian American Political Solidarity Club will be held on Monday, October 11, at 7 PM at City Lights Bookstore, 261 Columbus Ave., San Francisco. Featured this year will be Jennifer Guglielmo (see above) in conversation with WRC Vice-President Laura Ruberto and Tommi Avicolla Mecca, editor of *Smash the Church, Smash the State: The Early Years of Gay Liberation*. The event will be co-hosted by Cameron McHenry and James Tracy, co-editors of *Avanti Popolo: Sailing Beyond Columbus*.

California Curriculum

Michael Sicilia of the Italian American Task Force recently reported that the Italian American immigrant curriculum has been approved for inclusion in the next history-social studies framework. This means, if pending legislation passes, that in the 4th and 11th grade curricula, Italians are specifically named as those who should be studied for their contributions to California culture. Kudos to Sicilia and to Bill Cerruti for keeping up the pressure in this critical arena.

150 anni per dire Italia/ 150 years to say Italy

Amelia Antonucci of the Istituto Italiano di Cultura of SF has announced plans for a major celebration next year of the 150th Anniversary of the Italian Republic. A first meeting was held in June at which several WRC members were in attendance. Tentative plans include a series of events (opera), lectures and exhibits from both Italy and the United States. Laura Ruberto

has suggested, among others, the inclusion of the Las Positas Film Festival and a talk by Nancy Carnevale on her recent book, *A New Language, A New World* (see book review). A second planning meeting is scheduled for September.

Member Activities

In reporting on **Diane diPrima's** selection as San Francisco's Poet Laureate last time, we were unable to offer a diPrima poem to our readers. We now can. It's entitled "U Zio":

you gave us wine & gallons of wine vinegar
planted grapevines from Sicily in our backyard
when we bought our home
put a fish head under each tomato plant
as you set out the seedlings showing us how

I don't know when you died—no one told us kids
one day you just stopped coming to the house
carrying gifts in your roughened, leathery hands

Michael Parenti has produced another book sure to entice his fans and critics: *God and His Demons* (Prometheus Books: 2010). The book explores the dark side of religion, especially the threat posed by fundamentalists and theocratic reactionaries—a rich subject given the proliferation of such types in recent years and the mayhem they have caused.

Laura Ruberto will be reading from her translation of her grandmother's memoir: *Such is Life, A Memoir / Ma la vita è fatta così* (Bordighera Press: 2010) at two sites this fall: Sun., Sept. 19, 2:30 PM, at Bird & Beckett Books in San Francisco; Thurs., Sept. 30, 7 PM, at Pegasus Books in Berkeley. The bilingual edition features immigrant Leonilde Frieri Ruberto's account of both the gains and losses in emigrating from her rural village in Campania to the United States. Ruberto has also been appointed co-editor (with Nancy Carnevale) of a new series of Critical Studies in Italian America published by Fordham University Press. The series will publish works on the history and culture of Italian Americans as well as comparative studies in other areas of the Italian diaspora.

Don Marinelli, professor of drama and arts management at Carnegie Mellon and co-founder of that campus's Entertainment Technology Center (ETC), has written a tribute to his friend and co-director Randy Pausch, *The Comet and the Tornado* (Sterling: 2010). The book reflects on the often tempestuous relationship between "tornado" Marinelli and "comet" Pausch in running the ETC. Pausch gained international fame when his Last Lecture (he was dying of cancer) was posted on YouTube and became an internet sensation.

Lawrence DiStasi's essay "Derived Aliens: Derivative Citizenship and Italian American Women during World War II," will be published in the journal *Italian Americana* later this year. The essay discusses the American women who lost their citizenship upon marrying Italian immigrants, and were classified as "enemy aliens" thereby.

Book Reviews

A New Language, A New World: Italian Immigrants in the United States, 1890-1945, by Nancy Carnevale, University of Illinois Press: 2009.

Nancy Carnevale is one of the first immigration historians to take language seriously. By investigating the daily linguistic practices of ordinary immigrants in the first half of the 20th century, she gives us a new way to look at the phenomenon of immigration, i.e., through the lens of language loss, acquisition, adaptation, and even invention. By invention, I mean the way Carnevale highlights and dignifies what has usually been considered a disgrace or a joke—the Italian American ‘creole’ that immigrants invented by fusing standard Italian, dialect (often Neapolitan), and English. We see that this “Italglish,” far from being simply a by-product of ignorance, actually performed triple duty: it allowed immigrants to communicate with Italians who spoke different dialects, with their bosses who spoke English, and with each other in shaping their new identity as Italian Americans.

Carnevale begins with the linguistic situation in the Italy the immigrants left. She points out not only that Italy was unique in the number of mutually unintelligible dialects spoken, but also that “standard” Italian was hardly universal at the time of the great migration (1880 to 1920): just 4% of the population had reached post-elementary education in 1911, and “Italian only became a mother tongue to large numbers of Italians with those born after 1950.” Prior to that, nearly everyone spoke dialect; further, those from the South “arrived with an acute awareness of their linguistic inferiority” derived from scholars in Italy who associated southern inferiority with both race and language. This sense of inferiority about their language could only be heightened in a United States that was then in the grip of a movement which likewise associated the dominant language, English, with Nordic races and their allegedly superior capabilities. Literacy tests for prospective citizens were introduced for the first time in 1906, and English literacy became the standard for Americanization and for intelligence itself. Americanizers like Theodore Roosevelt believed that the English language was “the crucible that turns our people out as Americans.” As Carnevale summarizes these ideas, “by learning the English language, ‘stupid foreigners’ would be reborn as intelligent Americans.”

Even some Italian immigrants themselves came to subscribe to this view. Both Gino Speranza and Constantine Panunzio saw acquisition of English as the ticket for full entry into American life. Not unrelated was the contempt for most immigrants expressed by language elites. Tomasso Russo, who wrote a series of articles in the *Bolletina della Sera* in 1932, poured scorn on how the immigrants spoke dialects: “And what dialect! And what an accent! A real disaster, one of the greatest difficulties that Italian American students have to overcome for the proper pronunciation of the Italian language.” Giuseppe Prezzolini, professor of Italian at Columbia, added his condemnation when he wrote of “the horror which is experienced by every good Italian, who delights in his language” when faced with the jumbled “Italglish” spoken by New York’s laboring Italians.

As noted above, though, Carnevale takes Italglish seriously. Taking her cue from Michael LaSorte’s *La Merica*, she provides wonderful examples of the creativity displayed by the immigrants in fashioning a language suited to their situation. One of my favorites is the term *andarre a flabussce*

(go to Flatbush, a section of Brooklyn known for its large Italian American cemetery). The phrase was not only used literally, but also became an immigrant euphemism for dying: he’s gone to Flatbush. That’s the sign of language that’s alive. Immigrants also used loan words, Italianizing the English: *carro* for car, *marchetta* for market, *stritto* for street, *boia* for boy, and of course, the one we all heard, *baccousa* (backhouse) for toilet.

All this mixing of languages could be confusing, and as Carnevale points out, the confusion provided material for the Italian American theater and its comedians like *Farfariello* (Eduardo Migliaccio). A genius at fracturing languages to make fun of them, Migliaccio created familiar immigrant characters like the Ice Man to evoke the foibles and mixups of immigrant life, as well as to criticize the language they were forced to learn. To show how English was crooked (*storto*) compared to smooth (*liscia*) Italian, Farfariello would object to the word “beans” (“like something that espolodes”) and compare it to *pasta e fasule*: (“See, that’s *liscia*!”) To show how English was “upside down,” he punned on the words *women* and the Italian *uomini* (men) similarly pronounced: “The English [sic] is the Italian language upside down. For instance, in English *woman* means woman, in Italian *women* [*uomini*] means men..See, upside down.” Beneath the self-directed humor, in short, Farfariello “delivered a blistering critique of the materialism and perceived immorality” of the world to which the immigrants had to adapt.

Carnevale also examines the Americanizing efforts of teachers like Leonard Covello, who tried to promote Italian language learning as the most secure road to a new American identity for immigrants and their children. The irony was that Fascist officials tried this same route, though with a different identity in mind. Unfortunately, World War II put an end to both attempts when the Italian language became associated in the public (and government) mind with loyalty to Mussolini and all he stood for. Carnevale writes perceptively about this, making clear that though some in government attempted to maintain some balance (the OSS used Italian-speaking soldiers as intelligence operatives in Italy; the OWI tried to distinguish between Italian itself and its use by Fascists), the end result was that by the time war broke out, “Italian language instruction had been eliminated from two-thirds of the high schools and colleges where it had previously been taught.”

Carnevale’s book is thus not only indispensable history for anyone interested in the Italian American experience; it is also a lesson in the profound role that language plays in culture, in identity, and in acculturation. It is a lesson that all Americans should take seriously when we still, today, face “English-only” demands that bear striking resemblances to the situation that faced millions of Italian immigrants on their arrival.

What We Pass On: Collected Poems 1980-2009, by Maria Mazziotti Gillan, Guernica: 2010.

For all of us who have prized Maria Gillan’s poetry in the past, this volume is a treat. Seeing her poems, with some new ones, in one place, allows us to appreciate what a rich and varied tapestry she has woven—of one woman’s life in all its phases—in thirty years of poetry. Gillan will be reading with Diane diPrima at Bird & Beckett Books, Monday Sept. 13, at 7 pm. Go, and get a signed copy.

Lawrence DiStasi

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

Lawrence DiStasi
P.O. Box 533
Bollinas, CA 94924
email: lwdistasi@sbcglobal.net

The American Italian Historical Association

Western Regional Chapter

P.O. Box 533 – Bollinas, CA 94924

AIHA National Conference – November 11-13

“Advocacy and Activism: Italian Heritage and
Cultural Change”

Calandra Institute: New York, NY