



WESTERN REGIONAL CHAPTER

A people without a past is a people without a future

Bolinas, California

www.iasa-wrc.org

Summer 2012

President's Message

This year began with a change in our name and a renewed, stronger tie to the national organization of which we have always been a part. In January 2012 the American Italian Historical Association, officially changed its name to the Italian American Studies Association. We followed suit. We inaugurated this change in February with our first public event: Joseph Sciorra's presentation of his edited collection, *Italian Folk: Vernacular Culture in Italian-American Lives*, an event co-sponsored with U.C. Berkeley's Department of Italian Studies. The evening proved to be wildly successful: with a standing-room only crowd from both within and beyond the university. Sciorra's discussion of everyday practices of Italian Americans struck a chord with the audience, especially in how those practices suggest something different about the experience of Italians on the East Coast versus the West Coast.

The change in name also has shifted how we "do business"—moving (finally!) to a web-based membership process. If you have not already done so, please visit the IASA national website (www.italianamericanstudies.net), click on the *membership* link, scroll down to the "Join and Register with IASA Here" link, click and follow directions to become a member of IASA and IASA-WRC. If you have problems with this system (and as with any new system, there are still kinks to work out), please email Ottorino Cappelli at o.cappelli@gmail.com.

The Bay Area is abuzz right now with the Museo Italo Americano's current exhibit, *Italian Americans At Bar*; the WRC's own Lawrence DiStasi acted as one of the exhibit's curators. The show runs through November 25, 2012.

Shortly, the IASA-WRC will be hosting its first event of the fall, in collaboration with Berkeley City College. On September 18, 2012, come celebrate the publication of Maria Mazziotti Gillan's *The Place I Call Home* with an evening of poetry with Mazziotti Gillan, Sandra Mortola Gilbert, Jennifer Lagier Fellguth, Giovanna Capone and others. Details can be found herein.

The 45th Annual Conference of IASA will take place from Nov. 29 - Dec. 1, 2012 at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York. The current program is already available at the IASA website.

Become a member of IASA and IASA-WRC today. We look forward to hearing from you.

Alla prossima! ~

Laura E. Ruberto

Upcoming

The Place I Call Home Poetry with Maria Gillan & Friends

Place: Berkeley City College Auditorium
2050 Center St., Berkeley CA
Date: Tuesday, September 18, 7-9 PM

Maria Mazziotti Gillan's latest book of poems, *The Place I Call Home* (NYQ Books: 2012), is her 14th volume of poetry. She has also edited four anthologies of mainly ethnic writings, is the Founder/Executive Director of the Poetry Center at Passaic County Community College in Paterson, NJ, and is currently Professor of Poetry and Creative Writing at Binghamton University, SUNY. In 2008, she won the American Book Award for her poetry volume, *All That Lies Between Us*.

To help celebrate her latest volume, the WRC will co-host with Berkeley City College this evening of poetry featuring Gillan reading from her new work (and perhaps some old favorites), and also featuring an array of Italian American poets that will include Sandra Mortola Gilbert, Jennifer Lagier Fellguth, and Giovanna Capone.

Gillan's new poems, like many of her past ones, recall and revivify her life—her growing up, her parents and their struggles, and her own struggles as daughter, professional woman and mother. With courage and candor she focuses on the most intimate and ordinary details of her experience, past and present, thereby rendering them unique, iconic, and unforgettable.

Join us for what promises to be an exciting evening of poetry with some of the most celebrated Italian American poets writing today.

The event is free and open to the public. Light refreshments will be served.

For more information, please contact Sharon Coleman at scoleman@peralta.edu.

This event is co-sponsored by Berkeley City College and the Italian American Studies Association, Western Regional Chapter.

SAVE THE DATE

The WRC's annual film festival will be held on Friday, October 12 and Saturday October 13 at Las Positas College in Livermore, program to be announced. For further information, contact Dr. Teri Ann Benigveno at (925)424-1287 or email to:

TBengiveno@laspositascollege.edu.

Italian Americans at Bat: From Sandlots to the Major Leagues

On June 22, the Museo Italo Americano's exhibit honoring Italian American contributions to "America's favorite pastime," opened for a 6-month run ending on November 25. Following its appearance in San Francisco, the exhibit will travel to Reno, Nevada where it opens January 17 at Arte Italia. The exhibit features vintage photos of some of the first Italian Americans to play the sport in the 1890s, prize objects of some of the players, and depicts the history of Italian Americans as they rose to become some of the most renowned players in the game. The exhibit seeks to draw a parallel between Italian assimilation into mainstream culture and the progress of Italian Americans as first players, then managers and then owners. The ascension of A. Bartlett Giamatti to Commissioner of Baseball is presented as symbolic of this movement. The exhibit also draws attention to the stunning role Italian Americans from the Bay Area played, and still play, in breaking out of their early token status to become American icons of the sport.

On Thursday July 26, Lawrence Baldassaro made a slide presentation of some of the findings in his recent book, *Beyond DiMaggio: Italian Americans in Baseball* (see Review of Baldassaro's book on next page).

The Museo Italo Americano is open Tuesdays through Sundays, from 12 to 4 pm. Admission is free. For more information, call (415) 673-2200, or go online to sfmuseo@sbcglobal.net.

Italian Americans, California Italians

Italian Americans, California Italians is an event aimed at analyzing Italian immigration in California, vis-à-vis the Italian immigrant experience in other parts of the country. Distributed over October 21 and 22 at UCLA and Los Angeles' *Istituto Italiano di Cultura*, it will include a Sunday evening screening of Gianfranco Norelli and Suma Kurien's *Pane amaro* (2009), followed the next day by a symposium dedicated to exploring differences between the immigration and settlement of Italians in California and the Italian American experience at large from a range of disciplinary perspectives, and in dialogue with Norelli-Kurien's documentary.

In addition to the filmmakers, Gianfranco Norelli and Suma Kurien, speakers participating in the symposium will include: Luisa Del Giudice of the Italian Oral History Institute, Marianna Gatto of the Italian American Museum of *Los Angeles*, Laura E. Ruberto of Berkeley City College, Ken Scambray of the University of La Verne, and Edward Tuttle of the University of California Los Angeles.

Updated information about the event will be available in September on the UCLA Department of Italian's website (<http://www.italian.ucla.edu/>). Please contact JoAnne Ruvoli with questions: jruvoli@humnet.ucla.edu.

Member Activities

Lawrence DiStasi will give a talk, "Dommy: Remembering the 'Other' DiMaggio," on Dom DiMaggio on Thursday,

August 16, 7 PM at the Museo Italo Americano. DiStasi served as co-curator of the current exhibit, *Italian Americans at Bat*, writing the text for the exhibit.

DiStasi has also contributed an essay, "The Other Evacuation," about the evacuation of Italian Americans from West Coast prohibited zones during World War II, for a volume edited by Elizabeth Messina. Messina is a founding member of the Italian section of the American Psychological Association.

Mary Bucci Bush has a new novel entitled *Sweet Hope* (Guernica: 2011). The novel fictionalizes some of the experience of Bush's family when they were brought to the Sunnyside Plantation in Arkansas as virtual indentured laborers. One of the little-known aspects Bush reveals is the friendship between Italian immigrants and African Americans who sometimes worked side by side. For more info on Bush and her work, see www.marybuccibush.com.

Marianna Gatto, executive director of the Italian American Museum of Los Angeles, has been making headlines recently, most importantly with the project of documenting the history of Italian Americans in the Los Angeles area, and in turning the 1908 Italian Hall into a fully functioning museum. A key feature of the renovations will be restoring the mosaic spelling out the name "Italian Hall" in the entrance. The second-floor museum space will then be ready to feature exhibits of important artifacts and studies of the little-known history of Italian American contributions to early Los Angeles.

Maria Gillan's new volume, *The Place I Call Home*, has too many fine poems to choose just one, so we have allowed the choice to be dictated by this space. Many will recognize the emotion Gillan depicts here—of a familial past one has waited too long to ask about.

"My Father's Tuba Disappeared"

My father's tuba disappeared somewhere in my childhood, though there is one picture of him holding the tuba in his arms, wearing the gold epaulettes and fitted jacket of his band uniform, proud in full sunlight, our tenement, gray and seedy, in the background.

By the time I was old enough to notice, my father's tuba had vanished into some locked closet, only the picture to remind us that once he marched in that band through the streets of Paterson, playing booming tuba music and smiling.

Only now do I remember the gleam of that tuba, the pride in his straight shoulders, and regret that I lost this part of his life long before he died at ninety-two, all that time when I could have asked him when he stopped playing the tuba and why and what happened to the gold braid of his uniform.

Book Review

Beyond DiMaggio: Italian Americans in Baseball, by Lawrence Baldassaro, (University of Nebraska: 2011).

Lawrence Baldassaro, an emeritus professor of Italian at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, has been a pioneer in exploring the history of baseball and ethnicity; he was both a contributor to and co-editor of a previous volume of essays, *The American Game: Baseball and Ethnicity*, (Southern Illinois U Press: 2002). With *Beyond DiMaggio*, he focuses his considerable research skills (and his own experience as a semi-pro player) on the details of how Italians, an immigrant group with no history in organized sport, became one of the most recognized of the many immigrant groups to make the American pastime their own. Along the way, he profiles both the icons like the DiMaggios—possibly the most famous baseball family in history—and numerous others most people will never have heard of.

Baldassaro begins with the familiar story of an ethnic group facing prejudice and discrimination, their sometimes desperate attempts to fit in (Baldassaro's grandfather *Vincenzo* was "sometimes known as James Bowen," his father changed his first name from *Ruggiero* to Gerald, and his maternal grandfather anglicized *Nubile* to Noble), and the decision of their sons to fit in by becoming proficient at the quintessential American game. He shows how this same renaming reigned among early baseball players as well: Ed Abbaticchio, the first Italian American to play professionally, was often referred to by a nickname, 'Abby'; Babe Pinelli, both player and renowned umpire, changed his name from Paolinelli to make it easier to pronounce (the difficulty of pronouncing Italian names was almost a fetish among early sportswriters); while Francesco Pezzolo used the town of Bodie where his father had once labored to rename himself Ping Bodie. He also gives us chapter and verse about the familiar story of Italian fathers trying to discourage their sons from playing this children's game for a living—until, that is, as in the case of Joe DiMaggio, his father realized how great could be the earnings of a professional ballplayer and began urging his last son, Dom, to become a pro himself.

Baldassaro then profiles all of the great Italian players in the sport, beginning with Abbaticchio, continuing with the great early players out of San Francisco—Ping Bodie, Tony Lazzeri, Ernie Lombardi, Babe Pinelli, Frankie Crosetti, the DiMaggio brothers (a whole chapter), Billy Martin, and Dario Lodigiani whom Baldassaro interviewed personally just before he died. Through Lodigiani, he tries to account for the improbable number of Italian American players who reached the Majors from the Bay Area: mild climate, numerous playgrounds and parks all featuring semi-pro games on the weekends, as well as the economic situation:

"Things were kind of tough... We played a lot of ball. There was nothing else to do. A lot of us couldn't afford the price of going to different places, so we stuck around Funston Playground, North Beach Playground, and the different playgrounds around San Francisco. Of course, the Italian ballplayers came out of mostly Italian neighborhoods like all of North Beach and the Marina. At that time we were just a bunch of friends playing, not knowing that we were going to have one of the most famous players of all time [DiMaggio] playing with us."

Dick Dobbins, who has written about San Francisco baseball, adds his own professional opinion that the Bay Area was "the richest baseball center in the world. The game may have been 'invented' in upstate New York and played professionally for the first time in Ohio, but the true heart of

American baseball is right here in the Bay Area." It is hard to argue with that assessment.

Baldassaro then takes us through the other major eras of the sport: Tony Lazzeri's era (roughly the 20s, when Lazzeri played alongside the great Yankee stars, Ruth and Gehrig); the 30s when Italian stars really arrived with the advent of Joe DiMaggio and 54 other Italians who entered the Majors that same decade; the postwar time of greatness and MVPs like DiMaggio, Berra, Rizzuto, Lombardi, Cavaretta and others; a section he calls "Transitional Italians" covering players of the 70s who no longer could be exclusively identified with an Italian heritage; the 80s through the present when Italianness was no longer a defining feature; and finally the process wherein Italian Americans moved from the playing fields to managerial positions, and beyond that to the "executive suite." In all this, Baldassaro is making his overall point that in a very real sense, the path of Italians in baseball reflects their parallel path in American life itself. One of the most impressive documents Baldassaro marshals as illustration is a 1936 article by sportswriter Dan Daniel, called "Viva Italia!" In it, Daniel referred several times to what he saw as a parallel between Mussolini's "legions of Rome" marching across Africa, and the "invasion" of baseball by the "sons of men who immigrated from Italy" marching "across the diamonds of the Major Leagues.... This surely is Italy's year." While Daniel tried to put a somewhat positive spin on this "invasion," the subtext was not at all subtle: the numbers of players with strange names was not comfortable for those who saw baseball as an Anglo-Saxon game. Baldassaro cites another Daniel story of that same year in which, in a cartoon portraying the "three musketeers of the Roman Legion of the Yankees" (Lazzeri, Crosetti and DiMaggio), the caption has these lyrics to the song they're singing: "Oh, the miners came in '49—the wops in '51".

Soon, of course, DiMaggio would be the greatest hero, not only of baseball, but of a whole era. And many of those 'wops' would be not just regulars as major league stars, but would go on to become some of the most successful team managers in history. Baldassaro charts this movement as well, with deft portrayals of such managerial icons as Yogi Berra, Billy Martin, Joe Torre, Tony LaRussa, Terry Francona, Bobby Valentine, Joe Maddon (Madonnini) and Joe Girardi, and this conclusion: "between 1996 and 2009 Italian American managers were in the World Series every year except 1997 and 2005, and in 2000 and 2004 both teams were managed by Italian Americans."

Baldassaro ends his book with a loving portrayal of the man who left his position as President of Yale University to become the Commissioner of Baseball, A. Bartlett Giamatti. As both academic, baseball aficionado, and Red Sox fan, Baldassaro may have seen something of himself in the man known as "Bart." We see this in his evocation of Giamatti's writings on baseball as "a metaphorical expression of the American Dream." When you read Lawrence Baldassaro's book, you will be inclined to agree.

Lawrence DiStasi

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

Membership for both the national and the WRC is now available online. To join and register online, go to www.italianamericanstudies.net and select the box for membership. Follow the prompts for the type of membership you wish. Credit cards accepted.

Yearly national dues are:

Regular individual membership: \$40. Senior: \$25.

Student: \$20. Family: \$60. Institutional: \$80.

Life membership: \$800.

WRC Chapter dues are:

Regular: \$20. Senior: \$10. Family: \$20.

Institutional: \$30.

Having trouble renewing your IASA-WRC membership?

If you are a long-time IASA-WRC member who has never registered online and are not sure where to begin, WRC Secretary Teri Ann Bengiveno can help. Please call her at (925) 890-5553, or email her at:

TBengiveno@laspositascollege.edu

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

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**The Italian American Studies Association
Western Regional Chapter**

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IASA National Conference – Nov. 29 – Dec. 1
Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY

“E Pluribus: What is Italian America?”