

# 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](http://www.aiha-wrc.org)

Winter 2007

---

#### President's Message

*Buone feste a tutti.* I wish you and your families a peaceful and healthy New Year.

Laura Ruberto, Richard Vannucci, and I recently returned from AIHA's 40<sup>th</sup> annual conference in Denver. This year's theme was *Italian Passages: Making & Thinking History*. Denver was chosen as this year's site to coincide with the yearlong exhibit on "Italians in Colorado" by AIHA member Alisa Zahller, curator. The exhibit was exceptional, and it will be on display at the Colorado History Museum until April 2008. Dr. Paola Sensi-Isolani, of St. Mary's College, gave the keynote address "Gone West: An Italian Immigrant Looks Back." Her talk related very well to the conference theme and it was insightful and at times humorous. Some of the conference attendees also had the opportunity to tour North Denver, the one time home of Denver's Little Italy. With the exception of one or two restaurants and Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church with its Italian Festivals, there really is no remaining Italian presence in the neighborhood. However, on the front of the Church it says in bold letters **ITALIAN CHURCH**. The conference sessions were intriguing, and it is always delightful to see colleagues and friends from around the country and world. Next year's AIHA conference will be in New Haven, CT, November 6-8.

The WRC is currently 154 members strong and growing. Benvenuti to new members Michael Apicelli, Theresa Bottini, Richard Cannizzaro, Marti Casey, Louis Robert Chiaramonte, Rob DeFeo, Angelo de Mattei, Anna de Mattei, Mary Lameia, Bob & Linda Lucchesi, Dan Nocero, Toni Zoria Rusich, Joseph Scalise, Todd Vatararo, Christine Vota, Katherine Winkelman, and the Peninsula Italian American Social Club. Continued thanks to Jennifer Lagier Fellguth, our web goddess. A very special thank you to member Joanne Parenti who graciously volunteered to take over our mailing list.

The WRC is delighted to sponsor a series of presentations around the theme *Immigrants and the Land: Italian Americans in California Agriculture*. The first segment of this series is a one-day conference on April 19 at Las Positas College on Italian Farming in the Central Valley. Please mark your calendars and read on for further information.

We continue to welcome volunteers. Anyone who receives this newsletter by post and is willing to receive subsequent ones electronically, please email Lawrence DiStasi at [lwdistasi@sbcglobal.net](mailto:lwdistasi@sbcglobal.net). Interested volunteers, please feel free to call me at home (925) 833-9194 or at work (925) 424-1287.

*Buon Anno,*

-Teri Ann Bengiveno

#### Upcoming

##### **Italian Farming in the Central Valley**

Origins, Culture, Innovations

**Place:** Bldg. 2400, Las Positas College, Livermore, CA

**Date:** Saturday, April 19, 2008. 9AM to 5PM.

That Italian immigrants engaged in farming in the Central Valley may seem obvious. Judging by some recent reports, it is not so obvious to today's Californians—at least not those who determine what counts as California history. Just this year, for example, the *Fresno Bee* issued a "history" of Fresno's last 150 years. Included were accounts of the agricultural contributions of every major ethnic group, with the exception of Italians. A recent television documentary on Modesto likewise failed to mention Italians there. And in its Winter 2007 newsletter, the California Council for the Humanities featured an upcoming documentary, by Fresno Teens, about the area's agricultural history, with a writeup that mentioned Latinos, African Americans, Anglos, Japanese Americans, Filipino Americans, Hmong Americans, but notably left out Italians.

It is as if the rich history of Italians in California's agricultural heartland has been expunged from the record, or, at the very least, relegated to some rarely visited back room.

The Western Regional Chapter's upcoming conference, co-sponsored by the Social Science and Wellness Division of Las

#### NOTICE TO NEWSLETTER RECIPIENTS

The Western Regional Chapter is in the process of updating its mailing lists. In order to do so, it is important for us to know whether or

Positas College, will attempt to correct and alter that record. The conference will focus on four central valley cities: Stockton, Modesto, Madera and Fresno. A panel for each city will feature members of each community discussing their experience, memories, and research on the history of farms, canneries, and neighborhoods. To open the conference, Lawrence DiStasi will give a brief overview of farming and settlement in the Central Valley. It is hoped that the whole will be documented on video, to include photographs and other artifacts brought by participants. The conference—to run from 9am to 5pm—will include a light lunch, and will be followed by a reception with light refreshments.

The conference will comprise only the opening event in a continuing WRC project to document and research the key role that Italian immigrants have played in all phases of California Agriculture. It will be followed in the future by programs on Italians in other agricultural areas, including Bay Farm Isle on Alameda, the Santa Clara valley, some of the original farms in and around San Francisco and the Bay, wineries in every part of the state, the Salinas Valley, coastal ranches, and many others.

Las Positas College is located at 3033 Collier Canyon Road, Livermore, 94551 and can be reached from route 580 east, or 580 west from Highway 99; the exit in both directions is Airway Blvd. For more specific directions and a map, see [www.laspositas.edu](http://www.laspositas.edu).

In order to be able to provide lunch, it is imperative that those who wish to attend RSVP by April 1 to: Dr. Teri Ann Bengiveno, at (925)424-1287 or by email at [TBengiveno@laspositascollege.edu](mailto:TBengiveno@laspositascollege.edu).

---

The WRC is also planning an event to take place in Spring 2008. To be co-sponsored by the Pittsburg Historical Society, the program will treat the story of Italian POWs living and working in the Bay Area. VP Laura Ruberto, whose grandfather was a POW, will talk about her experience, as well as the larger historical context. The event will be held in Pittsburg (the site of a large POW camp during WWII), at the newly refurbished Pittsburg Historical Society building there: 515 Railroad Ave., Pittsburg CA 94565.

Notices about this and other programs being planned will appear in subsequent newsletters.

#### Member Activities

**Richard Vannucci** has been taking an active role in helping the shape the new Italian American magazine, *Salute*. The magazine is the brainchild of publisher Rob DeFeo of El Dorado Hills. The first issue was a smartly designed volume that featured several articles of historical interest, including a piece by Vannucci on jazz guitarist, Mario Suraci. Vannucci is listed as a contributing editor to the magazine, and is preparing a regular column for upcoming issues.

*Salute* has already issued a second number, which, though a little heavy on the food and wine spectrum, continued to feature items of historical interest. A six-part series, based on the Italian Cultural Society's *Nostra Storia* exhibit (about Italians in the Mother Lode), started in the first issue and will run through the year. An article about *Con Le Nostre Mani*, the exhibit about Italians working in the East Bay, appeared in number two. The magazine also features a regular column by

WRC member **Ken Borelli** of San Jose, as well as a calendar of Italian American events in the northern California area. We wish it well.

On October 25, **Lawrence DiStasi** gave a talk at the Istituto Italiano di Cultura in connection with their Italian Language & the Sea project. Titled *The History of Italians in California*, the talk focused on early northern California history as well as the impact of the wartime restrictions on Italian American fishermen and enemy aliens in prohibited zones along the West Coast during World War II. The latter was also the subject of another talk DiStasi gave on October 27 to a POINT (Pursuing Our Italian Names Together) luncheon in San Mateo. As the acronym implies, POINT is an organization devoted to genealogical research for Italian Americans. The meeting made clear that its members are keenly interested in Italian American history as well.

Several officers from the WRC attended the AIHA national conference in Denver in November. All commented on its fine organization, the quality of the presentations, and the exhibit on Denver Italian Americans. Laura Ruberto presented a paper titled "Hollywood on the Tiber and the Case of the Missing Italian Immigrant." Teri Ann Bengiveno chaired a session on American Gender, Sexuality and Identity. Dr. Bengiveno will co-edit the conference proceedings with John Paul Russo.

**Kenneth Scambray's** poem, "Piece Work," was among the winning poems of the 2007 Editor's Choice awards in the annual Allen Ginsberg Poetry Prize sponsored by the Paterson Literary Review. Another work of Scambray's, "Creative Responses to the Italian American Experience in California: Baldassare Forestiere's "Underground Gardens" and Simon Rodia's "Watts Towers," appears in Gloria Ricci Lothrop's new book, *The Land Beyond: Italian Migrants in the Westward Movement* (San Marino: Patrons of Italian Culture: 2007).

**Laura Ruberto's** PhD dissertation has just been published as *Gramsci, Migration, and the Representation of Women's Work in Italy and the US*, by Lexington Books/Rowman and Littlefield. Revisiting the work of Italian cultural theorist Antonio Gramsci from a feminist perspective, Ruberto uncovers insights into the relationship between the history of Italian emigration and contemporary immigration to Italy, particularly in relation to the representation of women's work. Through an interdisciplinary study of novels, films, testimonials, photographs, and other forms of cultural representation, Ruberto shows how migrant women workers (doing rice work and paid domestic labor in Italy, and cannery labor and unwaged housework in the U.S.) take part in the development of what Gramsci calls national popular culture, even as they are excluded from dominant cultural narratives.

The Enemy Alien Files consortium, of which the WRC is a part, continues to publicize the full extent of the restrictions and internments of all enemy aliens during WWII. This April, EAF will present its exhibit along with John Christgau's series of plays at the Oakland Museum. The event is tentatively set for April 12. Details and a firm date will be forthcoming.

Book Reviews

*The Earth Knows My Name: Food, Culture and Sustainability in the Gardens of Ethnic Americans*, by Patricia Klindienst (Beacon Press: 2006)

In her first book, Patricia Klindienst has investigated a subject that has lain dormant for years—the way in which the vegetable gardens of immigrants, native Americans and African Americans served to preserve their cultures. In so doing, she has brought to light an unsuspected source of resistance to the melting pot. As she points out in her introduction, “the garden can be a powerful expression of resistance, as much a refusal of one set of cultural values as an assertion of others...in refusing to assimilate fully to mainstream American values, ethnic gardeners kept alive, and offer back to us, viable alternatives to the habits of mind that have brought us to our current ecological crisis. The irony of the pressure to assimilate, then, is that it not only robs people of their heritage and their dignity, it robs the dominant culture too, impoverishing us all.”

Klindienst—whose mother is Italian American—then goes on to offer us vivid examples of some of these ethnic gardens, starting with “Vanzetti’s Garden” (an account of Bartolomeo Vanzetti’s longing for his Italian garden as revealed in his letters from prison) to accounts of gardens maintained by an Iroquois (“the original garden is in the Iroquois story of how the earth was created”), a Mexican American in New Mexico, Gullah gardeners on St. Helena Island in South Carolina, a Polish American partnering with a Japanese American on Bainbridge Island, two Italian gardeners in Los Altos (“we are green radicchio people”), a Punjabi gardener in Fullerton, urban Puerto Rican gardeners in So. Holyoke, MA, a Yankee gardener in Stonington, CT. Along the way, she gives not only moving accounts of these earthy centers of resistance, but also rich lessons in the value of locally grown foods, of food as a “form of deep memory.” Gerard Bentryn (the Polish gardener) remembers what he heard from a gardener in Germany: “If you cannot see where your food comes from, you are doomed to live in ugliness.” Klindienst herself comments in response to the garden of the Pellegrinis: “All around us, the garden is filled with life in every stage of generation and decay...How fixed in linear time the nongardener can feel! But here, as Maska and Mario work, the world is being born, ripening, and dying every day, and they are part of it.”

Klindienst also quotes liberally from Sir Albert Howard, whose 1947 book, *The Soil and Health*, was an early warning about the perils of industrial agriculture. His studies led him to see that mycorrhizal association, the process by which plants feed directly from the soil, was crucial: “If we interrupt this symbiotic relationship or destroy it with chemicals that kill the microorganisms...the soil dies and nothing will grow.” This simple principle underlies the “vast accumulation of disease which now afflicts the world. The undernourishment of the soil is the root of all.”

Virtually all of Klindienst’s gardeners save their own seeds. In doing so, they are saving not only the health of what they eat, but also their cultures. When asked which of her seeds she had saved the longest, Maska Pellegrini said, “It would be the bush beans. We just call them Italian beans, you know. I guess I’ve had those, let’s see, sixty years, anyway.” Otis Daise, the Gullah gardener, has been saving his okra, yam, peanut, watermelon, pigeon pea and other seeds even longer—since slaves first brought them to America and planted them in their

“provision gardens,” gardens some call “the botanical gardens of the dispossessed.” Of the four types of gardens typical of plantations—cash crop, kitchen, formal, and provision—these are the only gardens that have survived.

Possibly the most moving part of this moving book comes in the last chapter where Whit Davis, the Yankee farmer, returns some bones found in his garden to a Wampanoag medicine man. “‘Here,’ I says. ‘This is yours.’ And he kind of looked at me, he looked kind of funny, you know, and then I saw tears coming down his cheeks. He said, ‘You know, people don’t do this for us’....So that was it. I wasn’t trying to be demonstrative. *Here, this is yours, this is your people. Here, take it.* That’s all.”

*The Earth Knows My Name* was recently awarded an American Book Award by the Before Columbus Foundation.

*Italians in the Santa Clara Valley*, by Fred Marrasso, Arcadia Publishing: 2007.

Arcadia publishing, with an office in San Francisco, has been publishing a series called Images of America, books of mostly photographs complimented by detailed captions, and small introductions. WRC member Fred Marrasso is the author of one of the latest of these, on the Italians of the Santa Clara Valley, an area which includes San Jose, much of the south of the SF peninsula, and the area south to Gilroy. It was, and some still is, some of the richest farm land in California. Before there was the Silicon Valley, there were acres and acres of fruit trees planted and tended mostly by Italian immigrants. Marrasso tells this story through a splendid collection of photographs he first began to locate in preparing his public access TV series, *Cronaca*. For the book he has gone much farther afield and the portrayal of farms, families, canneries, businesses and progress achieved by the immigrants is rich and graphic.

The book is divided into seven sections: Getting Started, Farm Life, Fruits of their Labor, Family and Fraternity, Pride and Progress, Good Sports, and It’s a Wonderful Life. The organization is a fruitful one, making the book read more like a history than a photography book. Along the way we meet the farmers who grew the fruit, the canners who canned it, and the businesses which grew up around those basic industries, including Luigi Giannini’s Swiss Hotel (where A.P. Giannini was born and raised), the Guglielmo Winery as they started out delivering wine to San Jose Italians by horse and wagon, the women of the Biceglia Brothers Canning Company in their nurse-like uniforms. Marrasso has assembled a stellar array of photographs which portray Italian life in the early years of the Santa Clara Valley’s development as it has seldom been seen.

Though the text is limited to the captions for each photo, the sum total of the information that Marrasso manages to convey is truly impressive. One example: “Before the Santa Clara Valley became the high-tech mecca known as ‘Silicon Valley,’ the canneries were the main engine of economic growth and prosperity. They were at the crossroads of agriculture and industrialization. The Italians were very much like the underlying steam in this photograph (workers posed on a train engine), taken at the Hershl cannery in San Jose. They were an economic force that helped bring prosperity to the valley.” The IAHF in San Jose will hold a book-signing for Marrasso on Thurs. January 31, at 6 PM.

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

Send WRC dues (Individual: \$15; Family: \$20)

to: AIHA/WRC Treasurer

5072 Elrod Dr.  
Castro Valley, CA 94546

From:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
(name)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
(address)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
(city, state)

\_\_\_\_\_

(phone)

\_\_\_\_\_

(email address)

\_\_\_\_\_

(volunteer skills—events, computers, mailings, etc.)

Send AIHA National Dues (Individual:  
\$40; Student: \$20; Senior: \$25) to:

JOHN D. CALANDRA INSTITUTE  
25 W. 43<sup>rd</sup> St. – 17<sup>th</sup> Floor  
New York, NY 10036

(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:

Lawrence DiStasi  
P.O. Box 533  
Bolinas, CA 94924  
email: [lwdistasi@sbcglobal.net](mailto:lwdistasi@sbcglobal.net)

**The American Italian Historical Association**  
**Western Regional Chapter**  
P.O. Box 533  
Bolinas, CA 94924