

COLUMBUS' GIFT

by Patrizia Cinquini Cerruti

This year I brought my children Columbus day presents. Wrapping them in red, white, and green ribbon, I realize it is much more than books and paper ships they need and that I want to give. It is the gift of their ethnic heritage that I want to lay before them. But it cannot be neatly packaged.

For Italian Americans, Columbus day is more than the celebration of the Genoese navigator's discovery. It celebrates the voyages made by millions of Italians setting forth from their native Italy to "discover" America. They came only with their courage, hoping for a better life for themselves and their children. On Columbus day, I will share with my children the history and contributions of these Italians.

I will tell my children that on Columbus day, October 12, 1942, the United States declared that resident Italian immigrants would no longer be considered "internal enemies." Thousands of Italian Americans who had been arrested, interned, relocated and restricted were freed. On Columbus day, I will celebrate for those who were liberated.

To voices who say Italian Americans don't need a holiday, I say we do. Italian Americans are entitled to be visible - to be counted - to tell our own history. We cannot allow it to be rewritten, altered or lost, like our ancestors' beautiful multi-voweled names - cut and lost at Ellis Island. Like Giovanni Caboto, who in the history books became John Cabot to the millions of Italian American students who read his name, never recognizing him as one of their own.

Italian American children are exposed to books that either neglect them or, when included, they are overwhelmingly negatively stereotyped. Perhaps this treatment of Italian Americans accounts for the fact that Italian American students in major cities have among the highest high school drop-out rates.

To those who say that there are no Italian Americans and that we are all just Americans, I say, look around you. Almost every film and book about Italian Americans has to do with the Mafia. This presumption of guilt by ethnicity is so pervasive that Sam Donaldson argued on television that reporters must investigate all public figures who are of Italian heritage for mafia ties.

This nation, including Italian Americans, is terribly misinformed about the Italian American experience. Lack of knowledge can be devastating. Our children deserve better. They deserve the truth.

In this sea of angry voices, we need a strong voice. A voice that, like the winds that led Columbus to the new world, leads us to a new awareness of our cultural heritage.

Along with the Columbus Day packages, my children will hear that they too have a special place in the history of this continent. This is the gift of their heritage and the knowledge that there is room enough in this great country for them to celebrate the arrival of their first countryman, and to celebrate the millions of Italian Americans who crossed the ocean with dreams and made them our legacy.

[The essay, Columbus' Gift, received a first place award in the L'Italo Americano 1995 Christopher Columbus Essay Contest. L'Italo Americano is the California Italian American newspaper. The author, Patrizia Cinquini Cerruti, is the Director of the Italian Cultural Society's Italian Language School.]