

Italian American Studies: Telling Our Story

One of the stunning cultural successes of the past two decades has been the growth of Jewish, African American, Hispanic American, American Indian, and Asian American Studies programs at the grade school and university levels. These programs are now well established and compete with other academic programs for status, funding and influence. Italian Americans have been slow to develop and push for similar programs. As a result, the Italian American experience is not well known by Americans or even by Italian Americans. Italian Americans have entered the mainstream of American life and their story is now part of the American saga, but their experience and history is not included in the educational experience of Americans.

Italian Americans are beginning to realize the importance of being included in the school curriculum along with the other ethnic groups that are. And there are many reasons why they should be. For one thing, Italian Americans are one of the largest ancestry groups in the nation, the fifth largest according to the 1990 census. The Italian immigration to the American continents was the largest migration in history of a people from one continent to another. Most of that migration occurred in this century. In its 70 year history, 12 million people went through Ellis Island and almost one-third of them were Italian.

The settlement of the United States by Italians during the latter part of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century changed the history of the United States. Although the United States is often described as a nation of immigrants, the peoples who came to America during the great wave of immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe around the turn of the century are missing from the school curriculum. Previous ancestry groups from Europe, Africa and Asia are included as are later ancestry groups from the more recent third world immigration. If any group symbolizes the impact of this wave of peoples on the course of American history, it is the Italians, the largest group in that wave and the last large European group to come to America.

For much of California history, Italians were the largest of the immigrant groups to settle in the state. They came to California early in the states settlement and established successful economic and cultural communities in virtually every California town and city. The Italians played a significant role in the development of the nation and especially in the development of California where many of the states' basic industries, such as the wine, fishing, agricultural, canning and banking industries, were developed by the Italian people. Another good reason for including the contributions and experience of Italian Americans in the school curriculum is to overcome the effects of the humiliating and degrading media images of Italian Americans.

Recent studies indicate that the self esteem and academic achievement of Italian American school children suffers as a result of these negative images. This places Italian American kids at a

disadvantage. Italian Americans have learned from experience that if their experience is not specifically required to be included in the grade school and university curriculum then it is usually excluded altogether from the educational experience provided by our schools. At the same time, other ethnic group experiences are included in our childrens studies. To ignore the distinctive cultural and historical role played by Italian Americans despite the enormous contributions they have made while requiring the study of other ethnic group experiences leaves a misleading impression in students minds of who the primary groups are that have immigrated to this land and what role they have played in the creation of California and in the creation of the present day United States.

Establishing Italian American educational and language programs in the nations schools is at the top of the Italian American Agenda. There are a number of initiatives across the nation that should inspire Italian Americans to continue to work toward that goal.

John Carroll University in Cleveland recently established a Professorship in Italian American Studies to develop a full program of undergraduate courses about the Italian American experience. Lehman College in New York recently created an endowed Chair in Italian and Italian American studies. The new program will highlight the achievements of Italians and Italian Americans in all fields. DePaul University in Illinois offered a summer program about Italian American values and history that included the effects of American culture on Italian American immigrants, the evolution of the Italian community and contemporary Italian American ethnicity. The State University of New York at Stony Brook on Long Island recently established an Italian American Studies Program with an initial offering of four undergraduate courses.

The City University of New York has both an Academic Italian American Studies Program and a university wide Italian American institute to serve the distinct educational needs of Italian American students on its campuses. California State University at Long Beach has established the George L. Graziadio Chair of Italian Language Studies funded by a \$500,000 donation from the Italian American community in Southern California. A \$150,000 gift by George Graziadio as well as the fund raising efforts of Frank DeSantis, both members of the California Italian American Task Force, were instrumental in establishing the Italian major.

Louisiana State University recently established a professorship in Italian Studies with a \$100,000 endowment raised by donations from members of the Federation of Italian Organizations of the Southeast. Still, very few universities offer courses about the Italian American experience. Nor is our experience required to be included in the grade school curriculum or instructional materials. On the other hand, many universities offer programs and degrees in the study of other ancestry groups. Italian Americans have made a late start in pressing our educational institutions to include our experience in the educational experience offered to American students, but these programs are vital to establishing that we were here and that we were and are a part of the history and life of the nation. They are also vital to the future of the Italian people in the United States. For without them, our memory about the people who came here from Italy will be lost. And Italian Americans will find it increasingly difficult to maintain their heritage and identity as well as build family and community without the cultural support offered by such programs.

Unfortunately, Italian American institutions are too weak and underfunded to maintain Italian America even though they are better motivated to do so. Most Italian Americans would agree that it is important for our story to be included in the school curriculum. Because Italian Americans are unified about the need for Italian American studies they can speak with a unified voice and organize effectively in support of this simple goal on the Italian American Agenda. And that goal is for our educational institutions to meet our educational needs. For now, they do not. For us and for the nation, Italian American studies are an idea whose time has come