

COLUMBUS DAY REVISITED

Every year, tens of millions of Americans observe the Columbus Day Holiday. In fact, Columbus Day has been celebrated in the United States since 1792, the 300th anniversary of Columbus' landing. Italian Americans began celebrating Columbus Day in the mid-1800's as immigration began to swell their numbers. In 1892, President Harrison declared October 12th a general holiday to mark the 400th anniversary of the discovery of the Americas. During the early 20th century, the states began to observe Columbus Day as an official holiday and in 1968 it was officially made a national holiday. While Columbus Day as a National holiday may seem to be a recent creation, it should be remembered that Thanksgiving did not become a national holiday until 1939, only 29 years before Columbus Day received the same recognition.

Over the centuries, Americans have chosen Columbus as a national symbol to define themselves. In the early years of the Republic, Columbus was a symbol of patriotism and accorded the same status as Washington and Jefferson. A century later, the great navigator was treated as a symbol of the national achievement and progress. The World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago was dedicated to the 15th century explorer and attracted 28 million people, almost half the nation's population. The Exposition, built as a 633 acre city of Venetian canals and Roman buildings, symbolized the importance of Columbus to Americans of the time.

When Columbus Day was enacted as a national holiday in 1968 following the great wave of immigration of the early 20th Century, it was done to recognize the United States as a "nation of immigrants." and of immigrant success. Columbus, of course was the first modern immigrant. He was also Italian and the migration of the Italians to the American continent was the largest migration of a people from one continent to another in history.

Americans have celebrated Columbus Day for many reasons but the holiday is generally observed today as a celebration of the "Creation of America" as both an idea and an event. One of the most important ideas to come out of the creation of a new world was that every person be judged as an individual and not by when they or their ancestors lived on these shores. The "Creation of America" as we know it has gone on for five centuries and has involved the migration of many peoples to the American continent. It even involved the struggle for the continent among the

earlier migrants from Asia and the later settlers from Europe. But it has involved so many events that have changed the course of human history, not the least of those were the voyages of Columbus.

The European discovery of the Americas.

Columbus is still viewed as a hero by Americans is reflected in this year's Columbus Day Proclamation by the President of the United States in which he proclaimed: *"The life and achievements of Columbus demonstrate how powerful and lasting an influence an individual can have on the course of history. Although his momentous voyages across the Atlantic took place more than 1,000 Years ago, their impact can still be felt today. He made possible the exploration and settlement of North America and opened the door to our continent for generations to follow - people of every race and culture and ethnic origin, who have given our nation its rich and unique diversity ... all Americans can draw inspiration from his character and accomplishments."*

While non-Italians may not understand the importance of Columbus to Italian Americans, they cannot deny that Columbus has played an important role in history. The Fall 1997 edition of Life Magazine ranked Columbus' discovery of the Americas as the second most important event of the millennium and Columbus as the second most important person who lived during the past 1,000 years. With rankings that high, one can begin to understand why Italian Americans would have a difficult time coming up with a replacement for a national holiday or to celebrate as one of their own.

Columbus' voyages of discovery, followed by the voyages of other Italian explorers of the time give Italian Americans a claim to an important role in the "Creation of America." It also gives Italian Americans and the descendants of other immigrants that followed Columbus an opportunity to celebrate their contributions and presence in the Americas. The Columbus Day Celebrations are held across the American continent as well as in Europe and Columbus Day has evolved into a cultural event reflecting the many peoples and cultures that have contributed to the development of a unique American culture.

While Columbus Day is not exclusive to Italian Americans. they have adopted the holiday as their own for the obvious reasons that Italians have been involved in the

"Creation" since the European discovery by an Italian explorer. The Continent was even named for another Italian explorer of the day, Amerigo Vespucci. There is an expression used by Italian Americans on Columbus Day that sums up the connection: **"America, we discovered it. We named it. We built it."** This statement of pride represents their view of their role in the "Creation of America."

Columbus Day enables Italian Americans to commemorate their coming to America and their presence through local Columbus Day parades and at the thousands of Columbus Day parades and events - virtually every community across the nation. For them, it is their time to be visible. There is no other holiday that permits them this expression of their American lives or recognition that they too are part of this as much as Columbus Day does.

While Italian Americans have moved beyond Columbus Day, there is no doubt that it has served them well in helping them forge a common Italian American identity from a people as diverse as the Italian Peninsula is still. Columbus Day has also served the United States well as a national symbol of unity and has helped the many peoples who inhabit the land to forge a common American national identity.

While there are factions in American society or outside of American society that are hostile to having a Columbus Day holiday or even celebrating the "Creation of America" because they have not accepted the judgement of history, denying Italian Americans this holiday or interfering with their celebrations is equally unacceptable. The extent to which Italian Americans have become identified with Columbus Day is illustrated by the Chicago City Council Resolution this year condemning the vandalism to a Statue of Columbus "as a deliberate political attack on Italian Americans." The vandalism took place just hours before a major Columbus Day parade and festival by the Italian American community. This close identification of Italian Americans with Columbus Day puts them on a collision course with the detractors of Columbus. It also puts them in the position of having to defend Columbus to defend their adopted holiday and themselves. They will need fearless leadership to succeed.