

Italian Americans Should Be In the History Books Too!

One of the most pressing issues in the Italian American community is the lack of coverage of Italian Americans in the history books. While most ethnic groups are represented in the school curriculum in a positive way, Italian Americans are not. In a recent study of social science textbooks used in California schools and universities (The Treatment of Italian Americans in California Textbooks), it was found that Italian Americans were absent from the textbooks at both the grade school and college levels. Italian Americans are not even mentioned. Not even a footnote. This is grim news.

Yet, Italian Americans are the 5th largest ethnic group in America numbering some 25 million people. For much of the 20th century they were the largest immigrant group in the United States. As a group, they are never given credit for their collective contributions or the distinctive cultural and historical role they have played in shaping American life. This is truly an injustice. These same textbooks include significant coverage of many other ethnic and cultural groups whose contributions to society are not greater or more important. So why the second class treatment? The current treatment of Italian Americans by our schools is at best discriminatory as reflected by their exclusion from the school curriculum. This exclusion of Italian Americans needs to be corrected.

For years, the Italian community has tried to convince the State's educational agencies to include us but it became clear that we were not going to be included unless we were required to be included. As a result of this historic exclusion, a Bill has been introduced in the California Legislature by Assemblyman Joseph Canciamilla to include Italian Americans in the history of the state and nation along with the many other groups already included.

Italian Americans are one of the country's greatest success stories. Their enormous contributions to the creation and building of America, their struggles to overcome a persistent prejudice, their service in every war and leadership in every field of endeavor demand that they too be included in the story of the nation. This is especially true of California history where they were one of the earliest and largest groups to settle in the State. It was Italian immigrant pioneers that played a dominant role in the creation of California's basic industries such as the agricultural industry, food processing, branch banking, the fishing industry, the wine industry and a lot more. Every student of California history should know that it was the California Italians that created the Bank of America at the beginning of the 20th century and established the first branch banking system in the United States in the Italian communities across California. - a system that spread to the rest of the country. The list of collective accomplishments goes on. Today, nearly 2 million Italian Americans live in California.

Italian Americans do not feel well served by the current school curriculum which does not consider them part of all this. It is hoped that the legislative initiative to include us in the history books will end the generations of exclusion and provide society with more accurate images of who and what we are. Including Italian Americans in the educational experience provided by our schools is the least that should be done to rectify our past exclusion and to combat the many disparaging images of us presented in the popular culture and media. It is the least that should be done to provide Italian Americans with equal treatment and equal history.