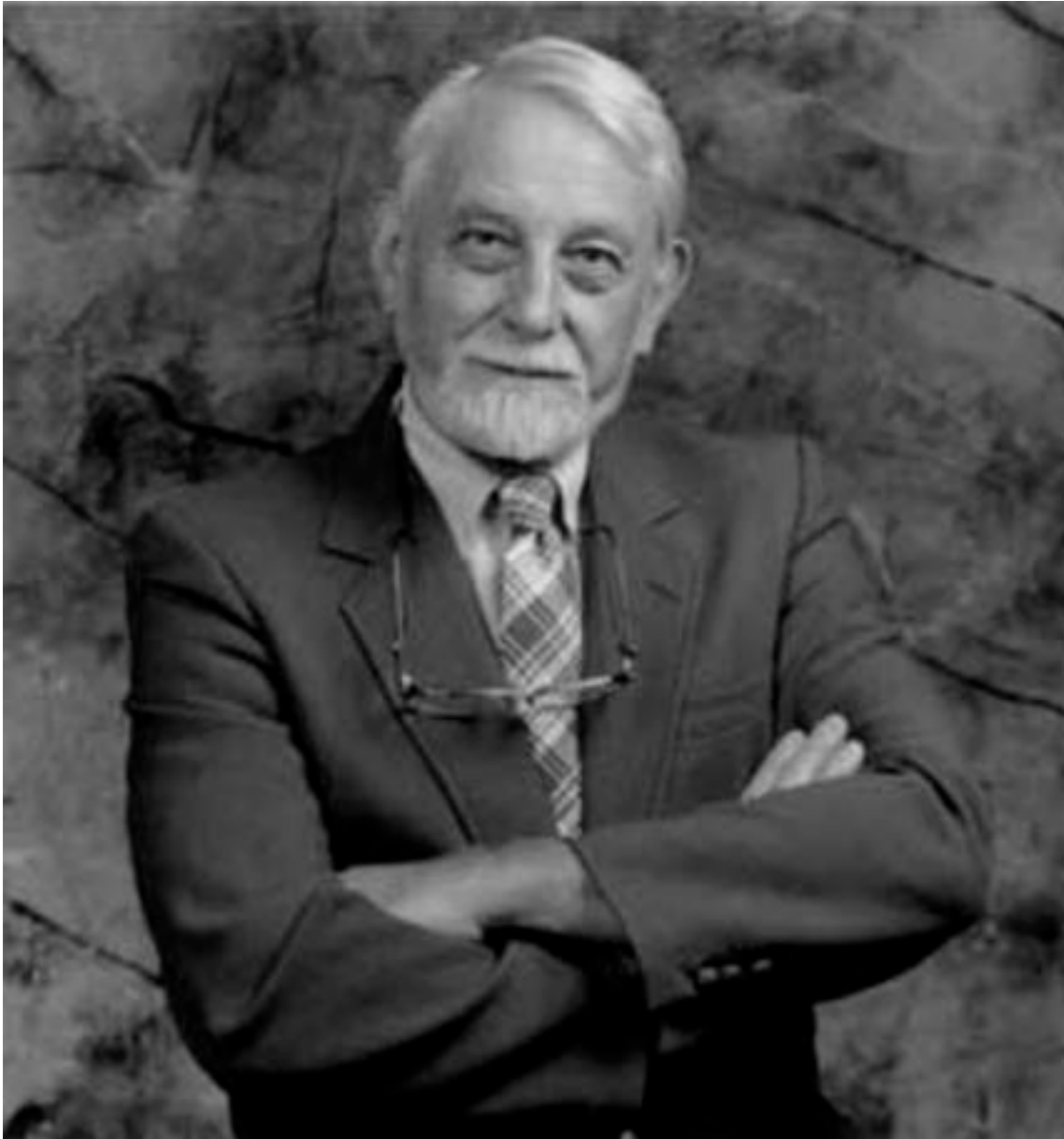




Conference Puts Blogger in Seventh Heaven

Dominic Candeloro (June 02, 2008)



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For three glorious days, Casa Italia was filled with informed discussion of Chicago's Italian American history, literature, and culture. It was an intellectual summit meeting of the best and brightest thinkers and writers about Chicago's Italian American heritage.

Our Keynote Speaker was

Melrose Park's own Fred Gardaphe', the highest ranking professor of Italian American studies in the world. Fred described his long and difficult journey to gain academic respectability for his interest in Italian American literature. He based his research on the stories of Italians whom he encountered in interviews at Villa Scalabrini, printed oral histories, the hundreds of books by Italian American authors that he read and reviewed, and on his personal experience. In large part, Gardaphe's position as Distinguished Professor of Italian American Studies at Queens College is based on his mastering and championing the stories of Chicago Italians.

The Conference was dedicated to Professor Rudolph Vecoli, the longtime director of the Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota. Vecoli's pioneering 1962 Dissertation "Chicago Italians Prior to World War I" is basic to any study of the topic. In the mid 1960s Vecoli joined the faculty at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign where he hired me as a research assistant, setting in motion my career in Italian American studies.

Vecoli was to have spoken at the conference, but health problems prevented him from attending. As an alternative, I called on Gia Amella, the producer of "And They Came To Chicago" who provided a videotape of the full interview that Vecoli did for the show last year. Vecoli. Conference attendees were intrigued to hear Vecoli describe his study of Chicago Italians who didn't "melt" as fast or go through as much "brutal uprooting" as previous historians had maintained. This view of ethnic retention eventually spurred the acceptance and encouragement of ethnic diversity that has become commonplace since the 1960s.

I am really excited about the work of several of the "newcomers" on the program. Peggy Glowacki (UIC) taught us about the efforts of the Progressives and the social workers to "reform" Italian diet, to get them to eat more meat and potatoes and fewer fruits and vegetables. Robert Lombardo (Loyola) presented the story of the White Hand Society that emerged in the early 1900s to combat both the reality of black mail crime and the negative image it created of Italians. A teacher, novelist and actor, Billy Lombardo (no relation) held listeners spellbound as he read from his "The Magic of the Rose," set in the Bridgeport neighborhood in the 1970s. Calogero Lombardo (no relation), born in Alta Villa Milicia (



Sicily) and a Vietnam Veteran, shared his sardonic autobiographical writings with an appreciative audience. Novelist/teacher Tony Romano presented a multi-media show and reading from his "When the World Was Young.," about the Peccatori family in the Grand and Western neighborhood in the 1950s.

Gary Mormino, (U of South Florida) deftly described the lasting impact of World War II. Judy Santacaterina (NIU) lovingly documented the adventures of her grandmother, Amabile Santacaterina, in the campaign to send relief provisions to the people of Italy at the end of the war. And Vic Giustino dug into his files to share a wealth of information about the Chicago homefront.

Some other highlights of the conference: Rose Ann Rabiola Miele remembering Egidio Clemente, the socialist editor of "La Parola del Popolo," WBBM-TV's Vince Gerasole screening a series of video profiles of Chicago Italians, Don Fiore regaling the audience with the exploits of Italo Balbo, Michael Serritella giving us the "inside dope" on the arranged marriages of the pioneering Italians, Mike Bacarella telling the tale of the New York Italian soldiers in the Garibaldi Guard who ended up settling in Chicago, Fr. Gino Dalpiaz giving a first hand account of demolition of the Near West Side to make room for UIC, Peter Pero previewing his new book on Chicago Italians at work, Chickie Farella in a gripping performance piece, Pam DeFiglio on Tina De Rosa, Kathy Catrambone and Vince Romano on Taylor Street, Annette Dixon on Italian American women, Tony Ardizzone addressing the conference via video, the irrepressible genealogist Dan Niemiec, Gloria Nardini on Bella Figura, Michael Polelle (Marshall Law School) replaying the "Sopranos" law suit, Bill Dal Cerro on image and mass media, and Richard Della Croce, OSIA Illinois President on anti-defamation, Jo Ann Serpico enumerating the energetic activities of the JCCIA, and the personal reminiscences of musician Paul Ciminello.

The richness of the presentations exceeded my expectations. And if you are kicking yourself because you were unable to attend, take heart. I am editing the proceedings into a book---an anthology of contributions by each of the presenters. I aim to make the book version of "Reconstructing Italians in Chicago: Thirty Authors in Search of Roots and Branches" the first source that anyone consults when they address the topic of Italians in Chicago. My vision of making the Italian community in Chicago the best documented in the US is in reach. If you can't wait for the book, video recordings of the presentations are on file in the Casa Italia Library. And, of course, you can always invite our multi-talented presenters to address your club/group. It's one of the best ways that we have for preserving the Italian immigrant heritage.

My dream came true, but it took a little help from my friends, to whom I'll forever be grateful: Casa Italia, the National Italian American Foundation, the Illinois Humanities Council, Leonard Amari, the



Romano Group/Morgan Stanley, Queens College CUNY, Sicilian American Cultural Association, the Italian American Executives of Transportation, Freddy's Pizza, Societa` Maria Santissima Lauretana, OSIA-Grand Lodge of Illinois, Triton College, the Joint Civic Committee of Italian Americans, Loyola University Department of Criminal Justice, Vic Lezza Spumoni and Desserts, Tony's Finer Foods, and Amaseno Lodge #3.

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