

# Heritage Newsletter

## From the Mediterranean to San Francisco Bay

By Carmen Kilkullen



c. 1925 view of Army and Potrero Photo: Greg Gaar Collection, San Francisco, CA

Overlooking the blue Mediterranean on the Ligurian coast of northern Italy is the small town of San Ruffino di Lievi, about 30 miles southeast of Genoa. It is a picturesque spot, perched on a hillside as if it

were simply hanging by a slim thread. The town has seen many families, who over the years have sent their sons and daughters to the Americas, both North and South, with the intent of seeking a better life, (cont. next page)

### Traveling in Italy

When planning a vacation to Italy, there are many books that can help you.

- *Eyewitness Travel Guide to Italy* (DK Travel)
- *Fodor's See It Italy* (Fodor's)
- *Rick Steves' Italy 2011* (Avalon)
- *Lonely Planet Italy* (Lonely Planet)
- *Italian Survival Guide: The Language and Culture You Need to Travel with Confidence in Italy* (World Prospect Press)
- *100 Places in Italy Every Woman Should Go* (Traveler's Tales Press)
- *Eating and Drinking In Italy: Italian Menu Translator and Restaurant Guide* (Open Road)



### HERITAGE COMMITTEE REPORT

In an effort to preserve and record the history of the Italian Catholic Federation, the Heritage Committee has begun interviewing past Grand Presidents and others who worked closely with Sir Luigi, Providenza, one of the founders of the federation. Interviews will begin with Tom Poggi and Al Teglia. Then during the spring and summer, other ICF members will be interviewed. The committee is also

reviewing archived pictures in the ICF office, identifying members and events. This spring, the committee will attend a variety of events, including the Sutter Creek Italian Festival, San Jose Giants Italian Night, and the Italian Festival in Lincoln, CA.



than their small towns had to offer. Among these were the Solari and Saini families.

My mother, Teresa Solari, was the youngest of eight children, four of whom immigrated to California. Her family ran the post office in their small town and my mother remembers helping deliver the mail in her youth. The family was blessed with a religious, for my mother's oldest brother, Giuseppe, had entered the priesthood, a source of great pride for the family. We were privileged to meet him when he came to visit us in 1948. Other than my uncle, my mother was the only one in her family to attend college, a virtual unknown occurrence for someone living in rural Italy in the early 1920's. Upon graduation, she was unable to find a teaching job, there being very few positions available in the province of Genoa, and literally, thousands of applicants. My grandfather encouraged her to come to America where she already had a brother and two sisters. The sea passage was a stormy one, but she said that she never missed a meal! In San Francisco, she found employment teaching at the Italian Language School in North Beach. Apparently she was highly regarded, for during my travels throughout the Federation, I have had the occasion to meet a number of her former students. They all remember her as being a very fine teacher, but quite strict!

My father, Ambrogio Solari, was from the same town, but in another district. He and my mother never hit it off in Italy. In fact, they rarely spoke to each other. My father also came to America to seek new opportunities, since as one of seven children, his possibilities were limited.

My father was the most wonderful of men, gentle and kind and the best father a girl could ever have. In San Francisco, these two wonderful people were fated to come together. My mother's brother, Michele Saini, had married my father's sister, Maria Solari. When my mother came to San Francisco, she lived with her brother and sister-in-law, and thus, my father, visiting his sister, began to date my

mother. In February of 1925, they were married in the old country church in Healdsburg. During the ceremony, the pastor's dog came to sit on the altar. This is considered a sign of good luck and happiness. Possibly, there is some truth to this, since my parents were a happy and devoted couple all their married life (65 years), a true inspiration for all of us.

There is an interesting story concerning my uncle, Michele (Mike) Saini and how he came to marry Maria Solari. My uncle had come to San Francisco early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was very successful in business and decided that the time had come to take a wife. She definitely had to be a girl from Italy! This was a common occurrence in those days as single Italian men wanted someone from their hometown in Italy. My uncle wrote back to his mother, my grandmother Saini, and asked her to possibly select a girl suitable to be his wife. My grandmother finally decided that Maria Solari would be perfect, for she was very pretty, strong and healthy. Now, remember that Maria was my father's sister, so that her mother and father were my paternal grandparents. Confusing enough? Maria's parents felt that this opportunity to go to America as a possible bride for my uncle Michele definitely had merit. And so it was done. My 18 year old aunt came to San Francisco to marry someone that she had never met.

Fortunately, they both hit it off and were married for over 65 years. In 1956, on my first trip to Italy, I had the wonderful experience of meeting my paternal grandmother, named Carmela. She told me her side of this story (all in Genoese dialect). This little lady, then in her advanced years, recounted how difficult a decision it had been to send her daughter to America to be married. She felt, however, that it was in my aunt's best interest as opportunities for girls in her small town were limited. I remember being so moved at the angst of this sweet woman still so many years later. I assured her that things had worked out well and that the family was strong and prosperous.

Scenarios similar to this were repeated many times over by the early immigrants. It certainly is a testimony to their courage and dedication that these families became a strong cornerstone of the Italian presence in America. In speaking with my grandmother, I learned the background of so many stories that my parents and aunts and uncles often told about their lives in Italy. For me, it was an experience that made an indelible impression and which I remember after all these years as if it were yesterday.

Our families, here in California, have grown and we are now into the fifth generation. About twenty years ago, with my mother as the spearhead, we decided to have our first family reunion. It was wonderful to see cousins who only knew each other by name actually meet and become better acquainted. They quickly shared experiences and developed new friendships. I seem to have inherited the role of the keeper of the family tree and family information. Picking my mother's brain, I was able to connect all the various "stems" of the family into a fairly intelligible unit. Every year, we add or subtract as necessary. It is sad to mark "deceased" after someone's name as I have had to do for my father and mother. (cont. next page)



From the Mediterranean to San Francisco Bay (cont.)



First Picture: Carmen Kilcullen as Grand President of the ICF  
 Second: San Ruffino di Lievi

It is a joy, however, to add a newborn and see the lineage of the family continue. I enjoy watching the younger generations study the family tree, find their names and see where they fit in in the vast network of "The Family". I urge everyone to do a family tree and plan a family reunion for it is a grand experience.

As a footnote, many members of our large family are and have been members of the Federation. A number of them have been charter members of their branches and one member even became Grand President!

I am so thankful to both of my parents for the love of Italy and things Italian that they passed on to me. Yes, they

loved America and were proud to be Americans, but they never forgot their roots. We, who are blessed to have been raised in this bi-cultural atmosphere, have come to appreciate all that Italy has to offer – religion, art, music, literature, and yes, that wonderful Italian cuisine. Even though I live here near San Francisco Bay, I will always feel the strong connection with that other bay in Italy.

Carmen Kilcullen was ICF Grand President from 1993 to 1995. She remains an active member of the Central Council as a Life Member Emeritus.

**Italian American Sports Legends**

When summer comes around, many enjoy watching the game of baseball. Often called "America's Game," baseball fills long, lazy summer days and cool summer evenings.

Of course, Italian Americans have made a name for themselves in American sports. Joe DiMaggio, Tommy Lasorda,



Joe Giardi, Mike Piazza and many more Italian Americans have dominated the diamond, but Italian Americans have succeed in other sports as well.

In *Bravissimo*, Mymar Entertainment highlights Italian American Sports Legends -- from baseball to hockey to gymnastics to football. This critically-acclaimed film pays tribute to the many great Italian-American athletes, coaches and executives who have had a profound and lasting impact on American sports history. Special guests include Yogi Berra, Mary Lou Retton, Paterno and more.



MYMAR ENTERTAINMENT'S ITALIAN AMERICAN COLLECTION

Mymar Entertainment has a series of five films that focus on the Italian American story. The FIVE films in this Special Collection include PRIDE & PASSION: THE ITALIANS IN AMERICA, BEING ITALIAN: IN OUR OWN WORDS, FRANK SINATRA: THE MAN & THE MYTH, DEAN MARTIN: THE ONE & ONLY and ROCKY MARCIANO: A LIFE STORY. For more information, visit <http://nsefilms.com>.

This newsletter was produced by the  
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