

## I. INTRODUCTION

This booklet commemorates the 50th Anniversary of the founding of the Italian-American Society of Peoria. Hopefully, it will provide today's members as well as future generations with some insight into the Society, its founders and its activities and achievements for the past fifty years.

This project was conceived in 1977 by a special committee established to prepare events to celebrate the 50th Anniversary. The two authors of this booklet were contacted at Bradley University and agreed to assist the committee in preparing a history of the Society as one part of its celebration.

To obtain data, the society's archives were arranged and read and special questionnaires were completed by current members of the organization. In addition several oral history interviews were tape-recorded. All of these materials will be filed for future reference of the Society and future historians. The expectation is that these files will be added to as sources for future study and remembrance. In the view of the two historians preparing this study, the present data and booklet are but a beginning of a systematic and more thorough collection of data about the contributions of Italian-Americans to Peoria and Central Illinois.

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America is a nation consisting of the contributions of many diverse ethnic groups. Italian-Americans are one of the many groups whose wholesome and positive actions have made the United States the greatest nation in today's world.

Nevertheless, it is easy for second and third generation Americans to

underestimate the difficultues, sacrifices and many small and great problems overcome by the generation of immigrants who risked much to leave their old homeland and come to the United States. Their success has made the lives of later generations more pleasurable and free; their efforts are often forgotten as later generations believe they were the ones who "did it on their own." The truth of course is that the roots of Americans today are covered with past hardships, difficulties and strife. A wholesome perspective requires acknowledgement of these prior efforts. To this perspective, the authors hope this volume offers some introductory understanding of the Italian-American Heritage for all families living in Central Illinois.

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## II. IMMIGRATION TO A NEW HOMELAND

Italians immigrated to the United States from 1821 onward, but it was not until after the unification of Italy was completed in 1870 that a large and systematic migration took place. Peak years for Italian immigration to the United States were reached between 1901 and 1914 when 55 percent of the total number coming left Italy. Most of those leaving were southern Italians--85 percent of the 5 million Italians who immigrated to the United States by 1924. They came for many reasons although economic conditions in Italy were an important factor for many and they persevered in the new land largely because of their courage, determination, hard work, and sustainment by family solidarity.

Italians who immigrated to Peoria and central Illinois during the past one hundred years came from various parts of Italy, but information gathered in preparing this anniversary booklet indicates that like the larger Italian migration to the United States, most came from the region south of Rome, during years between 1875 and 1920. Indeed, based on the data collected, the six southern regional states of Abruzzi, Campania, Apulia, Basilicata, Calabria, and Sicily were the birthplaces and original homes of approximately 60 percent of the immigrants to the Peoria area. Sicily, which provided 25 percent of the larger southern Italian immigration to the United States, was the birthplace and home of approximately the same percentage of those coming to the Peoria area from southern Italy.

Italian immigrants to the United States after 1870 were overwhelmingly peasant farmers (contadini), but there were also some artisans, miners, fishermen, and numerous unskilled urban workers. They came from such cities as Naples, Palermo, Messina, Catania, Reggio di Calabria, Ragusa, and Agrigento. Italians coming to the central Illinois area were also

largely from farming backgrounds--over half of those for whom information was available were listed as farmers or shepherds in Italy. As with the larger immigration to the United States, the forebearers of local Italian-Americans came from the large southern Italian cities listed above as well as from small towns and villages such as Crotone, Compiano, and Castellamonte and from the cities and regional states of northern Italy such as Turin, Soresina, Varese, Pistoia, Venetia, Piedmont, Lombardy and Tuscany.

#### Why Italians Left Their Homeland

Italians who immigrated to the United States came for a variety of reasons. First of all, the land of southern Italy is beautiful, but in several respects it is inhospitable. Hot desert winds from Africa blow across the land for six months of the year sending temperatures regularly above 100° F. (Interestingly, one Italian-American living in the Peoria area reported his grandfather had died in southern Italy of heat stroke.) Because much of the forest coverage of the area was removed, winter rains ran off the land to settle in stagnant pools and become the breeding places for mosquitoes which in turn spread the malaria that plagued southern Italy for three-quarters of the nineteenth century. Earthquakes and volcanoes also contribute to making the land a difficult place for living and encouraged many to migrate. Mt. Vesuvius erupted in 1906 burying entire towns and killing untold numbers. Mt. Etna in northeastern Sicily did similarly in 1910. Moreover, a series of earthquakes in 1906 killed thousands in Calabria and Basilicata and a major earthquake and tidal wave in 1908 destroyed much of Messina and Reggio di Calabria and killed over 120,000 people.

Another reason for leaving Italy involved the economic situation surrounding land ownership. After the unification movement of the 1860's

was completed, land became even more concentrated in the hands of a wealthy class than it had been. By 1901, almost 90 percent of the land in southern Italy was in the possession of large landholders. Moreover, the average holding of peasants at that time was 3.7 to 6.2 acres--too little to be economically viable. Aggravating this situation was the peasant's tendency to subdivide their land upon death among their sons, thus increasing fees required for water and road use. Amazingly, there were practically no public roads in southern Italy at the turn of the century. Roads were privately owned and peasants paid to travel over the roads or ship goods to market.

The great mass of Italians without land worked for low wages which failed woefully to keep up with the rising cost of living after 1870. A sharecropping system introduced near the turn of the century worsened the situation by making workers and farmer virtual serfs. When expected annual crop yields were not realized, farmers and workers owed the difference in rent to the landlord class and thus went deeper and deeper into debt by borrowing to maintain payments. Adding further to frustrations of the contadini, wealthy landowners dominated politics and thwarted all efforts to change the system or bring about reforms. Peasants had no way to gain political influence in Italy.

While geographic and economic reasons predominated, there was a variety of other reasons for leaving Italy. French duties on imported Italian wines in the 1880's ruined much of the wine-making industry of Calabria, Apulia, and Sicily. The citrus fruit industries of Calabria, Basilicata, and Sicily were seriously hurt during the years after 1890 by the rise of citrus industries in Florida and California in the United States. Finally a great population growth of Italy occurred after 1860 despite wars, famines, and the emigration of millions. Italy's population doubled by 1930, an increase

which could not be supported by Italy alone.

Information acquired for this commemorative booklet did not reveal specific reasons why Italians who came to central Illinois area left Italy. We can surmise that reasons influencing the larger Italian migration were also compelling reasons for those who came to the Peoria area to leave their old homeland. Certainly the dates are right for all information indicates immigrants to the Peoria area left Italy during the years 1905 to 1913.

Reasons cited thus far were all factors existing in Italy causing people to consider leaving. A more vital factor, but one difficult to estimate, were the psychological factors inspiring individuals to leave home, journey afar and start a new life. This was an especially difficult decision for family-oriented peoples of Italian ancestry. Yet, after 1890, the United States beckoned to many as a nation of future opportunity for their next generation. Perhaps, in America, some of their limits and problems could be overcome so that tomorrow's children would be better off.

A combination of problems in Italy and hopes for the future caused some Italians to evaluate their status and to take a big risk. Risk it was, for a long journey to a strange, new land was a difficult decision to make. Many chose to stay in Italy; others elected to risk everything in searching for a better life for their families and their descendants. These few chose to emigrate and make a difficult trip to the unknown: to America.

#### Means for Getting to America

Getting to the United States for most Italian immigrants meant going by steamship steerage class (below deck and under generally crowded and unhealthy conditions). The cost in 1904 for a steerage class ticket from Naples to New York was from \$27 to \$39, depending upon which steamship line was used. The price of a ticket seems cheap today, but one should remember

that it was very high in terms of the average southern Italian peasant's income--\$39 meant 100 days' labor to the average man of Calabria or Basilicata and more than 100 days' wages to a Sicilian. Moreover, few peasants would get 100 days of wages per year at that time.

However, earning enough money for a ticket to America was actually only a small part of the experience of the Italian immigrant--a greater testing awaited him on shipboard in the steerage. Located below deck in space normally used for cargo, crowds of immigrants of all ages and both sexes were jammed together without adequate bedding, heating, lighting, ventilation or sanitary facilities. The smell of vomit, urine, and excrement was overpowering and the moaning and wailing of the sick lasted throughout the voyage. Going on deck even in the cold Atlantic weather was preferred by as many as could do so but as a result large numbers of Italian immigrants actually arrived in America suffering from pneumonia!

Once cleared through Ellis Island (the major point of entry for immigrants near the turn of the century and located in New York Harbor), Italian immigrants sought work in the new land. Richard Gambino, in his book Blood of my Blood: The Dilemma of the Italian-American (Anchor-Doubleday, 1975), maintains that Italian-Americans deliberately avoided work where the product or end result was abstracted from them as had been the case in Italy. Instead, they preferred work where they could see their achievements and demonstrate their efforts to their families. He also asserts the Italian work ethic has differed from the Puritan work ethic held by so many Americans. The Italians viewed work as something to be done for loved ones here in this world and not as some form of punishment or expiation for sin.

Whether or not Gambino is right, the record shows that Italian immigrants worked hard for low pay. As one wit described their situation, Italian immigrants came to America believing the streets were paved with gold, but quickly learned that they were not so paved; indeed, the streets were not paved at all, and Italians were expected to pave them! Consequently, Italian immigrants did all kinds of work and were widely dispersed throughout the United States. They labored on the railroads, built canals, farmed, dug ditches, helped rebuild San Francisco after the earthquake of 1906, worked in the rising New York garment industry, mined coal in Illinois, and established numberless small family-owned businesses. And, despite the low pay, Italian immigrants saved a great amount and established a reputation with employers as frugal, self-sustaining and hard-working.

Like those in the broader stream of Italian immigrants to the United States, Italian immigrants who came to Peoria and central Illinois often took up work unrelated to their previous life's work in Italy. On the basis of information gathered for this booklet, over half of the Italian immigrants to this area had been farmers in Italy, but only two became farmers here. Instead, most became coal miners, railroad workers, and store and tavern keepers. Many also worked elsewhere in Illinois prior to the move to the Peoria area--Braidwood, Coal City, Orchard Mines, Litchfield, Assumption, Springfield, and Chicago were some of the places indicated. Some first worked in states such as Missouri or Montana before coming to Peoria.

Their Early Years in America

Another part of the immigrant experience in addition to the crossing in steerage and the search for work was the reception by those already here. In the case of southern Italians who began coming to the United States in large numbers after 1875, they were often slandered as inferior and violent people by nativist Americans. Indeed, over the years, the nativist American



mentality assigned Italian-Americans two basic bigoted identities. One was the spaghetti-twirling, opera-bellowing, organ-grinding buffoon and the other was the swarthy, sinister brotherhood dressed in a garish suit, shirt and necktie with a broad-brimmed hat shading the eyes. Neither identity fitted the overwhelming majority of Italian-Americans who were actually like other foreign-born and native-born Americans in their desire to work hard, get ahead and cherish their church and family.

However, Italian immigrants were unlike other immigrant groups and nativist Americans in several respects. First of all, they were among the poorest newcomers--records kept during the early part of the century showed them third from the bottom among twenty-five ethnic groups upon arrival. Average per capita wealth on arrival was \$8.84, less than \$1.00 more than the Lithuanians who were the second poorest group arriving at the same time. Also, Italian immigrants had the largest number of the unskilled workers among them--more than one-third for the years 1890-1914. Moreover, most of the remaining two-thirds were only semi-skilled workers. Still, the powerful motivation to work for the family caused Italian immigrants to move ahead of groups which came to the new homeland much better equipped for the economy.

Data gathered about the Italians who came to central Illinois contained repeated references to the poverty of the newcomers and the hard work which became their lot. However, comments also implied a strong belief in the moral training inherent in work and the traditional pride in having pulled one's weight and the benefits of hard work for the family.

Italian-Americans also differed from nativist Americans and other ethnic groups in their early illiteracy--nearly 40 percent for the peak years of immigration--and antipathy toward education. Much of this was

due to the fact that most Italians coming to the United States were from southern Italy where the contadino saw no need for an academic education; hard work and discipline were the things most necessary in proper child-rearing and these were taught by the family. Too, the new unified government of Italy after 1870 imposed a compulsory school law which southern Italians resisted because it sought to standardize language and cultural training derived from the northern Italian dialect and lifestyle which differed considerably from that in the south.

Of course, this anti-school bias changed as second generation Italian-Americans came to accept the need for education. This fact was reflected in the data gathered in preparing this anniversary booklet for there were repeated statements by Italian-Americans in the Peoria area noting the advantages of academic education. Several interviewees noted the failure to obtain more education as one of the regrets of their lives. However, one can also detect in this data the dilemma that confronts many third generation Italian-Americans, namely, that their parents admonished them to get an education, but urged them to continue to cling to the traditional Italian way of life. The difficulty here is that the former often tends to war against the latter.

Italian-Americans have differed in yet another important way from nativist Americans and other ethnic groups in that they have not been politically active and when they have been, it has been chiefly a reaction to real or imagined threats to traditional Italian-American values and lifestyle. For example, Italian-Americans gave little support to Franklin Roosevelt and the Democrats in the 1940's because of their homeland's political situation and Italian Americans were often angered at Roosevelt's anti-Italian posture.

Information collected concerning Italian-Americans in the Peoria-central Illinois area confirmed the political non-involvement of many Italian-Americans, for interviewees repeatedly stated they did not belong to a political party and had not sought public office. Indeed, some implied that they did not vote with any regularity. Some of this is changing both locally and nationally as third generation Italian-Americans are reaching maturity and the old Italian values and ways have less impact on their lives. Also, as noted in the chapter on achievements, many Italian-Americans later learned to participate actively in politics.

Italian-Americans have much to be proud of in their American heritage for in approximately three generations they have risen from among the lowliest of immigrant groups to become one of the most economically-stable ethnic groups in the United States. Moreover, they have made a great variety and number of contributions to American life and have even excelled in certain areas, notably music and the garment industry where, among other things, they are the most numerous ethnic group in the musicians' and garment workers' unions.

Yet, in moving to adjust their lives after arriving in their new homeland, Italian-Americans, like most newcomers to America, faced many new foreboding problems. The United States was a mixture of numerous ethnic groups with a variety of cultural traditions. In addition, citizens whose parents arrived before 1880 were not always sympathetic to the plight of the newcomers. Thus, this strange new land opened opportunity but also caused some bewilderment for the emigrant.

One means for assisting newcomers in adjusting to their new life was discovered in the formation of ethnic aid societies, a group in which the former traditions could continue which benefits of sharing common problems and difficulties would enable the individual to satisfactorily adjust. Against this background, the Peoria Society of Italian-Americans was founded and destined to play an important role in the lives of emigrants from Italy.

Despite the impressive record of achievements given in the foregoing, many Italian-Americans in the Peoria area apparently see their success in quite different terms. In response to the question "What do you consider to have been your most important achievements?" which was asked in the course of collecting the data for this commemorative booklet, a number of people answered that being married and rearing a family was their "most important achievement." This was especially true of first and second generation respondents which supports the contention that the first and second generation immigrants cling more closely to the old ways and values which weaken with the third and successive generations. In response to the same question, for example, third generation Italian-Americans were more likely to note the winning of a college letter in athletics or the earning of a college or university degree as their greatest achievement.

Of course, in listing the accomplishments of Italian-Americans in the Peoria area, or of any group of hundreds for that matter, one should keep always in mind that the great majority neither excel nor fail. What is important to know about such a group, then, is their way of life, thoughts, and values. Unfortunately, such an understanding cannot be given in a few pages of a commemorative booklet, but hopefully a few insights can be offered and a beginning made.

## III Founding the Italian-American Society of Peoria

1929-1939

The Italian-American Concordia Society of Peoria was chartered officially on October 5, 1929 as the Societa Italiana di Mutuo Soccorso La Concordia. Much effort went into planning this organization which established itself securely as a permanent group during its first ten years when its membership grew from seventeen founding members to sixty-eight members.

### Why the Society is Founded

Chartering the Italian American Society of Peoria came from the efforts of its seventeen founders led by Antonio Panteleone Montefusco. There were probably two major reasons why these gentlemen, fourteen of whom were born in Italy, decided to form this organization. First, part of the Italian tradition was to join together for the mutual aid of one another. Secondly, the 1920's were a difficult decade for emigrants newly arrived in the United States, difficulties stimulating newly arrived Americans to cooperate in promoting their group's benefits.

Between 1890 and 1914, when many Italians arrived in America seeking to improve the lives of their families and their future generations, a frequent phenomena was the formation of Italian-American societies to permit those with common Italian backgrounds to assist each other in successfully adjusting to their new homeland. Some of these groups were nation-wide; most were city organizations catering to the immediate needs of their members. During the 1890's in New York, the Order of the Sons of Italy in America was founded as a fraternal and insurance society and had over 250,000 members throughout the country by 1940. While at least

three other national groups existed by 1920, most societies were formed by Italians living in particular neighborhoods of various cities. Some of these groups like one Chicago society, were large enough to publish a weekly Italian language newspaper, L'Italia.

The Peoria Society resembled most societies in being formed on a local level, where personal friendships and special economic, political and social benefits could be shared between mutual acquaintances. These society memberships usually numbered less than 200 people, and carried on traditions from local communities in their Italian homeland where personal acquaintance and friendship formed mutual bonds of solidarity assisting its members in times of trouble and providing congenial social recreation for good times.

In addition to organizing being an Italian tradition, the Peoria Society like many in the United States in the 1920's formed because members experienced similar troubles in their adopted country. Emigration to a new homeland presents difficulties never fully appreciated by the children and grandchildren of immigrants. Each generation of Americans since the founding of Jamestown, Virginia in 1607 experienced a variety of difficulties after arrival. Early colonists had trouble from Indians and a wilderness area. Emigrants arriving after 1880 did not fight Indians but found native Americans who held prejudices and discriminated against the new southern or eastern European arrivals. Most of the emigrants who founded the Peoria Italian-American Society arrived in America between 1890 and 1910, an era which brought a peak period of immigration from Italy. In common, the newcomers had the problem of finding a neighborhood where they could settle peacefully, find jobs, improve their lives and

establish a better life for their families.

By the 1920's, one problem recent American immigrants from Italy, Austria, and Central Europe experienced was especially difficult: discrimination and prejudice from native-born Americans. While not all Americans projected prejudiced attitudes, a large enough group did to cause dissatisfaction and hazards for many emigrants in seeking jobs and settling down peacefully.

For most emigrants, the 1920's were particularly trying for two reasons. First, native Americans gained sufficient political influence to, for the first time in American history, establish quotas for future emigration and limit the number of new emigrants from Italy and other countries. Secondly, after the successful Bolshevik Russian Revolution in 1917, many Americans grew fearful of Communism, convincing themselves that recent immigrants brought Socialist and Communistic ideas with them. For Italian-Americans, the case of Sacco-Vanzetti brought guilt by association to many Italian immigrants who never knew or heard of Sacco or Vanzetti. These two men, one a fish peddler, the other a shoemaker, were accused, convicted and executed for robbery and murder in Boston. Both men were also political rebels who believed in social anarchy, a view disdained by the American democratic ideas. The Sacco-Vanzetti trial and appeals procedures lasted from 1920 to 1927, an era during which all Italians were falsely viewed as anarchists and robbers. We know now--in 1979--that Sacco and Vanzetti were innocent of the robbery and murder for which they were executed in 1927. At that time, however, their trial and political beliefs enflamed many Americans to wrongly extend prejudices to all Italian-Americans. The feelings became so prevalent that from 1924 to 1928 more Italian emigrants returned to their

homeland in Italy than arrived in America. In 1926, for example, while 8,253 new emigrants arrived from Italy, 19,980 left America and returned to Italy.

These troubles of the 1920's plus the Italian tradition of mutual aid caused many Italian Americans to find ways and means to overcome their difficulties, preserve the best of their old ways, and successfully adjust to becoming permanent citizens and contributors to their new homeland. Consequently, the spirit of those who founded the Peoria Italian-American society was like that of previous American immigrants--help each other; work hard yourself; you and your fellow immigrants can provide a better life in America for your families, your children and your grandchildren. Founding the Italian-American Concordia Society of Peoria served to promote this mutual assistance and social cohesion.

#### Founding the Society

The seventeen men who founded the Peoria Italian-American Society became acquainted with each other during the 1920's. Neighbors living in the Southwest area of Peoria, they first met informally on Sundays in the home of Tony Montefusco, Sr., who came from Italy in 19 and lived in Missouri and Montana before settling in Peoria in 1923. Discussion of their problems as well as their happy times led Tony to begin studying ways and means to form an organization through which they and other Italian-Americans could work together in facing difficulties and finding social conviviality.

Six men formed the original nucleus of the group, but more than ten members were required to gain an Illinois state organizational charter. The original six were Tony Montefusco, 43 years old; Frank Aiello, 54; Antonio deRosa, 50; Antonio Maggio, 48; Agostino Franco, 39; and Romolo Pandolfi, 42.



From this nucleus, other relatives and friends were added. Michele (Mike) Montefusco, Tony's son, joined through subterfuge. As he relates it, Mike came into his home one Sunday where the older men were meeting. At 22 years of age, Mike was not especially interested in joining the group being organized. His father asked him for \$5.00 and, an obedient son, Mike took the money from his coin purse. Thereupon, he learned he was a founding member of the Italian-American Society.

Other younger men joined Mike in the group. Tony Maggio's three sons: Gaspare, 26; Francesco, 24; and Guisepppe, 22. Others were Pietro Blum, 22; and Luigi Caruso, 21.

By the summer of 1929, the seventeen founders prepared to seek a charter from the State of Illinois. The necessary papers were obtained and filed and in the first week of October, Tony Montefusco and several members went to Springfield to get the charter.

On the evening of October 5, 1929, families of the seventeen founders met at the Peoria Railroad Station, waiting for the train from Springfield. After the train finally arrived bringing it back, the members and their families celebrated the receipt of the charter from the State of Illinois and founding of the new society.

#### The First Ten Years

Chartering a new organization is a necessary beginning; making it grow into a larger more permanent group requires time, dedication and recruitment of new members. By 1939, the new society securely established itself on a permanent basis.

Obtaining new members was one requisite. Specific activities of the society aided this effort. During the years of the Great Depression, which began with the stock market crash on October 29, 1929, the society provided social events, sick and death benefits and political assistance to its members. Social events included an annual summer picnic, sports

events, and various dances. The annual picnic was inaugurated during the summer of 1930. These affairs were held at a variety of picnic grounds in Pekin or at Luthy's Alps, the Waterworks Park or Frietsch's Park.

Beginning in 1934 the Society sponsored annual Bocci ball tournaments, keeping the popularity of a traditional Italian game. For other members, the old game of murra, played with one hand and many arguments, was enjoyed by many members. In addition, dances were held almost every month at Woodman's Hall at Blaine and Garden Streets on the south side of Peoria or at other locations.

The more serious business affairs of the organization were conducted at regular meetings, held the first Sunday of each month. These meetings were held in a member's home or in Woodman's Hall where space was rented after 1933.

The founders provided a Constitution to govern the group's affairs. This document stated the Society's goals were to bring mutual and social benefits to its members. The group was organized on a pattern typical for the members' adopted country, all members receiving equal privileges in conducting the group's affairs, serving as officers and committee members. A President headed the group, elected as were the other officers on an annual basis by all members in good standing. The Constitution gave instructions for conducting meetings, as well as methods to admit new applicants and the working of the oath of membership for the society.

Membership dues were \$5.00 upon joining and 50¢ each month. Two specific type benefits eventually accrued to members. A Sick Committee was established to provide funds to members who became ill and could not

work. To accommodate this after 1933, new members were required to have a doctor's examination and approval as being in good health. A second benefit went to families of deceased members. Each member contributed \$2.00 to a fund to be given the deceased widow or children. Whenever possible, all members attended funeral services of brother-members.

While the charter of the Society did not permit political activity, members found it beneficial to establish some means to exert the group's political interests in Peoria. Subsequently, a separate group, the Italian-American Club was organized. Through this Club members participated more directly in the electoral process for judges, aldermen, mayor of Peoria and other elective posts, and in assisting members in getting city jobs such as fireman or policeman. At this time, Peoria operated on a Mayor-Council form of government and a political reality was that lobby groups were essential to assist members in getting jobs they might deserve. The Italian American Club provided this important function for its members, an essential role until 1953 when a political reform movement established a City Manager government in Peoria. For twenty years, however, the Club aided Italian-Americans in getting jobs to serve the community as police or firemen, and electing officials who recognized the value of the Society to the Peoria area.

Benefits gained from society membership aided the growth of the organization. By 1939, seventy members had joined the group. The new members resembled the Society's founders in terms of age and being new immigrants to America. In 1939, forty-two of the members were at least forty years old. All but fourteen members were born in Italy and most of these came to America between 1900 and 1914.

Together with their families, therefore, over 200 Italian Americans in the Peoria area were affiliated with the society. By 1939, on the eve of World War II, the Society was well established, prepared to aid the American war effort and to expand its status during the post-war years. A firm basis for future excellence had been set for the Italian American Society of Peoria.

#### The Years After 1940

Although World War II temporarily halted the Society's activity, the war years ultimately provided a great stimulus to the organization's growth. Before and during the war, Italian-Americans demonstrated their loyalty to their new homeland, and gained greater recognition in the Peoria area. Thus, following the war a new era of prominence arrived as the members joined in constructing a Society Hall and becoming an important center for social activity on Peoria's south side.

#### The War Era

Under the Fascist Premier Benito Mussolini, the Italian government joined Adolf Hitler of Germany and Japan in the Axis Alliance and opposed United States global policies between 1937 and 1945. Some Americans became dubious of the loyalty of foreign-born Germans, Japanese, and Italians but Peoria's Italian-American Society joined most other former German, Japanese or Italian immigrants in demonstrating faith and support for their adopted country, the United States.

Late in the 1930's, suspicions about Italian patriotism became obvious when the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Congressional Un-American Activities Committee investigated organizations associated with foreign-born groups. At the time the FBI questioned the status of Peoria's Italian-American Society, Fabbio Bianchi was the organization's

president. As Fabbio recalls, federal agents talked with him and Tony Montefusco about the group's purpose and finances. The FBI claimed many groups constantly sent money back to Italy to aid Mussolini. When the agents asked how much money the group sent to Mussolini, Fabbio laughed, saying "That's a joke?"

Fabbio and Tony explained the social and mutual aid purpose of the Society enabled members to become good Americans. They explained the low membership fee and the 50 cents-a-month dues, which because of payment to sick benefits left the organization barely solvent. The FBI men were convinced. The meeting ended with a glass of wine, the FBI's assurance of the group's loyalty and fond farewells.

After Pearl Harbor, society members found an excellent means to publicly demonstrate their faith in America. At War Bond rallies and parades, Society officers played prominent roles, the Italian American banner waving proudly in parades to support their country and the war effort. The Society subscribed regularly to War Bonds, buying first \$500, then \$1,000 and later \$1,500 worth of bonds. By the end of the war, the group had purchased about \$3,000 worth of war bonds.

#### The Society's Building Project

From the day of its founding in 1929 to 1952, the Peoria Italian-American Society owned no home of its own. Soon after World War II ended, a major organizational project moved toward the costly and difficult task of building a meeting and social hall for the group.

After its founding in 1929, the society moved its meeting locations on many occasions. Some meeting places used in addition to member's homes, were Woodman Hall, Miners Hall, the Syrian Hall on Adams Street, and the

Montefusco Heating and Sheet Metal Building. On one occasion, they held only one meeting in a building on Adams Street. The building burned down before the next month's meeting. The public halls used were all rented, becoming regularly expense to the society in addition to preventing the group from the solidarity of owning its own place.

In 1948, while conducting meetings at the Itoo Hall, Society members began searching for some method to obtain their own hall. The task was not easy. Many hours of study, work and discussion were required from members and their officers before the dream was fulfilled.

Formal planning for a building began on February 1, 1948 when the Society, with Otto Bianchi as president, selected a committee to look at a building on South Adams below Western Avenue. After inspection and further consideration for over a year, the members voted on April 3, 1949 not to buy the proposed building.

Nevertheless, members continued to talk about the need for their own building and a meeting on January 8, 1950 inaugurated the final drive to successfully construct an Italian-American Hall. At this meeting, outgoing president Tony Montefusco yielded the gavel to the new president, Frank Maggio. Soon after, discussion led to a motion by Angelo Genusa, seconded by Gasper Maggio, that the Society should build a new hall. The motion passed and building committee members were appointed as follows: Gene Venzon, Gasper Maggio, Fred Romane, Angelo Genusa, Tony Montefusco and Otto Bianchi. A new era for the society was conceived; two years later the project would reach fruition.

Appointing a committee to plan a new building was only the start. The Building Committee, officers and members of the Society had to commit time, wisdom and money to the project which took thirty months to complete.

At a later date, members enjoying the excellent facilities of the Hall would seldom recall the pains, joys and hours of concern of those thirty months before construction ended.

Plans proceeded slowly. After three months of consideration about selecting a lot, members approved the building committee suggestion to purchase a lot at the corner of Helen and Antoinette Streets. On July 2, 1950, society officers were instructed to purchase title for this lot at a cost of \$2,300, almost 25% of the organization's assets at the time.

In succeeding months, much work continued. The lot had to be surveyed, building plans were approved and blueprinted, and finally in December, 1951, bids for the new building were sought. In February, 1952, members agreed to seek pledges for funding the new building and in March a building fund of \$12,000 was established at the South Side Bank. Finally, on March 2, 1952, members voted 20 to 0 to accept bids totaling approximately \$45,000 to construct the Italian-American Society Hall. In addition, Tony Montefusco was chairman of a committee to sell bonds at a minimum of \$100 each in order to finance the construction. The principal contractor for the building was the George D. Johnson Company.

Once agreed to, building construction went relatively smoothly. The new Hall would be ready in July, 1952. Consequently, the members voted to hold an open house for the community at the new Hall on July 13, and to have formal dedication ceremonies on July 27. President Maggio gave members a new password: "Beno fato," well done.

On August 3, 1952, the members of the Italian American Society held their first formal meeting in the new Hall. Building operations were governed by a new group of Building Trustees selected on April 20, 1952. The first trustees were: Gasper Ghelardini, Charles Ginoli, Gasper Maggio,

Tony Montefusco, Sr., Tony Montefusco, Jr., and Gene Venzon. In December, 1952, the Building Trustees were increased to 16 members, eight appointed by the previous president; eight, by the new president on a rotation basis.

#### In the New Society Hall

Throughout the years, the building trustees and society members experienced a wide variety of activities and problems to resolve. At the time each occurred, members and trustees often thought issues insuperable. However, each event was resolved, becoming part of the history of the group.

For the building hall, various incidents occurred. In 1952, only one problem arose with the building contractors. By the fall of that year, the wall in the Bar Room was presenting problems. These issues were resolved by March, 1953 and the contractor was finally paid. In the long term, establishing rental fees, maintenance work, hazard insurance, and scheduling building activities by the Society and outside groups took much attention of the Trustees. For the Society, weekly Bingo parties and monthly dances were scheduled. For outsiders, everything from Social affairs to wedding receptions were held.

Yet, all problems were weathered and financial conditions of the Society prospered. With significant help from the Women's Auxiliary organization of the Society, the Trustees obtained sufficient funds to pay all bonds and debts incurred in constructing the Hall. At the Society meeting of January 2, 1955, the Building trustees presented President Frank Maggio with the mortgage fully paid, so that it could be burned. The Italian American Hall took thirty months to plan and construct; in thirty months after completion, the Society fully paid the mortgage on the building. A great achievement.



In 1956, one vital improvement was made to the Society Hall: air conditioning. The decision to seek means to obtain air conditioning was agreed to on April 8, 1956 and by June, the job was fulfilled at a cost of over \$7000. Despite the cost, the building's utility was remarkably enhanced, especially during Peoria's hot, humid summer days.

A final addition to the Society's property came in 1959. Earlier, in August, 1958, the members agreed to investigate purchase of the property to the north of the Hall. A period of twelve months of negotiating ensued before an agreement was reached to purchase the property for \$3700 and to remove the house located there for \$500.

#### Other Social Activity

While many monthly activities have been held by the Italian-American Society, the most notable over a period of years have been continuous contributions to community charities, sponsoring an annual picnic and promoting celebration of Columbus Day as a symbol of the Italian heritage to American culture and society.

Reading through minutes of the monthly meetings of the society discloses regular society contributions to a variety of charitable organizations too numerous to list in their entirety. Whether it was the Cancer Drive or the special Freedom Train visit of 1948, the Italian American Society could be counted on for contribution to community charities. Even during the years from 1948 to 1955 when Society members were concerned about financing the Society Hall construction, contributions to charities continued. At the risk of omitting someone's favorite charity, a few charities receiving Society aid deserve mention as illustrative of the group's involvement in the Peoria area. Among these are the March of Dimes, Red Cross, Disabled Veterans, St. Francis Hospital, the Heart Fund, and St. Jude's Hospital.

Recently, St. Jude's gained a special place in the Society's history after the Italian Americans sponsored the annual ball for three years from 1974-1977.

A second notable activity of the Peoria Italian-American Society is the Annual Picnic. Held regularly since 1930, the picnic had by the 1960's become a well conducted, financially successful event. Food, entertainment, bocci ball, visits from local political celebrities and sale of special picnic books became highlights of the picnics from 1956 to 1975. In addition to providing fun and fine food, the picnics usually resulted in profits of as much as \$2000 for the Society's treasury.

Thirdly, possibly one of the Society's most significant community activities is its association with the celebration of Columbus Day each October. The first official society effort in behalf of Columbus Day occurred on December 4, 1955, when members voted to place a wreath on the Columbus statue every year.

Three years later, on August 2, 1959, consultation began with the Peoria Park Board and the Knights of Columbus looking toward erection of a new statue of Columbus. During the next year arrangements were completed. The Columbus Statue was donated to the Park District by Mr. M. Buehler and the Italian American Society joined with the Park Board in providing funds for the base on which the statue now stands in Bradley Park looking toward Columbia Terrace.

The statue was completed in September, 1960 and since that date, the Italian-American Society has sponsored ceremonies on or about each October 12th, to remember the spirit of Christopher Columbus and the contributions of Italian Americans to the United States. This annual project is recognized throughout the community and Columbus Day banquets at the Society

Hall are attended by members and prominent invited guests to the capacity of the dining hall.

#### Blue Ribbon Committee - 1970

Of historic worth is recalling the work of a special Blue Ribbon Committee of 1970. At request of the membership. President Tony Montefusco appointed this committee on December 11, 1969 to decide if a new building should be built for the Society in another part of Peoria. Committee members were John Aiello, Fabbio Bianchi, Joseph Basso, Jack Bowton, Caesar Dentino, Julio Frasco, Bruno Ghelardini, Oliver Ghelardini, Charles Ginoli, (Chairman), Don Gionali, Angelo Genusa, Stan Kerker, Everett LeRoy, Marshall Mozzuchelli, Tony Montefusco, Sr., Tony Montefusco, Jr., Mike Montefusco, John Montell, Gino Reck, Vincent Sicilia, and Al Volk. Throughout the year, the committee held monthly meetings, investigated costs of new sites, had the existing building appraised and thoroughly debated the advantages and disadvantages of moving and constructing a new Hall. The Blue Ribbon Committee worked for nearly two years. During the summer of 1971, the members voted to purchase land in the Pioneer Park area of North Peoria. Property proposed was not satisfactory, however. At the end of 1971, the members decided to retain the present society building and to work to improve the environment surrounding Helen and Antoinette Streets.

Decisions reached as a consequence of the 1970 committee survey continue to prevail during the 50th year of the Society. Working with Peoria's City Manager and the City Councilman of the First Ward, members of the Italian American Society are closely involved in plans to promote by beautification, progress and new developments the neighborhood surrounding the south side and the Society Hall. In 1979, the Society provided a black-topped parking lot to the north of the Society Hall and inaugurated plans to make the next 50 years of the Society even greater for its members and the larger Peoria Community.

#### IV. ACHIEVEMENTS OF ITALIAN-AMERICANS LIVING IN THE PEORIA AREA

As noted earlier, Italian immigrants were poorly equipped to succeed in America in terms of their lack of money and skills, their illiteracy, and the nativist animosity shown toward them. Yet they did succeed, largely through hard work, determination, and support of the family. In the case of Peoria-area Italian-Americans, achievements have included business and professional success, some political activity and public service, and considerable recognition of musical and athletic talent.

Many of the business achievements of Italian-Americans have involved the establishment of family-owned and -operated businesses. Among those who have operated grocery stores and taverns in the area are the Ghelardini. Gasper Ghelardini ran a grocery store in Farmington during the 1920's and a tavern in Peoria during the 1930's. John and Eva Pacione also ran a grocery store on Antoinette street for nearly 32 years. The Romolo family early had a grocery store and tavern business in Peoria and the Dentino brothers ran a grocery business while their sisters operated a dancing school. The Antonaccis had a tavern and then a grocery business. Both Mike Montefusco and the Frasco brothers had separate grocery stores in Peoria while Gene Venzon ran a tap on Lincoln Avenue for years. Other businesses include restaurants run by the Agatuccis and Avantis, a specialty grocery and delicatessen owned by the Ciotas, a contracting firm established and run by Marshall Mazzuckelli (now retired), an accounting firm owned and managed by Charles and Gene Ginoli, a trailer and tool rental business operated by Paul Micono, a terrazzo and tile enterprise headed by Richard Basso, Sr., a tile firm run by Jon Mazzuckelli, a music school conducted by Enrico Mastronardi, and an undertaking establishment in Toluca owned and operated by the Aimone family. Still other businesses are the insurance agencies of Ron Pacione and Ron Ghidina, the glass recycling firm owned

by Geno Reck, Sr., the pizzeria run by the Palanzas in Sunnyland, and the heating and air conditioning businesses run by the Montefuscos and Venzons.

Some Peoria-area Italian-Americans have gone to college, earned degrees, and entered upon professional careers. Among Italian-American lawyers in the area are Ralph Coletta, Richard Capitelli, Lou Benassi, Anthony Corsentino, Richard Frasco, Bernard Ghiglieri, Joseph Napoli, Joe Vespa, and Verne Dentino. Italian-American physicians include Ed Guinta, Gregory Spano, Anthony Ierulli, Michael Cottone, and Joseph Cospito who is a research doctor in St. Louis. Some Italian-Americans practicing dentistry in the area are Leonard Costa, Ronald Dentino, Donald Gianoli, Frank Ierulli, Bruno Perino, and Nicholas Perino. Italian-Americans who have achieved success as professional educators in the area are John Aiello who taught in the Peoria public schools for 41 years, Ray Morelli who was principal and assistant superintendent of Pekin High School, Robert Baietto, who is presently principal at Richwoods High School, and Jean Coletta who is a special education teacher in Peoria.

As explained earlier, Italian-Americans have not been as politically active or involved in public service as some other immigrant groups, but in the Peoria area there has been considerable participation, especially by members of the second and third generations. Ralph Coletta and Joseph Pendola have served as Republican precinct committeemen while Donald Zucco served in the same capacity for the Democratic party. Pendola also served as President of the Young Republicans and Zucco was selected as Outstanding Young Democrat in Illinois in 1961. Charles Ginoli and Pete Aimone III, served on the Peoria City Traffic Commission for a number of years. Ginoli

was also instrumental in getting the Greater Peoria Mass Transit District established in 1970 and served as chairman of its board of directors until 1977. Ernest Pierantoni, Sr. ran twice for state representative for the Fifth District on the Republican ticket and served on the Tazewell County Board. Pete Aimone, Jr. was a township supervisor and served as Marshall County Treasurer for five years. John Aiello was a Republican alderman for the First Ward on the Peoria City Council from 1961 to 1965. Dr. Leonard Costa served for eight years as a member of the Peoria School District 150 board and Mario Crocione served 16 years on the South Pekin grade school board and was its president for eight years. Charles Ingolia served on the Peoria Fire Department for years, rising to the rank of Captain before his retirement while Frank Maggio, Sal Pisano, and Joseph Berardi were in police work for years. Maggio was eventually Chief of Police at Ottawa, Illinois, but is now retired. Pisano is still with the Peoria Police Department as second in command. Barardi, now retired, was a detective and juvenile sergeant in the Pekin Police Department and ran for sheriff of Tazewell County on two occasions.

A special kind of public service is that of serving in the nation's armed forces. No pretense is made here that the listing that follows is exhaustive, but it does, nonetheless, indicate that Italian-Americans in the Peoria area have answered the country's call during international conflicts and rallied to the nation's protection during times of uneasy peace. Information on Italian-Americans in the Peoria area who served in the United States armed forces during World War One is inadequate. However, some Italian-Americans who served during World War Two were: Ralph Coletta (Army); August Frasco (Army); Laurence Mattioda (Army Air

Corps); Geno Reck, Sr. (Navy); Pete Aimone, Jr. (Navy); William Caruso (army); Richard Zucco (Navy); Earl Zucco (Navy); Richard Basso, Sr., (Marines); Ernest Pierantoni, Sr. (Army Air Corps); John Aiello (Army); John Antonacci; Richard Capitelli; and Frank Cospito. Ray Bianchi served in the Navy just after World War II, while Ray Morelli and Donald Zucco served in the Army and Navy during the Korean conflict. Pete Aimone III, served in the United States Army in Europe during the mid-sixties.

The record of achievements of Italian-Americans in the United States in the music and entertainment field is one of the most impressive of all. Most Americans are familiar with the musical talents of Italian-Americans who have gained international reputations--Italian-Americans ranging from Arturo Toscanini to Frank Sinatra. Peoria-area Italian-Americans have also excelled as musicians and entertainers from vaudeville days to the present and some have gained national and international recognition. Moreover, data collected in the preparation of this commemorative booklet indicated that many local Italian-Americans play instruments, sing, dance, and listen to music solely for their own pleasure.

Among the Italian-American vaudeville musicians from the Peoria area were Anthony Mainello, a clarinetist and saxophonist; Ned Picerno, a violinist; Paul LaRocca, violinist, vocalist and songwriter; and Frank La Rocca, Paul's brother and a violinist. Most of these men played in the Orpheum Theater orchestra during the heyday of vaudeville. Later, Mainello played in the Peoria Municipal Band and Picerno in the Peoria Symphony Orchestra and a number of local dance bands.

The two LaRocca brothers were part of a very musical family. Besides Paul and Frank, there were brothers Roxy and Joseph and their father, Salvatore, all of whom played the harp. Roxy was probably the most famous member of the family in that he traveled around the world playing the harp

and was reputed to have played before royalty. Paul, youngest member of the family, was the most talented in that he played, sang, and wrote music. Two of his songs were about his hometown--one was titled simply "Peoria" and the other was titled "Oh, How I Wish I Was in Peoria!" He also wrote a song in the 1930's for President Franklin Roosevelt titled "Savior of the U.S.A." and it was played on at least one official occasion. Joseph, who played the harp at concert halls across the United States, finally settled in Hollywood where he did musical scores for movies.

Another musically-talented Italian-American family from the Peoria area was the Bellson family. Louis Bellson, Sr. was an accomplished musician who taught drums, accordion, and strings from the 1920's to the late 1940's. His son, Louis, Jr. was a drummer who played in Duke Ellington's orchestra during the "big band" era of the 1930's and 1940's and married blues singer Pearl Bailey. Henry Bellson, another son, played drums in Ted Fiorita's orchestra and a third son, Tony, also played drums with bands of that era.

Another talented Italian-American of the big band period who hailed from Peoria was Bernie Petrarde who played accordion in nightclubs in the Peoria, Bloomington, and Chicago areas and on the radio in Peoria for several years. Danny and Frank DeNufrio were Italian-American pianist brothers from the area who played in a number of local dance bands during that period.

The accordion has been a favorite instrument of Italian-Americans and Enrico Mastronardi conducted a school here for 49 years (1930-1979) where he taught other Italian-Americans to play. Among his many successful pupils is Joyce (Ghelardini) Minton who won a number of accordion competitions both locally and nationally during the 1960's. Other successful pupils were Eugene Madalozzo who presently plays in a band, the Colson Combo, in



the Peoria-Pekin area, Robert Riccione who competed in national contests and still plays in local bands on weekends, and Bruno Ghelardini who occasionally plays before groups in the community.

Italian-Americans in the Peoria area have been an active, outdoor people who have excelled at most of the sports common to this part of the nation. Indeed, at least one Peoria-area Italian-American qualified to take part in the Olympic games! Theresa Montefusco participated in the summer Olympic games in Rome in 1960 as a female gymnast, and while she did not win a gold, silver or bronze medal, she did place high in the competition.

Ray Morelli played football at Illinois State University at Normal where he made the varsity squad as a freshman and was named all-conference end during his senior year. Later, he was offered a contract by the Detroit Lions of the National Football League. Ray also played baseball while in the Army during the Korean War, lettered in track at I.S.U., and coached basketball in the public schools.

Tony Romolo and Joe Romolo, father and son, also won recognition as football players. Both were quarterbacks on the Spalding Institute team-- Tony in the 1940's and Joe in the early 1970's. Tony went on to play two years of semiprofessional football while son Joe, who also lettered in basketball and baseball at Spalding, continued his interest in football by working with the Junior Football League program.

Carolyn Ghelardini started her athletic career playing tennis--she was Pekin Women's City Champion in the mid-,970's and on the University of Illinois tennis team in 1976-1977. Today, however, she is achieving more success as a racquetball champion and teaching professional. She was the National Collegiate Women's Champion in 1978 and has been a finalist in a number of national racquetball tournaments. During the past two summers

she has been a teaching professional at racquetball clubs in Georgia.

Young Mario Palmieri and Ronda Zucco also play tennis. Mario played for Spalding Institute during high school and placed second in the Mid-State Ten competition in 1978 while Ronda won a number of awards and trophies for her tennis playing in the Washington, Illinois area.

Italian-Americans in the Peoria area have also done well as golfers. James Fehl won the Peoria city golf tournament in 1933 and 1934 while Joe Berardi was city golf champion in 1939 and Ron Ghidina has won the city championship six times since 1962. Ron also lettered in golf and basketball at Pekin High School and in tennis at Western Illinois University during the 1950's. Louis Pierantoni is another Peoria-area Italian-American who has won recognition as a golfer by winning the Winerack Open tournament.

Several members of the Italian-American community have excelled as baseball players. Years ago John Aiello lettered in the sport while at Illinois State Normal School and still has the all-time batting average of .423 at that school. Ray Morelli played on the Fort Leonard Wood Army Service team in the 1950's. Joyce (Ghelardini) Minton also played baseball in addition to playing the accordion so well. A large number of individuals also indicated in the information gathered for this booklet that they played in the local Sunday Morning Baseball League or softball leagues.

Although some Italian-Americans who responded to the request for information indicated that they played basketball while growing up, few local Italian-Americans seem to have excelled at that sport. Robert Facker, Jr. and David Facker, his brother, lettered in basketball at Manual and Peoria High Schools, respectively. Bob Facker also lettered in the sport at Monmouth College and presently coaches basketball at Washington High School. David Facker played basketball at Illinois Central College after leaving Peoria High.

Several Italian-Americans in the Peoria area have received some recognition as wrestlers and boxers. Ralph Coletta wrestled on the Bradley University wrestling squad in the 1940's while in more recent years Ryan Bianchi has been a wrestling champion at Pekin High School. Boxers have included John Antonacci and Richard Basso, Sr., who both participated in Golden Gloves competition, William Caruso who had twenty professional fights as "Syd Taylor" in the early 1930's--he won 17 of them, and Frank Cospito who fought for prize money as a young man.

Italian-Americans have also excelled as bowlers. Ray Bianchi has won bowling tournaments in 1960, 1976, 1977, and 1978. James Fehl bowled in the American Bowling Contest in 1936, and John Aiello coached girl's bowling teams at Manual High School for years and had a team win the state championship in 1953-1954.

Soccer was Verne Dentino's sport while he was at Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana. John Venzon and Robert Palmieri, who came to the United States and the Peoria area in 1937 and 1954, played soccer in Italy. Venzon played on his village's team while Palmieri played professionally.

In addition to the business, professional, musical, and athletic accomplishments listed above, some Italian-Americans in the Peoria area have distinguished themselves in a number of other ways: Pete Aimone, III; Frank Cospito; and Ray Bianchi have worked for the Boy Scouts of America; Charles Ginoli served as treasurer of the Catholic High School Board; Mario Crocione and Stephen Capitalli have represented their unions (railroad and printing) in negotiations with management; John Aiello has received a Freedom Foundation Award as well as awards from the Peoria Area Center for the Blind and Peoria Public School District 150; David Venzon served in the Peace Corps for three years in Africa and Ron Caruso was a rodeo rider for 16 years.