



Il Notiziario

[The Newsletter]
of the

Friends of Isola delle Femmine, Inc.



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Special Issue: 2020-B

Editor: A.A. Grillo

Italian-American Heritage & Culture Month

Italian-American Heritage & Culture Month 2020

Italian-Americans of Special Note

by A.A. Grillo

As stated in our first of three special issues in honor of Italian-American Heritage and Culture Month, this our second special issue will include short biographies of a few very noteworthy Italian-Americans. The choice of which to include was very difficult as there are so many. Just ask your favorite internet search engine for "Noteworthy Italian-Americans". Several lists will appear. The Wikipedia one goes on for pages and pages. One criterion we applied was to pick some that you might not already know, or if you have heard of them, you don't know much about them. We also tried to find some who were born in Sicily or whose ancestors were born there. With that in mind, you might be surprised at those we left out. A prime example of that are the famous three DiMaggio ballplaying brothers. Joe was certainly the most famous, preceded by his brother Vince and followed by his younger brother Dominic. They are excellent examples whom we will always admire, whose parents were born in Isola delle Femmine, Sicily and who grew up in the Bay Area, but again, we already know much about them.

Here are a few you may not know or know much about:

A.P. Giannini (1870 – 1949) born Amadeo Pietro Giannini in San Jose, CA. He was the first son to parents Luigi Giannini and Virginia Demartini. Luigi immigrated from Favale di Malvaro near Genoa, Liguria to prospect in the California Gold Rush of 1849. He returned to Italy in 1869 to marry Virginia and bring her to San Jose to start their family. Luigi purchased a 40-acre farm in Alviso in 1872, growing fruits and vegetables for sale. He was fatally shot 4 years later by an employee over a pay dispute. Virginia, having to care for two children and a third on the way, took over operation of her husband's business. In 1880, she married Lorenzo Scatena who began L. Scatena & Co. Amadeo attended Heald College but was unsatisfied with his progress there and so left before finishing a degree. He first worked as a produce broker on commission for farms in Santa Clara Valley. He married Clorinda Cuneo, daughter of a successful North Beach San Francisco real estate broker. In 1892, he sold his interest in his produce business to his employees to administer his father-in-law's estate. Later, he became a director of the Columbus Savings & Loan, in which his father-in-law owned an interest. He saw the opportunity to serve the increasing immigrant population but did not find agreement with the other directors so he quit the board and started his own bank.

That bank was the Bank of Italy, founded on 17-Oct-1904. It was housed in a converted saloon with the business practice to serve hardworking immigrants that other banks would not. He offered accounts and loans, judging his customers by their character and not by their wealth. Deposits the first day of operation total \$8,780. Within a year, deposits were greater than \$700,000 (over \$14 million today). The 1906 earthquake and fire demolished a large part of San Francisco. Giannini, moved the money in his vault to his home in San Mateo before the fires threatened the money inside the vault. He managed to move the funds in a garbage wagon hidden under the garbage. Other banks were closed until it was safe to open their vaults

To preserve, protect, and promote the Italian-Sicilian cultural heritage among the descendants, immigrants, citizens and friends of Isola delle Femmine, Sicily and around the world.

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after the fire. He conducted business on top of a wooden plank set on two barrels in the street. His was one of the few banks open for business immediately after the earthquake. He honored withdrawals and made loans based on a handshake, all of which were repaid he said. He consequently made customers for life and North Beach, the Italian sector of town, was the first to rebuild.

The Bank of America, Los Angeles was founded in 1923. Giannini saw advantages of this bank and started investing in it. In 1928, the Bank of Italy merged with the Bank of America, Los Angeles with Giannini as chairman. In 1930, Giannini changed the name Bank of Italy to Bank of America. He continued as its chairman until his retirement in 1945. During the Great Depression and World War II, he made major loans for public good such as the construction of the Golden Gate Bridge. After the war he helped the rebuilding of Italy with loans to rebuild the FIAT factory. My memory of A.P. Giannini is his large portrait hanging in the Bank of America building at Railroad and Fourth in Pittsburg behind the desk of the branch manager.

Source: "Amadeo Giannini", Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amadeo_Giannini

Frank Capra (1897 – 1991) born Francesco Rosario Capra in Bisacquino, (about 75 km from Palermo), Sicily. He was the youngest of seven children to Salvatore Capra, a fruit grower, and Rosaria "Serah" Nicolosi. He immigrated with his family in 1903 traveling steerage on the steamship Germania. He claimed that the 13-day journey was one of his worst experiences. He remembered that at the sight of the Statue of Liberty, his father exclaimed: "Ciccio, look! Look at that! That's the greatest light since the star of Bethlehem! That's the light of freedom! Remember that – Freedom."

The family settled in Los Angeles' East Side, which he described as an Italian ghetto but is now Chinatown. His father worked as a fruit picker while he sold newspapers after school. After high school, he enrolled in the Throop College of Technology, later to be the California Institute of Technology or Cal Tech. He worked while a student there playing banjo at nightclubs, waiting tables, cleaning engines and washing clothes in the campus laundry facility. He graduated in 1918 with a degree in chemical engineering. He later wrote that his college education had "changed his whole viewpoint on life from the viewpoint of an alley cat to the viewpoint of a cultured person."

Having completed ROTC at Cal Tech, Capra was commissioned into the U.S. Army as a second lieutenant upon graduation. He taught mathematics to artillerymen at Fort Point, San Francisco but contracted the Spanish Flu and was medically discharged, returning home to his family. His father had already died in an accident in 1916. After recovering, he had trouble finding a job and fell into depression being the only family member with a college education but no job. He left home spending a few years hopping freight trains and wandering the western U.S. He took odd jobs on farms, playing poker, as a movie extra and selling books.

While selling books and nearly broke, he read a newspaper article about a new movie studio opening in San Francisco. He phoned saying that he had just moved from Hollywood and falsely implied that he had experience in the budding film industry. His only exposure to films had been in 1915 while in High School. Somehow he impressed the studio founder, Walter Montague, who offered him \$75 to direct a one-reel silent film, which he completed in two days with the help of a cameraman and amateur actors. This led to more movie work in S.F and then a move to a new studio in Los Angeles with producer Harry Cohn. He wrote for the *Our Gang* series and for comedian Harry Langdon.

Because of his engineering background, he adapted to the new technology of "talkies" much more easily than many, but his artistic vision as a director went far beyond the sound technology. His memorable movies

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include: *It Happened One Night* (1934), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), *Why We Fight* series (for the U.S. government during WWII), *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946).

Source: "Frank Capra", Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_Capra#cite_ref-Stevens_11-0

Enrico Fermi (1901 – 1954) born in Rome, Italy. He was the third child of Alberto Fermi, a division head in the Ministry of Railways, and Ida de Gattis, an elementary school teacher.

As a young boy, he enjoyed playing with electrical and mechanical toys. At a local market he found a 900-page physics book titled *Elementorum physicae mathematicae* [Elements of mathematical physics]. It presented in Latin the mathematics of physics as it was known at its writing in 1840. With another friend he pursued building gyroscopes and measuring the acceleration of the Earth's gravity field.

Entering the "Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa after high school, he first chose mathematics as a major but soon switched to physics. He excelled at both theoretical and experimental problems and wrote his thesis in 1922 titled "A theorem on probability and some of its applications". It was a study of X-ray diffraction images, an experimental study because theoretical physics was not yet considered a discipline in Italy. However, this was a very exciting time in theoretical physics due to Einstein's publications on Special and General Relativity and the introduction of quantum mechanics by Plank, Bohr, Heisenberg and several others. The period 1905 to 1927 truly changed our concepts of physics.

In 1926, based upon his early work, he was awarded a professorship in theoretical physics at the Università degli Studi di Roma "La Sapienza" [University of Rome "Wisdom"], one of three new professorships in Italy to create the discipline of theoretical physics. In 1938 Fermi was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics at age 37. After receiving the prize in Stockholm, he did not return to Italy. Instead, he and his family continued on to New York City arriving in December of that year seeking permanent residency. Their decision to move to America and become U.S. citizens was due to the recently introduced racial laws of the Fascists. Fermi's wife was Jewish. He accepted a professorship at Columbia University, later moving to Chicago for research reasons.

Fermi's accomplishments cover several areas of physics and are still directly applicable to research today. He, along with physicist Paul Dirac, developed a statistical formulation for one of the two types of elementary particles. That is now known as Fermi-Dirac statistics and particles that obey those statistics are called "fermions", the proton, neutron and electron being examples. He studied various examples of radiation leading to the study of bombarding heavy nuclei with neutrons. This led to the discovery that some heavy nuclei could break apart with such bombardment thereby releasing energy. Then he led of the research group at Columbia and then Chicago to build and exercise the first examples of controlled nuclear fission, the process now used in nuclear reactors. He was also part of the Manhattan Project during World War II to develop the atomic bomb. A national lab just west of Chicago is named for him, the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory, shortened to Fermilab. I, along with my research group of five others, ran an experiment at Fermilab for two years to collect data for my Ph.D. thesis in the 1970s.

Source: "Enrico Fermi", Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enrico_Fermi and personal knowledge and experience.

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Rita Levi-Montalcini (1909 – 2012) born in Torino, Italy. Her father was Adamo Levi, an electrical engineer and mathematician; her mother Adele Montalchini, a painter, who had moved from Casale Monferrato and Asti, respectively, to Torino at the beginning of the 20th century. Her family roots extend back to the Roman Empire. In her teenage years, she thought of becoming a writer but after seeing a close family friend die of stomach cancer, she decided to attend the University of Torino Medical School. Her father discouraged his daughters from attending college because he feared that it would disrupt their potential lives as wives and mothers. Does that not sound familiar for an Italian father? Eventually, he supported her quest to become a doctor.

While at university, neurohistologist Giuseppe Levi interested her in the developing nervous system. After graduating summa cum laude M.D. in 1936, she continued at the University as Levi's assistant. Her career, however, was cut short by the Fascists introduction of the 1938 Manifesto of Race, which barred Jews, of which she was one, from academic and professional careers. Losing her position at the University, of course, was not the worst trial for her of World War II. When the Nazis invaded Italy in 1943 after the surrender of Italy to the Allies, her family fled to Florence where they survived the Holocaust with false identities and protected by some non-Jewish friends. During the war, Levi-Montalcini set up a laboratory in her sleeping quarters and studied the growth of nerve fibers in chicken embryos, which became the basis of her later research. During the Nazi occupation, she was in contact with the partisan Action Party and after liberation in August of 1944, she volunteered her medical expertise to the Allied health service.

In 1946, she received a one-semester research fellowship in the laboratory of Prof. Viktor Hamburger at Washington University in St. Louis, who became interested in two articles she had published in foreign scientific journals. After duplicating her results in St. Louis, Hamburger offered her a research associate position, where she worked for the next 30 years. There in 1952, she did her most important work. She isolated nerve growth factor (NGF) by observing that tumor cells were releasing a substance to cause very rapid growth of nerve cells. She was made full professor in 1958. In 1962, she established a second laboratory in Rome and divided her time between there and St. Louis.

From 1961 to 1969, she directed the Research Center of Neurobiology of CNR (Rome) and from 1969 to 1978, the Laboratory of Cellular Biology. After she retired in 1977 from her academic positions, she was appointed to be director of the Institute of Cell Biology of the Italian National Council of Research in Rome. She later retired from that position in 1979 but then founded the European Brain Research Institute in 2002 serving as its president.

She was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1986, sharing it with Stanley Cohen for their research into the nerve growth factor (NGF), a protein that causes cell growth due to stimulated nerve tissue.

More connections: our own Vincent Malfitano earned his D.M.D degree from Washington University in St. Louis and my son Andrew and daughter-in-law Bree Grillo-Hill each earned their Ph.D. there as well. Andrew taught a biology study section in a conference room named for Levi-Montalcini, which had a portrait of her on the wall. He and Bree said that the older faculty members still spoke of her.

Source: "Rita Levi-Montalcini", Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rita_Levi-Montalcini