



Il Notiziario

[The Newsletter]
of the

Friends of Isola delle Femmine, Inc.



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Special Issue: 2020-C

Editor: A.A. Grillo

Italian-American Heritage & Culture Month

Italian-American Heritage & Culture Month 2020

Italian-Americans of Special Note

by A.A. Grillo

This is the third and last of our special issues in honor of Italian-American Heritage and Culture Month. We hope that you have enjoyed the first two special issues. Here we have a few more Italian-Americans to make your acquaintance or a better acquaintance.

Louis Prima (1910 – 1978) born Louis Leo Prima in New Orleans, LA, was the fourth child of Anthony Prima and Angelina Caraella. Anthony's father was Leonardo DiPrima who immigrated from Salaparuta, a town in western Sicily in the province of Trapani, while Angelina immigrated as a baby from Ustica, which is an island off the northern coast of Sicily about 57 km from Isola delle Femmine. It is not clear why Anthony dropped the "Di" from his last name. Possibly it was to make their surname sound less ethnic. Some biographies list Leonard as "Prima" but his brothers as "DiPrima". Leonardo was one of the early Italian immigrants to New Orleans because his son Anthony was born there in 1887.

Angelina was a music lover and insisted that all four of her children learn a music instrument. Louis was assigned a violin and started playing at St. Ann's Parish. But he became interested in jazz when he heard black musicians there in New Orleans including Louis Armstrong. Jazz music, black jazz music, was all around him in New Orleans. Black musicians played in clubs operated by Italian-Americans affording ready interactions between them and the Italian-Americans and the flow of Italian immigrants at that time. To the young Louis, this music made sense. At 17, he partnered with Frank Federico and played in a run-down French Quarter nightclub. After high school, he joined a succession of bands with little success but that did not dissuade him from the musical career he wanted.

In 1934, he and his band called the New Orleans Gang began recording for the Brunswick label. Their style was a combination of Dixieland and Swing. In 1936, he recorded his own composition "Sing Sing Sing", a big hit for him and later for Benny Goodman, and is still considered a standard of Swing music. His popularity really took off after WWII. Most memorable of his many band members were saxophonist Sam Butera and singer Keely Smith, whom he married but later divorced. She went on to a successful career on her own. He was not very successful with marriage, having five marriages and four divorces.

His style eventually encompassed Dixieland, Swing, Jump Blues, Boogie-Woogie, R&B, and Rock'n'roll, but also included Italian-American folk music. His inclusion of personal ethnic music is credited with making it easier for others to include ethnic music in their acts and recordings. Do you remember "I eat antipasto twice, just because she is so nice, Angelina." Or "Oje Marì, oje Marì, Quanta suonno ca perdo pe'tté!" [How much sleep I lose for you.] and he often would include "C'è La Luna", at least his slightly simpler version.

Source: "Louis Prima", Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis_Prima.

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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Lawrence DiStasi (1937) born in Bridgeport, CT to parents Edmond DiStasi and Margaret Weisz. His father immigrated in 1913 from Telese, located near the northern border of Campania, about 65 km northeast of Naples. His mother immigrated from Hungary. His father learned barbering and hairdressing from an uncle and opened shops in Westport and Bridgeport. All along he was tinkering in their basement with chemical formulae to develop his own shampoo and other hair additives. He died when Lawrence was a senior in high school.

In spite of this, his mother insisted that he attend Dartmouth College where he earned his degree in liberal arts in 1958. He finished all the course work required for a Ph.D. at New York University in 1967, but did not complete a dissertation. After grad school and a year of teaching, he moved to California in 1969 to work as an editor for Harcourt Brace in San Francisco. He left that position to pursue his own writing. In 1978, he joined the American Italian Historical Association, Western Chapter. Through that association, he first became aware of enemy aliens during World War II, in particular Italian-American immigrants, who were treated as enemy aliens and the restrictions imposed on them. That then has become a major focus of his work. He led the development and has been the project director of the traveling exhibit *Una Storia Segreta: When Italian Americans were "Enemy Aliens"* since 1994, which resulted in Public Law #106-451: *The Wartime Violation of Italian American Civil Liberties Act*. The Pittsburg Historical Society Museum provided many photos and news articles for the traveling exhibit.

He currently is the Curator/Newsletter Editor of the Italian American Studies Association's Western Regional Chapter and works as a writer and publisher of Sanniti Publications, which issued several of his latest books. In total, he has authored eight books including: *Mal Occhio: The Underside of Vision* (North Point Press: 1981), *Dream Streets: The Big Book of Italian American Culture* (Harper & Row: 1989), reprinted as *The Big Book of Italian American Culture* (Sanniti: 1996), *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret History of Italian American Evacuation and Internment During World War II* (Heyday Books: 2001), and *Branded: How Italian Americans Became 'Enemies' During WWII* (Sanniti: 2016).

He only learned recently that his father was actually an enemy alien during the war. His grandfather had become a naturalized citizen in 1928 and his father thought that he had derivative citizenship but he only discovered after the war started that being 26 in 1928 made him too old to qualify for this passed-down action.

DiStasi learning this only well after his father had died confirms the name *Una Storia Segreta* as a common experience. It was exactly that, not just for DiStasi but for many of us. I only learned of this by accidentally seeing a plaque on a store wall in Half Moon Bay in 2004 that mentioned "Una Storia Segreta". My father had died, but I asked his one remaining sibling, if she knew anything about this. Her response was very similar to story after story in DiStasi's book. They were embarrassed; they wanted to ignore it; they didn't want to be reminded of it. Apparently, this was an issue for the entire generation of our parents and consequently an issue for us. Lawrence DiStasi has done a great service for both generations and for our future ones as well. I have not seen the traveling exhibit, but my aunt purchased a copy of his book for me soon after our discussion and I read it cover to cover. It tells of another important segment of our Italian-American heritage.

For those who did not have the opportunity see the traveling exhibit, it is available virtually at the link: www.unastoriasegreta.com.

Source: personal correspondence with Lawrence DiStasi

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Angelo F. Coniglio (1936, no known relation to the Pittsburg Coniglio family) born in Buffalo, NY to parents Gaetano Coniglio and Rosa Alessi who immigrated to Buffalo from Serradifalco, Sicily at about the beginning of the 20th century. Serradifalco is located about 120 km southeast of Palermo.

Coniglio was in the first graduating class of the School of Civil Engineering at the University of Buffalo with a bachelor's degree in 1961, followed by a master's degree in 1970. His specialty was hydrology and water levels of the U.S. Great Lakes. He, along with his team on the Lake Erie Waste Management Study, are credited with the development of a plan that helped restore Lake Erie to more pristine conditions in the 1970s. He taught as an adjunct professor in Civil Engineering at U of Buffalo for twenty-five years, receiving the New York State Society of Professional Engineers' Engineering Educator of the Year Award in 1993.

After his retirement from the engineering field, Coniglio launched a second career becoming an experienced genealogist, researching the Sicilian origins of his family from Serradifalco and numerous others. This research, including trips to Sicily, led to his writing the book *The Lady of the Wheel* which tells of the lives of poor Sicilian foundlings and the sulfur miners in the late 1800s in Racalmuto, Sicily. He writes genealogy columns for several monthly magazines and Italian/Sicilian-American newsletters and gives lectures on the topic. He also writes for *L'Italo Americano*, a U.S. West Coast bilingual weekly. He has web pages devoted to Sicilian genealogical records, foundlings and the Sicilian language. He is a strong advocate for recognition of Sicilian heritage, actively writing articles about the history and the language of Sicily and its contributions to word culture. Since 2017, he has been a technical consultant on foundlings for the PBS television series *Finding Your Roots* hosted by Henry Louis Gates Jr. He is also an avid fan of the American Football League.

In addition to his many writings, he became a minor investor in a full-length documentary film by author and producer Mark Spano. The film, originally entitled *Re-imagining Sicily* was renamed *Sicily: Land of Love and Strife*. It premiered in 2018. After seeing the completed project, Coniglio remarked: "Attendees saw a film that extolled the beauty and culture of Sicily, without the foolish glorification of criminal elements that has come to be expected in films about my homeland. I commend mark Spano for creating such a film."

Angelo Coniglio is an excellent example of someone so sure of the importance of his heritage that, after a very successful career in engineering, he has devoted his time and energy to promoting the many positive aspects of our common Italian/Sicilian-American Heritage and Culture.

Source: "Angelo F. Coniglio", Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angelo_F._Coniglio.

Lady Gaga (1986) born Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta in Manhattan, New York City to parents Joseph Anthony Germanotta Jr., an internet entrepreneur, and Cynthia Louise Bissett, a philanthropist and business executive. Working back through the Germanotta tree, Joseph Jr was born in Elizabeth, NJ. His father Joseph Anthony Sr. was born in Jersey City, NJ, while his father Antonino, Stefani's great-grandfather, was born in Naso, Sicily, about 95 km west of Messina. Stefani's mother Cynthia has Italian and French-Canadian roots.

Stefani began playing the piano at age four when her mother insisted that she become "a cultured young woman", but apparently she wasn't forced. Instead, she took to music, especially the piano. From age 11 through high school, she attended the Convent of the Sacred Heart, a private all-girls Roman Catholic School. She said that she was "very dedicated, very studious, very disciplined" but also "a bit insecure". She considered herself a misfit and was mocked for "being either too provocative or too eccentric. At 17, she

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gained early admission to Collaborative Arts Project 21, a musical theater training conservatory, which at that time was partnered with New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. There, she studied music but also explored art, religion, social issues and politics. She withdrew from the school during the second semester of her sophomore year to concentrate on a music career.

This career actually started with small acting roles. She had a small part in an episode of *The Sopranos* at age 15, and one in MTV's *Boiling Points* at 19, but after leaving school, she was able to record two songs with hip-hop singer Melle Mel and started playing engagements around New York with a group of NYU friends. She was introduced to music producer Rob Fusari, who claims to be the first person to call her "Lady Gaga", which was derived from the song "Radio Ga Ga" by the British rock band Queen. From that beginning, her career started to take off and grew with exceptional speed. She has received many awards including Grammys and appeared in many TV performances as well as sold out concerts.

To say that Lady Gaga is avant-garde, would be a gross understatement, both in her music and in her style. Early in her career, despite securing a recording deal, some radio stations found her music too "racy" and "underground" for the mainstream, to which she replied: "My name is Lady Gaga, I've been on the music scene for years, and I'm telling you, this is what's next." Based upon her popularity since then, one would have to agree. I would say just that I never found her music to be my style. That is, until I heard her duets with Tony Bennett, another Italian-American we are all know. Bennett clearly saw past Gaga's stage name and style to find the person and the voice. Their duet album titled "Cheek to Cheek" followed by the special *Tony Bennett and Lady Gaga: Cheek to Cheek* and a tour of a similar name all received critical acclaim. These are filled with American Songbook Standards, which show off her exceptional voice and phrasing.

She has also become known for her philanthropic work, to mention just a few: 2010 Haiti earthquake relief, 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami relief, the WHO's Covid-19 Solidarity Response Fund and a Red Cross shelter for those evacuated from California wildfires. Her father sits on her foundation's board of directors.

Sources: "Lady Gaga", Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lady_Gaga.

"Joe Germanotta", Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia, https://ladygaga.fandom.com/wiki/Joe_Germanotta.

This concludes our special issues for October Italian-American Heritage and Culture Month 2020. We appreciate your feedback, especially the positive kind, but constructive ideas are also welcome. You can contact us through the FOI email address: Friendsofisola@gmail.com.

We will be back with our next quarterly issue on the first of January of the new year.

Buona salute a Tutti [Good health to All],
The Editorial Board of *Il Notiziario*