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DO WE NEED ITALIAN AMERICAN STUDIES?

By Dona De Sanctis, Ph.D.

Every year in February America celebrates Black History month. School children research and write essays about African American history and the leaders who shaped it while the mass media runs TV documentaries, radio interviews and newspaper stories on the topic.

Every October, Italian Americans celebrate Italian American Heritage Month. That occasion is marked by parades honoring Columbus and street festivals celebrating Italian fast foods like pizza, sausages and peppers and cannoli. What's wrong with this picture?

THE PROBLEM

Our parades and street festivals are colorful and fun, but they obviously are not designed to teach anything significant about Italian Americans, their history and achievements. Unfortunately, neither is our education system nor our mass media. Children do not study the Italian American experience in school. Adults don't read about Italian American history and issues in their local newspapers or see programs about Italian Americans on television.

Although we are the fifth largest ethnic group in America, we are the invisible minority -- seen only in movies, TV shows and commercials as goons and buffoons. As a result, a classic Zogby poll of American teenagers 13 to 18 years old revealed that 78% associate Italian Americans with either criminal activities or unskilled labor.

THE INVISIBLE MINORITY

Today in multi-cultural America, most school text books mention only two men of Italian descent: Christopher Columbus and Al Capone.

Elementary school children never learn that Giovanni Caboto aka John Cabot discovered North America or that Giovanni da Verrazzano entered New York's bay 85 years before the Dutch seaman, Henry Hudson, for whom New York's river is now named. They never hear the name Luigi Palma Di Cesnola, a Civil War Union officer who received one of the first Medals of Honor and went on to become the first director of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The situation is even graver in American high schools and colleges. Take for example, the text book **A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America** by Ronald Takaki, which is used at most American universities and colleges to teach the multi-cultural history of America.

Takaki's book features chapters on the hardships faced by early Americans of Indian, African, Latino, Irish, Jewish and Asian descent, but makes only two references to Italian Americans. One is in a sentence about the ethnic groups that passed through Ellis Island. The other is a photograph of early Italian immigrant ditch diggers.

As a result, most Americans including people of our own heritage do not know that when they first came to this country, Italian immigrants were lynched in the South, paid less than white *and* black workers in the north, relegated to living in ghettos, now colorfully known as "Little Italies" and interned during World War II.

They don't know that at the beginning of the 20th century, social scientists proposed that we were the "missing link" between the white and black races.

But they do learn that sometime in the 1920's, Italian Americans became associated with organized crime as did people of Jewish, Irish, and other heritages. Today students know all about Al Capone, Lucky Luciano and the Mafia.

They know much less about the gangsters Meyer Lansky, Bugsy Siegal, Legs Diamond, John Dillinger and Frank O'Donnell, who are rarely if ever mentioned in these text books. And probably only one in 10,000 students could tell you that Charles Bonaparte founded what was to become the FBI.

ITALIAN AMERICAN WOMEN

Information about Italian American women trail blazers is even scantier. While American children know the names Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks and Sojourner Truth, they never hear that the first American saint was Mother Cabrini; that the first woman elected governor in her own right was Ella Grasso or that the first wartime female combat commander was the pilot Marie Rossi, who died during the first Gulf War.

These women somehow didn't make the cut in *Women Who Dared*, a two-volume collection of historic postcards compiled by the Library of Congress for Pomegranate Books. Aiming for the youth market and inspired by multi-culturalism, the books recognize over 62 influential women living and dead from more than 12 nations.

These include women of Jewish, African, Russian, Greek, Czech, French, American, Mexican, Irish, Native American, English and Indian heritage who have made a difference. There was no Italian or Italian American woman mentioned. Not one.

FINDING A SOLUTION

The leading Italian American organizations are aware of this problem. Recently, the National Italian American Foundation funded a study that examined how Italian Americans are portrayed in the most popular school text books in America.

The NIAF plans to share its findings with the Sons of Italy, UNICO and other Italian American organizations as well as CARRES and the American Italian Historical Association, the professional organization for scholars, writers and professors of Italian American history.

Together we will use lobby the textbook publishers to include more information about the Italian American experience in future editions.

Last year, UNICO National, working with other groups in New Jersey, successfully petitioned the state legislature to allocate funds to establish an Italian American Heritage Commission. Now the commission is developing an Italian American curriculum so that children in New Jersey will learn about Italian American history as part of their social studies programs. The commission will share this curriculum when it is ready so that other states can use it as a model.

But these are only the first steps in a long journey.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

We Italian Americans need to start promoting Italian American studies in our communities. Fill your home libraries with books about Italian American history and literature. Discuss Italian American issues at the dinner table. Encourage your children who are still in school to choose Italian American topics for their reports and research papers. And also:

- Examine the social studies and history text books your children are studying from to see how Italian American history and culture is taught. [Tip: Look up “Italian,” “Italian American” and “Columbus” in the index at the back of the book.]
- If the picture is unbalanced or worse, if Italian Americans are not mentioned at all, send the book’s title, author and publisher to me at the Sons of Italy. [See below.]
- Then write a letter of complaint to your school principal and school board and include a copy of this column.

If we start now, the day will come when an American child will ask, "Al Capone? Who's he?"

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