

**February 2005**

**Word Count: 1,079**

## **THE ROOTS OF STEREOTYPING: REAL STORIES**

**By Dona De Sanctis**

On a cold day last December, about 300 people traveled to East Orange, New Jersey for an historic conference on Italian American stereotyping. This wasn't your typical anti-defamation meeting protesting the outrageous stereotypes of Italian Americans by Hollywood, television and the news media.

Instead, this conference explored the "why" behind stereotyping; its roots in U.S. history, in the entertainment industry and in politics. The conference came about thanks to a core of dedicated New Jersey activists and their organizations, who pooled their resources and worked together. What these activists accomplished is an object lesson for all of us concerned about the image of Italian Americans in the United States today.

### **REAL STORIES**

The all-day conference, "Real Stories: Discrimination and Defamation in the History of Italian Americans" was held December 4 under the auspices of Seton Hall University and its Alberto Italian Studies Institute.

It was organized by the university's Joseph M. and Geraldine C. La Motta Chair in Italian Studies, the Anti-Bias Committee of UNICO National and the New Jersey Italian American Heritage Commission.

"Our goal was to demonstrate that [Italian American stereotyping] is not a recent...phenomenon, but the consequence of a history that goes back several centuries," says **Prof. William Connell**, director of the Alberto Institute and one of the conference prime organizers.

Helping Connell pull off this major coup were UNICO National's **Manny Alfano**, and **Larry Paragano** and **A. Roger Marinzoli** of the New Jersey Italian American Heritage Commission.

The conference also received funding from the National Italian American Foundation, the Columbus Citizens Foundation, the Sons of Italy Commission for Social Justice and the American Italian Historical Association.

### **WHY IS THIS CONFERENCE IMPORTANT?**

Most of us Italian Americans know our personal family histories, but next to nothing about our *collective* history as a people in the United States or how our ancestors were received (and perceived) by the established American society.

These real stories are not in the history books we studied from as children and, more alarmingly, they aren't in the school books our children and grandchildren are reading today. For example, did you know that:

- John Calvin, the 16<sup>th</sup> century French preacher whose teachings helped found Puritanism, repeatedly condemned Italians as deceitful, lazy and hypocritical—stereotypes that Americans applied to the early Italian immigrants at the turn of the last century.
- After the Civil War, southern Italian immigrants were actively recruited to replace slave labor on plantations in the American South. They also were “imported” to work in the mines, build the railroads and help tame the frontier.
- The first recorded lynching of Italians in the south occurred in 1860. Between 1890 and 1915 at least 47 more Italian immigrants were lynched, including 11 in New Orleans in 1891—the largest mass lynching in U.S. history.
- The Americans considered Italian immigrants “the missing link” between the white and black races because of their olive complexions, curly hair and dark eyes.

- In 1921, the U.S. Congress passed laws with racially-based quotas that limited the number of Italians immigrating to the U.S. to 29,000 annually. This law was not repealed until 1965.
- The early 20<sup>th</sup> century, American school teachers considered Italian immigrant children intellectually inferior and put them into vocational programs that trained them for physical labor and factory work instead of college.

These practices have been abolished, but we still see evidence of them in the current stereotypes of 21<sup>st</sup> century Italian Americans.

### **LEADERS IN THE FIGHT**

The Seton Hall conference brought these and other facts to light. But apart from its powerful educational value, the conference constituted the largest gathering of Italian American activists in recent memory.

Panelists included some of the most familiar names in Italian American affairs and studies: **Salvatore LaGumina**, author of the well-regarded classic, *WOP: A Documentary History of Anti-Italian Discrimination*; **Fred Gardaphe**, professor and critic of Italian American literature; **Elizabeth Messina**, a psychologist who has studied the effects of stereotyping especially on Italian American women; and **Anthony Tamburri**, president of the American Italian Historical Association. In all, more than 30 experts in their fields explored the deep-seated roots of stereotyping and the price Italian Americans have paid because of it.

Also present were important representatives from government and the diplomatic community: Congressman **Bill Pascrell**, **Antonio Bandini**, Consul of Italy in New York; and **Paolo Toschi**, vice consul of Italy in Newark as well as two celebrities: **Joe Piscopo** and **Tony LoBianco**.

The experts not only got to hear each other speak, but were able to network and establish more enduring contacts during the breaks, lunch and evening reception.

Wisely, the conference organizers also took steps to ensure that the event would have a lasting impact so they had the entire proceedings filmed and will turn the footage into a documentary that hopefully will be televised.

Also, the Alberto Institute will publish a book of essays about discrimination against Italians based on the study papers. *[For details, call the Alberto Institute at (973) 275-2928.]*

### **WHAT YOU CAN DO**

Clearly this conference is an initiative that can and should be repeated in other states around the nation. So let's take a page from our New Jersey cousins' play book. Let's contact our local community college or university to arrange meetings with professors of Italian, history, media studies and journalism to explore the possibility of holding a similar conference on this issue in our community.

The stereotyping of Italian Americans is so much a part of the American landscape that it has reached the highest levels of our government. "I was surprised when I got to Washington to see how my fellow Congressmen stereotyped me because I am an Italian American from New Jersey," U.S. Congressman Bill Pascrell told the conference participants. "They made a lot of jokes about my Italian roots, but I wasn't laughing," he said.

We need to stop laughing, too.

***Dona De Sanctis is the deputy executive director of the Order Sons of Italy in America (OSIA), the oldest and largest national organization for Italian American men and women in the U.S. See [www.osia.org](http://www.osia.org) or call 202/547 2900 for membership information.***

+ caption: ***One of the five panels of experts that explored Italian American stereotyping during the historic conference held at Seton Hall University in New Jersey last December.***

+ caption: ***Cartoons like this one that stereotyped the new Italian immigrants frequently ran in American newspapers at the turn of the last century.***