

Buon Anno 2021 a tutti! (Happy New Year!)

Member News & Articles

LICS Bollettino Periodico

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LANCASTER
ITALIAN
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SOCIETY



L'Osservatore Lancastriano

Member News, January 2021

Condolences to the Joan Rossi Family on the passing of Al Rossi. Alfred Francis Rossi of Thomaston, CT formerly of Lancaster was born on June 15, 1938 in Fairview, NJ. He graduated from St. Peter's Prep and Stevens Institute of Technology with a bachelors degree in engineering and a masters in management science. He was recruited out of college to work for Kearfott Aerospace in engineering where he met his wife of 59 years, Joan. As a holder of many patents, he designed gyroscopes for the lunar landing when man first walked on the moon in 1969. He then went on to a successful corporate career in industry and moved from Wyckoff, NJ to Weston, CT. He was a true renaissance man and talented musician who spoke five languages (Latin, Italian, German, Japanese, French), avid tennis player and gourmet chef. He was also a proud Italian-American and a founding member of the Lancaster Italian Cultural Society.

He would say his biggest accomplishment was his family who will miss his advice, wisdom, and can-do attitude. He is survived by his wife, Joan. Children Louis and Corene Rossi, Robert and Elaine Rossi, Jean and John Wergeles, Matthew and Kristen Rossi. And nine grandchildren, Alex, Kendall, Isabella, Lily, Hannah, Luke, Sarah, Jack and Stephen.

The birth of LICS - In 1998, Al wrote a letter to the editor, which appeared in the Lancaster Newspaper on

October 11, 1998, about the closing of the Italian American Citizens Club. He had not known of the IACC, and was disappointed that it was gone. On March 7, 1999, the Sunday News featured an article by correspondent Mary Anne Motter Cullen about the newly formed LICS.

“It all began with a letter to the editor by Al Rossi on Oct. 11. Rossi, of Italian descent and a relative newcomer to Lancaster from New York, lamented the news of the impending demise of the Italian American Citizens Club, 335 N. Queen St. In his letter, Rossi asked to be contacted by readers who are interested in preserving the music, language and traditions of Italy, from the Alps to the Aeolian Islands to determine the interest in an Italian club. Over the next several weeks he received close to 30 calls. Several meetings followed, resulting in the first public meeting in late February at Failla Italian American Restaurant, 4301 Columbia Ave., Columbia. Approximately 60 people voted to form the Lancaster Italian Cultural Society.”

Al was a huge influence on the start of LICS, and was the first vice president. His charm, ideas and enthusiasm were much admired and appreciated. Al and Joan as LICS members, attended all of our meetings, picnics and events, until they moved away from Lancaster in 2005. Rest in peace, Al.

Member Spotlight by Mary Cae Williams

We welcome new sponsor, Peter Mastropietro, owner of Mastro Music LLC, a live music promoter here in Lancaster, PA.

Peter is a first generation Italian-American. His parents emigrated from Italy as children. His father, Pensiero, arrived in 1925 and mother, Armida, in 1931. They met at the beginning of W.W.II and first settled in Yonkers,

NY where Peter lived with his siblings in a two-family home. His father's parents lived in the first floor apartment and Peter's family lived on the upper floors. From those days, Peter remembers, “Of course, lots of food...” His father and grandfather made wine each year and Peter remembers the trucks driving up to drop off crates of grapes to be pressed, fermented, and enjoyed through the coming year.

Peter's grandmother spoke very little English; his parents were fully bi-lingual. As for so many families of that time, the emphasis for Peter and his siblings was on being fully American. Although Peter can understand much Italian, he never really learned to speak it.



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Peter Mastropietro

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When Peter was nine, his family moved to Thornwood, NY in Westchester County just a 40-minute train ride from Grand Central Station in NYC. Peter's father studied at Juilliard and started his adult life as a professional musician. The need to support a family caused him to let go of that professionally, but there was always music in the Mastropietro home. Peter's father taught him to play the piano and he learned to play brass through

participation in school bands and orchestras.

Peter played in the band and orchestra, he performed in high school musicals, and he was on his high school football team. When the drama department put on West Side Story, Peter was charged with recruiting members for the Sharks and Jets gangs. He persuaded several of his football buddies to take a turn on stage, quite a coup in the "socially segregated" high school life of the late 1960s.

Peter always wanted to work in the music field. He belonged to rock bands during his high school days. Because he was only 40 minutes away, he managed to get into NYC often to hear live music, see shows on Broadway, and become familiar with the many music and record shops that burgeoned in the 1960s and early 1970s. Peter's first job was as a sales representative for a local rock radio station. In this job he met guys coming up from the city with the latest records, trying to

convince the station to play them on the air. In those days, that was the way for musicians to become known and the business was booming.

Peter worked in the record industry for a decade and then there was a downturn. He partnered with one of his brothers to open a delicatessen business, which they successfully operated for several years. In 1987, they sold that business and Peter and his family moved to the Lancaster area. One of his brothers had already lived here and recommended it as a great place to raise the family. Before retirement, Peter was employed by Horizon Healthcare Services, which specializes in providing home-based infusion treatments.

Peter's multi-faceted working career gave him numerous opportunities to observe all kinds of people. In his working life, he met many famous performers as well as some shady characters. His work in the music industry, the food business, and healthcare gave him insight into many personal stories of struggle and success. Retirement has given Peter a chance to pursue his original passion for working in music.

Through Mastro Music, Peter promotes live performances for events such as weddings and retirement parties. He continues to perform music himself with his outlaw-country group, All Weather Band.

Peter shared with us that many of the musicians he knows have been making a living with their music. They may play in an orchestra, belong to a band that plays at events, and offer private lessons to a new generation of musicians. In 2020, many, if not most, of these income streams were shut down by society's attempts to halt the spread of the Covid-19 virus. The pandemic, which has altered all our lives, hit live performers especially hard. Peter is hoping that as we open up again, he can be part of helping these folks get back on their feet.

Mastro Music (www.pmastromusic.com) provides Peter with some income, a chance to be involved with other musicians, and an outlet for his passion for music.

Peter and his wife Sheila, currently reside in Lancaster City. Thank you, Peter, for being a business sponsor of the LICS Newsletter and Bollettino.

Columbus by Dolores Gareis, Part 2

The life of Columbus incorporates one of the great adventures of mankind. His epic voyages are only part of the story. It took him years of effort before finally convincing Queen Isabella of Spain to back his efforts of exploration to the west. Even her husband Ferdinand disagreed with this venture. His voyage of discovery would not have been possible without his persistence and perseverance in this effort.

The Voyage of Discovery

He made a total of four voyages to the New World. They can be distinguished by their four different objectives. The first was obviously a voyage of exploration and discovery. He was venturing to the West in uncharted waters that no sailor had ever attempted. He was searching for a way to get to the fabled Indies, China, and Japan. He knew the world was round but he believed that it was smaller than we now know it to be and he thought a water passage to Asia would be possible. Columbus set off from the Spanish port of Palos with three ships the names of which we all know. From previous voyages he knew that there was a westward flowing current and wind as one approaches the equator on the west coast of Africa. He went south and then west following this current. Today the choice of this path seems obvious with our knowledge of the prevailing winds and currents but in the time of Columbus this course was a leap of faith. He successfully made the voyage with landfall in one of the islands of what we now call the West Indies. He progressed to the island of Hispaniola now known as Haiti and the Dominican Republic and there a peaceful contact with the natives was accomplished. The largest ship, the Santa Maria eventually went aground and was lost. After establishing a temporary trading post with the natives on Hispaniola he returned to Spain leaving 39 men behind in the care of one of his friends, the native chief, Guacanagari, who pledged to Columbus that he would help the men in his absence. At this time Columbus had his first experience with treacherous behavior when Martin Pinzon, the

captain of the Pinta, raced back to Spain in an attempt to take the credit for the discovery from Columbus. Maybe it was "karma" as he died two weeks after arriving.

Columbus made a triumphant return and this was arguably the high point of his career.

The Trading Voyage

Excited by the discovery of the islands and the gold that was brought back to Spain, Queen Isabella sent 17 ships back under Columbus's command to exploit the possibilities of trade with the natives. Unfortunately for the expedition there were many entitled aristocrats sailing with Columbus who were seeking only riches and adventure and had no desire to do the work necessary to establish a trading post. They left the work to the laborers and soldiers who also accompanied Columbus and these entitled individuals were a constant source of problems for Columbus. Carol Delaney in her book noted, "Expectations that these men from different classes would work together for the common good of the settlement seem to be the ideals of a dreamer." It's easy to see that this motley crew did not have the same objective as Columbus. He did have specific orders from the Queen to treat the Indians well and to punish those crew members that misbehaved. On his way back to Hispaniola Columbus encountered some Caribs on the island of Guadalupe. These were a war like tribe of cannibals who were known for castrating their male captives. Columbus distinguished this group of natives from those of the friendly tribes. In a battle, his forces captured many Caribs and planned to send them back to

Spain to serve as slaves. It was a legitimate policy at the time that combatants captured in battle could be kept in slavery. This policy was even approved by the pope. Those that had been enslaved by the Caribs were repatriated to their homes by Columbus. Continuing his voyage Columbus sailed through the West Indies on the way to the island of Hispaniola and discovered many islands along the way well known to us today such as Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. That he could successfully navigate the route through these uncharted waters without the loss of even one of the 17 ships under his command was a tribute to his unparalleled seamanship and skill in navigation.

On his return to the outpost, which was called, Navidad, Columbus found a gruesome site. All of the 39 men had been killed, some in the most gruesome way. The entire crew and the priest accompanying the voyage, Friar Buil wanted to exact revenge immediately on the surrounding natives. Columbus would not allow this and he consulted with his friend, the chief Guacanagari, who told him that the men who were left behind did not follow Columbus's orders to avoid doing injury or using violence against the natives and had gone on raiding parties to the neighboring area under control of a different chief. They stole goods and captured women to bring back to the trading post as their concubines. The neighboring chief understandably retaliated and killed the entire garrison. Thus, the peace and tranquility, which Columbus had hoped for in the New World, was destroyed and the men accompanying Columbus were filled with suspicion and hate

for the local inhabitants. From this point on the administration of the trading post went downhill and Columbus ran into one problem after another with disappointed aristocrats and fellow travelers. Columbus, the expert sailor and navigator was not a good administrator and the unfortunate combination of individuals in his expedition was an insurmountable obstacle that led to multiple clashes.

The discontent became so great that when some ships left to return

to Spain 330 of the settlers insisted on returning also. Most were the entitled and disillusioned Hidalgos who refused to work. Columbus's subordinate captains were also a problem and began rampaging through the islands despite orders to the contrary. Columbus literally lost control of the enterprise and terrible deeds were committed against the Indians. Columbus also wanted to continue with his explorations as directed by Isabella and every time that he left the settlement sailing away to seek

some evidence of Asia and the Great Khan the settlers seem to run amok, killing, stealing, raping and taking slaves. What followed was a number of serious rebellions among his captains all of which was reported to the Queen and King in Spain. Finally Columbus was summoned to Spain for a consultation. This visit turned out to last two years before preparations were made for the third voyage. (To be continued.)

Jill Biden, by Marian Caroselli



Ciao Washington

Our beloved heritage has achieved another milestone. Dr. Jill Biden will be the first Italian-American First Lady in the White House. Whatever your political affiliation, our Italian pride cannot be denied.

Family Roots

Jill's ancestors were born in Gesso, Messina, Sicily. Her grandfather Domenico Giacoppo (age 2), alongside his mother and siblings, left Gesso in 1900 for Ellis Island to join his father, Gaetano (Jill's great-grandfather), who had been living in the States for a couple of years.

Gaetano Giacoppo (Americanized to Jacobs) worked as a furniture deliveryman in New Jersey. Jill's father, Dominic, started as a bank teller and went on to become the head of a savings and loan institution in Philadelphia.

While immigrants like the Giacoppo found a better life in America, the mass exodus dealt a blow to Gesso. The population dwindled from almost 3,000 in the early 1900s, when locals worked in grain fields, olive groves and in the chalk caves, to about 550, today.

The picturesque hilltop village of Gesso dates back to the 1500s. "Gesso" means "chalk" in Italian; the word in local dialect is "ibisu", so residents of the village are affectionately dubbed "Ibbisoti". Gesso chalk has been mined and used in art for centuries. A few of Jill Biden's ancestors are buried in the tiny village church where her great-grandfather celebrated his marriage before taking off for the New World in search of fortune. And for sure, Jill Biden is the ultimate incarnation of the great 'American Dream' come true, fueled by the passion and sacrifice of millions of Italian émigrés who contributed to building the US.

Each year, longing for what was left behind, groups of Gesso-rooted Americans fly in from Hammonton, NJ to discover their origins and explore the fascinating town and its simple lifestyle, indulging in homemade delicacies.

Jill Biden's Ancestral Memories

Jill Jacobs Biden (69) was born in Hammonton, NJ but grew up in Willow Grove, PA. She has fond memories of her culture, including weekend visits with her four younger sisters to visit her nonni in Hammonton. She savored the meals of red sauce, meatballs, pasta, Italian wedding soup, and braciole. She often reminisces about the Annual Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Italian Festival with rides, games, fireworks and the grand procession of saints through the streets of Hammonton. It was a

festival where many Italian grandparents could bond with their grandkids.

Jill Biden's Education and Career

Jill Biden exemplifies the immigrant's dream of wanting a better life for their children and grandchildren. She has a bachelor's degree and doctoral degree from the University of Delaware, as well as master's degrees from West Chester University and Villanova University. She taught English and reading in high schools for 13 years, and also taught adolescents with emotional disabilities at a psychiatric hospital.

From 1993 to 2008, Dr. Biden was an English and writing instructor at Delaware Technical & Community College. Since 2009, she has been a professor of English at Northern Virginia Community College and plans to continue teaching after the presidential inauguration in January, which would make her the first to continue working as First Lady. She says she wants people to value teachers and know their contributions and to lift up the profession.

Jill Biden's Life as a Politician's Wife

In the past, Joe Biden has said his wife only ever wanted him to be given one job: US ambassador to Italy. "Every year is the year of the Italian in my house," he said in 2013, according to The Washington Post. "I'm always referred to as an Irish politician – but I was smart enough to marry Dominic Giacoppo's granddaughter."

Dr. Biden served as Second Lady of the United States when her husband President-elect Joseph R. Biden Jr. served as Vice President from 2009-2017. As Second Lady of the United States, she worked to bring attention to the sacrifices made by military families.


"Like so many immigrants, Italian Americans have contributed so much to this nation," said Dr. Biden in a speech in Westmoreland County, PA "Our culture, our values and our lives have made this nation richer and stronger and a more beautiful country."

Gesso's Plans for the Future


The Bidens' ascent to the White House and Jill's ties to Gesso have done much to increase the pride of the village as well as to discover distant relatives who want to host her when she visits. Residents also hope to find ways of promoting the relationship to boost the sagging economy of this poor town.

Giacomo Chillé of the Discover Messina Travel agency is working on tailored "Biden" package tours of Gesso and nearby villages. Visitors will be shown the native house of Jill Biden's forefathers, now an abandoned and crumbling dwelling, and those of other migrant families. Promoters are thinking of launching 'cave walks' and artisan labs where people can learn to shape their own little perfumed chinks into American flags or other American-style objects. In all of these endeavors the US theme and the stars and stripes of the US flag will be central features.

Gesso's village museum showcases old Sicilian puppets and masks, farming artifacts and a collection of ancient musical instruments. Locals hope to boost tourism attractions, including its festivals with partygoers in bright costumes, horse-drawn, painted, wooden wagons, Arab-style belly dancers, folklore storytellers, singers and puppeteers. Jill's success may prove to be the town's salvation.



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