



Historically Speaking

With Town Historian
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So many miles before we rest

Barriers of prejudice and discrimination

The overwhelming majority of Italians started off poor and had the additional burden of learning a very difficult language in an alien culture. In the first half of the 20th century, it was not easy for people of Italian ancestry. Many remained isolated in self-contained communities and often had to struggle to find a decent place to live and a steady source of income. According to the 1930 Census, Italians and their descendants, while not a majority, were the largest ethnic group in this community. But an obstacle that is often incomprehensible to young people of Italian descent are the barriers created by prejudice and discrimination.

To gain employment, people of Italian descent sometimes had to change their name. Jack Bianco moved his family to Tuckahoe in 1922. Jack changed name because he was unable to get decent jobs. In 1928, Jack Bianco changed his name to White (*Bianco* means 'white' in Italian). His oldest son Frank, who recently passed away, never changed his name because he had already started school. Phil White, his younger brother, kept the name of his father when he enrolled in the Main Street School in the village. Phil would go on to serve as mayor of Tuckahoe.

Another untruth that Italians had to deal with was that the unfounded rumors that Italian neighborhoods were violent and lawless. There was actually less crime in Italian sections of town, but that did not matter. It is true that because of centuries of historic mistrust of people in authority in Italy, Italians tended to settle disputes among themselves rather than turn to the police. A stark example of a violent reaction toward people of Italian ancestry is an incident in New Orleans in 1891.

David Hennessey, the police chief of New Orleans, was murdered. His dying words were "The dagos did it." Eleven Italians were lynched for the murder of Hennessey. Local residents ignored the fact some of the men had already been acquitted. Another example of prejudice against Italians was the infamous case of Sacco and Vanzetti in the 1920s. These two Italian immigrants were executed for a robbery and murder in which there was a large body of evidence that they could have never committed.

Italians in our community faced the sting of prejudice, although on a much smaller scale.



Sacco and Vanzetti, two Italian immigrants, were executed for a crime in which there is a great deal of evidence that either one or both of the men could not have committed. (Contributed photo)

Luigi DiRienzo and Carmella Fiore were not allowed to be married in the Immaculate Conception Church, but had the ceremony performed in the basement of the building. In 1911, Luigi, with other Italian contractors, masons, and laborers with their own hands would help erect the Assumption Church a short distance away where Italian language and customs were respected.

The story is often told of how Irish boys around Waverly Square would throw rocks at Italian boys and tell them to go back where you belong. The words 'wop' (without papers) and 'dago' (day laborers) were slurs that were especially offensive to hard working, respectful citizens of Italian ancestry. Jeanne Cerreta DeRosa, who grew up in the north end of Eastchester and recently passed away at the age of 102, tells a sad story of her first exposure to prejudice against Italians. DeRosa attended Waverly High School and was never personally exposed to bigotry against Italians.

She once applied for a position at a firm in New York City. She completed the application that, in those days, included a question about the applicant's religion. She answered the question honestly, stating her religion as Protestant. When she later sat across the desk for the personal interview, the woman conducting the interview looked at the answers on the application and said with a smirk "What? Protestant! With a name like that?" She tossed the application back at DeRosa, implying that she had lied about her religion in order to get the job.

DeRosa quickly left the office in tears due to such a hurtful, accusatory experience. She arrived home, still in tears, and her mother, a very wise woman, comforted her and told her that the fault was not with her but rather, it was a definite fault in the woman who conducted the interview.

A serious complaint against guidance counselors and administrators at Eastchester High School as late as the 1950s was that they enroll the children of Italian immigrants in non-college bound programs and even if they were successful in more challenging courses, discourage them from attending college. Unwittingly, teachers in the schools would change the first names of Italian American students so that we would sound more American. Al Carapella tells the story of when he received a letter from his older brother during World War II, he did not recognize the first name of his brother because he had never heard his proper name. This happened countless times in the misguided effort to help Italian Americans fit in.

One of the most disturbing and long lasting stereotypes of people of Italian ancestry is the assertion that the most successful Italian Americans owe their success to the Mafia. The media has contributed heavily to this image. "The Godfather" novels and movies, the television series "The Sopranos," along with a host of other movies and novels misrepresent qualities of Italian culture by linking them with organized crime. Many people of Italian ancestry are sickened when even in just a person attributes the success of an Italian lawyer, doctor, educator, businessman, or some other kind of professional to some kind

affiliation with the mob.

Time has dulled but not erased the painful memories of the past. It is important to note decades ago, it was not always easy to be Italian in America. The barriers of language, poverty, prejudice, and discrimination sometimes seemed insurmountable. But through hard work, filial devotion, patriotism, and natural ability Italian Americans no longer have to be innocent victims of the bitter pill of prejudice.

This is the fifth in a series of articles on the Italians in the community. "Historically Speaking" runs bi-weekly.