



Historically Speaking

*with Eastchester Town Historian
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La Famiglia: The importance of the Italian-American family



The picture shows Carmela Vaccaro and her family when they celebrated her 80th birthday. The Vaccaro clan is one of the largest families in Eastchester and Scarsdale. Contributed photo

The Italians, who in the first three decades of the 20th century became the largest ethnic group in town, had their own unique ways of adjusting to an alien and often hostile culture. On the peninsula of Italy for over 15 centuries of domination by foreign conquerors and constant political upheaval, the Italian family was the one institution that survived intact.

The late Bartlett Giamatti, a former president of Yale University and commissioner of Major League Baseball, eloquently expressed the importance of family as a way that Italian Americans not only adjusted to American life, but also took full advantage of the opportunities open to them.

“The primacy of those for whom one worked, those whom are trusted, and those whom one cherished remained constant despite separation and struggle. In an imperfect world, it is the family, where one does not have to be on guard, where one finds support, that today reinforces the central place of the family in Italian American consciousness.”

In the United States, as it had been in Italy, the family was the strongest social unit. In 1997, an 11-year-old girl in my seventh grade social studies class at Eastchester Middle School from a large Italian family that had lived in our community for decades placed the importance of family in much simpler language than the former president of Yale:

“There are many aspects of my life that are important to me: Being part of a loving fam-

ily, doing well in school, having lots of caring friends, and most important of all believing in God and myself...Being part of and spending time with family is something every person should do to get through life. No matter what the situation, coming home to a warm house filled with loving people is the most secure and comforting feeling.”

It is no accident that many of the descendants of Italians who moved here as many as six generations ago still live in or near Eastchester, Tuckahoe, and Bronxville.

Like the Irish before them, it was not easy for Italians who came to this country. The first Italian immigrants to this community were part of a male movement of single men living in encampments, hotels, boarding houses or inns, alone or without families. Salvatore and Emanuel Tavolilla were two of nine children that lived in Italy, but the family cheese business could not support the entire family. A family friend in Tuckahoe promised them a job in a soda pop company.

Alfonso DePippo, a tailor, came to Tuckahoe in 1903. He never went back to Italy. That same year, his wife died in Italy, and he would send for six of his seven sons to join him. Luigi DiRienzo and his brother Gennaro in the same decade came to Tuckahoe and worked on the rebuilding of the Kensico reservoir.

Life was not easy for these men. Separated from their families by the Atlantic, they worked hard to save enough money to send for their loved ones to join them. Divorce among the first generation was virtually unknown. Desertion and illegitimacy remained low. Keeping their families strong was all-important in Italian culture.

Economic success came within reach for family members pulled in the same direction – like fingers on a hand. If children went out to work, they turned all their earnings over to their parents. Mothers would bring piecework home so they could be with their children. The mass of Italian immigrants respected education but had little of it: they know work and trusted it. None of Alfonso DePippo’s six sons went to school when they arrived in Tuckahoe. They all went to work in the construction trades and built homes on Morgan Street, west of the Waverly Square. The DePippo’s sent their children to the Eastchester schools.

Dr. Margaret Gotti, a former president of the Tuckahoe Board of Education, co-authored a book entitled “The Italian Heritage in Yonkers.” In the book, Dr. Gotti made some profound generalizations about the Italian American family.

“In the United States, as in Italy, the family was a tight-knit unit encompassing a wide range of relationships. In the traditional family, the father was the head of the household. Even employed children would turn over their entire earnings and receive allowances. The mother was regarded as the heart of the family and her main concern centered around the management of the home and the raising of the children.”

No barrier was too great for the Italian family to overcome. The difficulties of learning a foreign tongue, overcoming discrimination, poverty, crowded living conditions, and adjusting to an alien culture were simply obstacles to overcome.

The pleasures of the extended family where grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins lived in the same quarters and/or in close proximity were many. Bartlett Giamatti described the structure of the Italian family beautifully:

“The mother dominated at home (like the Italian version of the Holy Family) but patriarchal in values and structure...The family was loathe to let its young go too far, too far away to college, too far away to church, too far away to work – too far from the village of the family.”

As time passed, the children of Italian immigrants would sometimes chafe from the insular nature of the Italian family. But the more functional and loving the family, the closer the attachments remained.

The experience of being an Italian American is the result of individual family histories and memories, as well as Italian-American traditions, all filtered through when a family arrived in America, where it settled, who joined the family since and whether Italy continues to play a role in the individual’s life. Please email clancy5@optonline.net if you would like to share the experiences of your family.

This is the seventh in a series of articles on the Italians in our community. “Historically Speaking” runs bi-weekly.