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ITALIAN AMERICAN COLLECTION

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The Price of an Education

There was a rumor in Italy in the late 19th century that the streets in the United States were paved with gold. This story was perpetuated by the appearance of newly wealthy return emigrants and the *padrone* who worked on behalf of American companies seeking inexpensive foreign labor. It was often the poor peasant of the agricultural south who fell under the spell of promises of the American dream. While the immigrant sacrificed much in exchange for their new home, there was one resource in the United States that proved to be priceless to generations of Italian Americans: the ability to earn an education.

When the first Italian immigrants came to the United States, many had only attended school until the third or fifth grade. Italians living in rural communities did not have access to secondary education in pre-World War I Italy and a large percentage had to forgo schooling to work. One third of WWI recruits were illiterate and the rate of illiteracy in women was even higher.¹ Despite these staggering statistics, Italians held the profession of teaching in high regards; teaching positions were well compensated and having an education was valued.²

Migrants brought this cultural attitude

towards education with them to the New World. While the first generation didn't always reap the benefits of the American educational system, graduating from high school and pursuing a college degree was encouraged for the second and third generation. Mary Ferro, a music teacher in the Carlynton School District, recalls her father, an immigrant from Calabria, encouraging her:

I remember education was so stressed in my family because neither one of [my parents] really had the chance to pursue what they wanted to do, and when I graduated high school I remember coming home and saying, "Gee Dad, I don't think I want to go to school.... I think I want to be an airline stewardess or something." And he said, "You look at me. If you wanna be dirty like me, you don't go to school. If you don't wanna

be dirty like me, you go to school." That was it. That's all he had to say.³

Mary's father, Vincent Ferro, had been a teacher in Italy, but was forced to take work in a factory after his inability to speak fluent English prevented him from continuing his role as an educator in the United States.

Though access to education for the lower classes was better in America, teaching in the public school system was another issue altogether. In 1954, Joseph D'Andrea was looking for work after earning his degree from Duquesne University in Public Administration and Foreign Languages. In his oral history, he states, "When I went to be a teacher in Pennsylvania, I went into what you would call the difficulties: 'Well, you have an accent'; 'You are Catholic, and nobody will hire you'; 'You are an Italian immigrant.'"⁴ He had an



An address book made by Jane Ferro for her mother Vittoria Iannotta, an Italian immigrant illiterate in Italian and English. Second down on the right page is her nephew, Dominic Iannotta, pictured in his cap and gown from his graduation from Duquesne University in 1942.

HMC Collections, Gift of Jane Ferro, 96.38.3.



Joseph D'Andrea appears at a U.S.A. Bicentennial event during his PSEA presidency at Forge Elementary School in Harrisburg with student Douglas E. Rauk, April 1976.

HHC Detre L&A, gift of Joseph D'Andrea, MSS 1113.



A light-hearted moment captured between Principal Dominic Iannotta and students from the 1972 Oliver High School *Omicron* yearbook. After years of tension at Oliver, Iannotta's brand of discipline, which underscored mutual respect between students and authority figures, brought out the best in the student body.

HHC Detre L&A, Yearbook Collection.

interview with a public school in Somerset County and, despite a good meeting with the school's principal, his conversation with the superintendent wasn't as constructive. D'Andrea recalled, "He said, 'Yes, very good, but your church is a little bit away from here.' I didn't know what he meant.... So, I went home and asked my father and he told me [about] the potholes in America.... Three schools didn't accept me."⁵ Eventually, D'Andrea found a position at an elementary school in Snowden and later transferred to Moon Area School District, where he taught Spanish for 28 years. In the mid-1970s, he served on the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA), first as President Elect, then as President, and was on the Board of Directors

for the National Education Association (NEA) from 1971-77.

Even well into the mid-20th century it was difficult for American-born Catholics to find work in certain industries. There were no laws officially barring Catholics from leadership positions but many institutions exercised their right to exclude religious minorities; this included the heavily Protestant-run school boards.⁶ In the beginning of the 1969-70 school year, the Pittsburgh Board of Public Education transferred Dominic F. Iannotta to David B. Oliver High School in the North Side to serve as principal. Formerly Vice Principal and later Principal at Latimer Junior High School, he was one of the first Italian American Catholics to be promoted within the Pittsburgh Public

School system. Under normal circumstances, Iannotta's transfer would be considered a good promotion, but his placement at Oliver initially came with its share of difficulties.

Oliver High School made headlines in the late 1960s because tensions were high between the African American and Caucasian student body; violence had spread from the neighborhood into the school, students were boycotting class, and the Pittsburgh Police became a regular presence in the hallways. Iannotta, son of Italian immigrants Angelo and Giacinta Iannotta, was brought to Oliver to address these issues. In the December 1971 issue of the school newspaper, *The Bear Facts*, a student author writes, "It was Mr. Iannotta who was in the thick of the riots as soon as

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it started.... He insisted that many privileges which had been denied us be reinstated. And then he told us to shape-up if we wanted to keep them.”⁷ Privileges allotted during his tenure were student selected music in the cafeteria, more food options in the lunchroom, new student clubs, and an incentive program for field trips to destinations like Fallingwater. Chief among the changes instituted by Iannotta was equal representation of black and white pupils in all areas of student life. Iannotta served as principal at Oliver High School until 1976.

Even within my own family, which is now into the fourth generation, a respect for earning an education and for those professionals dedicating their lives to instruction was viewed as a by-product of our Italian heritage. My father said in his oral history, “[Grandpap] felt that the key to success in the United States was innovation and education; he wanted every one of his [five] kids to go to school.... Our family put a very high focus on education.”⁸ Like Joseph D’Andrea’s mother Candida, who

told him that books were his best friends, and Mary Ferro’s father Vincent, who pushed his daughter to attend college, the first generation of Italian Americans recognized that, in the United States, diplomas and degrees subsidize the upward mobility of our ethnic group. ☀

¹ R.J.B. Bosworth, *Mussolini’s Italy: Life Under the Fascist Dictatorship, 1915-1945* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 40.

² Ibid.

³ Oral History Interview with Mary Ferro, HHC Detre L&A, 2016.0103.

⁴ Oral History Interview with Joseph D’Andrea, HHC Detre L&A 2017.0054.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Kenneth J. Heineman, *A Catholic New Deal: Religion and Reform in Depression Pittsburgh* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 4.

⁷ Dominic Iannotta Papers, HHC Detre L&A, 2017.0028.

⁸ Oral History of David Marinaro, HHC Detre L&A, 2015.0013.



In 1974, Dominic Iannotta received his doctorate from Carnegie Mellon University. He lectured in History at Duquesne University from 1946-1982 and received the Valley Forge Classroom Teachers Medal by the Freedoms Foundation for History in 1961.

HHC Detre L&A, Gift of Catherine DeRiggi, 2017.0028.



Dominic Iannotta’s mother proudly wears her son’s cap and gown in the backyard of their house in the Lower Hill District, 1942.

HHC Detre L&A, Gift of Catherine DeRiggi, 2017.0028.