

Books of The Times

A Revealing Ethnic Study

By FRED FERRETTI

A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY OF THE ITALIAN AMERICANS. Edited by Wayne Moquin with Charles Van Doren. Consulting editor: Francis A. J. Ianni. 443 pages. Praeger Publishers. \$15.

As a New York-raised Italian-American whose parents, both Italian-Americans, were born in New York and whose grandfather and grandmother were cargoed here at the ages of 5 and 3, I have muddled through to my still-amorphous and quite mild ethnocentrism rather late and somewhat indirectly. I grew up in eastern Queens—WASP country—in the nineteen-thirties and forties when that borough was rural suburbia and when a visit to my grandparents' upper Harlem brownstone was a bus-subway-subway day's excursion to "the city" made bearable only by the proximity of their home to the Polo Grounds. I neither spoke nor read Italian and my parents spoke it badly and only



Giovanni Caboto

for my grandfather's sake. I grew up among the Lutherans and entered my teens only sporadically conscious of being a kid whose name happened to end in a vowel. I was, as my grandfather said often and with what I now perceive was some scorn, an Ah-Meddi-Gan. I didn't become a "wop" until I went to parochial high school in Brooklyn where several of the Christian Brothers who taught there and the largely non-Italian student body used this pejorative because it seemed to them terribly funny. I fought a lot in high school and often fantasized over Anglo names even though I revered Joe DiMaggio.

I knew virtually nothing about Italian history except that, in my pre-teens, there was this fellow Mussolini who must have been something special for my grandfather to collect all those medallions about, and there was, evidently, no inclination on the part of my parents to see that I was exposed to anything except American history. As for Italian-American history well, it simply didn't exist and there was no inclination on the part of the schools to see that I, or for that matter any of my contemporaries, be exposed to it. There was no place in the Melting Pot for Italian spices, the editors of this multifaceted book tell us.

Little-Known Exploits

Oh, there was Columbus all right, and Vespucci, and La Guardia, Fermi, Mother Cabrini, Giannini's Bank of America, and Vito Marcantonio, but were we told that John Cabot was Giovanni Caboto of Genoa, or about the Waldensers from Piedmont who fled to New Amsterdam in the mid-17th century, or the Italians in 1610 Jamestown, or the creation by Italians of experimental agricultural enclaves in New Jersey, North Carolina, Mississippi, California and Arkansas? Or that Enrico di Tonti founded what is Illinois in the sixteen-eighties and that Eusebio Kino charted much of the Southwest at the same time? Or of the role of Filippo Mazzei of Virginia

in the War of Independence? Or that the Planters Peanuts everybody ate were from Amedeo Obici's corporate empire?

This "Documentary History" admirably fills these many gaps and, simply as a utilitarian primary source of little-known history told through the words of those who made and recorded it, it is most valuable. But the book's ultimate value transcends this, for unobtrusively, with their tightly written essay introductions to the sections and selections, and by what they selected, the editors tell us exactly how it was, and is, to be an Italian in America.

It explains how most Italian-Americans, individually and collectively, were forced by Anglo social attitudes fostered by incredibly jingoistic periodical and newspaper writings to become defensive about their origins, and why it is that Italian-American yahoos acquire instantaneous followings, it seems, when they begin shouting.

To be in the Italian immigration wave, the editors show us, was to be fair game for the padrones, to be exploited, sold into servitude on railroad work gangs, corralled like animals, enslaved. In 1905 the Southern cotton growers cautioned that Italian pickers were "destined to threaten the conceded supremacy of the negro in his oldest American field." In 1891 Representative Henry Cabot Lodge thought that it was not nice for 11 Italians to be lynched by a New Orleans mob, but after all "the mob acted on the belief that these men were guilty of the crime" of killing the city's police chief.

In 1908 exotic tales of Black Hand, Mafia and Camorra gangs permeated the press and "almost every dark-skinned European, not speaking English, who does not wear the Turkish fez, is put down on the police records as an Italian." Italians were swarthy and filthy, uneducable and crime prone, the social essayists wrote, and the newspapers wrote, and with the post-World War I xenophobia they were ripe for such abominations as the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti. During World War II they had to be watched constantly so that their Mussolini-Fascisti leanings would not erupt into damage to America.

A Question of Attitudes

Today, the editors tell us, insensitivity toward Italians in America, if not terribly intense, exists widely, with American society generally accepting as truths the notions that Italian-Americans are somehow ethnically inferior, anti-intellectual, inherently criminal and easily dismissed. I have sat in on editorial conferences where, when it was ventured that "all Italians have at least one relative in the Mafia," there was a general nodding of agreement. I have been asked by the well-known author of a book about Italian-American crime to tell him "about the Mafia guys I know," and who reacted with disbelief when I told him that I thought my Uncle Frank once bet with a bookie, but that was the extent of my knowledge.

That is what the "Documentary History" is about in its essence—attitudes. Even a cursory reading will evoke surprise, perhaps pride or even chauvinism, maybe skepticism. But an intense, questing read will serve, I believe, to make the reader question his own attitudes, whatever they may be.