

## Film Reviews

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*And They Came to Chicago: The Italian American Legacy.*

By Gia M. Amella.

Modio Media, 2007.

76 minutes. DVD Format, color.

*And They Came to Chicago: The Italian American Legacy* is a meticulously researched, visually compelling, and for the most part inspiring and uplifting portrait of Italian life in Chicago from the late nineteenth century to the present. Featuring extraordinary film clips and photographs – many of them clearly drawn from family archives – that bring to life scenes in southern Italian villages, American factories, and Chicago ethnic neighborhoods in the industrial era, the documentary sears into the viewer's imagination how long and hard and convoluted was the journey of Chicago's Italian migrants toward economic security and a place in the American middle class. I found myself deeply moved by the film's depiction of this journey, narrated with eloquence and humor by a carefully selected group of notables and ordinary citizens ranging from actor Dennis Farina to historian Rudolph Vecoli.

From a historical standpoint, the film is remarkably thorough, covering labor conditions, religion, the impact of regionalism and localism, neighborhood formation, and anti-immigrant racism when dealing with early generations of migrants and suburbanization, urban renewal, and the weakening of ethnic identity when dealing with the post-World War II era when the majority of Chicago's Italians were American born. Nor is the film mere celebration. The film treats controversial issues such as the rise of the Black Hand Society, the growth of the Capone organization, and the enormous appeal of Mussolini to Italian Americans, an embarrassment only erased by the disproportionate enlistment of Italian Americans in the U.S. Armed Forces during World War II. Because of the power of its visual images, the charisma of its narrators, and its generally uplifting message, it is easy to imagine this film becoming a staple on PBS stations and gaining widespread use in ethnic studies courses at American universities.

However, there are flaws in this film that should give scholars pause. Most important of these is its reinforcement of the narrative that Chicago's Italian Americans climbed into the middle class almost entirely by dint of their own efforts, without significant help from the government or alliances with other groups that were part of Chicago's working class. As Lisabeth Cohen points out in her great book on the Chicago working class in the Depression, *Making a New Deal*, the network of banks and savings-and-loan organizations among Chicago's Italian Americans all collapsed during the Depression, leaving many residents impoverished and in danger of losing their homes. Without the relief programs of the New Deal, ranging from work programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Works Progress Administration to mortgage support from the Home Owners' Loan Corporation, Chicago's Italian Americans would have suffered far more grievously from the Depression than they already did. It was the federal government that stepped into the breach to prevent permanent impoverishment when Italian American workers lost their jobs and the community's financial structure collapsed. You would never know this from the film.

Neither would you know how much Chicago Italian Americans benefited from the expansion of the city's labor movement in the late 1930s and 1940s. It was only in those years that Chicago's largest industries (steel and meatpacking) became fully unionized, lifting many of its workers into near middle-class status. How much of a role did the labor movement, which Italian Americans helped build with workers of many other nationalities, play in their ethnic group's rapid economic ascent during the postwar years? There is much more in the film about the contribution of Italian-American businessmen and religious leaders to the group's progress than a hard-edged analysis of how Italian Americans benefited from New Deal programs and the multiethnic social movement connected to the New Deal.

But the most disturbing omission in the film, at least to me, is its utter failure to analyze conflict and cooperation between Italian Americans and blacks. At no point does the film explore, or even mention, black-Italian relations in Chicago, not in factories, not in neighborhoods, and not in local politics—nor does it show groups or individual portraits of African Americans in any of its extraordinary visuals. Given that Chicago has one of the largest and most cohesive black communities in the United States, was the scene of major riots in the post-World War II period and the 1960s, and featured civil rights marches through white neighborhoods that were met with violence, the absence of any discussion of black-Italian relations is most unfortunate. Did the groups ever intermarry? Did they ever live in the same neighborhoods? Did Italians participate in the mob attacks on blacks during the 1919 race riots? Did they use violence to keep blacks out of their neighborhoods during the 1950s and 1960s? And, on the other side, did Italian-American youngsters, whether during the jazz age or the heyday of rock and roll, adopt African-American music and dance styles as symbols of their Americanization? Do Italian Americans, even today, live their “whiteness” in ways that differ from other European ethnic groups? What is the process through which Italian Americans, often stigmatized for their racial identity, became “white”? There are great potential insights on these issues in sources ranging from Spike Lee's films (*Do the Right Thing*, *Jungle Fever*, etc.), the essays in *Are Italians White?*, and numerous books and articles on Italian Americans in “doo wop,” the urban harmonic music of the postwar era, but the filmmakers draw on none of these. Rather, by ignoring the issue entirely, it seems they have decided that “race” in all its complexities is a subject that is best kept private lest it disturb the film's portrait of the Italian-American odyssey in Chicago as the triumph of a hard pressed, oft-beleaguered ethnic group guided by a reverence for hard work and ethnic solidarity.

When all is said and done, *And They Came to Chicago* will do nothing to disturb the common perception among Italian Americans that they “did it alone” without significant government help and that African Americans and recent immigrants should follow their example. For all its strengths, it ends up doing the community whose triumph it portrays a disservice by sanitizing its history and failing to account accurately for the reasons for its economic success.

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