

Our Story: Italian-Americans in Utah.

By Sam Prigg (Editing and Post Production Director), Joanne R. Milner (Executive Producer), and Alan Lucchetti (Editor).

Our Story/Your Story Documentary Productions, 2008.

65 minutes. DVD format, color.

Famiglia Italiana in Corning, NY.

By Richard La Vere (Production and Editing) and Constance R. Sullivan-Blum (Script Writer).

Painted Post Historical Society, Corning, New York, and Arts Council of the Southern Finger Lakes Region, 2008.

36 minutes. DVD format, color.

The emergence of digital technologies has provided the means as well as the space for media productions that tell the story of the Italian diaspora in the United States. The passing of elders and dissolution of once vibrant Italian-American communities across the nation have made this work of recovery all the more timely and necessary. Sponsored by a panoply of organizations, foundations, as well as individual donations, the productions are often distinguished by different points of view effected through a range of oral history segments, historic documents, live footage, editing techniques, and sound effects.

Our Story: Italian-Americans in Utah is one such effort. It opens with the reenactment of a scene recounting the grand gesture of Giuseppe Taranto. Placing a money belt with gold coins containing his life savings of \$2,500 on the table of the noted religious leader Brigham Young, the immigrant from Palermo provided enough money for the completion of the first Mormon temple in the United States. Returning to Italy to proselytize about the Mormon faith and the joys of the newly established farming communities in Utah, Taranto had recruited seventy-four Italian converts by 1870 and helped shape one of the first settlements of Italian Americans in the United States in Carbon County, Utah.

The first half of the documentary chronicles how the decades after the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 brought waves of immigrant Italian Catholics from northern as well as southern Italy to Utah. Sophisticated editing techniques by Sam Prigg and Alan Lucchetti, rivaling those found in any big-budget PBS documentary production, weave together primary documents and an original score with dozens of interview segments with Italian Americans from all walks of life. Good use is made of early Edison footage and Carbon County promotional films from the 1920s to underscore how great numbers of immigrants arriving at Ellis Island were ushered into boxcars with tow tags marked Carbon County to work in Utah's mines and railroads. Philip Notarianni (current director of Utah State's History Department), Frank Pignanelli (former Minority Leader in the Utah State Legislature), and the producer, Joanne Milner, among other narrators, give collective voice to the ways in which their ancestors sought solidarity amidst dangerous working and harsh living conditions.

To its credit, the first part of the documentary also provides insights into the organizing efforts of the labor leader, Ben Bonacci, as well as Italian-American immigrants'

involvement in the United Mine Workers strikes of 1903 and 1922 in which the National Guard was called out. Walter Borla, current secretary of Stella D'America, explains how miners in the early part of the twentieth century formed the fraternal organization to provide mutual aid and insurance.

Highlighting another dimension of Italian-American labor history, Tony Tonic stresses the contributions Italian-American stonemasons made to the region's built environment and emphasizes their connections with men who worked the "tough jobs" in the mines and railroads. Maintaining that nationality did not matter, he recalls "if one of them got hurt, they all helped one another." The theme of solidarity is further driven home by the story of a union man who discourages his son from taking a job as a supervisor. "You treat those men fairly [. . .] get a good days work out of them [. . .] but be more concerned about those men than the chunk of coal you are working on," he admonishes.

The ways in which Italian Americans shaped beloved communities amidst adversity and beyond regional differences is similarly accentuated in succeeding sections that focus on farmers in Weber County. Family members recall how Italian Americans shared the work of planting and harvesting and taught one another how to hitch horses to plows and raise alfalfa and cattle. Along a similar vein, Italian shop owners and merchants in Salt Lake County stress how their ancestors contributed to the good of the whole community by writing off the debts of their compatriots.

Rare archival photos of hospital tents set up to treat patients afflicted by the influenza epidemics of 1910 and 1918 remind us how sickness and poverty struck down the early immigrants and their newborn children. Eighty-four-year-old Alma Colleni Parisi testifies she weighed only a pound and a half at birth. "They wrapped me in cotton, put me in a shoebox and laid me on the oven door [. . .] The doctor said to my dad, 'Well, if you are not rich, let her die.' My father insisted, 'I am not rich and I am not letting her die.'"

The second part of *Our Story* takes us to the present day by focusing on the cultural legacy of Italian Americans in Utah, including contemporary expressions of ethnicity, lifestyles, and a tendency to search for roots back in Italy. Sam Siciliano, emeritus board member of the Utah Opera Company, and musician John Tibola discuss the long-standing importance of opera and accordion music. Providing a broad view and setting the stage for a section that references Utah's noted resources in the field of genealogy, Giovanni Maschero informs us that the number of people of Italian-American descent in the state has grown from 15,000 to 70,000 since he became Italian Vice Consul in 1989.

While there is a nod to the important role Italian-American woman played maintaining households, the film leaves the viewer with questions about women's work histories. The Utah Historical Society archives houses enough oral history material to create several noteworthy productions that could shed light not only on Italian-American women's work but also on other significant absences in the film, such as interactions between Italian immigrants and Native Americans. Of similar importance would be stories about Italian immigrants' responses to the nativist activities of the Ku Klux Klan.

One hopes that *Our Story* is the first of many productions about the Italian-American experience in Utah. All in all, the documentary makes a significant contribution to

understanding Italian Americans' input on the development of the American West and furthers dialogue about the larger history and legacy of Italian-American immigration, labor history, entrepreneurship, and leadership.

Famiglia Italiana in Corning, NY, a grassroots effort issuing from the Corning-Painted Post Historical Society and the Arts Council of the Southern Finger Lakes in New York State, seeks to address the lacunae of women's histories by foregrounding Italian lace as a metaphor for the Italian-American experience. A common practice in many Italian immigrant households, Italian-American women's needlework holds particular relevance for Italian Americans in Corning who saw their carefully tended homes, gardens, and storefronts destroyed by floodwaters generated by Hurricane Agnes in 1972.

Narration based on a sensitive script written by Constance R. Sullivan-Blum, who organized a 2008 exhibit on Italian needlework entitled *Lace: The Space Between* in conjunction with the documentary, provides the occasion for six Italian-American women to tell their stories about growing up in the neighborhood around Water Street. Recounting how they participated in one another's lives, they commend their ancestors' virtues of frugality and resourcefulness. They reminisce about "gardens as long as the backyards would allow them to be without going into the river," growing and eating anything "from dandelions to cucumbers and beets," and "trading coal found along the railroad tracks for food." Particularly noteworthy are stories of inventive child's play, born out of necessity, inspiring doll furniture made from burdock, sleds from barrel boards, and footballs from strips of rags tied together.

A segment that focuses on men's work on the railroads and movement from shanty town to shanty town reveals that not all was idyllic before the storm. The specter of occupational lung disease that killed mine, factory, and quarry workers across the United States also hung over the men who breathed in silica dust in the "pot and clay" division of Corning's Glass Works.

Set against a segment that features images of women's lacework while highlighting their creativity and the role of memory in maintaining cultural ties, interviewees also bear witness to enforced assimilation through English language classes. Two narrators—a woman recalling the stigma of looking "ethnic" and a man recounting when his car was vandalized by his girlfriend's father, angered by their dating—underscore the fact that racist views about Italians extended into the 1960s.

And then came the flood—occurring at a time when most Italian Americans in Corning were enjoying economic prosperity. Tales of evacuating buildings because water was streaming up stairways and the palpable sense of loss experienced by Richard Negri as he tries to "feel the vibes" of his home while standing in what is now the parking lot of a supermarket makes the preceding section on Italian women's lace all the more poignant.

Smaller than *Our Story* in scope and budget but just as equal in heart, the strength of *Famiglia Italiana* is the space it provides for individual narrators to talk in depth about their life histories. The documentary would be enhanced by the inclusion of more information about the hometown origins of the Italians who settled in Corning and by the depiction of additional archival documents. Speaking to the film's production, the documentary would have benefited from re-positioning the camera to capture two narrators' direct gazes or by including the interviewer in some shots.

By presenting the collective memories of Italian Americans in visual and aural forms, both *Our Story* and *Famiglia Italiana* constitute important interventions in the dominant historical record. In so doing, these media productions also engage the general public, provide a needed counterbalance to fictional and nonfictional accounts in books and cinema, and have the potential to inspire how Italian Americans recount their histories.

—CHRISTINE F. ZINNI
State University of New York at Brockport

Monongah Remembered.

By Peter Argentine.

Argentine Productions, 2007.

25 minutes. DVD format, color.

An explosion at the Monongah coal mines in Fairmont, West Virginia, on December 6, 1907, was the worst mining disaster in American history. As a result of the explosion, 362 mine workers, both men and boys, working in mine numbers 6 and 8 of the Fairmont Coal Company were killed. Among those who perished, 178 were Italian immigrants, mainly from the regions of Molise and Calabria. It is estimated that the blast left approximately 1,000 widows and orphans in both the United States and in Italy. In December 2007, in remembrance of the hundredth anniversary of the Monongah mine explosion, Argentine Productions, in collaboration with the Heinz History Center and the American Italian Cultural Institute (AMICI), produced the documentary *Monongah Remembered*. The film, although only 25 minutes long, provides a fresh take on the world of work through the eyes of Italian immigrant workers and their families, both in the United States and in their hometowns in Italy.

The force of the explosion reverberated throughout Fairmount County, destroying buildings and houses in proximity to the mines, but the explosion also rocked many towns and villages in Italy, where news of the tragedy and the deaths of the workers quickly spread among family members and town residents who anxiously sought information. With massive working-class immigration to the United States at the onset of the twentieth century as the story's backdrop, Peter Argentine's documentary goes beyond recounting the journey of immigrant Italian workers. The film examines the transition from the misery of life in the rural regions of Italy to the precarious and perilous existence in the industrial United States by exploring the impact that the explosion would leave on the lives of workers and their families in both countries.

The film draws on interviews of surviving family members and Italian political authorities responsible for collecting support for the construction of a memorial to honor the victims of the explosion. The series of interviews realized in Italy and the United States provide an important perspective of how influential such far-reaching events continue to be over time and that the world of work is in many ways