



# Il Notizario

[The Newsletter]  
of the

*Friends of Isola delle Femmine, Inc.*



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Special Issue: 2020-A

Editor: A.A. Grillo

Italian-American Heritage & Culture Month

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## **Italian-American Heritage & Culture Month 2020**

by A.A. Grillo

This is the first of three special issues of *Il Notizario* to note that October is Italian-American Heritage and Culture Month. This one will be a remembrance of how we have celebrated our Italian-American Heritage in past years, some very past years. Then the second and third issues will call to our attention other Italian-Americans who have led noteworthy lives. There are so many such individuals, fellow Italian immigrants and fellow descendants of Italian immigrants that we could not possibly list them all. Instead we will tell the stories of just a few, possibly a few who will be new to you. Heroes we can add to our personal list of heroes to exemplify our exceptional heritage as Italian-Americans.

Christopher Columbus was possibly the first famous hero for Italian immigrants and us their descendants. The United States took special note of his discovery of these new lands by naming many prominent places in our country, among them the headquarters of our Federal Government in the District of Columbia, the Columbia River, several cities like Columbus, Ohio, and the very noteworthy Columbia University in New York. Given that all that celebrity, it was only natural for Italian-Americans to adopt him as their hero. Columbus Day on the 12<sup>th</sup> of October was observed in many cities with parades large and small. Such a celebration held annually in Pittsburg is remembered in the following article of this issue.

In the past several years, Columbus' celebrity has been questioned pointing to his maltreatment of indigenous natives in the lands he discovered and governed. The accounts, publicized in recent years, of these actions describe behavior that we certainly could not condone, but we do not wish to enter here into the continuing debate among historians of how to treat these actions in the era 500 years ago. We can at least admire his bravery to set out west across the Atlantic from Spain for discovery, something not attempted by any others of his time.

The celebration of Columbus Day in those many years past was an opportunity to tout our heritage, to take pride in it. For some it may have been a salve against the mocking experienced by early immigrants. It is in that spirit that we look back with fond memories of these past celebrations.

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*To preserve, protect, and promote the Italian-Sicilian cultural heritage among the descendants, immigrants, citizens and friends of Isola delle Femmine, Sicily and around the world.*

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## Discovery Day & Columbus Day Celebrations in Pittsburg

by Vince Ferrante Jr.

1911 marked the first of many Discovery Day or what quickly evolved into Columbus Day Celebrations here locally. Several pictures of past celebrations are included to give a visual impression of these festive events. Initially, as per Pittsburg Post news reports, the event was a collaboration between the towns of



Columbus & His Crew: L-R Standing: Joseph Russo, Tredo Russo, J.P. Catanzaro, Carlo Gildi (Columbus), Salvatore Troia, Salvatore Bagno, L&R Sitting, Peter Costanza, Joe Russo

Pittsburg and Antioch. It was an opportunity for local Italian-Americans to celebrate and share their culture in a more innocent time. Soon the event was hosted solely by Pittsburg, which had a predominantly Italian population in the early 20th century. That being said, there are local news reports in the 1920's of the local Mexican colony taking part in the festivities as well as Anglo groups. It was truly an inclusive affair. The event would be celebrated nearly

every year until 1957. The entire business community supported the event and it became a huge success. The event grew in size and stature and was attended by people from throughout the greater Bay Area, many arriving by train. Newspaper reports number the event attendees into the thousands, in some years exceeding the population of the town itself. Columbus, Queen



Columbus & His Crew Ride Their Float Down the Parade Route



A Better View of this 1947 Parade Route

Isabella and her court, in full regalia, were honored with “boat landings” re-enacted at the waterfront. One year in the 1940's Columbus arrived by water aircraft! The Queen was chosen at times by vote and later by number of tickets sold as a fundraiser for community organizations. The winner was the center of attention and honored with great pageantry and crowned at a coronation ball of “gorgeous splendor”. The celebration was a 2-3 day affair with a variety of food



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Horse Groups Were Very Popular – This in the 1930s

street but later its primary course was changed to Railroad Avenue. In later years, the route would start on School Street then turn north to run down through the business district towards the waterfront. The parade was filled with a wide variety of floats, marching bands and drill teams. Marching units would come from places such as Stockton and other California cities. Spectators lined both sides of the street, many viewing from the rooftops. The 1950's saw much more inclusion with an ethnically diverse



vendors, special church services, musicians, orators, dances, games, fireworks, boat races, fishing derby, air shows and of course a great parade, and we mean great. In 1957 there were a record number 183 parade entrants! In the early years, the parade route ran down Black Diamond Street since that was the town's main

queen's court and dancers of a wide variety of ethnic groups. Interruptions over the years were only due to the great influenza and two world wars. Finally, with the loss of two pillars of the town's economic engine, the closure of Camp Stoneman and the state mandated closure of commercial fishing in the Sacramento Delta in 1957, the end was at hand. The loss of disposable income forced the event into a hibernation until 1973. The Pittsburg Sons of Italy organization revitalized an annual Italian Festival honoring Columbus, Isabella and her court on a smaller scale at the Del Monte Center and later the Marina Center. These events would be held intermittently until 1992.



The 1937 Queen Isabella & Her Court  
L-R: Rose Pizzimenti, Katie Seeno, Uelia (Viscuso) Doppie, Queen Connie (Guiliano) Marks, Angelina Guistina, Rose (Ferrera) Hernandez  
Children L&R: Ida Flossi, Kathy Russo

[Pictures courtesy of the Pittsburg Historical Society Museum]