



California Italian-American Task Force

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TO: Ethnic Studies@cde.ca.gov,

FROM: William Cerruti, Chair, California Italian American Task Force

SUBJECT: Request To Include Italian Americans In The Ethnic Studies Curriculum.

THE TASK FORCE

On behalf of the California Italian American Task Force, I am submitting this request to include the Italian American experience in the Proposed Ethnic Studies Curriculum.

The Task Force is a State Commission created by the California Legislature to address the concerns of the Italian American population of California.

WHY ITALIAN AMERICANS SHOULD BE INCLUDED A DISTINCT ETHNIC GROUP

Italian American are a distinct and important ethnic group in California and in the United States. They are one of the largest ethnic groups in California and in the United States numbering over twenty million people.

The contributions of Italian Americans to the development of California have been enormous yet are often unrecognized. One of the most pressing issues in the Italian community is the lack of coverage of Italian Americans in the school curriculum.

California school children learn about the experiences of other ethnic groups in their educational experience but the Italian American experience is not included. As a result, California schoolchildren are uninformed about the role Italian Americans have played in their history.

HISTORIC PREJUDICE AND NEGATIVE IMAGES

Instead, most Californian's rely on prejudicial and negative images of Italian Americans as depicted in film, the media and society in general. To overcome this **historic prejudice** against Italian Americans it is vital that their story be included in the California Ethnic Studies Curriculum. Americans do not know who the Italian Americans are and what they are.

STUDY OF TREATMENT OF ITALIAN AMERICANS IN CALIFORNIA TEXTBOOKS

In a recent study of social science textbooks used in California schools and universities (The Treatment Of Italian Americans In California Textbooks), it was found that Italian Americans were absent from the textbooks at both the grade school and college levels. Italian Americans are largely not even mentioned, not even a footnote.

ONE OF LARGEST ANCESTRY GROUPS IN CALIFORNIA

Yet, Italian Americans were the single largest immigrant group to arrive in the United States through Ellis Island. A quarter to a third of the immigrants that passed through Ellis island were Italian. Still, no mention. For much of the 20th century, Italian Americans were the largest immigrant group in the nation. Still no mention. Today Italian Americans are the largest ancestry group in 4 states, the second and third largest in 2 other states and one of the largest in California

ITALY IN CALIFORNIA - CONTRIBUTIONS

Italian immigrants in California came with the Gold Rush and were one of the earliest and largest groups to settle in the State. Their descendants still live in the foothill towns of the "Mother Lode" The largest settlement arose by San Francisco Bay where they built a successful Italian colony. By the 20th Century Italian Newspapers operated across California. They established themselves in fishing villages along the coast and by 1910 dominated 80% of California's fishing business. By the 1880's Italians dominated the fruit and vegetable and food processing industries of California. . Italian pioneers played a major role in the creation of California's basic industries such as agriculture, branch banking, food processing, the fishing, lumber and mining industries, the wine industry and the list of collective accomplishments goes on. Branch banking in the United States began when Italian Americans established branches of the Bank of Italy in the Italian neighborhoods across California in the early 20th century and later changed the name to the Bank of America.

CONTRIBUTIONS IN POPULAR CULTURE

Their role in popular culture was especially notable in the Italian Music Decade of the 1950s and 60s when Italian American entertainers topped the charts. In Film, Sport and Entertainment, Italian Americans have made their mark and have risen to the highest positions in government, the military and industry. We know their names as they stood out as the symbols of their professions: Joe DiMaggio in baseball, Frank Sinatra and Mario Lanza in music, Antonin Scalia in law, Rocky Marciano in boxing, Vince Lombardi in football, Francis Ford Coppola in film, Charles Atlas in body building, Domenico Ghiradelli in candy, Gallo Brothers in Wine, and the list goes on.

HISTORY OF DISCRIMINATION AND SEGREGATION

They made enormous contributions against the historic prejudice and fierce discrimination they endured. They created hundreds of "little Italy" communities across the nation in every city, large and small, in part because of their segregation and the hostility toward them by other Americans.

Well into the 20th century, they were not allowed to join labor unions in California. They created their own industries where they employed Italian American labor. They were often not allowed to live in restricted neighborhoods or join social clubs. They frequently had to build their own churches because they were not allowed to pray in Churches built by earlier immigrant groups. As late as the 1920s, a mob invaded the Italian neighborhood of Frankfurt, Illinois and after 3 days of resistance and violence hundreds of Italian were left homeless.

SECOND LARGEST ANCESTRY GROUP TO BE LYNCHED IN THE UNITED STATES

After the Civil War, Italian immigrants were recruited to work on the southern plantations to replace the slaves. It was in New Orleans in 1891 that one of the largest lynchings in American history occurred when 11 Italian Americans were lynched by a mob. Leading newspapers of the time including the New York Times and Washington Post fanned the flames of racial hatred against Italians and justified their lynching. In the following decades dozens of Italians were lynched across the United States. **Italian Americans were the second largest American group to be lynched in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.**

IN DEFENSE OF THEIR COUNTRY

Italian Americans have served in every major American conflict. Three regiments from Italy and hundreds of Italian Americans served in the Revolutionary War. The first Marine Corp Band was formed by Italians recruited by Thomas Jefferson. During the Civil War More than 200 officers and four Generals in the Union (The Garibaldi Guard) and Confederate armies were Italian. An estimated 400,000 Italian Americans served in World War I. **An estimated 10% (over one million) of the American military in World War II was of Italian descent. Tens of thousands died to prove their loyalty in a war fought against Italy which pitted Italian against Italian.** In Occidental, California, 90 percent of those killed in action were Italian Americans. The loss was repeated in Italian neighborhoods across the country. In Newark, New Jersey 65% of the soldiers from there were Italian American. In one California town, 9 Italian American mothers each had 4 sons in the military but 7 were barred from visiting their sons due to wartime restrictions on Italians.

Italian American Rosie Bonavita became a symbol of women working in the war effort as "Rosie the Riveter." Marine hero Sergeant John Basilone become the only man in American history to win the nation's two highest honors for bravery, The Medal of Honor and the Navy Cross. General Douglas MacArthur described him "a one man army" when he almost single handedly defeated an enemy regiment of 3,000 soldiers.

INTERMENT AND RELOCATION DURING WWII

In 1941, on the eve of World War Two, Italian Americans were the largest immigrant group in California and the United States. When the war began, 700,000 Italian American immigrants were restricted with curfews and travel restrictions and their personal property seized. Hundreds were interned and 10,000 California Italians were forced to relocate from their homes and businesses on the California Coast. Their language was suppressed and their community leaders arrested. These events happened despite overwhelming Italian American participation in the War. Their Crime; Being of Italian Ancestry

THEIR CULTURE SUPPRESSED

After the War it was not popular to be too Italian. Many changed their names. The damage to their communities and cultural heritage from the repression of the war years remain and contemporary Italian Americans have worked hard to reclaim their heritage. To embrace that heritage rather than reject it. But this painful episode, among others in the Italian American experience, remain left out of the school curriculum. The stigma associated with Italian Ethnicity remains in California and needs to be addressed by the educational system.

EXCLUSION FROM THE CURRICULUM

The story of California and the United States is incomplete without telling the Italian American story. The exclusion of the Italian American experience from the Ethnic Studies Curriculum would be an injustice.

Italian Americans do not feel well served by the current school curriculum which does not consider them part of the American story. Including Italian Americans in the Ethnic Studies Curriculum would help end the generations of exclusion and provide society with more accurate images of who the Italian Americans are and the role they have played in society.

Including Italian Americans in the educational experience provided by our schools is the least that should be done to rectify their past exclusion and to combat the many disparaging images presented of them in the popular culture and media. It is the least that should be done to provide Italian Americans with equal treatment and equal history.

ITALIAN AMERICANS SHOULD BE IN THE HISTORY BOOKS TOO

While including Italian Americans in the Ethnic Studies Curriculum muddies the waters of racial indignation of other ethnic or racial groups it is essential that Italian Americans be included. Injustice cannot be quantified. It is absolute. It does not belong to any race or ethnic group. To include Italian Americans in the Ethnic Studies Curriculum does not lessen the experience of any other group, rather it transcends racial boundaries. It forces us to look at history more closely and break down stereotypes.

Italian Americans should be in the History Books Too!