

PLENARY SESSION REPORT

APRIL 16, 2016

HOST

CELLINI LODGE #2206

CLINTON G. MARTIN PARK COMMUNITY CENTER
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INTRODUCTION

The quarter began in a rather mundane fashion, but as the days moved on matters became quite heady, and we had to be far more attentive and focused than at the beginning of the quarter.

“THE SICILIAN GIRL” MOVIE

The concern regarding this film surfaced two years ago in the Basilone Lodge when the leadership wanted to show the film to celebrate October Heritage and Culture Month. The film is based on a true story in the 1990s of a young girl who defies the Mafia because of its vicious deeds which culminated in the death of her own relatives. Some members though claimed the film should not be shown because it portrayed Sicilians in an unfavorable light or was defamatory against Sicilians. CSJ requested that if the film was of questionable value, then another activity should be chosen for the Month, which was done. However, to be fair to the lodge members we vowed that we would review the film, evaluate it, and return with our estimation.

Having established a CSJ ad hoc committee to review the film at the Huntington Public Library and organized another showing later at the Farmingdale Public Library for a wider audience of CSJ Executive Board members and interested members of the Order, it was concluded that the film was not discriminatory nor defamatory against Sicilians. However, because the film's subject was rather dark, serious, and weighty, we suggested that other subjects and activities should be chosen in a more positive and festive light for October Culture and Heritage Month.

This film was so notorious in Italy that it was ordered by the government that it be shown in every high school in the country. The ultimate result was that the populace became so incensed that demonstrations were held against the Mafia, which in turn resulted in a cascade of arrests and prosecutions that put a host of Mafia chieftains in jail for a very long time.

GATES RESTAURANT REVIEWS

In last quarter's report it was mentioned that a one Michael Marsocci was doing local restaurant reviews in Facebook videos in the upstate suburb of Rochester (Gates) with an Italian accent, which some thought offensive. Having assigned the matter to District 8 Chairperson Dr. Joseph Rube' and lodge liaisons, they investigated each video thoroughly and came to the conclusion that such videos were not that offensive, and so the matter is now dropped.

BENSONHURST DATING GAME

Last quarter we reported the particulars of this racist spoof, and we attempted to remove it off Facebook and other outlets. When that effort failed, a letter was sent to the NYS NAACP since the video showed Black comedian Chris Rock was the butt of the racism by the Italian contestants. Our idea was to encourage the NAACP to view the video and work with us to eliminate it off Facebook. To date we have not received an answer from this organization, and we really hope we do.

OUR LADY OF LORETO CHURCH

All of you are aware of CSJ's efforts for a long time to landmark and thereby preserve this historic neighborhood relic in East New York, Brooklyn. We've already secured the Brownsville Heritage Center as an interested community group which wants to use the building as a cultural center, a requirement necessary for landmarking. We followed up the Heritage Center's letter with one of our own in support. Mario Togliola, a retired schoolteacher interested in the preservation, has already sent a landmark application package to the State, which was so highly praised that state officials proclaimed that the Church is definitely eligible for landmarking!

Furthermore now, we must seek out the owner of the Church, Our Lady of the Presentation, and get it on board, a prerequisite state officials say will make the landmarking move forward more easily. Consequently, I sent a letter to OLP requesting its involvement, and we are awaiting word.

In the meantime Mario has secured another interested group that supports preservation—-PENY (Preserving East New York). This group suggested we organize a petition drive in the neighborhood and get all local elected officials to join the effort, which we intend to do.

Mario and I will be even meeting a reporter from the Brooklyn Daily Eagle to publicize our efforts and hopefully begin to galvanize the locals.

WANDERING DAGO FOOD TRUCK

Finally, the U.S. District Court in Albany has adjudicated this case, unless of course WD is successful on appeal. In early March Justice Mae Dagostino issued her 64-page decision which I read from end to end. In her discourse we come to learn that freedom of speech is relative, even if the speech itself is vile or offensive. She stated that the Empire State Summer Lunch Program in part of the Empire State Plaza was an extension of the indoor cafeteria facilities for state employees and their visitors. Therefore, in this capacity the State was acting as an employer, proprietor, or property manager, not as a sovereign, lawmaker, or regulator. Therefore, that part of the plaza where the program took place was a "NON-PUBLIC FORUM," not a "PUBLIC FORUM" to discuss community issues or public policy. In this regard speech is limited and participating vendors must abide by whatever rules this employer set down, including being family-friendly and nonuse of pejorative or offensive language (which was in the state contract vendors had to sign! So, WD knew all this!). Therefore, since the state felt WD did not meet these requirements, the state had every right to dismiss WD from this program because of the name of its truck! The case has been dismissed. WD is appealing, claiming that in such a Plaza there is no distinction between a non-public forum and a public one. The whole Plaza is a public forum and therefore the State had no right to dismiss WD. We'll see.

THE OSGOOD FILE ON WCBS RADIO 880 AM

At about the same time the WD decision was released, Tony Conetta from the JMM Lodge alerted me one morning about the above program which commemorated the anniversary of the patent Alexander Graham Bell received for the telephone, giving him such great praise. I

immediately wrote an extensive e-mail to the station extolling the exploits of Antonio Meucci who had preceded Bell and his efforts and requested equal air time to state the Meucci case. The News Director Tim Scheld told me that was not possible because other programs after the Bell segment were already planned for air time. However, Scheld suggested a followup story on Meucci on the grounds of the Museum. In turn I contacted Museum Chairwoman Madeline Matteucci and Museum President Joe Sciame about this suggestion. Both have agreed to the story, and I have asked Scheld to contact Sciame about the necessary arrangements. Next I contacted Prof. Lou Leonini to do the piece on Meucci, which he will do.

I literally can't wait for this event to occur because we need to aggressively sensitize the media about the correct story of the invention of the telephone and give credit to where it's obviously due!

NYC TRANSIT AUTHORITY

In my last report I mentioned to you about a NYC Transit Authority payroll timesheet that used the acronym "WOP" (Without Papers) to describe a situation in which a union leader does union work on Transit Authority time. As a result, he is paid by the union for such time and not the Authority. On the timesheet that leader would bubble in the WOP code to document such pay. Having sent a letter to the Authority about the use of this defamatory code which incensed Italian American transit workers, the Authority sent me a letter and stated they found this matter very serious and therefore will change the code to something else. The transit workers are so relieved and grateful for CSJ action.

The transit workers (the Transportation Columbia Association of NYC) now want us to turn our attention to another grievance— —the failure of the TA to promote Italian American workers upward on the job. The President of the TCA, Paul Gallo, and I have decided to meet shortly on this irritating issue to gather the facts and plan a strategy.

Patrick Morelli

Last quarter I mentioned to you about a one Patrick Morelli from upstate Loudonville, an Albany suburb, who for the last fifty years has devised and presented strategies in how best to fight bias and bigotry in mass media. On March 26th a few of us from the Order traveled to Manhattan to the Petrosino Lodge hall to attend Pat's engaging two-hour power point presentation on the subject. It was fascinating!

It boils down to comprehending the nature of mass media and understanding and devising strategies to address that nature. He knew we had the passion to fight, but we needed to redirect our energies in such a way as to be more effective. The presentation was so enlightening and instructive that I will ask Pat to return once again to make the same presentation to more CSJ Executive Board members and lodge liaisons. In fact, all the instruction is really developmental in that we move from step-to-step and gradually understand more technical and sophisticated techniques. Once more experience step one we will move

onward and upward and eventually apply these tactics to real issues we face. Hopefully such training will make us more effective in getting real results.

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS ISSUE

This matter was the number one issue and priority of the quarter and still is! It created our most anxious and heady moments all over the country and results were checkered. Firstly, we learned in early February that Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, a city with numerous Italian residents, decided to dump Columbus Day on campus in favor of Indigenous Peoples Day. National responded with a letter of protest and CSJs and lodges were asked to respond. Secondly, we learned that the Utah State Senate in a vote of 15 to 10 rejected a bill to do the same, and the Utah state legislature put heavy pressure on the University of Utah to do the same with a proposed resolution, and the effort succeeded due to intense lobbying by Italian Americans. In Colorado with a combined force of Colorado and NYS CSJs actively engaged the sponsor of the same legislation, Rep. Joseph Salazar withdrew his bill in committee twice in one week! He has until May 11th to re-introduce it, otherwise it will die in committee. Colorado CSJ has informed us that they monitor the legislative calendar constantly, and so far there has not been any re-introduction of Salazar's bill. The School District of Philadelphia has just eliminated Columbus Day and has made the day a regular school day with classes in session. National CSJ has pleaded with CSJs and Grand Lodges around the country to demand that the district re-introduce the holiday. The city and school district of Seattle eliminated Columbus Day last year, and so Italian American groups have petitioned National CSJ to join them in reinstating Columbus Day and terminate Indigenous Peoples Day. In March the city of Los Angeles had initiated a two-month study to investigate the creation of Indigenous Peoples Day as a paid day-off for city workers. The sponsor, Mitchell O'Farrell, a half Wyandotte Indian, stated he is open to all options— a separate day, or the substitution for Columbus Day, or none at all. Once we tackle and successfully address our own issue in our backyard we will help with the aforementioned affairs.

For us it's the saga of the Southampton School District! At our annual brunch/dinner fundraiser on February 28th we learned that the District was having a School Board Meeting to discuss the issue. In two days I mustered together 14 people to attend the March 1st meeting in Southampton. We spoke forcefully about maintaining Columbus Day! The Superintendent Dr. Scott Farina then said that the matter would be discussed further on March 15th, and a vote would be taken. Now, with more time available we organized about 40 people and constructed a banner "Save Columbus Day" to be introduced at this board meeting. On March 15th both OSIA and the Shinnecock Nation stacked the meeting. Both sides gave passionate and cogent speeches on the matter. The Board decided not to vote and mentioned that it would create a series of community forums to discuss the issue and devise a solution. At this juncture Dr. Farina told me personally that he wanted to hear now from Southampton residents and not interested partisans from up-Island. In that regard I set out to organize a cadre of like residents to prepare for these forums. I also took the time to personally confer with the Shinnecock Tribal Chairman Bryan Polite. At the Princess Diner in Southampton he and I discussed this matter for an hour and a half. We basically regurgitated our arguments, but Polite candidly said he knew

how important the Day was for Italian Americans, but the Nation simply did not want the Day to be named Columbus Day. I understood but I offered no concessions! I then called an emergency meeting of the CSJ Executive Board. We decided that we want the holiday to be named Columbus Day, but if the Southampton residents should move to change the name of the Day, we would want it to be Discovery Day. We relayed this decision to Farina and Polite.

However, this decision is Plan B and only endemic to Southampton alone! I then immediately contacted Joan DePaola Tutt, our representative in Southampton, and told her to organize residents for a strategy meeting on April 13th before the next community meeting on April 14th and the next school board meeting on April 19th. The strategy is to fight for the integrity of Columbus Day and adopt another day for Indigenous Peoples Day. We feel and are confident that if the residents muster enough of a vociferous effort relative to this strategy that they will be successful in convincing the Board to maintain the holiday as is! We really hope so.

We will definitely update you in our next report.

NEW FINANCIAL SECRETARY

Since Gina Ferrara has now assumed the office of Financial Secretary for the Cellini Lodge, she has stepped down from the same CSJ post. Everyone knows how capable Gina is in this field, and we will definitely miss her expertise. Thanks Gina, especially since your professional occupation made it somewhat difficult for you sometimes to handle our cash flow documentation. We wish you loads of luck in your Cellini post!

Over the last two months we entertained a search for a new Financial Secretary, and we settled on Joann Grove of the Sellaro Lodge who is presently the Treasurer of the Smithtown Library Board. We are confident she will be a capable successor to Gina.

Respectfully submitted

Lou Gallo
Chairman