

HISTORY OF
ITALO-CANADIAN
PEOPLE
IN BRANTFORD

The task of writing a "brief" history of the Italian people leaves one bewildered. The job of separating historical facts from the popular legends which have grown up in over two and a half thousands of years is no small task. Most high school students can readily recount for you the tales of Romulus and Remus, the exploits of Aeneas and his flight from fallen Troy, the parts played by gods and goddesses in the founding of the country which we of today call Italy.

The earliest of myths recounts the founding of Rome some twenty-seven centuries ago on the Palatine Hill by Romulus, who through jealousy had slain his twin brother Remus. But Italy's true history begins with tribes like the Villanovans, Sabines and Ligurians, who lived on the boot-shaped peninsula from the earliest days of history. The name "Italy" comes from a word used by one of the many tribes, meaning "calf-land". The Etruscans were by far the most aggressive of the tribes, and they set about conquering the native kingdoms and establishing their supremacy. In 509 B.C. the ruling monarchs were overthrown and the age of the Roman Republic began. During this period Rome's rule was spread far and wide by conquests and acquisition of lands. With the passing of time and this insatiable lust for power, the republican government grew too tyrannical, and mighty Caesar took over as dictator in 49 B.C. During his tenure of office the Roman Empire spread in all directions, even to the little known islands to the west of France. But mighty Caesar's rule came to an abrupt end at the base of Pompey's statue with the thrust of a dagger held by Brutus.

There followed Italy's second great period of history — two centuries of peace and prosperity, oftentimes referred to as the Golden Age of Rome. During this time the Roman Empire flourished in the fields of the arts, and the Emperor was deified by a grateful Roman senate and people. This prosperity continued, decade after decade, for the duration of twelve Caesars. With the death of the great emperor Constantine, who had introduced Christianity into the Empire, the second phase of Italy's history came to an end.

In 1966, Canada welcomed an estimated 200,000 immigrants or 1% of the population, of which 23,678 were Italians. Italy is the second largest supplier of immigrants to Canada, second only to Britain.

In 1903, the Italian population of Brantford consisted of approximately two families. Today, in 1967, this figure has increased to approximately 6,000 people of Italian birth or descent. During the early 1900's, the Italian people's contributions to the Brantford Community consisted largely of manpower toward construction, foundry

work and the building of railroads. In 1906, the average salary was approximately 15¢ an hour.

In 1914, the first Italian grocery store in Brantford, (still in existence) was established by Mr. Jim Forte. In 1936, the Italian population in Brantford had grown to approximately 500 people.

During the Second World War, the Italian people in Brantford suffered grief and persecution through no fault of their own. Then from 1946 to 1956, due to the flow of immigration after the Second World War, the Italian population in Brantford grew extensively.

Today in 1967, there are very many respected citizens of Italian birth or descent holding important positions in the community. Many have been recognized for their good deeds and heroic actions in time of emergency. Many have inherited skills from their forefathers. One with such a skill is Mr. Louis Torti. Mr. Torti has constructed four authentic Roman armor suits and a Roman chariot. Mr. Torti, working with raw materials, has moulded and shaped in bronze, aluminum and steel by hand, as would have been done by the Romans themselves, all four of the Roman armour suits and the chariot. Mr. Torti's skills do not stop at the construction of Roman symbols but extend to hand-made telescopes, guitars, violins, mandolines and other instruments.

The Album of Honour in Brantford contains many Italian names. Perhaps the best to illustrate the history of the Italians in Brantford is by relating of personal stories.

One of the first immigrants to arrive in Brantford was Mr. Joseph Marco, who came in 1907. He is still alive and can recall vividly the early days of Brantford. In 1910, Mr. Marco returned to Italy with intentions of marriage, but upon his arrival in Campobasso was recruited into the Italian Army and sent to Turkey for 18 months. After his honourable discharge, he received the Medal of Honour from Italy on November 21, 1912. In 1913, Mr. Marco returned with his bride to take up residence in Brantford.

Mr. Michael Pignotta came to Brantford in 1910 at age 14 and in June 1914 became a Canadian citizen. In 1916 he enlisted in the Canadian Army, 2nd Depot Bn. 2nd C.O.R., Brantford. He served through the First World War in England and France. He fought at Vimy Ridge, and in 1918, while in the battle of Cambri in France was wounded by a bomb which killed seven soldiers out of the ten in his group. In 1919 he was discharged. In 1937, Mr. Pignotta returned to Italy and there married. In 1939 he made transportation arrangements to return to Brantford, but for security reasons due to rumors of war, was unable to board the ship which was to take him



and his family to Canada. In 1944 when the allied forces, including Canadians, penetrated central Italy, Mr. Pignotta, still having retained his Canadian citizenship was recalled to the Canadian Army. He served as interpreter with the 5th Field Security Bn. 2nd Div. and fought at Ortona and Cassino. After the war he left the army, and in 1948 he and his wife and children, two boys and a girl, left Italy and came to Brantford where they presently reside.

THE ORDER SONS OF ITALY

In 1905, the Order Sons of Italy was founded in North America. The Italian community of Brantford joined the Order Sons of Italy of Ontario in 1934 and named their club Pontine Lodge. In 1940 it ceased to function. During the period Pontine Lodge was in existence, it offered to the people of Brantford, among other benefits, an educational programme in Italian and English. Pontine Lodge was organized mainly to promote Italian culture and traditions. The first Venerable or president was Mr. Peter De Maggio. On November 23, 1953, the Italian community in Brantford organized once more through the Order Sons of Italy of Ontario a club to be named Rossini Lodge No. 18. The name Rossini was chosen in commemoration of the famous Italian composer of opera, Gioacchino Rossini. Through the years Rossini Lodge has contributed extensively to the many charitable organizations of Brantford. Rossini Lodge has been a leader in the Brantford community in organizing special drives to raise money when disaster struck. The first Venerable or president of Rossini Lodge was Mr. Charles Del Rossi.

In 1957, after four hard years of planning and fund raising, building of the new Rossini ballroom was begun. With all members planning and working together, Rossini Hall at 140 Grey St. was finished in June 1958. In 1965, a two-floor addition was added to the rear premises. The motto of Rossini Lodge "Liberty, Fraternity and Equality" governs all its activities.

Each hamlet in Italy has its own special patron saint and its annual celebration. Pratola-Peligna is no exception. Its patron is Our Blessed Lady under the title of Madonna della Libera. In the early days of Pratola-Peligna's history, the legend goes, a plague was ravaging the land and this plague was halted through the miraculous intervention of the renowned Madonna della Libera. A little bit of Italian tradition has been transported to Brantford due to the efforts of some natives of Pratola-Peligna who have settled here. Their dream was to re-enact here in their adopted city the religious procession and festivities of their native village. A committee was formed in 1948

headed by Mario Lucenti, to approach the other natives from Pratola-Peligna residing in Brantford. The result was the first procession during which a small framed picture of the Madonna della Libera was carried. For the next few years the festivities alternated between St. Mary's and St. Basil's Churches. But the organizers dreamed of having a replica of the statue in the Pratola-Peligna Church to replace the small picture. Finally the Italian families in Brantford from Pratola-Peligna, helped by other members of Brantford's Italian community raised about \$1,000.00 and the order for the statue was placed with one of the finest sculptors in Italy. An Italian travel agent who lives near Pratola-Peligna heard what these Italian immigrants in Canada were attempting to do and was so impressed that he underwrote the total cost of the statue's transportation direct to Brantford.

The statue was delivered in time for the celebrations in May 1962.

The annual festivities begin with the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, during which the congregation joins in singing the favourite Italian hymns, especially the one called "Evviva Maria." After the Mass comes the procession through the streets. The Knights of Columbus St. John's Drum Corps leading the procession. Next come the Italian community of Brantford and visitors from the surrounding districts. People from St. Catharines, Welland, Hamilton and Toronto usually attend. These loyal Italian-Canadians march proudly in front of the statue of the Madonna della Libera reciting the Rosary and singing hymns. Finally, comes the statue itself, borne on the shoulders of four men. Sometimes a stop is made at Alexander Park, where a sermon is given on the history and significance of the statue and the day. The procession now makes its way back to the Church of Our Lady of the Assumption for Solemn Benediction.

In the afternoon, if enough players can be rounded up, there is a soccer game at Mohawk Park. This is the Italians' national sport. Later in the afternoon the families gather in the park for the meal of traditional Italian dishes. Until late in the evening Italian musicians entertain the crowd with Italian Operatic airs and sometimes there are people from Toronto who sing solos, duets and finally the quartet from Verdi's Rigoletto. The evening closes with a gigantic fireworks display.

It is good to see these traditions and customs of the home-land being interwoven into the fabric of the Italians' newly adopted land. This is what makes Canada great, the fact that here the old is so easily blended with the new and that here the traditions of the old world are so readily incorporated into the Canadian scene as part and parcel of emerging Canadian heritage.