

History of The Italian American Club of Mahopac

Founded in 1928, the Italian American Club began as a benevolent organization to help Italian families that had suffered catastrophic illness or death. At the time, the population of Mahopac was about 1,700 with approximately 30 Italian families, who had come from Italy to work as masons, carpenters, laborers and gardeners. It was very difficult for them, especially during the Depression. Masons and carpenters were paid \$4 per day, while gardeners and laborers only received between \$2.50 and \$3.00 per day.

When there was a death in the Italian Community, someone would go around to the other families and ask for a donation to help pay for the burial expenses. After a few such instances, Louis Casagrande suggested that all the families chip in a little money each month into a kitty and use that money to help those families in need. As a result of Mr. Casagrande's suggestion, the Italian American Club of Mahopac was born.

The first meeting of The Italian American Club was held outside a building next door to Harry Veschi's home. Among those attending the first meeting were: Harry and Angelo Veschi, Louis, Gene and John Casagrande, Chiero Benvenuto, Chiero Montenari, Virgilio Cucci, Jim Lombardi, Eugene Dazi, Bruno Pompei, Aurelio Lauretti, Phil Battista and Nano Morini. During the meeting, Phil Battista was elected as the first president.

Almost all the Italian families were living in the Buckshollow Road area, which was at that time a dirt road and also the main road passing by the railroad station. As the Club grew, additional space was needed and they began having meetings and social events in the basement of the Lauretti home. They also began holding dances in the red barn by the railroad crossing. The dances began making some money, so the members decided to have a dance every month. These dances were the highlight of the social life of the Italian community. Additionally, they helped finance the purchase of land to build their Clubhouse.

As the treasury increased, the Club purchased a lot from William Agor on Buckshollow Road where the current Club now stands. Raymond Costello, Regina Morini's father, was the attorney that signed the deed and represented legal counsel for the transfer of ownership. One of the members drew up plans for the clubhouse and construction began in 1929. Materials were purchased from the funds raised at the social functions. All the members used their skills to build the Club. Gino Veschi logged time with the intention of paying the workers when funds were available. Unfortunately, every cent was necessary to complete the clubhouse and no one ever got paid. The clubhouse took about four years to complete. Upon completion, the upstairs hall was used for monthly dances, weddings, family parties and basketball games for the kids. On a cold winter's night, the men would gather around a coal and wood stove to play cards in the basement. The bar was added and every evening there was always a lively crowd of men.

In February, 1937, the Women's Auxiliary of the Italian American Citizen's Club was established. The purpose of the Auxiliary was to provide a forum where women could "be united, and work for the Auxiliary and look forward to having a dignified and flourishing organization; to arrange dances and other activities for the general welfare of the Auxiliary."

The original members were Mary Butironi, Solinda Mancini, Maria Veschi, Christina Battista, Italia Benvenuti, Eva Prospero, Letizia Veschi, Laurina Casagrande, Louise Ferrieri, Anita Pegoli, Mary

Paniconi, Rose Alfiero, Pierina Sbroolini, Nancy Lombardi, Aldina Veschi, Mary Carloni and Jenny Ferrieri.

Meetings were held the first Tuesdays of the month at the clubhouse. Members were encouraged to speak the Italian language or dialect and fines were imposed for offensive language or improper conduct. They adopted a Constitution and conducted business in a purposeful and professional manner. Many events, like their Annual Card Party, were earmarked for a charity like Putnam Hospital, Mahopac Library, or PARC. The Auxiliary donated the first projector and camera to Putnam Hospital in 1965, for staff training and patient recreation. These women were community focused and although their finances were slim, with dues only \$5 per year, they always managed to save a little after each event. They were resourceful and committed to charitable giving- VA Hospital, Rosary Hill, VFW, Girl/Boy Scouts, Little League, Cancer Fund, etc. - but still made time for recreation and fun. After meetings they enjoyed refreshments and Bingo, organized Carnivale Costume Masquerade Balls, Penny Socials, Fashion Shows, Theatre Parties, and a Ladies Christmas Party at a local restaurant. They initiated the idea of a high school scholarship, and Italian American Cultural Exhibit at the Historical Society.

The men never accepted money for their use of the club, so in return the women assisted them at their Columbus Dinner Dances, New Year's Eve Party and Clam Bake. With the growing number of social events, the women quickly realized the need for a dumbwaiter and closet upstairs and financed the building of the kitchen on the second floor. They sewed drapes for the stage, purchased chandeliers, blinds, tables and chairs.

Although they were separate organizations, the men and women collaborated frequently. They jointly raised \$800 in 1966, hosting a Fashion Show and Dance that was used to purchase a pacemaker, portable transistor and vacuum pickup unit in the operating room at Putnam Hospital. Through these philanthropic efforts and with events expanding into the community, the club's notoriety grew as an organization committed to making the lives of the community better.

The Italian American Club members paid dues of \$1.50 per month; fifty cents of which went into a benefit sick fund for members who lost work due to illness. This fund had accumulated to \$8,000, but in 1960, the sick benefits were discontinued. A \$300 death benefit was substituted for members who had contributed to the fund. For the Auxiliary, the death benefit was \$50 and a floral arrangement was sent with condolences from the membership.

Over the years, many of the original members passed away and social activities diminished. A revitalization occurred beginning in the 1980s under the leadership of presidents Tony Morfea, Nino Guastadisegni, Guido Boniello, Luigi Cefaloni, Giulio Cefaloni and a very active Board of Directors and Membership.

During the years 1988- present there have been many physical plant improvements and cultural milestones. Both the first and second floors were gutted and new ceilings, walls, floors, wiring and fixtures were installed. The furnace was replaced, air conditioning was installed, an emergency generator was connected, and oil tank removed. Ceramic tile was installed upstairs in the coatroom, kitchen and entry hall, as well as, downstairs when renovations were performed. The downstairs kitchen was renovated through the efforts of Patrick Pennella and his team of helpers in completion of his Eagle Scout Project in 2002-03. Amazingly, he was simultaneously, Recording Secretary of the Club and at seventeen was the youngest elected officer! Outside, the front of the building was beautified with decorative

balusters; new slate steps, new sign, new platform, handrails, sensor lights, painting, stucco, Belgian blocks and blacktop of both parking lots. A bocce court was built and cover was installed for year round enjoyment.

Meanwhile, the club began sponsoring The Putnam County Columbus Day Parade in an effort to celebrate Italian American culture and contributions to the USA. This helped make our club more visible and attracted new membership. Thirty years ago, the festivities began with only a parade, a joint venture with St John the Evangelist Church, on the occasion of its Centennial Celebration. Since then the festivities have risen to a new level under the leadership of Chairman and current President, Giulio Cefaloni, and include not only a parade but also Marshal interviews, and a cultural and cooking show. A wide range of events and fundraisers characterize the festivities and include a Journal, Dinner Dance, Mass and Concert, Miss Columbus Pageant, and Poker Tournaments that help defray the cost of a this popular and growing parade. The following events were FIRSTS, milestones in our history, with the dates they were first initiated: Columbus Parade (1988), Columbus Dinner Dance at Villa Barone Hilltop (1999), Columbus Journal (1990), Columbus Statue Unveiled (1993), Cooking Shows and Interviews (1995), Relay for Life (1998), Italian Masses (2003), Italian Classes (2003), IAC Website (2005), Miss Columbus Pageant (2005), Golf Outing (2008), Bocce Tournament (2008), Evening in the Piazza (2010), Columbus Festivities Charity Established (2010), Wine Making and Tasting (2014), Concert and Mass (2014), Putnam's Got Talent (2015), and Briscola Tournament (2018).

Over the years we have promoted the Italian language and culture, through a variety of programs: Italian language and culture classes with Mahopac High School, St. Anthony, St. Joseph and St. Pio Masses in Italian, folkloristic groups from Italy, Wine Making and Tasting Competition, and Bocce and Briscola Tournaments. We hope to continue in the future!

The Italian American Club of Mahopac has been recognized for its community contributions by the Town of Carmel and Town of Carmel Historical Society for the commissioning and dedication of the Christopher Columbus Statue in 1992, The National World War II Memorial Fund, The Gold Star Mothers' Memorial, The American Legion, The Mahopac Sports Association for team sponsorships and from The Mahopac Central School District for scholarship awards. They have also been recognized by numerous charitable organizations like Wounded Warrior, Community Cares, Pajama Program, United for the Troops, Drug Crisis in our Backyard, etc. to which they have contributed.

The Italian American Club and the Mahopac-Carmel Chamber of Commerce have partnered to bring our community a wonderful and exciting Columbus Day celebration with the parade and street fair coinciding on the same day and culminating in our scenic Chamber Park! All this coordination, cooperation and effort are a tribute to the spirit of our community. The Italian American Club Leadership and Membership are proud to sponsor these Putnam County Columbus Day Festivities for our community and welcome opportunities to collaborate with our Town Officials, Merchants, Library, and other Organizations. We welcome new members and invite everyone to participate and contribute in keeping our traditions, language and culture vibrant for future generations. **Ad Multos Annos!**