

Tante Belle Cose--A Reflection on Rudy Vecoli's Contribution to Italian American Studies

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Vecoli and the American Italian Historical Association have enabled the activities and careers of just about everyone in the field of Italian American studies.

“Tante Belle Cose” (many good things—wishes). That’s the way Rudy Vecoli signed his personal letters and emails. As a pioneering professor of Italian American history, that’s what Rudolph Vecoli



gave to Italian Americans and the world of scholarship. Vecoli died in Minnesota on June 17 at the age of 81.

Rudy was born in Wallingford, CT. His immigrant Tuscan parents taught him Italian at home. After serving in the Navy (training at Great Lakes) he received a BA from the [University of Connecticut](#) [2], an MA from the [University of Pennsylvania](#) [3] in 1951 and then went on to the [University of Wisconsin](#) [4] for his PH. D.

It was in Madison, WI that he determined to write his dissertation on Chicago's Italians Prior to World War I. In his research phase he spent several years in and around Chicago doing interviews with immigrants and observing the community. At that time the reigning interpretation of the immigrant experience was that of Harvard Professor Oscar Handlin. In his book, "The Uprooted," Handlin stressed the brutal cultural experience of immigration that over two or three generation destroyed the cultural identity of immigrants, marginalizing them socially and creating a relentless melting pot.

As Vecoli came to know Chicago Italians better and better, he was impressed by a new point of view. Of course there had been cultural changes, but not nearly as many as Handlin saw. The social and religious values and family practices and even language of Italians in Chicago had helped them to form communities and to gain success in America without melting completely. The big story here was not that the culture immigrants had lost their culture, but that they had RETAINED so much of their identity and culture..

Because Vecoli's research was so meticulous and and well-documented, he was among the first academics in the US to interpret the general immigrant experience as going beyond the melting pot to a situation that we are all familiar with today---a view of American society where (for better or worse) ethnic identity counts in politics, the market place, and in the arts.

His challenge to Handlin put him on a fast track to promotion and Vecoli ended up in the mid 1960s at the University of Minnesota a Director of the Immigrant History Research Center and for the next 38 years built up the collection to one of the premiere depositories for archival material on a wide range of ethnic groups. He was a friend and mentor of countless scholars in the field.

I met Vecoli in 1966 when he was on the faculty briefly at the University of Illinois. He hired me as his graduate research assistant. For the first time in my life I realized that the Italian community where I grew up in Chicago Heights was a legitimate part of history, worthy of study, just like the order of the presidents. I was already well advanced in writing my dissertation on Louis F. Post (who stood up against A. Mitchell Palmer and J. Edgar Hoover in the Deportation Panic of 1920). I went on to teach general US History with my research interest in turn-of-the-Century Chicago. A decade after working for Vecoli, I was on the job market and had accepted (in July) an offer to teach at Texas Tech University in Lubbock when miraculously a call came from the University of Illinois at Chicago History Department to interview for a visiting position in Italian American history funded by the Italian American Executives of Transportation. The fact that I had worked for Vecoli convinced my interviewers to offer me the job. Lubbock became the "road not taken" for me and all my family members and I launched into a multi-varied (not to say checkered) career in Italian American studies. For the past 30 years I have taught formal classes, written books and articles, produced radio programs, exhibits, archives, lectured at hundreds of clubs, and helped in the production of major and minor video documentaries. I have rubbed elbows with Pietro DiDonato, Jerre Mangione, Giovanni Schiavo, Joseph Tusiani, John O. Pastore, Danilo Dolce, Italian President Napolitano, and even the Agnellis. I have visited Italy 30 times and even managed to learn enough of the language to give elementary presentations in Italian. I'm not bragging, I'm just listing the Belle Cose that have happened to me as a result of my contact with Rudy.



During the period that I worked as his research assistant, Vecoli became the founding president of the American Italian Historical Association and insisted that the group adhere to the highest standards of unbiased scholarship and avoid the appearance of flattery. He required that we be scholars first and not just apologists or PR people for Italian Americans!

The organization flourished and most of the professors who hold positions in Italian American history and literature got their start through the networking of the American Italian Historical Association. AIHA initiated the Italians in Chicago Project which propelled me into the field some 30 years ago. That project influenced many other things including the production of Gia Amella's "And They Came to Chicago" and the publication of many books. Fred Gardaphé, Distinguished Professor of Italian American Studies at CUNY, was mentored by Vecoli. One of the many reasons why Anthony Tamburri was chosen to become the Dean of the John Calandra Italian American Institute is the leadership that he showed in the AIHA. Vecoli also nourished the scholarship of dozens of Italian scholars and integrated them into the AIHA. All of the networking of the thousands of people who have been members of AIHA during the past 43 years should be credited as Tante Belle Cose that Vecoli gave us. He sure did have a "Wonderful Life" that touched the careers and personal lives of many teachers and writers who, in turn, have been and will continue to touch lives in ways that perpetuate the values and humanity of the Italian American Experience. Rest in Peace Rudy Vecoli and thanks for Tante Belle Cose.

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