

Peggy Merigo Citarella

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What brought you to Vermont?

My husband's sisters was married to an osteopath. And the gentleman who supplied him with his medicines also supplied St. Mike's. My husband (Armand) was supposed to be on the faculty at Harvard but there was a 12 day delay because of bad storms. So they told him to wait another semester and he didn't want to do that. So the man who supplied these pharmaceuticals to my brother-in-law asked him to see if St. Mike's would like to have an Italian (on the faculty).

So they called Armand and he came up and they hired him right away.

And what field was he in?

He was a Renaissance man.

And then we left, got married, went on our honeymoon to Italy and then came to Vermont.

And he was the first one hired as an associate professor and Catherine mentioned a placed called Miketown. It was a series of old army barracks that were transported to the property; and there were four apartments in each one of those for students.

How and when did you originally find the Vermont Italian Cultural Association (VICA)?

So before coming to Vermont both Armand and I had a few sessions with an osteopath.

So when we came to Vermont we wanted to see if we could find an osteopath and we did. First we went to Doctor Norton, and when he was going to retire, he referred us to "a nice young man in Burlington, Dr. Kenneth Ciongoli."

When I went to him he mentioned that he was interested in everything Italian and asked me if I could speak Italian because he needed me to translate for another patient. But as it turned out, she didn't speak Italian, she spoke Sicilian.

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Anyway, we became good friends and he had us over for dinner and after a while he said to me “What do you think about starting an Italian club?” I told him I really don’t think there’s any Italians around here because when I first came to Vermont the first thing I did was look in a phone book and I saw only three Italian names. So anyway, the next time I saw him he came up with a list that was quite substantial.

He said how do we get started? He said you have to have meetings — that’s central. I said we can meet at my house which we did for almost a year and included anyone else we could think of to come. We met once a month and I would make some cookies or whatever. And then finally they found a spot on Church Street, but that didn’t last long. Then somebody suggested we try either the Junior or Senior high school in South Burlington and they were willing to let us have the library.

What were the early days of VICA like?

So we moved to the Library. And then we realized that we had to have some cohesion so we formed a committee. (Board) And I remember one of my responsibilities was to get speakers. And I got my husband to be the first one. The four people who were meeting were Frank Caruccio, Dr. Ciongoli and Dr. Morselli. It was 1983 when we began to meet as a committee and registered as the Vermont Italian Cultural Association with the Vermont Secretary of State.

I think when something is new you know the interest that people showed was tremendous. We would get together once a month or whenever we could. I was head of Events and someone else was in charge of entertainment and hospitality.

It was kind of exciting and interesting. After living here for a period few years to know that there were people of Italian extraction that might want to meet and do something you know whether it was for themselves or the community but they had the desire to get together and that’s how the club started. People even came from out of state because you’re kind of isolated and you don’t know anybody.

What I always wondered about is where the name of the Club came from?

I hate the name “VIC”! I know that Vermont Italian Cultural Association is the name of this

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organization. So when was it changed? I'm not sure. But I love the name. I agree with it. I mean not just agree with it — I think that is the name of this organization. But I'm wondering if that word cultural somehow makes makes people feel resistant.

Well a bunch of us got together and each one had a suggestion. And so the word Italian had to be in it and the word Vermont had to be in it. So we were left with a space and I don't know who came up with the word Cultural but we all agreed to it. There was a feeling that the word "club" didn't really capture it.

Who do you remember best from the early days of VICA?

I would get Celeste to make cookies and somebody else would make a pie. And then somebody else would come up with future ideas for what we could do. And I think that's where we started having picnics. We used to go to Grand Isle. And people would swim if they wanted to and the children could wade. So it became very popular and everybody liked it. So we continued with that.

I remember that one time we were trying to get some Italians from somewhere to come but we had to have a big dinner which we would have had if we were going to the hotels. And then it was our first and it was a complete success, it made the headlines and everything — it was just incredible. And everybody chipped in to make it a success. And then we had dancing and you know it was it was really good.

At the meetings we had pastries and stuff like that usually home made by some of the members. And there was always coffee and tea. At first Kenny in charge and then he would give the responsibility to somebody else. I know my husband you know was responsible for some programs. And then sometime during the meeting or during the evening of whoever was in charge of the meeting would ask the audience if anything unusual happened since the last meeting and if they would like to get up and talk about it. And I remember somebody said there was somebody who had triplets and everybody went into shock!

I remember in the early days if there was anybody that needed help with learning a few Italian words I gave lessons at my house. Just simple Italian. Some of them didn't even know how to say bread. I just did that because a lot of these people that are Italian grew up with parents who spoke English or they spoke some kind of mixture of dialect and Italian. They really didn't know

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you know any Italian words. So I had a simple grammar and I used to have them come over and didn't teach them the swear words, did you?

What activities and events do you remember?

At the meetings you would speak Italian first to socialize and then the meeting was in English. Sometimes a half hour or so might be set aside for anybody who wanted to ask questions like: "How do you say this in Italian?". Sometimes we even had a list of words in Italian and the translation which was a big help. They don't do that anymore.

The feeling of community when we went to these meetings was wonderful. Catherine indicated that some of the early members came from IBM. And so for people who came here from another state there was a sense of community.

The special events were at the meeting. For example, Frank Caruccio gave a talk on his hometown in Italy and Adrian Languasco gave a talk one night on the Italian language and my husband gave a talk on Italian cinema which drew a lot of people. You can see they were varied and quite extensive (ref. Program from 20th Anniversary).

We really were much more active in those days than we are now. We had monthly meetings and everybody came. And I think that we had monthly luncheons and there were more people then than there are now.

I mean we did have faculty members from UVM and St. Mike's And one of the wives of one of our members taught Italian. But I always put up with whatever she'd say. I didn't want to correct her. Really.

What are your fondest memories of VICA?

(Epifania)

We started the Epifania celebration early on and there have been a couple of different ones playing the role of La Befana. I was the first one. Yeah I got an old potato sack and you know put stuff in it and went around with my back hunched down like an old woman. We've continued the tradition...I got a kick out of Bob McNamara's wife (Marianne) ;...she did a great job this year.

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That was really fun.

(Opera trips)

Yes. Oh we loved going to the opera. I'm sorry they stopped that. We'd meet in the parking area of the junior high school in South Burlington, get on the bus, go all the way up to Montreal and get there in time for the matinee performance and then we went out to dinner.

Dr. Tortolano helped organize some changes when he came up with us. He would explain the particular opera that we were seeing. He would give us details of who wrote it and tell what the story was about because a lot of people don't know it. He would make us all comfortable with the story. A lot of the people who came were associated with the university.

Did you enjoy being a member of VICA?

Oh yes! We tried to get people from as far away as we could you know providing they were willing to make the trip you know since it was just once a month. The attendance wasn't very good in the winter but in the summertime you know they made the effort to come from Barre and _____.

How would you connect your family story with Italy and VICA?

I thought it would be nice if we could get somebody to talk about what they heard their parents say went on in their little villages you know and that was interesting. I don't remember exactly what they said but you know there was somebody whose grandmother lived somewhere. And on birthdays they would make special gifts you know for the family member and they would invite everybody around. It was like a birthday party but it was something particular to that area in Italy in Italy.

For example, my mother was always talking about name day (onomastica) which had a very important role because they don't really have a big celebration for birthdays.

Is there anything else — important to you — that you would like to tell us about your connections with VICA?

I think... there was a sense of community because people came from different parts of Italy and

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we could share knowledge of those cultures and traditions.

And you know other than that I just think that it's a good club and we've got some pretty good people in there and some proud Italians and I get a kick out of what's his name — the new president, Bob McNamara.

Well you know as far as connections...I mean being a member and being an active member and putting forth suggestions once in a while. I think that the older members of the club should never be forgotten. Absolutely. You know, because we worked hard to get it going. It sounds easy to say well we'll met here and all that but it meant getting a lot of names and interviewing people and 16seeing if they were interested you know even trying to offer rides if they live too far away.say went on in t