



CALGARY ITALIAN CLUB

OUR HISTORY

Beginnings-The “Lodge” and the “Association”

The history of the Club goes as far back as the arrival of the first Italians to Calgary. After the arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railroad in 1883, Calgary, already a transportation and distribution hub quickly became the centre of Canada’s cattle marketing and meatpacking industries, thereby shaping the cultural and social completion of the city for decades to come. With that came the area’s first boom. Between 1896 and 1914 settlers from all over the world poured into the area. The oil strike near Turner Valley in 1914 also opened new business opportunities in Calgary.

Prior to this time, there were few, if any, Italians in Calgary. Italians began coming to Calgary from other parts of Alberta, British Columbia and elsewhere around 1910 to work for the railroad and take advantage of the jobs created by the boom. Italians were heavily employed in the construction industry and therefore settled in Bridgeland with other immigrant communities in order to be close to work.

The newcomers were sometimes welcomed – and sometimes not. Immigrants from Southern Europe were viewed as being less desirable. Their dress, customs, food and character were quite different from their counterparts from northern Europe. Social activities, therefore, took place in people’s homes. As Calgary’s “Little Italy” grew though, some form of organization was required to respond to the difficulties being encountered by the new arrivals.

The Loggia Giovanni Caboto No. 8 was founded in 1918 as a branch of the Ordine Indipendenti Fiori d’Italia whose head office was in Fernie, B.C. Organized primarily for charitable and philanthropic purposes, each meeting of the lodge opened with the words, “Si apre la riunione con cooperazione e pace”. The Club continued this tradition until 1974. Members paid dues of \$1.00 per month. The lodge used the dues primarily to assist members in times of illness and death. Initially, the lodge members continued to hold their meetings in peoples’ homes. Later a garage was purchased on Third Avenue and Edmonton Trail N.E. Used for the benefit of the entire Italian-Canadian community, the Lodge was now able to organize an Italian school, a band and various social activities.

Starting in the mid 1920’s, the Lodge faced a number of challenges. The Fascist Italian government viewed widespread emigration from Italy as a national disgrace and restricted the amount of emigration from Italy. In October 1929, the stock markets of the world crashed and the Great Depression virtually brought to an end all emigration from Italy.

The financial pressures of the depression caused many members to leave the Lodge. A few members tried to revive membership by reorganizing the Lodge and rebuilding the community hall. Their efforts failed. Other members left to form the Associazione Italo-Canadese in 1933. This group was also a chapter of the Ordine Indipendenti Fiori d’Italia.

The Depression was brought to an end with the declaration of World War II. World War II represented perhaps the biggest crisis faced by the Italian community in Calgary. There had been maintained strong cultural and family ties between the Italian families in Canada and those back in Italy. With declaration of war against Germany and Italy many Italian-Canadians became the victims of prejudice and discrimination. People became wary of speaking Italian, communication with Italy or advertising their background. Some Italians tried to disassociate themselves from their Italian heritage. Italian immigrants who had not become naturalized citizens prior to September 1, 1929, were considered enemy aliens by the Canadian government.

Worse yet, the police, acting on half of the federal government took into custody a number of Italian men and interned them as enemy aliens. While most Italian-Canadians were interned in Petawawa and Gagetown, there was also an internment camp in Kananaskas. The stock reverberated through the community leaving emotional and psychological scars. Neither the Lodge nor the Association was able to attract members. The Lodge was forced to sell the community hall.

New Beginnings

The end of the war and the Leduc oil strike in 1947 brought about another drastic change for the economic and social fabric of Calgary. That same year immigration restrictions against Italians were lifted and the great wave of Italian immigration was under way. Taking with them the hope that prosperity would replace the shattered dreams of a youth lost to poverty and war, they made the long voyage by ship and train to Calgary. Most were poor with little education but they settled quickly with the help of those who came before them. They worked in low-level manual labor. They stressed the importance of family, hard work and education as the keys to building a new life for their families.

Nonetheless, a group of dedicated individuals had the foresight to see that something concrete had to be done to deal with the influx of new families, the divisiveness caused by the two competing groups and hostility the community had to endure during the war years. This group of visionaries was made up of a sheet metal worker, a tileman, some teitirees, a carpenter, a barber, two pipe men and a janitor. They officially incorporated The Italo-Canadian Society of Calgary on May 1, 1952 with the stated objectives to:

- A.** Acquire lands, erect or otherwise provide a building for social and community purposes;
- B.** Provide a meeting place for the consideration and discussion of questions affecting the interests of the community;
- C.** Provide a centre and suitable meeting place for various activities of the community.

In its first year, the society had 65 members who paid dues of \$1.00 per month. \$22.75 was raised from the sale of the constitution book. From these proceeds \$655.00 was paid to members on account of illness and death as was the practice in the Lodge as well. \$25.00 was provided for Italian flood relief and \$8.00 paid to incorporate the society. This continued until the publicly funded social assistance made such benevolent activities unnecessary.

The next step in the process was to unite the two competing groups so the community would be in a better position to overcome the many challenges that confronted them. In 1955, the Italo-Canadian Society of Calgary amalgamated with the Loggia Giovanni Caboto and changed its name to the Calgary Italian Club.

The Calgary Italian Club

From the mid 50's to the late 60's, the Club was the centre of Italian culture in the city of Calgary. In 1957, a group of young men joined the Club to form the Juventus Soccer Club. In September 1957, the team played in its first tournament in Fernie, B.C. It played its first full season in the second division in 1958. Two short years later, the team won it's first of many City Championships.

Prior to 1959, the club had no permanent home. On May 1, 1959, a barn was purchased at 416-1st Avenue NE to house a club for the price of \$17,000.00. Once the first floor and attic were developed, the Club really caught on in the community. The Club developed the basement so it could have more activities. The increased revenue flow that followed (along with a significant volunteer effort) lead to the acquisition of adjoining properties.

In 1960, in response to the problems many Italians had in trying to secure loans form existing institutions, again under the leadership of Luca Carloni, the community formed the Columbus Savings and Credit Union.

Luca Carloni also played a significant role in organizing the first Sportsman Dinner fund-raisers for the Club which has evolved into the most successful dinner of its type in the City. The funds raised by the dinner not only go to support the activities of the Club but many other note-worthy organizations and individuals.

As Italians started to find success in the growing City and government started to play a role in providing social services, the Club became less of a philanthropic organization and more of a cultural – social organization. Many people in the community met their spouses at the Club and started to introduce the Club to their children. It seemed like the old hostilities were long behind them.

That all changed during one night in November 1964. The RCMP with search warrants raided 17 Italian families. The raids were carried out with particular viciousness between the hours of midnight and three 'o' clock. In each case, their wine and equipment used to make it was confiscated and destroyed. Samples of the wine were kept as evidence. Each family was fined \$1000.00. Many in the community, fearful of further legal action, destroyed their owns supplies.

Italians have been making and drinking wine for thousands of years. It is the most visible expression of our cultural heritage. This was an attack on the communities identity. The community looked for leadership. It found it in the Calgary Italian Club. Immediately following the incident, The Calgary Italian Club organized the community and hired a lawyer. Approximately 500-600 people showed up for the meetings and organized a petition to persuade the Legislative Assembly to amend the Liquor Control Act so that individuals could make a limited amount of wine in their homes, for their own use. It took a couple of years of persistence and hard work, but eventually, in 1967, a new law was passed that permitted families to produce 25 gallons of wine for every person over the legal drinking age.

In the 70's, the Calgary Italian Club continued to play an active role in many aspects of the lives of Italian-Canadians. The Club severed its ties with the Ordine Indipendenti Fiori d'Italia in 1974 in favour of a new national organization, the National Congress of Italian Canadians. Several members of the Club participated in its organizing meetings. In 1974 members of the Club formed the Calgary Italian School. Classes were originally held at St. Alphonsus school but eventually moved to the new club facility after a short stay at St. Mary's High School. In 1975, The Columbus and Savings and Credit Union surpassed \$1 million in assets. Attendance at the Club's annual picnic reached over 1,000 persons for the first time. The community was informed and entertained by its own cable television program.

The mid 1970's, also saw the Club preparing for a \$500,000.00 expansion of the existing facility. Building permits and funding were in place then, on October 11, 1976, fire destroyed the old building. The community regrouped and the new facility opened on the old site in 1977.

A Community

In the late 70's and early 80's organizations that were created by and grew at the Club were incorporating themselves as separate societies. As a result, membership and support for the Club fell to drastically low levels. This caused the Club to experience serious financial difficulties even though the City was experiencing its greatest economic boom. It faced foreclosure from the bank. Members organized considerable fund-raising activities that included more bingos, casinos and the famous "Ferrari Raffles". It was only through this enormous volunteer effort from the members who stayed and supported the Club that made it through this extremely difficult time. The Club was able to discharge its mortgage on May 10, 1986.

Italian Canadians have relied on family and friends to help them get established in Canada. Though this network has been maintained, it was never the intention of the Calgary Italian Club to remain an ethnic enclave. That the Club only serves its members is a misconception. Notwithstanding the financial challenges of year-round facility, the Club continues to provide, on a non-profit basis, its facility to various Italian-Canadian cultural and social groups in the City of Calgary. The truth is that the Club is active not only within the Italian-Canadian community but within the greater Calgary community as a whole.

- The Calgary Italian Sportsman's Association has held an annual dinner since 1986 with large portions of proceeds going to charity.
- While the proceeds from the Ferrari Raffles helped the Club to pay off its mortgage, the raffles also raised close to \$1 million for various charities in Calgary.
- The Club has been co-hosting along with the Calgary Firefighters their annual "Ladies Night Out", the proceeds of which go to the Foothills Burn Treatment Society.
- Cognizant of issues in the inner city, members of the Club initiated the "Food for Friends" program where, with the help of the community, the Club feeds the homeless 3 times per year.

Furthermore, the Club is still the focal point for the community when the community needs to come together.

- The Club has been instrumental in organizing disaster relief efforts in the community. \$50,000.00 was raised for victims of an earthquake in Friuli in 1979. In 1980, the Club and the National Congress of Italian Canadians – Calgary District, along with support from the provincial government, raised over \$1 million for the victims of the earthquake near Avellino.
- In 1982 the community joined at the Club to witness Italy's first World Cup win in over 40 years.
- In 1988 the Club was Casa Italia for the Italian Olympic Association. One of the lasting benefits of that experience was the creation of the Calgary Italian Folkdancers. Initially put together to represent our community at the opening ceremony of the 1988 Winter Olympics in Calgary, the Calgary Italian Folkdancers were formed in 1987 and have now become the most visible expression of our Italian culture.
- The Club hosted the Besana Brianza Marching Band on two separate occasions.

Our parents and grandparents risked everything they had and persevered in a new country – achieving personal success beyond their wildest dreams in spite of incredible odds. The Calgary Italian Club played a role in the successes of the Calgary Italian community. The Club is the only organization in the City of Calgary that offers a year-round program dedicated to the preservation and furtherance of Italian culture while actively supporting a number of organizations within the community. The immigrant tradition seeks to preserve the traditions of the past while acknowledging that risks must be taken in the present in order to achieve a better future. Our challenge is to continue that tradition for the next 50 years.