When Italians Were "Others"

The 1891 Lynching in New Orleans

by Dr. Sue Weishar

This weekend local residents will celebrate their Italian, as well as Irish, ancestry at parades and block parties with the joy and abandonment for which New Orleans is famous. On the Feast Day of St. Joseph, March 19th, St. Joseph Day altars will be featured at churches with Italian roots throughout the metro area.

Tomorrow, March 14th, is also a unique day in the history of Italian immigration to New Orleans, but not for reasons we celebrate. It was on March 14, 1891, that eleven Italians were lynched at the hands of a mob at Orleans Parish Prison. The brutal murders were precipitated by the assassination of a popular Chief of Police, David Hennessy, who was shot in front of his home on Girod Street on the foggy evening of October 15, 1890. When a friend rushed to his aid, Hennessy allegedly whispered to him, "The Dagoes did it." The chief was taken to Charity Hospital but died the following morning without ever having identified his assassins.[1]

After learning of Hennessy’s murder Mayor Joseph Shakespeare immediately ordered the police to “scour the whole neighborhood. Arrest every Italian you come across ..."[2] Three hours after Hennessy’s death police had arrested and charged five dozen Italians with the murder of the police chief. Most were later released for lack of evidence but eventually 21 Italian immigrants or descendents were indicted for the murder of David Hennessy.[3]

Despite the lack of evidence, the local press freely blamed the ‘Dagoes’ for the murder.[4] A closely watched trial of eleven of the indicted Italians finally began on February 15, 1891.[5] After closing arguments the jury quickly came to a verdict. Eight defendants were found not guilty and a mistrial was declared for three[6] The judge then remanded all eleven men to the parish jail.

That evening about 150 citizens, including prominent leaders of the legal and business communities, drafted a notice that appeared in all the morning papers on March 14.[7] It read: "All good citizens are invited to attend a mass meeting on Saturday, March 14, at 10 o'clock A.M. at Clay Statue[8] to take steps to remedy the failure of the Hennessy case. Come prepared for action."[8]

Six to ten thousand people of varied backgrounds awaited the organizers that morning. Men, women, and children cheered from windows as the mob marched past them on their way to Orleans Parish Prison in the Tremé chanting, "We want the Dagoes."[9]

Depiction of mob gathering at Henry Clay statue, March 14, 1891 from Harper’s Weekly.

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About 40 vigilantes forced their way into the prison and shot nine of the accused and hung two on trees outside the prison. One man was shot 42 times. Of the victims, five had not stood trial, three had been found not guilty, and no verdict had been found for three.[11]

Throughout the history of our country newcomers have been vilified as dangerous others—less than human. As the New Orleans community honors its Italian heritage this weekend it is an opportune time to reflect—have we learned from the mistakes of our collective past?

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March 11
Dr. Alex Mikulich met with State Senator Jean-Paul Morrell to discuss death penalty legislation.

March 12
Fr. Kammer and Ms. Baudouin met with staff of Senator Mary Landrieu about increasing the minimum wage.

March 13
Fr. Kammer discussed the first year of Pope Francis on MSNBC’s NewsNation with Tamron Hall.