

# St. Ambrogio Club marks 100 vibrant years in south Rockford



Valeri DeCastris

Rockford's social clubs provided its early immigrants with social and financial support and a way to preserve Old World customs in an often-unwelcoming New World. And many still thrive here today. In the case of Italian immigrants in America, they faced prejudice, restrictive property covenants, poverty, language barriers, denial of entry to associations and condemnation of their customs and religious beliefs.

Starting in the 1870s, mining companies exploited them as strikebreakers, and the Ku Klux Klan incited riots by marching against their ethnicity and Catholicism. The largest mass lynching in U.S. history was of Sicilians in New Orleans in 1891, followed by nationwide attacks and mass arrests of Italian immigrants. The 1924 Immigration Act caused Italian immigration to fall from 216,000 annually in 1905 to 1914 to 6,000 in 1924, separating families for decades. During WWII, Italian Americans were forced into U.S. and Canadian internment camps or placed under surveillance. Unlike the likewise interned Japanese Americans, they never received government reparations for this travesty.

Rockford's Italian immigration began in 1878. The 1980 census counted 35,000 people of Italian ancestry here. Settling along Madison Street and in south

Rockford, they formed social clubs that reflected their regions of origin. In 1943, an American-Italian civic league and 25 Italian social clubs existed here.

Today, the St. Ambrogio Club at 802 Montague Street is the last one remaining in south Rockford. And it just celebrated its 100th anniversary with an open house and banquet. This milestone was recognized with city and country proclamations and Illinois House and Senate Resolutions.

A century later, this vibrant club has hundreds of members, weekly dinners, special events, bocce leagues and a ladies' auxiliary. Important to south Rockford's revitalization, its longevity there shows its commitment to our west side.

The St. Ambrogio Martyr Mutual Benefit Society was founded on May 1, 1918, by two dozen men from our Sister City of Ferentino, Italy, a hill town founded near Rome in 4 B.C. The ladies' auxiliary began on March 1, 1933. Members first met in various homes near St. Anthony Church at 1010 Ferguson St., founded in 1909 and long associated with the club. The church's first pastor, Father Anthony Marchesano, came to Rockford in 1905 to assist Italian immigrants with assimilation.

The church had a school, religious societies and affiliated marching bands. Today, it has over 1,110 members and is a designated national Italian parish by the Catholic Diocese. In 1919, it had an "Americanization Hall" erected by the National Catholic War Council.

This served as a school for Italian immigrants to learn English and American

customs and prepare for citizenship. When no longer needed for this, it was sold to the St. Ambrogio Society and moved on July 4, 1929 to its present Montague Street location. Placed on wooden logs and pulled by horses down Ferguson Street, the move took two days. The Italian Consul General of Chicago and notable Rockfordians spoke at its opening banquet.

The St. Ambrogio Club was named for Ferentino's patron saint, a Roman cavalry centurion who was imprisoned, tortured, and murdered for opposing the emperor by defending Ferentino's Christians. His jail cell and remains are preserved there and city laws and proceedings incorporate references to him.

Since the 1600s, a silver statue of him has been carried in annual processions there. For decades, this was also done in Rockford from the St. Ambrogio Club to St. Anthony Church. His Catholic feast day is celebrated there and here. At the St. Ambrogio Club, we are preserving history and traditions. Join us for fellowship, family, and fun. All are welcome! Here's to our next 100 years!

Go online to [saintambrogio.com](http://saintambrogio.com), [griaa.org](http://griaa.org) and [ourrisca.org](http://ourrisca.org) for more information.

*Valeri DeCastris, B.A., M.S. is a member of the St. Ambrogio ladies auxiliary and she and her family have lived in south Rockford for more than 90 years. Her paternal grandfather was club president for six years and her father's bands have performed there, beginning with his orchestra on New Year's Eve in 1938 when he was 12 years old.*