

Lodges played large part in Italian-American history

By Tina Calabro for the Observer-Reporter, September 25, 2018



Alpine Lanes at 735 Jefferson Avenue is the home of Alpine Star Lodge #9

In 1929, a group of Italian immigrants who had settled in the city of Washington formed a chapter of the Italian Sons and Daughters of America (ISDA), a fraternal association with headquarters in Pittsburgh. The group decided upon the name “Alpine Star,” a reference to the colorful mountain flower.

The purpose of Alpine Star Lodge No. 9 – like most Italian fraternal groups of that era – was to help immigrants navigate the challenges of building lives in America and to forge a stronger connection with each other.

Italians who came to the city and many other locations during the period of mass immigration, from Italians who came to the city and many other locations during the period of mass immigration, 1880 to 1930, often faced prejudice and discrimination. Most immigrant families were poor, without a safety net in times of crisis. The purpose of the Alpine Lodge was to address basic needs – to put food on the table of those in need, even to pay for burials when families could not afford to do so.

“It was a means to stick together and help each other out,” said Patsy Manfredi, 69, the Alpine’s current vice president.

The Alpine, which will celebrate its 90th anniversary next year, is one of the most successful ISDA chapters, said Manfredi.

“We’re well-respected in the national order,” he said, noting that Alpine members have served as national officers and have sponsored the start of chapters as far away as western New York.

Chief among the club’s distinctions is the fact that it owns the building at 735 Jefferson Avenue – only one other chapter has its own building – and operates a bowling center.



Patsy Manfredi, left, is the vice-president of Alpine, Randy Comfort is trustee and Joe Nicolella is president

The opening of Alpine Lanes in 1960 was the result of strategic thinking, said Manfredi, and a good example of turning lemons into limoncello.

The catalyst was the construction of the Interstate 70 overpass that forced the Alpine to vacate its original building on Jefferson Avenue. Instead of simply moving to another place, members decided to think bigger. Club members decided to build a bowling alley and event venue on the site of the former Duncan Miller glass works.

The idea, which was shepherded by then-president Tony Macre, was to serve the community and make the club sustainable for the long term, said Manfredi.

Alpine Lanes brought in everyone, not just the Italian community, he added.

“It became a destination,” Manfredi said.

“We had Jimmy Beaumont and the Skyliners here in the 1970s. Tickets sold like hotcakes.”

Tony Macre’s daughter, Mickey Macre Bradley, 78, recalled both her late father’s and late mother’s involvement with the Alpine. Her mother, Marjorie, was a past president of the Alpine’s “sister” group, Vittoria Lodge No. 76, founded in 1935.

Bradley has been a member for five decades.

Vittoria Lodge was an organization for the wives and daughters of Alpine members. While other lodges under the ISDA umbrella include both men and women, the Alpine started as a men-only chapter. There are no plans to combine the two groups.

Vittoria Lodge is important in its own right, said Bradley and Shirley Vito Mahaffey, 78, a longtime officer and the daughter of Joseph (Vitagliano) Vito, one of Alpine’s founders. Vittoria Lodge has 200 members and meets at the Alpine. Among other activities, it provides scholarships and participates in charity efforts.

The historic connection between the two lodges remains strong. Julie Veltri, 90, Vittoria’s current president, is the widow of Pete Veltri, who was active in the Alpine, as were his father, Salvatore, and grandfather, Pietro.

The Alpine today has 379 members, down from about 600 at its peak. Most are descendants of the early members, introduced to the club during their childhoods. Many now live far from the city of Washington and consider membership



Mickey Macre Bradley and Shirley Vito Mahaffey are longtime members of Vittoria Lodge.

itself a tradition. To be a member, one must have Italian heritage or be married to a person with Italian heritage.

Current president Joe Nicolella, 89, was introduced to the club by his father, Antonio; Manfredi by his father, Salvatore. Both recall the huge spaghetti dinners on “meeting

day,” the Christmas parties and, of course, bowling.

Manfredi, who was in a youth league sponsored by pizza-maker Alfred Osso, admits with a laugh that he’s “a terrible bowler.”

Alpine trustee Randy Comfort, 57, introduced to the Alpine by his father, Joseph, recalls the youthful pleasure of catching a movie “uptown,” grabbing a hot dog at Shorty’s, then heading to the Alpine to bowl.

Mahaffey remembers the stylish ballroom dances and popularity of the local Johnny Cimino Orchestra.

Although fellowship remains a part of the Alpine mission, preserving Italian heritage and performing community service has taken a central role.

Each November since the 1970s, the Alpine, with support of the Vittoria Lodge, hosts Special Olympics for 150 participants. The Alpine also has a close relationship with Pathways, a disability services organization located next door.

Running a non-profit organization is “very hard work,” but members are committed and want to keep it going for future generations, said Manfredi.

“We want our grandkids to come here and remember where it all came from.”

Even as interest in bowling has waned in recent decades, the Alpine has held its place in the Washington community, he added. It’s the only bowling center in the city.

Rental of the social hall and weekly bingos have become more important to the Alpine’s bottom line in recent years. Phyllis Rush, office manager for the past 18 years, keeps the entire operation running.

“We’d be lost without her,” said Nicolella.

Among the lodges in the Italian Sons and Daughters of America “no one has ever had a club like the Alpine,” said Mahaffey. “People are in awe of what we have accomplished.”

Tina Calabro is volunteer project manager of the Italian Heritage Collection at Citizens Library (www.primoitaliano.org/relax). The project will collect stories about the local Italian community and provide free scanning of historic photos and documents at the Washington Italian Festival.