**Introduction and Research Goals**

The Italian Heritage Project is an initiative in collaboration with the Italian Canadian Archives Project (ICAP) and the University of Guelph (U of G). The principal aims of this project are to collect and preserve the narratives and artifacts of Italian immigrants to Guelph-Wellington area. This project also encourages the participation of students at the University of Guelph and invites the collaboration of members of the wider community.

The goals of this project include:

- Developing an open project that will augment our knowledge of the Italian immigrant experience.
- Helping students and the general public to confront the theme of collective memory and cultural heritage.
- Exploring the role of Italian migrants in the development of Guelph and the intercultural dialogue that characterizes our community.

**Background**

Dr. Sandra Parmegiani, Head of both the European Studies and of Italian Studies programs in the School of Languages and Literatures (SOLAL) at U of G, developed a community engaged core course for the Italian Minor students, utilizing a guided, independent study approach. Sharon Findlay (student) worked with the U of G Library to build a website as a place to collect, curate, and ‘exhibit’ the material assembled during the experiential learning course on a locally hosted version of OMEKA (a web based platform designed for academic standard collections and virtual exhibits). How can we preserve and share the narratives and artifacts of Italian Canadian immigrants to the Guelph-Wellington region?

**Methods**

This pilot project began in 2016 with a small group of students. They identified Italian migrants in the Guelph-Wellington community, and conducted oral history interviews, studied family histories, and collected artifacts. A virtual exhibit and website have been created and are now being populated with photographs, interview transcripts, and overviews of each participants’ personal experiences. The material archive of artifacts is growing, and will eventually be housed in the local community. Community members are also invited to submit items to this collection.

This is a long-term project that will continue to grow both online and physically. ICAP is the primary methodological authority, and the Italian Canadian Club will be an ongoing partner.

**Limitations**

The collection of material artifacts is a challenge; a physical repository (museum or archive) needs to be identified.

**Key Themes From Interviews**

- The reshaping of identity and the migrants’ relationship with Canada.
- The selective workings of memory, poised between forgetting and remembering.
- The need to preserve material heritage items; confronting their imminent loss.

**Meet a Participant: Giovanni Giardino**

- Owner of Giovanni’s Custom Tailor on Quebec Street in Downtown Guelph
- Emigrated to Guelph from Rocco San Giovanni in 1967 at the age of 29
- A tailor by trade, he came to Canada in order to work and provide for his young family when finding a job in Italy became increasingly difficult
- He recounted a personal story of hard work and sacrifice; recalling a time when he worked two jobs before renting his first shop on MacDonnell Street
- He is proud of his success and the new life he and his family created in Guelph, but expressed feeling torn at times, as well as a desire to return to Italy one day
- 40 years after emigrating, he still has tools of the trade he brought with him on the journey to Canada, including:
  - Large tailor’s scissors
  - Coal-headed iron

**Conclusions**

- Collecting the oral histories of contributors, who are often older adults, and glimpsing into the reality of their lived experience is a deeply moving and validating exercise for both the student interviewers and the participants.
- Sharing the migrants’ experience promotes community awareness and collaboration
- Several students have been moved to research their own family histories, some tracing the stories of relatives who have passed, discovering fascinating details and even unraveling decades old mysteries about the lives of their own ancestors.
- The Italian Heritage Project captures personal memories and experiences that otherwise would not be recorded and might be lost forever.

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**The Italian Heritage Project**