

The 'Mayor' of the Wharf Tells a History

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By MARGARET KOCH
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Malio Stagnaro has been the "mayor" of Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf for more years than he cares to count...

He's done pretty well for a little Italian boy who couldn't speak one word of English when he started grammar school at Laurel...

"Barefoot and wearing overalls," he says. "We spoke Italian in the home."

Malio's mother and father, Maria Zolezzi and Cottardo Stagnaro, were married in Italy. Cottardo went to sea at age 9 and landed in Santa Cruz in 1874 at age 15, jumping ship and finding refuge with the Fred Perez family.

From time to time he went back to Italy, shipping out to pay his passage, and he met and married Maria who remained in the homeland until 1899 when she and their 13-year-old son crossed the Atlantic in steerage.

Cottardo was only in Santa Cruz for five years when he had his own boat built and his own business established. As patriarch of the Pacific Coast Genovese colony, he was responsible for the steady stream of relatives, in-laws and friends who left Italy for Santa Cruz and Monterey Bay — land of plenty — plenty of fish, that is.

Cottardo, whose father had died early, supported his mother and four sisters for years, and helped other relatives and in-laws financially in coming to this country. By 1912 there were some 60 fishing families living here, many from the Stagnaro family's ancestral village of Riva-Trigoso near Genoa.

All of this — and more, much more, are in Malio's story of the Italian fishing families of Santa Cruz, which has been completed in book form this week by UCSC's Oral History department.

The 445-page typescript volume, MALIO J. STAGNARO: THE SANTA CRUZ GENOVESE, was presented to Malio in his wharf office by Randall Jarrell who now heads the re-

with Malio were conducted and taped. She completed the research, interviewing and editing prior to leaving to enter law school at which time she was succeeded by Mrs. Jarrell. Mrs. Jarrell then completed the manuscript for publication.

Malio was born in Santa Cruz in 1900 and worked for most of his life as a commercial fisherman on Monterey Bay. In recent years, with the decline of commercial fishing in the bay, he has headed the Stagnaro family's seafood restaurants and sports fishing cruises on the bay.

From childhood he worked alongside the older members of his family, through the eras of the lateen sailing craft to the lampara launchers and deep sea seiners.

In the book he tells of the "share" system of payment, the primitive navigation methods used by oldtimers and the backbreaking physical toil in the days before mechanization.

He also tells of the lives of the women — their endless tasks of cooking, preserving foods, raising vegetable gardens, sewing clothes and making and mending fishnets far into the night.

"The women made do with very little," he recalls. "They made everything out of flour sacks — sheets, tablecloths, towels — I liked those towels. They were thin and I could really get into my ears with them."

In the book which is three inches thick, Malio also discusses the business end of commercial fishing, the changing economics of the industry and the depletion of the once-rich fishing grounds of the bay.

Bootlegging, rum-running, all the colorful days of Prohibition are included, the Depression and World Wars I and II. It was during World War II that Malio fought a battle that had nothing to do with bullets or ships. Older members of the Italian

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Malio still snorts indignantly when he recalls it. "Those people were the best citizens the town had,"

he says.

Through his efforts they were left in their homes — most of them were in their 70s or 80s anyway. And all of them had sons or grandsons or nephews in the United States forces. A total of 83 boys from the wharf joined the navy with Malio leading the parade.

So this is Malio's book. A thick, heavy book, full of fascinating stories about the people, the wharf, the bay, the town of Santa Cruz and its citizens.

The book is available to researchers at McHenry Library and the tapes have been preserved in the Regional History office. A portion of the tapes is available for those who might like to listen to the conversations between Elizabeth Spedding Calciano and Malio Stagnaro.

Interspersed among the questions, answers, chuckles, laughs, thoughtful pauses and occasional sighs, one may hear the calling of gulls and the bark of a harbor seal, or the rumbling of autos passing over the wharf timbers.

The interviews were conducted in Malio's office on the wharf — where else?

The wharf that once was threatened with amputation — somebody got the idea that it should be cut off at the pockets.

"Can you believe it?"

Malio demands yet today with the greatest indignation. "Can you believe such a crazy idea?"

Looking around at the hundreds of persons who use the wharf daily, today — no, it's hard to believe that it was threatened with near-extinction at one time, like some denizen of the deeps.

After all, where would Malio go if there were no wharf?



Malio Stagnaro is presented with his book by Randall Jarrell of UCSC.



Gilda Stagnaro runs "Gilda's" on the wharf.