

Connecting Through the Corsa

Stephanie Longo (June 02, 2008)



Jessup, Pennsylvania's St. Ubaldo Day celebrates family, friends, and the bond between Italy and the United States.



Late in the afternoon on Saturday, May 24, crowds of people began to line either side of Church Street in Jessup, Pa. The sounds of “Eh Cumpare” and “Volare” flowed out of a nearby hair salon and several members of the throng began to hum in tune to the music.

“Today, everybody’s Italian. It is like with St. Patrick’s Day, everybody is Irish. On St. Ubaldo Day, everybody is Italian,” said Diane Mellow of nearby Peckville. Mellow, along with her daughter, Melissa, has been coming to St. Ubaldo Day every year since 1976.

Along with Gubbio, Italy, where the festival originated, Jessup is the only other town in the world that celebrates St. Ubaldo Day. The day-long festivities culminate with La Corsa dei Ceri or “The Running of the Saints” where statues honoring St. Ubaldo, St. Anthony, and St. George are set high atop wooden structures called ceri and raced through the streets of the town.

Legend has it that St. Ubaldo protected Gubbio twice from invasion while he was bishop during the 1100s. After successfully negotiating peace, St. Ubaldo was placed on a platform and carried through the streets of Gubbio to show citizens that he was safe. La Corsa dei Ceri was brought to Jessup by immigrants from Gubbio.

“We are trying to follow the original traditions of Gubbio’s festa as closely as possible. They consider our ceri as part of the only Corsa dei Ceri known to exist in the world,” said Thomas Fiorelli, III, who was president of the St. Ubaldo Society from 2003-2007. The St. Ubaldo Society was formed to promote La Corsa dei Ceri in Jessup as well as to preserve the town’s Umbrian heritage.

“We are rekindling our heritage and not just in our families. We have made so many friends in Gubbio. If we have a question regarding the historical accuracy of our Corsa dei Ceri, we call them and they are always happy to help us. I can’t imagine where our celebrations would be right now without that connection to Gubbio,” Fiorelli said.

St. Ubaldo Day almost became part of the pages of Jessup’s history; in the early 1990s the town stopped celebrating the festival.

“They took a break for a while from 1990-2000 and then the younger generations brought it back. It was great to bring it back. Seeing it as an adult, it is a very inspirational thing. Now it is more energetic, too; it’s livelier now than it was back then,” said Jim Casarin of Jessup. Casarin ran in the Corsa dei Ceri as a child and then again for five years after the festival was reinstated.

Although it celebrates Jessup’s connection to its Italian heritage, St. Ubaldo Day also celebrates family ties.

“My great-grandfather, Francesco Balducci, came to the United States in 1905. The current cero of St. Ubaldo in Gubbio was built in 1895. My father and my brothers Michael and Jon all carried the same cero my great-grandfather carried when they were in Gubbio. When you talk about how the St. Ubaldo Day celebrations unite generations, this proves the point,” Fiorelli said.

As the brightly-colored ceri rush down Church Street and disappear around the corner, one can’t help but think that St. Ubaldo Day is a bridge between the old world and the new.

“A long time ago, Jessup was like Italy. People would sit outside playing cards and drinking wine. Everybody is disconnected today, people were connected back then. The world is so cold now and people are floundering about. Unfortunately, they aren’t grounded in their families anymore,” Mellow said.

“St. Ubaldo Day is a reminder of what was, of how we should all be connected, how we should remember our traditions.”

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