

Accents Oral History Project
Interview with Alfonso D'Emilia

1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? Your ethnic background? How long have you lived in Cleveland?

He is an American citizen but grew up in Italy. Both of his parents were American citizens. He came to America at the age of twenty and worked for Italian language newspapers in New York City and Cleveland. Eventually started working at the Cleveland Plain Dealer and worked there for forty three years until retirement. He is married and has seven daughters.

2. How and when did you first get involved with the Cleveland Cultural Gardens?

The sixties were a period of social unrest in America. Cleveland was no different. *“There was some vandalism. In fact, there was some vandalism perpetrated at the Cleveland Museum of Art. Rodin’s statue, (‘Le Ponce’ ?) The ‘Thinker’, was damaged at that time and, purposely has been left that way – mutilated – so if you go you can still see the damage.*

“At the same time, almost, a period of decentralization within many major American cities took place. Call it movement from the center of the city to the suburbs, flight to the suburbs...whatever. The point is, in 1960, the population of Cleveland (in 1930 the population of Cleveland was almost one million people) was still almost approaching one million people. But, of course, that’s when the decline of Cleveland’s population began to take place to the point that today it is less than 500,000. So there was this decentralization movement and the (Cultural) gardens were practically abandoned. And there were a few voices that we should try to do something about it. But nothing really came about until Mayor Perk (?), who preceded Mayor Voinivich, that’s really when the first interest really began to be intense. And I, having been associated with foreign language newspapers, was approached many times. I always had an interest, but...finally...the representative for ethnic affairs for Mayor Voinivich, August Poost (?), ... said ‘we’ve got to take a stand here. We’ve got to get involved. And so that’s when I began to be involved. This is around 1980. But in 1990 I was also elected president of the Cleveland Cultural Garden Federation and the one who succeeded me was Richard Konashevitz (?) who went on to become ethnic affairs representative under the Michael White administration. And really at that time quite a bit was accomplished because Mayor White had an intense interest in the (Cultural) Gardens. He lived nearby and really became involved. The gardens have... their not owned by the ethnic groups because they are owned by the city of Cleveland. But prior to that the land was donated be John D. Rockefeller....” “ At that time the word ‘ethnic’ almost didn’t even exist. The word was ‘nationality groups’.

The first cultural garden was the British Cultural Garden. It started as an outdoor theatre for performing Shakespearean plays. *“There was a man who was at the time editor of a Jewish newspaper, Wiedenthal, who also had an inspiration ... and at this point it was that it (the Gardens) could be a spring for universal brotherhood.*

In 1925 the Civic Progress league was organized. In 1926 they changed it to The Cleveland Cultural Garden League. It was in 1952 that it became the Cleveland Cultural Garden Federation. The Hebrew Garden was the second garden. Then came the others. The last one was India society garden in 1997. Croatian, Hispanic, Latvian all in formative stages.

“What happens here is that as soon as an ethnic group expresses a desire to develop a garden it has to be approved and it goes through different stages. And also they need quite a bit of money because even though it’s property of the city, whatever you do in the Garden is from money that that particular group has put aside for that project.”

3. Do you know anyone present at the initial opening of the Cultural Gardens in the 1930’s?

No. The Italian Garden was inaugurated in 1930 and attracted 3000 people. *“The Italian government under Mussolini was trying to promote good will...get a good image abroad. So they sent from Italy a bust of Virgil, the Latin Poet, on the 2000th anniversary of his birth. You may say “So what”. But it ‘s amazing. In 1930 classical studies were still very much strong in the United States so that there were often banquets and at one of the banquets a professor would give a speech in Latin. And the Italian government also sent the remains of a column taken from the Roman Forum. So it was pretty unusual.”*

4. What about vandalism in the Italian Garden?

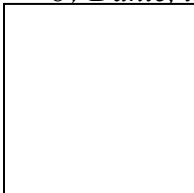
“We are trying now to restore every different aspect of the Garden. In fact last June, we just put back a plaque that was commemorating the American participation in World War I.” They are trying to replace the bust of Virgil. *“My hope is to give a scholarship to Cleveland Institute of Art and let the students come up with the creation of a bust of Virgil. The student whose bust is considered the best will be the winner. That’s what we hope to do”*

The original design of the garden was inspired by Renaissance Italian Villas. And the man that originally designed them worked for the city of Cleveland but had just returned from Rome at the American Academy where he was a Fellow. The fountain in the Italian Garden was inspired by a fountain in Rome at Piazza de Spania (?).

5. Do you know who decided what originally went into the Italian Garden. Were there any disputes?

In 1930 the Italian community in America was fairly new. Immigrants were required for the insatiable American demand for a labor force. Up until the 20th century when Italians went abroad they usually went to South America. *“Whenever people move, they actually bring with them the cumulative experience of an entire people. So in other words, even though they might not even have read a single line of the “Divine Comedy” by Dante, they had it in their blood.”* There are six medallions in the Italian Garden to

ian heroes from past to present. The Italian Consulate had great input.



Although there's never complete agreement things got done. He calls the column in the Italian Garden – *"A decapitated column in search of a bust. It's searching and searching, waiting for a bust to be replaced back there"* Many feel Christopher Columbus and St. Francis of Assisi should have been included in the original garden. Many people now have an interest in the garden and want to keep it going.

6. Who funds the Italian Gardens?

The gardens are in pretty good shape and people don't believe it. *"In the sixties, and even part of the seventies, they were completely abandoned. Plus, you know, ...people were afraid to even get close to it. It's amazing. And I must say, the neighborhood surrounding the gardens are mostly Black residents. They are wonderful people and many of them have an interest in the gardens."* Some contributors are 'hit' continuously. Each garden should have a sponsor organization that appoints representatives to CCGF. That sponsoring organization usually donates a lot of the money.

7. Some say the neglect of the Cultural Garden was symbolic of American peoples' loss of touch with their ethnic ancestral identity. What do you think?

Many immigrants forced their children to learn English only and not worry about their native language. "Cultural suicide". But then the multicultural movement came into being, especially after World War II. Now young people like to go back to their roots. Foreign languages are not studied in the U.S. anymore.

8. Who maintains the Italian Garden?

Volunteers. Gino Collage (?) is a generous volunteer in the Italian Garden.

9. What relevance do you think the Cultural Garden has in today's society?

The CCG are unique in the U.S. and in the world. *"Each group of people represented in the garden represents the cumulative experience of that group of people. So what you have there is really a connecting link between the past and the present. So you go to the German Cultural Garden you have Goethe and Schiller. The Italians sent Virgil. As a remembrance of the beginning of Western civilization from Plato to Socrates, etc., etc. The English have Shakespeare. As I say it's really a connecting link"*

10. What is your hope for the future of the Garden.?

"Well, they are we like to say – living monuments.In the sixteen hundreds after the Renaissance, after the silencing of Galileo, Italy really went down. ...A British writer called it the 'Land of the Dead'. So it continued to be that way in Italy until the 1800's. What happened? Revolutions were taking place everywhere...American...French...Spain...Italy...Greece. It was really upside down. After that came an intellectual revival in Italy, and finally political unification...So you

have cycles. ...these currents are there. So the more movement you have, the more invigorating the human race really becomes.

“I would say I hope it remains there as a symbol, a connecting link, hoping that from there people become interested. They see the picture of, say, DaVinci, and they (become interested) in DaVinci not only for his artistic creations, but for his scientific discoveries...”

“Even at the beginning when the Gardens were in their prime, only in the last few years has there been an interest in this ‘ethnic consciousness’ that’s beginning to assert itself. Never as a divisive force but adding more to the creativity of an entire people.”