

Dear Neighbors,

I can't believe that in all the years I have been writing the Rose letter, I have yet to include a story about the one thing that has put Melrose Park on the map and set our little village apart from all the other Chicago suburbs. Of course, I am talking about none other than our Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. And so, relying on historical archives, I now present a cliff note version of our famous Feast's history, which is the longest running religious festival in the Chicago area.

In 1894, ladies from Laurenzana, Provincia Potenza, Italy, founded the Societa Di Signore Italiane Di Maria Santissima Del Carmine. Their leader was Mrs. Emanuella DeStefano, whose husband was seriously ill at the time. Emanuella made a pledge to the Madonna that if her husband was returned to good health she and the members of the Societa would establish the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Melrose Park.

Mr. DeStefano's health was restored, and the first Feast was held on the DeStefano farm at Twenty-fifth and North Avenues on July 16, 1894 when Melrose Park was just 12 years old. Hundreds of newly arrived Italians came to the first Feast to honor the statue of Our Lady, which Emanuella had commissioned from a Neapolitan artist. It is a replica of the famous statue of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, venerated for centuries in Laurenzana.

In 1895 a wooden chapel was built on Twenty-fourth Avenue to house the statue and offer a place of worship for the local Italian community. In September of 1905 Father Benjamin Franch arrived in Melrose Park. He founded the Congregazione Parrocchiale Maria SS Del Monte Carmelo with the intention of getting this group to help him finance and build a new church. But this was not their only task, they were also asked to help prepare the Feast; thus, becoming the proto-type of what would eventually become the official Feast Committee. In 1907, the chapel was moved to 1101 N. Twenty-third Avenue; and in 1908, a much larger and more beautiful church was built for the burgeoning number of Festa devotees.

From that point on the Feast began developing its own traditions, some of which are still practiced today. On Thursday eve as devotees exited Novena, a marching band would serenade the Virgin and then the band would march through the streets of the parish. On Saturday evening, the band would repeat the ritual, but would also add a concert. It didn't take long before out-of-towners started arriving and camping out on the lawns of homes along the Procession route so they too could be part of the celebration.

The Procession would start with fireworks saluting the Madonna's exit from church after Solemn High Mass. From there Our Lady was carried on a platform adorned with an arch of flowers and trailed by a satin embroidered canopy. In 1926, this was all changed when Fr. Franch hired an Italian woodcarver to reproduce an elegant Baldachino, which is still used today. What never changed were the crowds of people who would march behind the statue of Mary, praying and singing in thanksgiving or supplication. In the evening there would be a band concert, the crowning of the Queen of the Festa, and a magnificent show of fireworks that would bring the Feast to a close.

Despite its Italian origin, other ethnic groups have also been involved in the Feast. Due to Fr. Franch's encouragement, both the St. John Baptist and the St. Anne Lithuanian Societies have marched in the Procession. As have the San Rocco and the San Michele

Societies, with the San Michele Society carrying a statue of their patron, St. Michael the Archangel, at the lead of the Procession for years. And today, Hispanic residents are deeply involved in the Feast and are represented in the procession by Our Lady of Guadalupe and the Grupo San Lucas Societies.

In 1921, the first official Feast Committee met. By 1925, the growing number of groups marching created a need for a Grand Marshall to organize the Procession. Sebastian Lorenzo became Grand Marshall in 1930 and served 40 years.

Since 1925, decorative, illuminated arches have been set up over Twenty-third Avenue from Lake Street to Cortez Street; the committee at that time also decided to serve refreshments and have amusements for the children.

In 1922 the Madire Christiane was originated for the mothers of the parish and they marched in the Procession until 1960 when they merged with Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Sodality, who had been marching since their founding in 1936. Together they formed the Altar and Rosary Society. Melrose Park followers of St. Anthony of Padua began marching in 1956.

When World War II began, area Italians flocked to the feet of Our Lady to pray for the safe return of their sons and the end of the war. Thousands marched behind the Virgin during these years, and many are the stories of prayers answered through her intercession.

In 1944, the Golden Jubilee of the Feast was celebrated and new crowns were purchased for the statue. Because of the large crowd expected, an outdoor altar was constructed near Twenty-fifth and Augusta; and the first Field Mass was celebrated. The tradition of the outdoor Mass was continued until 1981.

In 1966, a new church was dedicated with a place for Our Lady in a chapel near the entrance. At that point, the Blue Army of Our Lady of Fatima and members of the Italian Catholic Federation began marching in the Feast.

In 1969, in preparation for the 75th anniversary of Our Lady, Fr. Adam Torresan, the pastor at that time, had an Italian jeweler create new crowns for the statue, which were made of 18k gold and bejeweled with precious gems. The crowns were made possible through votive donations made by devotees, who according to custom, would present the Statue of Our Lady with a votive offering in gratitude for the favor she had granted; Fr. Adam crowned the statue after the Field Mass that year.

This year the Feast celebrates its 124th anniversary. The dates for this year's Feast are July 13-16th. Attend this year's Feast and be part of Melrose Park's grandest tradition.

Sincerely,

Mayor Ron Serpico