

100 Years of Italian American History

A Historical Perspective on the Italian American Community in Metro Detroit

A year-long series highlighting businesses and community members from 1909 to today.

Frank J. Calcaterra Funeral Business Survives

The Frank J. Calcaterra family of funeral homes turns 101 this year. Started by Frank J. Calcaterra, the family business predates the Italian Tribune by one year. It was the first Italian funeral home in Metropolitan Detroit.

The year was 1908. Henry Ford was about to introduce his "Model T" to the Detroit driving public, and three Italian-American brothers, Frank J., Louis C., and Paul C. Calcaterra (who later moved to St. Louis), opened their first funeral home on Brewster and Rivard, near the present Eastern Market area. The Calcaterra family originally immigrated from Cuggiono, Italy, a province of Lomardia.

One of the original brothers, Paul, left Detroit in 1921 and opened Calcaterra Funeral Home Inc. in St. Louis, Missouri, which reverted to the family in 1970 upon his death. "We sold it to a conglomerate, but they kept the name," said Larry Calcaterra.

In 1937, the family relocated their business to prestigious East Grand Boulevard in Detroit. They stayed over 35 years at that location before moving in 1965 to Seven Mile and Kelly following the Italian migration patterns.

After Frank J. Calcaterra passed away in 1949, his brother, Louis Sr., took over the operation along with his four sons: Louis (who passed away in 1992), Frank, Paul and Larry.

The suburban sprawl caused still another move, and in 1984, Louis Jr., Frank and Paul Calcaterra opened another funeral home on Schoenherr Road and 15 Mile in Sterling Heights.

Also in 1984, Larry Calcaterra opened a new chapel on 16 Mile and Schoenherr, co-founded with Edward J. Wujek. Co-founders of the Wujek-Calcaterra Funeral Home, Ed Wujek and Larry Calcaterra graduated together from the New England Institute of Anatomy, Sanitary Science, Embalming and Funeral Directing in Boston, in 1963. They were classmates, roommates and fraternity brothers.

The tradition continues as the next generation of the Larry Calcaterra family has taken its place in the family business: Larry and Judy Calcaterra's three sons, Larry, Matthew, and Michael, now all work in the family business.

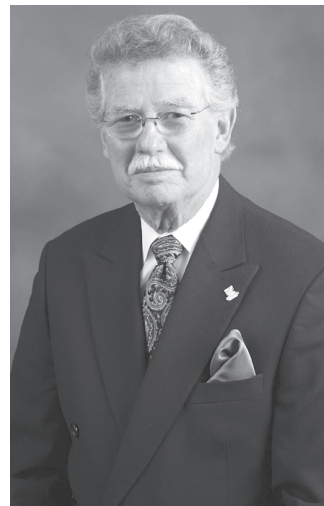
In August 2000, the Frank J. Calcaterra Funeral Home, Inc. sold to a conglomerate who then purchased the building, company and name, along with Bagnasco, Clyne, and Sobocinski Funeral Homes. It was that conglomerate that combined the names of Bagnasco and Calcaterra. They also combined the names of Clyne and Sobocinski.

Frank and Paul were still co-managing the Bagnasco-Calcaterra Funeral Home when it was bought in August 2000. Frank has now semi-retired, while Paul still maintains an active role in that funeral home. Linda Calcaterra, Louis Jr.'s daughter, now works with her two uncles in the family business known currently as Bagnasco-Calcaterra Funeral Home.

There is one good reason why the family has been serving the Italian-American public in their time of need: "It's in our blood," says Larry Calcaterra. "We were raised in it."

It's in the blood of the Italian American community in Detroit as well. Many remember the original building located in the neighborhood near San Francesco Church at Rivard and Wilkins, one of the oldest Italian churches in Detroit. "We were just kiddy corner from the church," explains Larry Calcaterra.

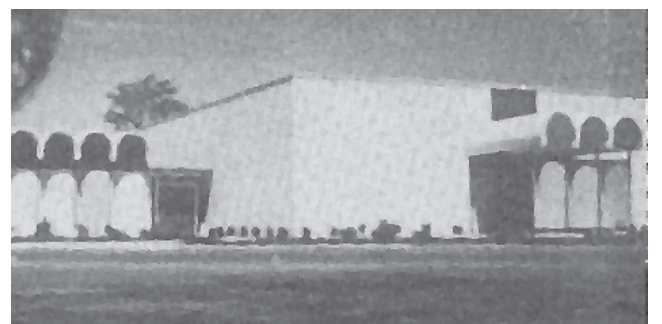
Although the pictures of horse-drawn carriage hearses has been replaced with modern hearses of today, Italian family traditions have remained in tact. The Calcaterra family in its entirety remains committed to keeping the Italian heritage alive in the community, including the traditions of creating a pleasant homespun atmosphere in which to pay our final respects to our dearly departed relatives.



STILL COMFORTING:
(Top) The Frank J. Calcaterra Funeral Home as it looked on East Grand Boulevard in 1937, where the business remained for over 35 years.



(Center) The Calcaterra family still runs the business today. (Left) Paul Calcaterra, a third generation Italian, co-manages the Bagnasco-Calcaterra Funeral Home with Bill Bagnasco. (Right) The Larry Calcaterra Family (standing, from left) with Larry, his sons Matthew M. Calcaterra and Lawrence P. Calcaterra, and (seated) Judy Calcaterra and son Michael J. Calcaterra, who are all involved in operating the Wujek-Calcaterra Funeral Home.



Bottom: Three views of Calterra Funeral Homes over the years (top) The 15 Mile and Schoenherr location, the Moross location and the Van Dyke location in Shelby.



Editor's note: If you have a business, club or individual that you believe deserves historical recognition in a future edition, call (586) 783-3260 or email Italiantribune@yahoo.com