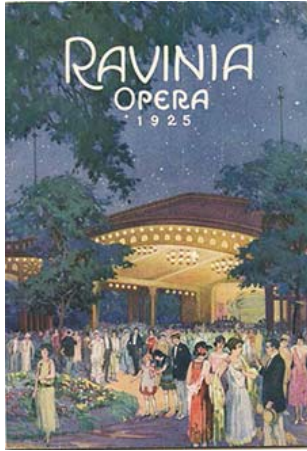


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## Highwood's Legacy of Opera

By Sue Masaracchia-Roberts



In a letter written in 1929, Louis Eckstein, the Ravinia Festival's first president wrote, "The appreciation of good music is largely the result of environment and opportunity. The people of Europe for generations have known good music, . . . the greatest of all the arts. It is by fostering such an art that we are attempting to make a tangible and lasting contribution to the cause of musical appreciation in America."

The town of Highwood, originally founded by immigrants from Ireland, Sweden and Germany, clearly shared Eckstein's passion. For years, many Ravinia chorus members and stars would spend time in this Old World North Shore suburb amongst its growing population of Italian craftsmen from

Modena and Bologna who opened their homes and restaurants to them.

From opera's Ravinia debut in 1912 through its final performances in 1931, there were few local restaurants in the area with culinary fare that attracted the visiting European stars. However, Highwood, with its hard working laborers and artisans, offered them a taste and feeling of home, especially those in the chorus.

One of those places was the Del Rio Restaurant, which began in the 1920s, when Linda Pigati, a young widow with three sons, opened a boarding house that served meals. It was one of three such places that existed in Highwood at the time, each creating uncommon, traditional meals from their distinctive areas of Italy. The reputation of these eateries soon gained esteem and made Highwood a destination both by train and by car. Also, "For a time," Linda's grandson Bill Pigati noted, "Highwood was one of the rare places to drink alcohol outside of No Man's Land."

"The Del Rio was originally a dance hall built during the 1920 depression by a good looking Italian bricklayer with a great smile, a great voice and a jealous wife," said current Del Rio owner Bill Pigati. "My grandmother closed our boarding house restaurant and made [the dance hall] into a restaurant."

Operas such as Carmen, Faust, I Pagliacci, Rigoletto and Madame Butterfly were presented at Ravinia every summer evening from June to September. In a July 1962 Marjorie Raymond article called, "Memories of Days of Opera Live On in Ravinia Park," John D. Laurie, park manager since 1914, said, "All the great singers of the day were here except Caruso, who signed a contract but died before the performance date." The singing stars included international luminaries like Elisabeth Rethberg, Giovanni Martinelli, Virgilio Lazzari, Tito Shipa, Ina Bourskaya, Vittorio Tervinsan and Rosa Raisa.

A protégé of dramatic diva Rosa Raisa, Highwood native Gloria



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Linari, performed as Gloria Lind. She appeared with both the Lyric Opera in Chicago and the Metropolitan Opera in New York, as well as toured Europe and sang on Broadway. After a 12 year opera career, she settled in Highwood in 1963, taught music lessons and was instrumental in creating a Highwood repertory opera house out of an abandoned movie house, the site of the current Isaac & Moische's Deli. We would like to hear from you. Contact us.

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Waukegan News Sun 1964 staff writer Olga Pottker was a young girl at the time. She said of the owner of one of those boarding houses, Pia Gibertini, as an "amazing woman who transformed her mural decorated dining and living rooms so she could cook for and serve the opera guests." Gibertini added, "Some guests came before the opera, but many of them preferred to wait until the end of the performance. Then it would mean late hours . . ." Class and status vanished as they socialized as a family.

During Luciano Pavarotti's Chicago visit in 1980, a childhood friend from Modena, Italy, lived in the area and invited him to a Modenese club. "We had a party here and he came," said Pigati. Although Pavarotti, was not allowed to sing opera classics due to contract restrictions, he began "to sing the anthem and other Italian songs with a lot of really pretty voices."

In the summer 2013 issue, Cynthia Krol, a contributor to the Highwood Historical Society newsletter, wrote, "[Members of the opera company] could speak the [same] language and eat familiar foods. They boarded at homes and at the tables of many old Highwood families – Fabbri, Gibertini, Pigati, Scornavacco and Turrelli." Nightly, residents could hear music billowing from these rooming houses as they strolled the town streets.

Krol's article also said, "Rumor has it Pavarotti had such a good time that he was unable to perform the next night at the Lyric Opera. Thus began his reputation for last minute cancellations."

Despite the years since opera left Ravinia, the Pigatis continue the tradition at the Del Rio each year for "a couple of weeks around Christmas. We push a piano into the middle of the room and do opera. This is a neat town for folks to live in. We keep a lot of Italian traditions; it's kind of a neat thing to do," said current owner, "to [continue] live music at the Del Rio."

Today, although opera and its stars are no longer the mainstay of its summer night life, Highwood also keeps music alive with its Young Midwest Artists, founded in 1993. YMA offers orchestra, chamber music, jazz, wind symphony classes and choral ensembles. This is a proud, diverse town, rich in history and culture, even as the cultures blend with its newer immigrant arrivals.



*Images courtesy of Ravinia Festival, Highwood Historical Society, Highland Park Historical Society and Gloria Linari. Sue Masaracchia-Roberts is a freelance writer and public relations consultant specializing in health care, profiles and small businesses. Sue can be reached at 847.680.6583 or [suemas@comcast.net](mailto:suemas@comcast.net).*

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