

## **Americans Come to the Rescue of Messina Earthquake Victims**

By Salvatore John LaGumina, Ph.D.

Emeritus Professor Nassau Community College

Author of *The Great Earthquake: America Comes to Messina's Rescue* (to be published in October 2008 by Teneo Press, Youngstown, NY)

The earthquake that struck the Messina straits on December 28, 1908 was Europe's most powerful earthquake in modern times. Centered in the Messina Strait that separates the island of Sicily from Calabria on the Italian mainland, the quake's power, estimated at 7.5 on the Richter scale, shook southern Italy to its very foundations with tsunami-like consequences including forty-foot waves that crashed down on dozens of coastal cities spreading thick, viscous, impassable mud in the streets resulting in enormous casualties. Perhaps as many as 200,000 perished.

Respecter neither of the peasant nor the prominent, the earthquake numbered as fatal victims the American Consul and his wife, English Consul's wife along with respectable tourists, among whom were many American travelers of the Gilded Age.

Survivors faced the bleakest of realities --homes destroyed, family members dead, and nearby cities and villages reduced to rubble. There were reports of survivors wandering about dazed, demented and nude, while widespread looting and vandalism required massive deployment of police and troops to keep order. The Italian government relocated many Messina survivors to new towns within Italy while others became immigrants destined for America. Within weeks over 400 were placed on the "Republic," a luxury passenger liner, while the Italian ship SS "Florida", carried 850 passengers away from Naples en route to a new life in New York City. En route these survivors endured a second disaster when lost in dense fog off Nantucket Island, the "Florida" collided with the "Republic," an accident that cost three more lives. Survivors finally arrived in New York's harbor shaken and unnerved, as they confronted a new challenge to begin their lives again.

Although several countries responded the greatest assistance came from the United States Navy then in the final leg of its historic world tour which took steps to bring immediate and concrete succor in the form of tens of thousands pounds of food (bread, cereal, fresh meat, fruit, milk, canned vegetables, and beverages) and several doctors along with cots and blankets to the stricken area.

It was soon realized that recovery from the horrific devastation would require much more assistance and thus began a little-known but important chapter in Italian/American relations in the form of extensive and vitally-needed house-building projects. The United States Congress responded to an Italian government request home-building material by approving a relief bill of \$500,000, that filled several steamers with construction items for approximately

3,000 homes in the destroyed village of Reggio and smaller nearby villages on the Calabrian and Sicilian sides of the straits of Messina. American naval personnel became vigorously engaged in actually erecting the homes that became known as “the American village.” The operation that lasted for weeks elicited genuine appreciation from Italian officials. It also required a delicate temporary relinquishment of national sovereignty by the Italian government to an American camp within Italy.

Another indication of the close association between Americans and Italians wrought by the tragedy was the personal visit by former President Theodore Roosevelt to the stricken area on April 6, 1909. Although it was a hastily arranged unscheduled visit, the King of Italy was on hand to greet him while throngs of townspeople filled the streets to show their appreciation for American aid. It was a stirring sight to see the destitute population welcome him with the seemingly incongruous but nevertheless heartfelt shout of “Long live our President,” in deference to a man who was considered “a kind of spiritual President of the unfortunate island.” Crowds were so large that the Roosevelt entourage was unable to visit the ruins of the former American Consulate, however, he did visit remains of the destroyed Messina Cathedral and adjacent interior streets piled high with debris.

Representatives from the national government, local municipalities, religious orders and plain Italian citizens were profuse in articulating their gratitude as expressed in official and private letters and in name designations –albeit employing bewildering phonetic Italian variations of American appellations such as Via Rosuvett [Roosevelt] and Via Brocchlin [Brooklyn]. Americans who participated in house-building were convinced that they were engaged in an essential humane undertaking involving construction not only thousands of cottages, but also schools, workroom, church, hotel, and hospital.

The prompt reaction by the United States Navy via its warships laden with ample food, medicine and medical personnel and the extraordinary manual work undertaken by thousands of navy members within the stricken areas, the proficiency and capability exercised by United States representatives, the generous approval substantial sums by Congress to vote to help the afflicted, the voluntary contributions of the prominent and proletariat Americans, the personal visit of President Roosevelt to the scene of the disaster; all of these actions and more elicited astonishing commendation. They won praise from Italy, from other nations and from Italian Americans. That the United States assumed this foremost role of extensive aid to people in other parts of the world during the Gilded Age may seem unusual in a survival of the fittest era,–yet in answering the human needs in a time of immense disaster this was also an example of America at its best.

---