

**Title:** Continuing Traditions, Adapting to Changes

**Grade level:** 5-8

**Primary Curricular Area:** Social Studies and Language Arts Literacy

**Links to NJ Core Curriculum Content Standards:**

Lang Arts 3.1 – Read variety of texts with fluency and comprehension  
Lang Arts 3.2 - Write in varied content/form for different audiences/purposes  
Lang Arts 3.3 – Speak in varied content/form for different audiences/purposes  
Lang Arts 3.5 - Asses, view, evaluate respond to print/non-print resources  
Soc St 6.1 – Utilize historical thinking, problem solving, and research skills  
Soc St 6.4 - Understanding of US and NJ History  
Soc St 6.6 - Geographical understanding though spatial relationships  
Consumer, Family, and Life Skills 9.2 – Demonstrate critical life skills to function in society

**Unit Topics:** *Italian Americans Today*:, Italian American identity; Italian traditions, Italian Americans in New Jersey.

**Lesson Topics:** Cultural assimilation, traditions and adaptation

**Goals:** Explore how and why Italians and Italian Americans in New Jersey (with Trenton as a case study) continued traditions from Italy and adapted them as they assimilated into United States culture.

**Objectives: Students will be able to:**

- “Read” a photograph for information. [SKILL]
- Analyze a primary source document for information. [SKILL]
- Explore the reasons traditions are kept, and why they are adapted.

[KNOWLEDGE]

- Empathize with Italian immigrants in Trenton, New Jersey who wanted to continue traditions, and second generation Italian Americans who wanted to adapt traditions to match contemporary societal changes. [ATTITUDE]

**Background:**

As with many immigrant groups in the state, Italians have a long history in Trenton, New Jersey, with the first immigrant arriving in 1714 in Amwell Township. From the 1890 through 1921, Italians were the largest immigrant group in Trenton. Most immigrants were from areas south of Rome and Sicily, and, due to the abundance of jobs in the industries of Trenton during the turn of the century, they settled in the Chambersburg area of Trenton, known to others as “the Burg.”

While Americanization was encouraged, since wages were low, hours long, and conditions dangerous, many Italians banded together in family units and small concentrations of people from their hometown in Italy, or “paesani.” Social clubs were a means for immigrant men (women were often not allowed as members) to socialize and

gather around an activity which they used to do in their hometown in Italy, such as hunting. It was in 1921 that the Italian American Sportsman's Club was formed in Trenton; in the 1970s with the advent of the National Women's Rights Movement and second generation Italian Americans now taking shape, that the club's parameters were expanded to change with the times. Many of the older generation fought fiercely to preserve the more traditional values and purpose of the club, which brought about power struggles and jealousy, and which led to the club's eventual dissolution.

With religion such a strong factor in Italian culture, immigrants to the New World, especially New Jersey, often tried to continue traditions related to feast days of the patron saint of their town in Italy. In Trenton, the feast of St. Joseph, celebrated every March 19<sup>th</sup>, manifested itself in the creation of a "tavola di San Giuseppe," or St. Joseph's table. This table, set by individual families as a thanks for answering a prayer in times of crisis, consisted of exotic vegetables, fruits, flowers, and candles. Also integral to the table were specially baked breads by a local bakery in various forms such as St. Joseph's beard, St. Joseph's staff, baby Jesus, and the Madonna. In the 1950s, as fewer families were continuing this tradition, a community "tavola" was arranged by the San Giuseppe Society of St. James Church. A priest would come and bless the table, with selected people portraying Mary, St. Joseph, and baby Jesus. Then the community would feast. Today there are still some communities in New York that carry on this tradition. (For more on the origins of the St. Joseph's table, view the article at <http://www.faithmag.com/issues/mar03.html#culture>)

**Vocabulary and Key Concepts:** Tradition, continuity and change, cultural assimilation, adaptation

**Suggested Activities/Procedures:**

Activity 1: Begin with a group discussion: Ask students to define the word tradition, and ask if they have any traditions in their families. *Are there any traditions in their neighborhoods or communities (such as a block party, parade, town celebration)? Why do people have traditions?* (Since the definition of tradition states that it is unwritten, it is important to continue them so that future generations will remember the culture of their ancestors) Tell them that they will be thinking more about traditions and why and how they might continue in a community, and why and how they might change over time.

Show students Photograph #1, the photograph of the people seated indoors. Ask them:

*What do you see in the photograph?* (Answers will vary. People seated, a deer head, photos on the wall, lights, an American flag, glasses of wine, a little boy, etc)

*Was the photo taken inside or outside? How can you tell?* (pictures on walls, light fixtures)

*Was the photo taken long ago or recently? How can you tell?* (by clothing of people)

*What do the people seem to be doing in the picture?* (Posing, and some are raising glasses for a toast)

*Why do you think all these people are gathered together inside this room?* (For a meeting or dinner, because of long table with tablecloth)

*These people all belong to a club. What is a club?* (A group of people that get together for a common purpose).

*What kind of club do they belong to? How can you tell?* (A hunting club, because of stuffed deer in front)

*What do you notice about the people?* (they are all men)

*Why do you think this is so?* (The club admitted only men)

*Why do you think no women were allowed?* (Hunting is not usually a sport that women do) Point out to students the caption written directly on the photograph, "Banquet of the Italian-American Sportsman's Ass'n, Nov 28<sup>th</sup>, 1926, Trenton NJ" if they have not seen it already.

*What activities do you think the club has besides the banquet?* (Hunting, maybe fishing, other sports).

Now show students the primary source document, the Italian American Sportsmen's Club placemat. Working in pairs or groups, ask students to get more information about the club and its buildings/facilities, and activities from the writing and the pictures on the placemat. Have each group share one thing that they found out with the rest of the class.

*What are some changes that the group made in their membership and activities?* (Membership grown; changed buildings; bought new building; built ballroom; added pool; allowed family members to come in; provided activity for families; dining room and bar open to public so not just for club members; old hunting lodge burned, new one built)

*What does this suggest about changes in the club's purpose?* (Not just for hunting anymore, since have pool; have new membership structure since families allowed; focus of club shifted from a place to be with those from your hometown to assimilation.)

*Why do you think some of these changes were made?* (Community changed and grew so needed new facility and activities to accommodate changing population and membership.)

*What does this suggest about traditions, change, and continuity in the Italian American community in Trenton?*

Show students Photograph #2, the photograph of the man standing to the left of the small table. *What do you see in the photograph?* (Answers will vary. A man next to a table, candles, statues, food, flowers, tablecloth, window shutters, etc)

*Was the photo taken inside or outside? How can you tell?* (window shutters, wallpaper)

*Who do you think the statue represents?* (Jesus, Mary, and Joseph)

*What is the round thing to the left of the statue?* (Bread made in the shape of a circle)

*Why do you think there is so much food on the table?* (many people will be eating it)

*What clues suggest this is not for sit down eating?* (There are no chairs or place settings.)

*Why is the man standing near the table?* (He is the owner/creator of the table.)

Explain to students that this is a “tavola di San Guiseppe, or St. Joseph’s table. Tell them some of the background information (see above) about the tradition. Point out the bread and explain its meaning. This photograph was taken in Trenton, NJ in 1946 at the home of the man in the photo. *Why do you think Italians in New Jersey set up a St. Joseph’s table?* (They were carrying on a tradition.)

Now show students Photograph #3, showing 2 people behind a long table. Ask students (they may work in pairs or groups) to list similarities and differences between the two photographs. You might suggest they set up a chart or Venn diagram to record their answers. (Answers include, but are not limited to: Similarities: Food, candles, bread, man near table, indoors; Differences: Less variety of food, younger man standing with older man, table longer).

Review the answers of the groups. *Is this a “tavola di San Giuseppe? How could you tell?* (Food, bread, candles) *Why is this different from the other photo of the “tavola?”* *Why do you think there is such a long table?* (more people to feed) *Why is there less variety in the food?* (the food is more symbolic than meant to be eaten as part of a balanced meal.) This photograph was taken in Trenton in 1982 at St. James Church. *How do you account for these changes in the “tavola” and the location almost 40 years later?* (The tavola is for the community as opposed to being done by individuals in their home. This suggests that fewer people were doing the tavola in their homes, and the church, in trying to keep up traditions, set up a “communal table” for the parishioners.) *What does this suggest about traditions, change, and continuity in the Italian American community in Trenton?*

*For present day, what other adaptations might the club or the “tavola” make to accommodate changes in lifestyles while still linking to a tradition?* (Answers will vary)

Ask students to “redesign” the Italian American Sportsmen’s Club or plan a “tavola di San Giuseppe” for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Students should design a brochure or placemat, or a 30 second radio or TV commercial, which explains the “redesigned” club’s mission, who is welcome to join as a member, activities, facilities, and other pertinent information; or write a newspaper article or stage a photograph that explains the “tavola.” *What images will you use to convey the information you are putting into words?*

Wrap-up: *What is the consequence of a club where the membership is not diversified and/or the facilities and activities do not change? How can traditions be preserved when populations and times change? Is adaptation and cultural assimilation important to survival or is it better to preserve old customs so they will not be lost?*

**Suggested Assessments:** Have students exchange their completed projects with a peer and evaluate the “message” they are sending about the club or the “tavola.”

**Extended Activities:** Students could debate “Cultural assimilation versus preservation of traditions.” Have them look for examples of each in other cultural groups in New Jersey to support their position.

Additionally, students could research to see if Trenton still has an Italian American Sportsmen's Club and still celebrates the feast of San Giuseppe with the "tavola." What does this suggest about the Italian American population in Trenton today?

Find the recipe for and bake a loaf of the bread used for the "tavola di San Giuseppe."

**Resources/Materials:** Photographs # 1, 2, 3 (included, from the Collections of The New Jersey Historical Society); computers with design program (optional); art supplies to create brochures

**Related Curricular Areas:** World Languages, Visual and Performing Arts