AFFINITY

MOULEDOUX | BLAND LEGRAND | BRACKETT
ATTORNEYS AT LAW, NEW ORLEANS

VOLUME 4, ISSUE 6 June 25, 2024

By: Rob Popich

Croatian Culture and Influence on the United States

Croatia became an independent country after breaking away from Yugoslavia in 1991, with the 25th of June recognized as the day that the Croatian Parliament declared independence.

With a large population of Croatian descendants living in the United States today, the ties between Croatia and America run deep. Currently, it is estimated that approximately 1.2 million Croatian descendants reside in the United States helping make the Croatian culture more recognizable, accepted and celebrated. Regions with significant Croatian American population include metropolitan areas of Chicago, Cleveland, New York City, Southern California and Pittsburgh. These Croatian descendants help promote the Croatian culture and heritage in the United States, and also here in the New Orleans area.

Immigration

The height of Croatian immigration to the United States took place between 1900 and 1914. Throughout the 19th century, Croatian settlers made their mark on the southern and western states. Census records show that there was a large population of Croatian settlers living in Mississippi and Alabama throughout the 1850s and 1860s. By 1880, there were as many as 20,000 Croatians living in the United States. During the 1800s, much of the Croatian population, given their expertise in seafaring, made their living through the use of transferable skills in the fields of fishing and oyster farming. Others made their way west in search of their share in the California Gold Rush; but instead, they found a climate similar to their Adriatic home, resulting in establishing farmland for growing quality apples, figs and grapes. In addition to farming, the California settlers also turned to commercial fishing (tuna, for example) and working on the longshore docks. For many Croatians, the purpose of the trip across the Atlantic was to send money back to their homes. These immigrants, primarily unskilled laborers, helped boost the Croatian economy during the early 20th century.

Croatian Independence Day

Because independence took centuries to achieve, Croatians are especially proud for their country to be recognized as an independent country. Croatians commemorate Independence Day on June 25th, which is the day Croatia proclaimed its intentions to sever its ties with the Socialist

Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. On October 8, 1991, the Croatian Parliament made their independence official when they adopted the Decision on the Termination of State Legislators of the Republic of Croatia with other republics and Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia provinces. Croatian Independence Day, known as 'Dan neovisnosti', was initially celebrated on October 8th; but since 2002, Dan neovisnosti' has been widely celebrated on June 25th, the day their intentions were proclaimed.

Croatians In America Today

There is a great sense of pride in the ethnic heritage of Croatian-Americans, with many traditional practices still deeply set within family practices, ranging from Croatian-influenced cuisine to celebrating national holidays and vigorously supporting the Croatian national sports teams from United States soil. Croatian Americans maintain a deep connection with the country of their ancestors and take pride in Croatia. Many enjoy visiting and vacationing in Croatia to deepen their traditions and culture. With scenic Mediterranean coastlines and islands and a rich culture and history, Croatia has become a very sought-after tourist/vacation destination, not only for the Croatian-Americans of the United States, but of vacationers worldwide.

Croatian Influence and Culture in New Orleans

The New Orleans area is home to several thousand people of Croatian descent, which largely resulted from the Croatian immigration during the early 19th century. Louisiana Croatians settled in or near Plaquemines Parish fishing communities such as Empire, Buras, and Port Sulphur.

Commercial fishing has long been the most prevalent traditional occupation among Croatian men in Plaquemines Parish, particularly oyster harvesting. Croatians are credited with developing the state's commercial oyster industry. Many of Louisiana's Croatian men continue to harvest oysters, and some are third- or fourth-generation oystermen. While the commercial oyster industry has changed significantly since the early settlers, the Croatian oyster community remains strong and adapting to the ever-changing industry. While commercial shrimping has never been as wide-spread among Croatian-Americans as oyster-harvesting, many oyster-fishermen also convert their commercial oyster vessels to shrimping vessels during the Louisiana shrimp seasons.

Many Croatians established businesses in New Orleans, especially seafood supply businesses and restaurants in New Orleans. Famous New Orleans area restaurants such as Drago's and Crescent City Steakhouse are still owned and managed by Croatian families. Of course, many (especially later generation) Croatians have also gone into other professions such as real estate, law, government, education, and the medical field.

Local New Orleans Group and Celebrations

Croatian communities across the United States have organizations dedicated to help preserve and promote the Croatian heritage and to provide a place for their communities to gather. In

September 2023, the New Orleans area Croatian American Society ("CAS") celebrated the grand opening of its Croatian House, the cultural center of the CAS. The grand opening of the Croatian House was highlighted by the visit and meet and greet from Croatian President Zoran Milanovic. The Croatian House, located in Belle Chasse, is used to host annual parties, dances, language and cooking classes, and many other cultural activities for the community. The CAS is an active participant at several local festivals, featuring the local delicacy, raw and char-grilled oysters, and handmade Croatian desserts.

Croatian Fest, which is rooted in Belle Chasse, is one of New Orleans' newest festivals. The newly created Croatian House has become the perfect backdrop for Croatian Fest. The festival features Croatian food and drinks, live music, dance demonstrations, dancing, and all sorts of family-friendly fun. Mouledoux Bland Legrand & Brackett is a proud sponsor of the Croatian Fest and looks forward to its continued support of the Croatian community, whose culture has enriched our beloved city.