Italian-American Week, exhibit begin Sunday in Abbeville

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Vermilion Bureau Editor

ABBEVILLE — The red, white and blue has been joined by the red, white and green with Abbeville's declaration of Italian-American Week and an exhibit at a downtown museum and art gallery.

A trio of Italian flags are flying in front of the Abbeville Cultural and Historical Alliance Center at 108 S. State St. for the third annual display by I Cugini Della Sicilia, or The Cousins of Sicily group.

The week to honor the contributions of Italian- and Sicilian-Americans in Vermilion Parish, Acadiana and the state runs from Sunday through March 29, said cousins' group founder Janice Bourgeois Macomber. Her grandparents were part of the city's prominent Russo clan.

A traveling exhibit from the American Italian Renaissance Foundation in New Orleans is the centerpiece of the art and history display, Macomber said Friday. "We are also encouraging people of Italian and Sicilian descent to bring in artifacts, photographs or what have you to be part of the exhibit," she said.

A "Meet the Cousins" reception is scheduled from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. Wednesday at the center, with refreshments afterward at Bollino's coffeehouse across the street.

Alliance Center guide Cheryl Benoit said the exhibit has stirred a lot of interest among residents because of the key roles Sicilian and Italian immigrants played in the city's history.

One of them was Joseph D. "Joe D." Russo, who arrived at Ellis Island, N.Y., in 1898, made his way to Abbeville and became a successful merchant from 1908 to 1952 with his "Joe-D Pop Rouge," a popular strawberry soda bottled at a plant where Robie's Supermarket, still a Russo family business, now stands.

Other family names that have figured prominently in the community, and continue to do so through third-generation descendants are Piazza, Scalis, Campisi, Fontana, Moresi, Rizzuto, Scelfo, Greco, Guarino, Mula, Alesi and Crusta.

Crusta Memorial Airport is named for a Sicilian American pilot who pioneered aerial planting of rice.

Want to know more?
American Italian Renaissance Foundation:
537 S. Peters St., New Orleans
(504) 522-7294, www.airf.org