

Zamboni!

Laura E. Ruberto (February 24, 2009)



A little diddy about California's role in the Italian American invention of an ice-resurfacing machine.

This year, 2009, marks the sixtieth anniversary of the first patent for a "self-propelled ice resurfacing machine"—what most readers probably know as a [Zamboni](#) [2].

The inventor, Frank Joseph Zamboni, Jr., and his famous machine have found their way into countless



cultural references. Charles Schulz, who owned the [Redwood Empire Ice Arena in Santa Rosa, California](#) [3], had resurfacing machines in his Peanuts comic strip in the 1960s and started naming them Zambonis in 1980. The alt-rock band the Gear Daddies (with Italian American bassist Nick Ciola) had a hit with their “Zamboni.” And Frank Zamboni is the only Italian American to appear in the [Capstone Press’s Graphic Library](#) [4] series of Inventions and Discoveries, though no mention is made of his Italian background.

The man whose last name is practically synonymous with ice-skating was born in Eureka, Utah, on Jan. 16, 1901, but grew up mainly on a farm in Lava Hot Springs, Idaho (near Pocatello). His parents were both immigrants (his father, Francesco Giuseppe, from what was then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire; his mother, Carmelina Masoero, from Avigliana, in Piedmont). At age 19 he moved with his family to Southern California. He joined his brothers in various business ventures, eventually turning to the business of ice—first refrigeration, then production.

In 1940 they opened the [Iceland Skating Rink in Paramount](#) [5], just south of Los Angeles. The rink first was uncovered, but that caused the Zamboni brothers all kinds of troubles because of the hot, dry weather, and so a dome was built on the rink. The rest is history. Frank—who had been working as a mechanic since he was 15—came up with the idea of a machine that would resurface the ice quickly, evenly, and efficiently. What better place than So Cal’s Mediterranean climate to conceptualize the need for such a contraption?

There are plenty of details missing in my account, but in telling the story of the Zamboni machine and its inventor I don’t intend to proselytize about yet another “famous-but-forgotten” Italian American. Rather, I’m curious to think about what, if anything, his Italian American background—the



child of immigrants from Northern Italy who grew up in one of the U.S.'s coldest regions—might suggest about the work he took on in his life.

The connections are clear to me. Snow and ice were woven into his life history. Immigrant resourcefulness goes hand and hand with the farm life with which he was surrounded as a kid. Southern California in the first half of the twentieth century was packed to the brim with an entrepreneurial (not to mention heavily mechanized) sensibility (the first McDonald's opened in 1940 in nearby San Bernadino), a world of glitter and glamour (think Hollywood!), and amazingly distinctive fabrications ([Sabato Rodia's Watts Towers](#) [6] in nearby Watts). Zamboni fit right in.

In 1956 Frank Zamboni took over Berkeley Iceland, situated just west of the UC campus. I only recently discovered this fact even though I drive by the now-closed rink each day on my way to work (it closed in 2003).





Outside the Berkeley Iceland as it looks today.





Barbed wire surrounds the rink today.

Frank Zamboni died in 1988. Italy and California informed his life, his work experiences, and, no doubt, his creative outpourings.

(Stay tuned for a post on another famous Zamboni, Anteo, teenage anti-fascist martyr in Bologna!)

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