

Time Traveller Summer 2020

Roma Hall

940 Ewen Avenue

In May 1929, 27 families came together to establish the Italian Mutual Aid Society. The society was incorporated in February 1931. Mary Canil and other women also established the society's Ladies Auxiliary. The group supported Italians both socially and economically as they settled in Queensborough. It is still the oldest Italian club in Metro Vancouver.



The Roma Hall and the Italian Mutual Aid Society, 1931

Mr. Sprice, the first president, at the official opening of the Roma Hall with the other society directors and a three-accordion dance band. Sprice is in the centre with a sash in the Italian flag's colours across his chest.

IHP6460

The Roma Hall, built by the society and its volunteers in 1931, has been one of the social centres in Queensborough since its earliest days. Many weddings ended up at the hall for receptions of 200-300 people. In the 1930s and 1940s, it was the place to be on Saturday nights. Local writer Steve Gatensbury described the dances held there: "Anthony and his Starlighters played with metronomic determination and we grimly waltzed and jogged our standard box step fox trot until the break of day." The writer also complained that, when he first kissed a girl there, she had eaten too many onions.



First Gathering in the Roma Hall, 1931

This was in the still-unfinished basement.

IHP6461

One of the original 1931 buildings was demolished in 1960, and eventually a new building, designed by architect Gordon Stene, opened in 1982. At one point, the building sank, prompting repairs on the foundation, as the members began to call it the Leaning Hall of Queensborough.



The First Roma Hall, ca. 1960

The hall was demolished in 1960 and rebuilt immediately. It was altered for the third time at a later date.

IHP6574

The first president of the society was Anthony Ivanovich Sprice (1872-1954). Known as the “little mayor” of Queensborough, Tony Sprice was born in Trieste and came to Queensborough around 1910 where he ran a grocery store and post office at Pembina and Ewen. He was said to be Serbian and Ukrainian, and also Turkish on his mother’s side. He spoke German, Italian, French, Spanish and other languages. He was said to have been a master mariner, an Austrian Navy officer, a navigation teacher at the Trieste Naval College, a freedom fighter, and a medical worker “without formality of an official license” who helped other refugees. During the Great Depression, he helped feed many people even if they couldn’t pay right away.

A 1932 *Province* article said he was the “friend, confidant, interpreter, peacemaker and legal, medical and spiritual advisor” to the people of Queensborough. He sold his store in 1939 to Hary Spagnol, and was buried as a pauper when he died.

If you have stories about the Roma Hall and want to share them with the New Westminster Museum and Archives, please email ocapota@newwestcity.ca.