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Film on immigrants to premiere at Heritage Discovery Center

*“The Children of Lazo’s Grove” tells the story of
Eastern and Southern immigrants to Johnstown*

The Johnstown Area Heritage Association will host the world premiere of a new documentary, “The Children of Lazo’s Grove,” which tells the story of Eastern and Southern European immigrants to the Johnstown area. The film was produced by Johnstown native Dr. Maria B. Oparnica Simic and her husband, Dr. Andrei Simic. More than 50 people in the Johnstown area were interviewed in the making of the 90-minute film.

Two showings are scheduled for Saturday, May 15, at 5:00 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. at the Heritage Discovery Center, as part of JAHA’s Spring Lecture Series. A reception with the filmmakers will be held between the showings at 6:30 p.m. The showings and reception are free and open to the public.

The title of the film refers to Lazo’s Grove, a meadow where immigrants used to gather for social occasions. According to Maria Simic, the grove’s heyday was in the 1920s and 1930s, but gatherings took place as late as the early 1950s. The grove included a covered dance floor and other outbuildings. Located in Conemaugh, Lazo’s Grove is now deserted, and the buildings are gone.

“When growing up, I heard so many stories about Lazo’s Grove, about all the great times they had there, dancing, singing and picnicking,” Maria Simic said. “This all happened before I was born, but my whole life I’ve longed to be part of that, to go back to Lazo’s Grove.”

Most of the immigrants who came to Lazo's Grove worked six days a week in the steel mills or coal mines. Despite the scarcity of old photographs, the filmmakers managed to collect a variety of photos from the immigrants' descendants for use in the film.

"They would always gather on Sundays after church at Lazo's Grove, where they would be together, eat their own food, sing their own songs and dance their own dances. They would emerge restored, rejuvenated, and ready for another hard week," Simic said.

Dr. Maria B. Oparnica Simic is a former professor of comparative literature at Arizona State University. She lived in Johnstown until she was nine years old, when she moved with her family to California; however, she continued to visit Johnstown periodically. Dr. Andrei Simic is professor of anthropology at the University of Southern California. They spent three months in Johnstown gathering more than 33 hours of interviews with immigrants and their descendants, including Johnstown Mayor Don Zucco, the priests of area churches and former steelworkers. The film combines interviews with materials from JAHA's archives as well as photographs from the interviewees' personal collections.

People interested in seeing the film are asked to RSVP to JAHA at 814-539-1889, and indicate which showing they plan to attend. The showings and reception will be held at the Heritage Discovery Center, located at 7th and Broad Streets in Johnstown.

At the reception, the Simics will distribute a copy of the film and outtakes of family interviews to each family they interviewed. Others may purchase VHS copies of the film for \$15.00.

This presentation will conclude JAHA's Spring Lecture Series, which opened on Thursday, April 15 with Dennis P. McNay's multimedia presentation of his 2003 book, Juniata, River of Sorrows.

The Johnstown Area Heritage Association is a non-profit, membership-based organization dedicated to preserving and showcasing Johnstown's unique history to the nation through high-quality educational, cultural and recreational experiences. JAHA owns and operates the Johnstown Flood Museum and the Frank & Sylvia Pasquerilla Heritage Discovery Center, and produces the FolkFest, a 3-day free music and food festival held annually over Labor Day weekend; events commemorating the 1889 Johnstown flood; a spring lecture series; and a wide variety of additional cultural programming. For more information on JAHA programs, museums and events, visit www.jaha.org.