

## BENVENUTO ROSSI: MASTER OF ROSES

by Laurie Burchell

*This is an edited version of the article 'Coburg: Rose Capital of Victoria' published in Search: Journal of the Coburg Historical Society, No. 57, June 1999. We wish to thank the author for his permission to reproduce it.*

Benvenuto Vincenzo Natale Rossi was born on Christmas Eve, 1860 at Casale Monferrato, near Asti in Piedmont, northern Italy. His father was a surgeon and fought with Garibaldi in the *Risorgimento* for the unification of Italy. He was shot dead in action in the late 1860s. Young Rossi was apprenticed to a printing firm in Turin and became a skilled lithographer. In 1884 he was commissioned to illustrate 3000 copies of the Koran in Egypt, a job which took three years to complete. In 1887 he sailed from Port Said on a ship bound for Australia and possibly America. It was his intention to migrate to United States. However he stopped in Melbourne where, at the Italian Club, he met a friend who convinced him to stay awhile and secured him a position as lithographer with Troedel & Cooper, a printing firm involved in the publication of material for the Great Centennial Exhibition of 1888. His great knowledge of lithography landed him with a lucrative job and so he never reached the United States. He settled down in Melbourne and after marrying a young lady of English parentage in 1892, moved from Fitzroy to Coburg.



54 Loch Street, Rossi's first house in Coburg.

Benvenuto had the hobby of growing carnations. One day he met William Buzaglo [Buzaglio] on the tram, on his way to work. Both were amateur gardeners, thus Ben wore a carnation in his

buttonhole and William a rose; naturally they fell into conversation. William soon convinced his newfound friend that growing roses was far more interesting than growing carnations. He gave Ben a couple of plants to get him started. Ben must have embraced rose growing as an alternative occupation to lithography. After a few years he gave up his job with Troedel & Cooper in favour of full-time gardening. There was not enough land around his house in Loch Street, Coburg, so in 1899 he bought four and a half acres in Harding Street, near Nicholson Street, where he built a new house set well back from the street and established a plant nursery in front.

The National Rose Society of Victoria was formed in 1899 and for many years was the only rose society in Australia. Naturally both Buzaglo and Rossi became members. The Society held its inaugural show in Autumn 1900 and from 1901 both an Autumn and a Spring show. Rossi was an early exhibitor but it was not until 1903 that he won any prize. In April 1906 he won the Society's championship gold medal when he finally mastered the art of protecting a bloom. At that show he virtually swept the board taking four first prizes and one second in the six categories available to growers. In spring of the same year he won first prizes in five of the seven sections. This became the pattern for the next five years. Five times he gained the coveted championship gold medal. From 1905 the Society conducted a competition for the best bloom at its monthly meetings. This proved to be a successful means of promoting attendances, with nearly a hundred entries on some occasions. For both the 1905-6 and 1909-10 seasons Rossi was the outright winner. When the Coburg Council conducted rose shows in 1907 and 1909 the first prizes went to him.

For a number of years Rossi continued to grow carnations but by 1907 he stated in his catalogue:

*Owing to the success of my rose plants achieved with the public, I have decided to relinquish growing carnations so as to be able to give all my time to the 'Queen of All Flowers'.*

The front page of the same catalogue read:

***The Nursery and Rose Gardens are open for Inspection Every Day except Sunday. Visitors welcome, purchasers or not. My Rosaries are well worth a visit. All the best varieties can be seen blooming at any time, more especially from the middle of April onward.***

Persons acquainted with the large number of varieties can thus see for themselves what is most suitable, and make their selection. The Nursery is easily reached. Take the Brunswick tram in Elizabeth Street up to the terminus (cost 2d), then take the horse tram (cost 1d), and ask the conductor to let you down at Harding's Road. A few minutes walk will bring you to my gate.

Rossi was not the only one in Coburg to excel at rose growing. His friend Fred Buzaglo enjoyed similar successes in the Amateur Class during the same years. When the National Rose Society of Victoria introduced a prize for the best kept state school rose garden, Coburg won in 1909 and tied for first place with Surrey Hills the following year. Truly Rossi and others, but chiefly Rossi, had made Coburg the Rose Capital of Victoria.



Benvenuto Rossi, c.1926.

Rossi was not entirely happy with the location of his nursery. For would-be visitors and purchasers it was a slow tram ride north of Moreland Road

and a long walk down Harding Street. Moreover most of his customers would have lived in the eastern or southern suburbs. With the surge in house construction from 1908 Benvenuto seized the opportunity in 1912 to subdivide his land into eighteen allotments, creating an extension of Gladstone Street as far as Harding Street. The subdivision was quite successful: the 1912-13 council's rate book showed only four unsold allotments. One of these, lot 18, facing Harding Street, was much larger in order to accommodate his existing house. This was rented out and finally sold in 1917. Rossi had paid £302.10s for the land in November 1898 and although it is not known the total he received from the sale of all the allotments, he was able to buy six acres in Ford Street, Ivanhoe for a new rosary and build a much finer house.

From this nursery he produced some of the finest plants and blooms in Australia. Up to the time of his retirement in 1926, he had won 120 championships 150 gold and silver medals and two thousand first prizes. In 1930 Benvenuto published *Modern Roses in Australia* which sold all over the world.

Benvenuto Vincenzo Rossi died aged 92 on 25 May 1963 and rests in the Fawkner Cemetery.

#### SOURCES

- Ian and Dorothy Aitken, Vice-President and Secretary of the Rose Society of Victoria.
- *Australasian*, Horticultural, 25 April 1902, 15 April 1905, 7 November 1908, 29 October 1910, 15 April 1911, 28 October 1911, 20 April 1912.
- Coburg Building Permit No. 7309, dated 19.12.1961.
- Coburg Rate Records 1891-1918.
- Grandchildren of B.V. Rossi: Eunice O'Callaghan, Lois Gothard, Joan and Keith Rossi.
- *Ivanhoe News*, 5 June 1953.
- Lodged Plan No. 5774.
- W.A. Lugton, 'A History of the National Rose Society of Victoria' in *Victorian Rose News*, p. 31, March 1967.
- MMBW plans Nos. 2348 d. 1910 and 2361 d. 1911.
- B.V. Rossi, *Catalogue for Season 1907*.
- Sands & McDougall Directories 1892-1913.
- Title Application No. 31583 d. 10 November 1908.
- *Weekly Times*, Horticultural, 20 January, 14 April 1900, 7 November 1903, 5 November 1904, 25 February, 22 April, 18 November, 19 December 1905, 22 April, 26 May, 14 July, 18 November 1906, 27 April 1907, 18 April, 6 November 1908, 24 April, 6 November 1909, 23 April, 21 May, 2 July, 5 November 1910, 4 November 1911.