

FRIENDLY SOCIETIES: AN UNEXPECTED SOURCE OF HISTORY ON ITALIAN-SPEAKING PIONEERS

by Dr Nancy Renfree

During the course of her Ph.D research into Friendly Societies in existence in the Daylesford — Hepburn Springs area of Victoria in the 1870s, Nancy Renfree became aware of the sizeable Italian –speaking community that had been enrolled as members of these mutual benefit societies.

The origin of the Friendly Societies was based on the old English guild system with local societies in virtually every village. By the late 19th century, the Societies had evolved to cater for the welfare needs of a diverse and multicultural population in the new colonies. They were in fact an integral and essential part of many citizens' lives, providing them with social welfare benefits not otherwise available, and a level of protection against unforeseen adversities such as accidents, ill-health or loss of employment. A more mobile working population benefitted from the ability to gain a clearance from one lodge to another, without loss of benefits. Overall the Societies' role was modified to meet the needs of a changing society in a more egalitarian context.

More than fifty men of Italian or Swiss origin belonged to either the Daylesford or Hepburn Springs Lodges of the Manchester Unity Independent Order of Oddfellows in 1874. It was one Friendly Society among the thirty-two in existence in towns and country areas of Victoria in the second half of the nineteenth century. Some of the other friendly Societies included the Hibernian Societies, the Foresters, The Free Gardeners, the Rechabites, the Independent Oddfellows, the Grand United Oddfellows and the ANA (Australian Natives Association). This latter did not by definition include Italians.

The lodges were secret societies with strict rules of governance and behaviour of members. Manchester Unity was, however, the biggest and the most efficient, and had a more comprehensive system of record-keeping; and their Registration Books provide valuable identification information on individuals of the Italian-speaking community who were members.

Throughout the Colony at that time there were at least 50,000 members of over 800 branches of the various Societies. If we add the 30,000 registered wives of members and the children of the marriages, it means that the Societies had a direct significance in the lives of a large number of the Victorian population of 798,688 in 1874. There was no government scheme in existence to provide sick pay, medical attention, or funeral benefits. A Royal Commission in England that year was 'decidedly adverse' to any such scheme,

stating that people must make 'their own provision against sickness and their own to work' and 'bear the consequences' if they failed to do so. A Royal Commission held in Victoria the following year totally agreed — which is hardly surprising seeing that of the 78 witnesses called before the Commission, 73 were connected with Friendly Societies which provided people with the means of making 'their own provision'.

Although the Friendly Societies had nothing to do with Freemasonry, they all employed to some extent a Masonic-type binding ritual, and as well as providing financial security, they played a social and cultural role in the lives of immigrants from all over the world. The only way to explain why members could not have escaped this influence is by describing how the Societies worked. The following procedure was that employed by the biggest of all the Societies, the Manchester United Independent Order of Oddfellows. The other Societies, such as the next biggest, the Foresters and the Rechabites, had a different ritual and might have varied in small details but essentially they all worked in much the same way.

There was a great deal more to becoming a member than just signing an application and paying a fee. Admission was by initiation and the candidate required a proposer and seconder from among existing members, one of whom must have known him for at least six months. The proposer would table a notice at one lodge meeting asking leave to propose a new member. A ballot was

taken at the next meeting on the question of whether such leave should be granted, one-tenth of the votes against the motion being sufficient for it not to be carried. A successful proposal was then referred to a committee of three whose task it was to investigate and report as to the character and moral standing of the applicant. Full particulars of the candidate were also circulated to all lodges in the District asking for information for or against the candidate. If successful to this stage, the candidate had to sign a declaration of age and health in the presence of a medical officer who gave a certificate. If proposed as a married man, proof of marriage was required and a declaration as to his wife's health.

One half of the initiation fee was paid on proposal and the other half on admittance. In the 1860s the scale ranged from twenty-eight shillings for an 18-20 year-old to five pounds six shillings for a 35-36 year-old at a time when the wages of skilled workers in country towns fluctuated around three pounds per week. The basic weekly contribution was a fraction less than one shilling and fourpence, roughly the price of 28 pounds of potatoes.

Quite apart from financial obligations, there was no escaping the necessity to abide by rules which were very strictly enforced. All contributions could only be paid on a regular lodge night at a particular point in the course of procedure. A powerful reminder of all that membership involved came in the form of a wide range of offences with penalties that hit the pocket. Fines were imposed for late arrival at, or absence from, or misdemeanour during, any sort of meeting and if not paid a member ceased to be 'good on the books' and therefore not entitled to any sort of benefits. More serious offences had to be heard at a meeting to which all members were summoned for that specific purpose. Strict secrecy was maintained and any member who revealed to an outsider matters discussed at such a hearing was subject to expulsion. Such was the fate of one member who could not resist the chance for a bit of a gossip with his sister-in-law who was not a trustworthy recipient of such a confidence.

A careful check was kept on those receiving sick pay. Sometimes a doctor's certificate might state that a little light work on his own garden would aid convalescence, but if a member was discovered to be engaged in any profitable employment while

on sick pay he was punished. A dairyman was seen milking his cows and his sick pay was stopped. Another member who acted as a bookmaker's marker while on sick pay, was fined 21 shillings and suspended from all benefits for six months. Anyone sick enough to stay home from work was too sick to go out at night, could not leave his house between sunset and sunrise, and must never be more than five miles from home unless a doctor had recommended a change of air. On these occasions travellers were required to supply details of their route so that a check could be made if there was any suspicion of imposition.

Not even the most genuine case nor the most regular contributor could expect to draw any benefits if his incapacity for work, or his need for medical attention arose from 'any immoral, intemperate, or disorderly conduct... provoking or engaging in wanton quarrels... venereal disease, or any species thereof... racing or wrestling for a consideration'. In 1861 a member was discovered to be 'unlawfully cohabiting' with a female. Despite the fact that he had been paying the extra contribution for her medical attention, the member was expelled. No sick pay could be claimed for an injury caused as 'the result of inebriety', and getting drunk while on sick pay was definitely out. A member was horrified to observe another member 'inciting his wife to prostitution'; another member was convicted on a wife-beating charge. After hearing before summonsed meetings of the whole lodge both members were expelled.

The rule that all such charges should be heard by the full lodge and that notices summoning members to attend had to state the nature of the business meant that members were constantly reminded of the required standards of behaviour and that swift retribution would follow any lapse. No serious punishment was inflicted, however, without exhaustive enquiries and careful attention to correct legal process. It took all of 1861 for a Maldon lodge to resolve the question of a member's blindness, diagnosed by one medical officer as gonorrhoeal ophthalmia and as something else altogether by another. Consultants were brought from Melbourne to give expert evidence. The decision eventually went in favour of the member who later returned to Germany and for the rest of his life regularly received his sick pay from Maldon through the burgomaster of his town.

What did a system so encumbered with checks have to offer? Apart from medical attention and

sick pay there were the funeral benefits. Only if a member or his wife died at a greater distance than ten miles was a death certificate required, and many funeral benefits travelled much further than that: they were sent to other Australian colonies, to New Zealand goldfields, and after one member had left Castlemaine and 'gone home to die' in 1871, the benefit was paid to his mother in England.

Subscription lists were often circulated within a district, the hat was passed around within a lodge, and donations from lodge funds were frequently voted for relief of members in distress. Similar payments were made to the widows of deceased members. When a Castlemaine member died while in Ballarat with his family, a Ballarat lodge helped the widow for some months at Castlemaine's request, keeping them informed as to her welfare and making payments to her on Castlemaine's behalf.

Finally, there was one further benefit that was of great importance for a very transient population during the years immediately following the first goldrushes. If the locality first chosen was found to be wanting, a member could move to a more promising location. While he tried out the new town he could present to a local lodge a Letter of Recommendation supplied by his old lodge vouching for him and requesting 'the kind attention of the Officers and Brothers of the Lodge he may desire to visit'. There is no doubt that these arrangements really worked. A Maldon member took sick while in Sydney. Maldon wrote asking a Sydney lodge to visit him in the Infirmary. This was done and his sick pay was advanced by Sydney. When reimbursing them Maldon tendered its thanks with an assurance that if ever the situation was reversed they would be happy to reciprocate. Earlier that year a Melbourne member was admitted to Maldon Hospital with a broken arm. A letter from Maldon to Melbourne brought no reply. Maldon wrote again, expressing 'great surprise' that a brother had not received the attention that he was entitled to expect. The rebuke brought immediate results.

Having decided on his new location, a member could be 'cleared out' by his former lodge and, armed with a very formal Clearance Certificate present it and gain acceptance by a lodge in his new town. He could move into adjacent Colonies, go to Queensland or Western Australia, New

Zealand or South Africa, or return to his land of origin. As long as he kept himself 'good on the books' he could enjoy all the benefits of membership. In the event of there being no lodge of his Order within a reasonable distance he could pay his contributions and receive his benefits by mail, either directly or through the nearest available lodge.

In towns where anything up to sixty per cent of adult males might be members of a Friendly Society, no public event ever took place without processions of members in full regalia led by a Society band, with at least one of their officers up on the rostrum as part of the official party. This meant that the Friendly Societies were a very visual presence, and an article in a journal of the Oddfellows at this time stated that a member 'is cordially recognised in the best society'. For the businessman or tradesman on the move, to be cordially recognised was like having a passport to a new community stamped with approval.

Some Registration Books for the period c1860-1880s have survived, covering Castlemaine and the surrounding districts, Maldon, Geelong, the Western District and Collingwood. A full list is lodged at the State Library of Victoria. Ritual books are not available as strict rules governed this 'secret societies' component of Friendly Societies of the nineteenth century.



Illuminated certificate awarded by the Hibernian Australasian Benefit Society to W.J. Bustelli of Daylesford in 1901.

The Manchester Unity Independent Order of Oddfellows (MU)

This select list of 66 members c1860-1880 is based on names in the surviving Registration Books of MU for this period. A full list is held at the State Library of Victoria. The correct spelling of names and towns of birth have been added by the Italian Historical Society and are indicated in brackets.

Name	Country and Town of Birth	Date joined	Branch	Profession	Age on enrolment	Other information
BADILOTTI [BADILATTI], Domenico	Switzerland [Poschiavo-Prada]		Hepburn Springs	Carter	26	
BELEMI [BALEMI], Giovanni	Switzerland [Minusio]	Dec. 1870	Hepburn Springs	Miner	23	
BELEMI [BALEMI], Peter	Switzerland [Minusio]	Nov. 1872	Hepburn Springs by Clearance in.	Miner	36	
BIONDA, Vincenzo	Switzerland [Carasso]	Oct. 1870	Hepburn Springs	Miner	31	Also described as Milkman, Italian Hill. Died 11 Aug. 1899.
BONELLI [BONETTI], Peter	Italy [Bormio]	May 1867	Maldon	Miner	21	Single
BUZZINI, Giovanni	Switzerland [Brione Verzasca]	July 1867	Hepburns Springs	Miner	30	Married to Rhoda.
CAPPONI, Antonio	Switzerland [Cerentino]	Oct. 1872	Hepburn Springs	Miner	33	
CASOLI [CASOLO], Sebastiano	Switzerland [Biasca]	Apr. 1866	Hepburn Springs	Butcher	22	Granted Clearance out in Aug. 1867.
CASSINELLI [CASINELLI], Angelo	Italy [Genoa]	Sept. 1872	Hepburn Springs	Miner	36	Married to Angelina.
DANELLI, Andrew	Switzerland	Oct. 1865	Castlemaine	General Dealer	31	Postal Directory 1869: still in Castlemaine. Aug. 1870 ceased payments to Lodge.
DELMOTTI, Giacomo (also known as James)	Switzerland [Verscio]	July 1871	Hepburn Springs	Baker	36	Married to Fedela
DELMUÈ, Serafino	Switzerland [Biasca]	Aug. 1867	Hepburn Springs	Farmer	28	Oct. 1869 ceased payment to Lodge.
DORSA, Antonio	Switzerland [Brusio]	May 1867	Maldon	Farmer	28	Married. Postal Directory 1869 lists him as a Woodcarter.
DUCHINI, Giovanni	Switzerland [Giubasco]	Apr. 1875	Hepburn Springs	Miner	34	Still in Lodge in 1899.
DUNKIN [DONCHI?], Peter	Italy [Teglio?]	Oct. 1866	Maldon	Miner	21	Single
FASOLI, Eugenio	Italy [Nobiello/Como]	11 Sept 1867	Daylesford	Baker	34	
FASOLI, Vincenzo	Italy [Nobiello/Como]	18 Sept 1867	Daylesford	Baker	27	By Dec. 1899 he is probably in Melbourne because he tries to get a Clearance from Daylesford Lodge to Melbourne Lodge. Melbourne will not accept him because he is over age, so he continues to pay his dues to Daylesford. In 1899 he is described as a Publican.

FATH, Martini	Switzerland	30 Oct. 1872	Daylesford	Miner	33	Married to Annie.
FERRARI, Andrea	Switzerland [Semione]	4 June 1873	Daylesford	Miner	30	Married to Louisa.
FINETTI [TINETTI] Andrew	Switzerland [Biasca]	20 Apr. 1870	Daylesford	Farmer	35	Married to Marie.
FINETTI [TINETTI] Felino	Switzerland [Biasca]	14 July 1869	Daylesford	Dairyman	25	24 Aug. 1870 granted Clearance out.
FOCHETTI, Filippo	Switzerland [Brione s/Minusio]	10 Oct. 1870	Daylesford	Miner	31	
FUSIO [FUSCO], Luigi	Switzerland [Locarno]	7 Feb. 1866	Daylesford	Carter	29	Married to Mary Ann. Still in Lodge in 1899. Died 1 June 1900.
GAGGIONO [GAGGIONI], Pietro	Switzerland [Gordevio]	21 Nov. 1872	Daylesford	Miner	32	Still a member in 1899.
GARZONI, Alberto	Switzerland [Maggia]	2 Mar. 1870	Daylesford	Miner	34	Married to Elizabeth, 18 Residing at Italian Hill.
GINNETTO, Aquilino		24 June 1868	Daylesford	Miner	28	
GIAVANELLI [GIANELLI], Michele	Italy [Castiglione Chiavarese/Genova]	20 Sept 1871	Daylesford	Miner	27	June 1877 ceased payments.
GIAVESI, Giuseppe	Italy	20 May 1876	Daylesford	Winegrower	29	Single. 1880 granted Clearance out.
GUARTI, Ben	Italy	26 Feb. 1879	Daylesford	Shoemaker	32	Married to Mary Ann, 26.
GUSCETTI, Frederick	Switzerland, [Quinto]	28 Oct. 1870	Daylesford	Wine merchant	23	
MAGGINETTI, Aquilino	Switzerland [Biasca]	26 May 1869	Daylesford	Miner	34	
MILESI, Battista	Italy	11 Mar. 1868	Daylesford	Miner	22	2 Jul. 1879 re-admitted to Lodge, aged 33. Married to Amelia. Still in Lodge in 1899.
MILESI, Giovanni	Italy	1868	Daylesford	Miner	30	20 July 1879 re-admitted to Lodge, aged 35.
MONETTI [MONOTTI], Giacomo	Switzerland [Cavigliano]	3 July 1867	Daylesford	Baker	30	Still in Lodge in 1899. (being referred to as James)
MONICO, Giacomo	Switzerland [Malvaglia]	30 Oct. 1872	Daylesford	Barber	19	Still in Lodge in 1899.
MONTI, Charles	Italy [Cuzzago/Novara]	11 Oct. 1871	Daylesford	Miner	25	
MORESCHI, Bernard	Italy [Colico/Como]	Apr. 1868	Maldon	Woodcarter	33	
MORETTI, Pietro	Switzerland [Cevio]	15 Mar. 1871	Daylesford	Miner	28	
NICOLAI [NICOLA], Sylvester	Switzerland [Gordevio]	Arrived in Victoria in c1860		Miner		Died 23 Mar. 1890 in Castlemaine Asylum, aged 79.
NICOLAI [NICOLA], Edward	Switzerland [Gordevio]	31 May 1860	Castlemaine	Gardener	29	Son of Sylvester. Married to Catherine, aged 24. Granted Clearance to Sandhurst in 1875.
NICOLAI [NICOLA], Robert	Germany [Switzerland, Gordevio]	6 Sept. 1860	Castlemaine	Gardener	25	Son of Sylvester. Single
PELASCI [PELLASCIO], Giovanni Domenico	Switzerland [Cugnasco]	2. Dec. 1868	Daylesford	Miner	28	

PERINONI, Domenico	Switzerland [Someo]	20 Oct. 1867	Daylesford	Miner	29	Married to Elizabeth. 31 Mar. 1869 granted Clearance out.
PIEZZI, Angelo	Switzerland [Giumaglio]	25 May 1870	Daylesford	Hotelkeeper	30	Married to Ellen.
PINCINI, Silvestro	Switzerland [Moghegno]	9 Oct. 1867	Daylesford	Miner	26	
POZZI, Stephen	Switzerland [Giumaglio]	30 Sept. 1868	Daylesford	Tradesman	34	Married to Jacomina. She died 25 July 1877. Still in Lodge in 1899.
RASPINI [RESPINI], Alexander	Switzerland [Cevio]	5 Aug. 1868	Daylesford	Miner	28	Married to Frances.
RIDA [RADA], Giovanni	Switzerland [Poschiavo-Prada]	4 Dec. 1867	Daylesford	Woodcutter	24	
RIGHETTI, Raffaele	Switzerland [Someo]	11 Dec. 1867	Daylesford	Miner	33	
RODINI [RODONI], Giuseppe	Switzerland [Biasca]	14 Aug. 1867	Daylesford	Baker	29	
RODOM [RODONI], Gabriele	Switzerland [Biasca]	10 May 1871	Daylesford	Miner	31	
ROSSETTI, Francis	Switzerland [Biasca]	17 Jan. 1866	Daylesford	Surgeon	32	Honorary Member. 17 Apr. 1867 granted Clearance out.
ROTANZI, Francia	Switzerland [Peccia]	17 Apr. 1867	Daylesford	Clerk	26	Died 26 Dec. 1880.
SOLIVA, Giovanni	Switzerland [Semione]	1 Jan. 1873	Daylesford	Miner	33	
TAMMO [TAMÒ], Pietro	Switzerland [Sonogno]	28 Apr. 1868	Daylesford	Miner	35	Married to Alice, aged 23. Died 29 May 1880.
TOGNI, Antonio	Switzerland [Brione Verzasca]	12 June 1867	Daylesford	Butcher	25	Died 22 May 1902.
TOGNI, Camillo	Switzerland [Semione]	23 Dec. 1872	Daylesford	Miner	19	Died 19 June 1902.
TOGNI, Constante	Switzerland [Semione]	23 Dec. 1872	Daylesford	Miner	32	
TOGNI, Michele	Switzerland [Bignasco]	23 Dec. 1872	Daylesford	Miner	34	Married to Eliza. Still in Lodge in 1899.
TOGNI, Virginio	Switzerland	23 Dec. 1872	Daylesford	Miner	20	
TONINI, Valentino	Switzerland [Poschiavo]	13 July 1870	Daylesford	Dairyman	25	
VALERY Antonio	Corsica	17 Nov 1872	Daylesford	Miner	25	
VANINA, Giuseppe	Switzerland [Biasca]	7 June 1871	Daylesford	Farmer	19	Died 1 Mar. 1874 of 'consumption'.
ZANOTTI, Giuseppe	Switzerland [Aurigneo]	19 June 1867	Daylesford	Miner	30	Married to Margaret.
ZANOLI, Martin	Switzerland [Gordevio]	18 July 1878	Daylesford	Miner	33	
ZANOLI, Peter	Switzerland [Gordevio]	11 Dec. 1872	Daylesford	Miner	27	Married to Virginia.