

THANKYOU MIRBOO NORTH: HOLDINGS ON THE HISTORY OF ITALIANS AT THE CENTRE FOR GIPPSLAND STUDIES

by Meredith Fletcher

The Director of the Centre for Gippsland Studies, Meredith Fletcher is also the editor of the Gippsland Heritage Journal

*'I would like to thank all the people of Mirboo North, all the people that in those times were in the stores, that all respected me. I have been friends with everyone, they always used to say hello when they saw me, and showed me respect and also how to speak. They encouraged me, in a word, to live in this Australia.'*¹

This is an extract from *Nella's Lunchbox*, a series of interviews from an oral history project conducted by students from Mirboo North Primary School, interviewing Italo-Australian residents of Mirboo North and surrounds. Paolina Germano, born in Solarino in 1919, came to Australia in 1949 to join her husband who had left Italy ten years before. Her home in Australia was Mirboo North, a small town on the Grand Ridge Road, south of Morwell. In the interview she recalled feeling humiliated and sad at not being able to communicate, but found the people in the town were willing to help and respected her. *Nella's Lunchbox* is just one of the items documenting the lives of Italians in Gippsland held at the Centre for Gippsland Studies.

The CGS is a research centre located at the Gippsland Campus of Monash University, at Churchill. The Centre houses a collection on Gippsland and aims to document Gippsland's history, literature, Aborigines, environment and social sciences. This includes collecting on the history of migration to the region. Although our holdings on Italians in Gippsland are not extensive, it is possible to piece together their experiences in the region.

Through the work of Patrick Morgan, lecturer in Gippsland history, it is possible to outline an overview of Italians in Gippsland.² Patrick Morgan's research shows that the first significant group of Italians in Gippsland were the woodcutters at Walhalla, the isolated mountain gold mining town. They stripped the steep hills of their timber to feed the boilers powering the ore-crushing machines. The pride of Walhalla was the Long Tunnel Mine, the

richest single mine in Victoria.

Soon after the railway line was put through to Walhalla in 1910 at vast expense in such difficult terrain, the Long Tunnel Mine closed and goldmining was no longer viable. The timber industry flourished in the mountains until the devastating 1939 fires. Some of the Italian woodcutters stayed in the industry. Others moved to small farms nearby and eked out a subsistence living.

During the 1920s, recently arrived Italian migrants came to Gippsland. Many worked as farm labourers in the market gardens in the Bairnsdale region, others acquired small blocks around Metung, Nungurner and Kalimna on the Gippsland Lakes. Italians were also seasonal workers in the sugar beet fields at Maffra where they were adept at topping the beets with a skilful slice of the large topping knife. Those who migrated to Australia in the 1920s also found work at the black coal mines at Wonthaggi.



Giuseppe Di Palma ploughing the fields at Bruthen in the 1930s.

During the Second World War, Italian prisoners of war, who had been captured in the Western Desert campaign and interned in Australia, were assigned to work on Victorian farms to help overcome the labour shortage. Research on the experiences of prisoners of war in the Yarram and Maffra areas reveals that friendly relations were established between the farm families and the prisoners.³

After the war, immigration of Italians to Gippsland was mainly concentrated in the Latrobe Valley where there was an abundance of jobs in the rapidly expanding industrial centre. Many settled in Morwell and became active in the Italian Club, founded in 1961, and the Morwell Falcons Soccer Club. As well as working in the Latrobe Valley, other new settlers moved to Thorpdale and Mirboo North and acquired potato farms. The people who moved to Mirboo North are the informants in *Nella's Lunchbox*.

From this brief overview of Italian experiences in Gippsland, we can now dip into some of the holdings at the CGS, to give a taste of their contents and the type of research which has been undertaken.

Several accounts of the Italian woodcutters at Walhalla have been published, among them *My Walhalla* by Lou De Prada.⁴ Lou De Prada, who was born in Walhalla in 1904, writes about his father's arrival in Australia from Tuscany in 1890, and his return two years later to marry Maddalena Cabassa who lived near the Swiss border. The young couple then came to Australia and settled at Walhalla. De Prada describes the family's lifestyle at Poverty Point near Walhalla where Giovanni De Prada and his eldest sons worked as woodcutters for a contractor supplying the Long Tunnel Mine.

When mining ceased at Walhalla, the De Prada family turned to farming and moved to a small allotment nearby. There was no employment in the area when Lou left school in 1917, so he moved to Maffra to work on dairy and sugar beet farms, and this is where he eventually settled on his own farm. Besides writing about his family and childhood in the book, Lou De Prada also documents the life of the Italian community, and describes the mystique of living in the fabled town of Walhalla.

The back-breaking work on vegetable farms between the wars has not attracted as much attention from researchers as the woodcutters,

bathed in the romance of Walhalla. An unpublished student research essay by Paul O'Brien has investigated Italian migration to the Koo-wee-rup district of West Gippsland from 1925 to 1955. This work also includes a biography of Carlo Catani, the engineer who was instrumental in drawing up plans to drain the Koo-wee-rup swamp.⁵

Experiences of Italians in the interwar period can also be gleaned from local histories, among them Kath Ringin's *Old Brown Coal Mine*, where some families alternated between farming and working in the original brown coal mine near Morwell.⁶ *A Valley of Glens*, the history of the Upper Macalister Valley, records the lives of the Pellegrini, De Borteli and Franceschini families who came as labourers and share farmers in the late 1920s to the foothills of the Australian Alps, north of Maffra. It was difficult to educate their children because of the isolation, and with their own language difficulties, the parents did not feel they could cope with correspondence courses. When the children grew older, the families moved closer to Melbourne.⁷



Kilcunda Mine, 1929. Newly arrived Italian miners after a day's work. Among the group: Reg Grisotto, Dante Ongaro, Vittorio Benetti and Beppi Storti.

Italians feature in church histories documenting the period between the wars. Of particular note is the history of St. Mary's Church at Bairnsdale where Francesco Floriani painted a profusion of murals on the church ceiling and walls. Floriani, who had left Italy in 1928 and worked in Melbourne as a house painter, came to Bairnsdale in search of work on the vegetable farms during the depression. After a stint of picking peas, he spent nearly three years decorating the church. Close ties have remained between St. Mary's and Bairnsdale's Italian community, including an annual celebration to honour St. Anthony, patron saint of immigrants.⁸

Information on another Italian craftsman of that period, Peter Moresco, is also discussed in local publications. Moresco completed the stonework at the entrance to the Tarra Valley National Park, and built stone walls in the Yarram district.⁹

Research recently completed by students as part of their Master of Arts in Public History on the experiences of Italian prisoners of war in Gippsland and reprinted in the *Italian Historical Journal* has not only added to our knowledge of Italians during the war, but has also stimulated local historians to carry out investigations in their areas. This will lead to further articles in historical society bulletins. In their research on the Yarram area, Philippa Watt and Elizabeth Brooks discovered that the Moore family sponsored the return to Australia of several of the men who had been assigned to their farm during the war.¹⁰

In 1964, Jerzy Zubrzycki's pioneering sociological study *Settlers of the Latrobe Valley* was published. The book studied immigrants to the Latrobe Valley, and was the first sociological study in Australia to be based on extensive field work.¹¹ The study now provides



A group of woodcutters at Erica in 1927. Included among the many Italians in the photo, are Pasquale Toscano, Vincenzo Spano, Domenico Trimboli, Antonio Custureri, Pietro Tortona, Giuseppe Paparone, Giovanni Versaci e Antonio Zuccala.

us with an important insight into the experiences of Italians in the Latrobe Valley in the post-war years. Zubrzycki conducted a survey of 541 foreign-born employees in the Valley, and investigated their backgrounds prior to migration, their adjustment to new occupations, their family life and social networks.

Thirty years after Professor Zubrzycki's study, local writers are currently working on projects documenting Italians' experiences in the Latrobe Valley since the war. I look forward to adding these works to our collection when they are completed.

I opened with a quote from *Nella's Lunchbox*, one of the most innovative publications on the history of the Italians in Gippsland that is housed in our collection. The book consists of oral histories of Italo-Australians in the Mirboo North district, carried out by grade six students and published by the Mirboo North Primary School. Teachers at the school recognised the importance of the Italian community and its contribution to the area's local history. The project they devised consisted of the children conducting interviews, organising an Italo-Australian dinner and preparing transcripts of the interviews for publication. From the book, readers learn about personal stories of the migration experience and the Mirboo North community. *Nella's Lunchbox* serves as a model for many other schools to follow.

As part of our mandate to collect on the history of the region and encourage research, we are anxious to augment our holdings on the Italians in Gippsland. We welcome hearing from people who have written on this topic, or who would like to use our collection in the course of their research. The Centre is open from Monday to Wednesday, 9am to 5pm, at Monash University Gippsland Campus, Churchill 3842. Telephone: (051) 226356.

NOTES

1. Mirboo North Primary School, *Nella's Lunchbox: an Oral History Project Relating to Italo-Australian Settlement at Mirboo North*, p. 32.

2. Patrick Morgan. 'Italians in Gippsland'. Included in *A Profile of the Italian Community in Gippsland*, a report to CO.AS.IT. by Gippsland Region Information Bank, 1985.

3. See Philippa Watt and Elizabeth Brooks. *Italian Prisoners of War in Gippsland*, *Gippsland Heritage Journal*, no. 13, 1992, pp. 11-14.

4. L. De Prada, *My Walhalla: the Reminiscences of Lou De Prada, Born in Walhalla 1904*, Morwell, Vic, 1978.

5. Paul O'Brien. *The history of Irish and Italian Immigration in the Koo-wee-rup District*. Unpublished essay, C.G.S., 1985.

6. Kath Ringin, *The Old Brown Coal Mine*, Moe, Vic: 1986.

7. Linda Barraclough and Minnie Higgins, *A Valley of Glens: the People and Places of the Upper Macalister River*. Bairnsdale, Vic: Kapana Press, 1986, pp. 112-113.

8. Barbara Glover, *St. Mary's Church, Bairnsdale, Victoria*. Scancolor, Moorabbin, Vic, 1985.

9. Jim Sinclair and Carlo Di Angelo, 'The Garden at Eilean Donan', *Gippsland Heritage Journal*, no. 13, 1992, pp. 51-54.

10. Philippa Watt and Elizabeth Brooks. op. cit. p.14.

11. Jerzy Zubrzycki, *Settlers of the Latrobe Valley: a Sociological Study of Immigrants in the Brown Coal Industry in Australia*, Australian National University, Canberra, 1964.