

A VISIT TO LOVEDAY

by Laura Mecca

Laura is manager of the Italian Historical Society. She has collected many photographs, documents and personal accounts on the internment of Italians during the Second World War.

It was on a Spring day last year, on my return from a two-week 'exploration' of outback Australia, when I travelled through the Barmera district, in South Australia. The region, known as the Riverland, encompasses the towns of Barmera

and Cobdogla and the villages of Loveday and Overland Corner. Barmera is a picturesque town nestled on the shores of sleepy Lake Bonney, an aquatic paradise fed by the River Murray via the Chambers Creek wetlands.

The land is very fertile. Extensive cultivation of grapes, citrus fruit, canola, vegetables and wheat bordered the road on both sides. The panorama was breathtaking. The striking yellow of the canola fields against the gentle green of undulating young wheat fields, strong purple splotches of the noxious weed Paterson Curse and the blue of



Above: *Portion of Loveday Internment Camp in March 1943.* Source: Australian War Memorial, Canberra.

Below: *Portion of former Loveday Internment Camp today.*



a cloudless sky accompanied the traveller through an imaginary trip on a painter's palette.

A visit to Loveday was not planned. However, when I saw the road sign pointing to Loveday, I felt that I could not leave the area without visiting the place where hundreds of Italians spent long years of internment during the Second World War.

The Italian Historical Society contains a wealth of information on the internment experience at Loveday. Photographs of Italian internees at work in the fields, the barbed wire around the huts, the hardship of the women who had to work the land or run the family business while their husband and father were interned, a belt made with coloured cigarette paper, oral accounts of the anguish of being suddenly separated from family and friends, the shame the children felt with their Australian peers for having their father taken away as an 'enemy alien' ... these are only some of the testimonials and facts of internment which emerge from the material held in the collection.

I had often wondered what had happened to the buildings which had housed Italian, Japanese and German civil internees and Prisoners of War (POWs) at Loveday from 1941 to 1946.

A visit to the Barmera Travel Centre provided me with directions and an informative pamphlet on the history of the camps, from which I have drawn the following information.

Loveday Internment Camps were set up in 1941. The complex was one of the largest of its type in Australia, and consisted of three main camps (numbers 9, 10 and 14), three wood camps and a Group Headquarters.

The site covered 440 acres of cultivated land and held 5380 internees and POWs at its peak and over 1500 Australian Military Forces personnel. Loveday was very suitable for an internment camp: it had been piped for irrigation; it was near a highway linking major cities; electricity and telephone communications were available; a train service from Adelaide ran near the camp;



Rosario La Spina (first from left, standing) with fellow Italian internees at Loveday, c.1943.



Italian internees at work on the wood pile at compound No. 14C, Loveday, 1943.

Source: Australian War Memorial, Canberra.



Example of a monetary token used at Loveday, c1943.

and it was sufficiently far enough inland away from the seaboard. Its location rendered it less vulnerable from attacks by enemy war ships.

The Group Commandant was Lt. Col. Dean, while a Camp Commandant administered each camp. Under Lt. Col. Dean's guidance, the camp became self sufficient and prospered to become the only camp in Australia which was profitable by selling agricultural products farmed by the internees.

The internees were not obliged to work, and were paid one shilling a day in monetary tokens, which could only be used to buy goods of primary necessity, sold in the camps. The German and Japanese Governments augmented this by making pocket money available for their POWs. Internees were permitted to wear civilian clothing within the compound but outside the camp they had to wear the mandatory army-issued maroon uniform. If one attempted to escape, the colour of the uniform would clearly distinguish him as an



A sketch of Tony Jannucci by Lumberto Yonna in the costume worn in a theatre play staged by Italian internees at Loveday, November 1942.

internee on the run. These attempts were few: only one person escaped through the perimeter fence, nine escaped from working parties outside the compounds and a tunnel built by the Germans was discovered before it was completed. The skills of the famous Aboriginal tracker, Jimmy James the First, were often called upon to recapture escapees.

The International Red Cross conducted regular visits to the camps to inspect the conditions and attend to requests and complaints by internees. Family and friends could also apply for visitor passes. Travel restrictions imposed on Italian immigrants during the war and vast distances made it difficult if not impossible for families and friends to visit their loved ones in the camps. This was especially the case for the relatives of the internees from the sugar-cane farming region of North Queensland or the fishing towns and market gardens of Western Australia, communities from which many Italian internees held at Loveday were removed.

Italians were creative in their pastime activities: they staged plays and held concerts. They also formed an orchestra led by an Italian musician from Melbourne. Lumberto Yonna, an Italian artist from Sydney drew humorous sketches of

everyday events or of fellow internees in theatrical costumes. His work is deposited in the archives of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. Many internees made artefacts to ease the boredom, utilising mallee stumps for carving and tin containers for a range of metal trinkets. Others worked the land growing vegetables or attending to the animals. These were natural abilities as most Italians came from rural areas and were skilled farmers.

The contribution made by these men is significant: 21,000 kilograms of seed (mainly tomatoes, beans, beetroot, lettuce and cabbage) valued then at £15,000 were produced at a time when there was a great deficiency in seed produce. During the 1944/45 season 130 tons of tomatoes were supplied to the Berri Picking Union, providing 16,000 gallons of canned juice for distribution to the Allied Forces throughout the Pacific. The camp's nursery supplied 11,500 tomato plants to the Department of Agriculture Experimental Farm at Berri. Over 85,000 tons of wood were felled and sold, mostly to pumping stations.

Under the supervision of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), the camps conducted 'secret projects' cultivating rubber plants, opium poppies and pyrethrum daisies. The first harvest of poppies provided more than half the morphine requirements of the Australian Military Forces for 1944. The poppies covered over 160 acres and were estimated to yield between 30 and 35 tons. The camp was the largest producer of raw opium in Australia. Nearly 10 tons of pyrethrum flower heads were harvested for sale to insecticide firms.

The piggery, which was built in 1943, had a capacity to house 760 pigs. Over 1200 bacon pigs, fed entirely on food scraps from the camps, were sold at the market. The poultry farm provided nearly 30,000 eggs and 2800 dressed birds for use by the Military hospital in two years alone. The farm had 5000 purebred birds. More than 110,000 pounds of soap was made from surplus fat and distributed to army units. Army tents and equipment were also repaired at the camps.

It is a great irony that on one hand Australia interned these men because they represented a danger to national security if left in their homes to work their properties. On the other hand they needed them to work the land at Loveday to produce valuable products to assist with the war effort.



Only the recreation hall in the former Group Headquarters and a few ruins of buildings have survived.

Loveday Internment Camps closed in 1946. The campsites were sold off, along with the buildings and are now divided into small, privately owned properties which are not opened to the public. Only a few former buildings are still intact such as the recreation hall in the Group Headquarters. Guided by the map printed on the information brochure of the Barmera Travel Centre, I walked around the perimeters of the properties looking at the ruins, as on a pilgrimage. It was impossible to identify any of the former buildings. I felt a deep sadness lingering in the air and my thoughts went to all those Italians who were taken away from their families. They were deprived of their freedom and rights as citizens of the country they chose to live in. A few of

them did not survive internment to return home, succumbing to sickness and violence.

The red signs marking the campsites stand as guards of honour against the blue sky and as a stark reminder of the madness of war.

The Society has developed a data base of all the Italian internees in Australia with information extracted from the Australian Military Forces' Internees Service and Casualty Forms. The data includes place of capture, date and place of birth, profession, date of release and name and place of residence of next of kin. Access to the data base is available by appointment or by contacting the Society during office hours.



Graves of Italian nationals in the Prisoner of War and Internment Section of the Barmera Cemetery, March 1943.
Source: Australian War Memorial, Canberra.