

## THE STORY OF LORENZO PENSINI Snr., HIS LIFE AND TIMES

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In the north of Italy, in the picturesque alpine valley known as the Valtellina, lies the town of Tirano, just south of the Swiss border. It was here in 1866, in one of the "locali" (apartment house) surrounding the Piazza Parravicini, that my father-in-law, Lorenzo (Laurence) Pensini Snr. was born. He was the son of Stefano Pensini and Margherita Pensini (nee Delius).

The history of the man, remarkable in many ways, is interwoven with that of his wife's relations, the Anulli and Tonta families of Silkwood and El Arish who were pioneers also. From his experiences, as told to me by my father-in-law himself and by his own sons, and from information gathered from surviving relations, one of whom (Mrs Caterina Fomiatti, nee Tonta) is one hundred and three years old, I have written this account of the life and times of Lorenzo Pensini Snr. I have also obtained information from official documents, where available, in order to verify the facts.

Dad Pensini arrived in Australia in 1890 when he was a young man. He first went to the Herbert River District (now known as the Ingham District). Later on he went to Mossman looking for work. He decided to return to the Herbert River District but, being short of money at the time, could not afford the boat fare, so he walked the distance. Walking long distances was never a problem for this hardy Alpine race. Mr Anulli, himself, with another man, had walked all the way from Gympie to North Queensland, carrying as foodstuff tea-leaves, flour etc. With the flour the pioneers made damper which took the place of bread.

In 1895, Dad Pensini obtained two leases from the Colonial Sugar Refining Co. Ltd., Goondi Mill, one in partnership with Mr Giuseppe Bassanelli and the other in partnership with Mr Lorenzo Cocchetti. Mr James McRobbie and Mr Moses Ellis obtained leases at the same time.

Dad Pensini again returned to the Herbert River District, settling as farmer in Macknade. On the 19th May, 1900, he married Maria Anulli. Maria, twenty years of age, was the daughter of Antonio Anulli and Caterine Anulli (nee Bombardieri). Maria's birthplace was Barrufini, a village on the mountain above the town of Tirano. Her father had come to Australia and was established as farmer in Macknade. Laurence and Maria were married according to the rites of the Roman Catholic Church by Father Patrick Mulligan in the house of Charles Lacaze at Macknade. Witnesses were Giovanni Beccaris and Teresa Catrastellero.

Nine children were born to Dad and Mum Pensini. They were Stefano (Stefan), Giovanni (Johnny), Antonio (Tony), Margherita, Michele (Mick), Lorenzo (Laurence/Laurie), Luigi (Louis), Maria Caterina and Giuseppe (Joe). All were born in Macknade.



The Pensini family

In late 1906 or early 1907 Mr Antonio Tonta Snr. arrived in the Ingham District from Italy with his eldest son, Matteo. Antonio Tonta was Mr Anulli's half-brother. Besides, the Tonta family and the Pensini family had occupied the same apartment house in Tirano, Italy. The Bombardieri family also occupied or owned a row of apartment houses on one side of Piazza Parravicini. Antonio Tonta had been to Australia before. In 1896 he was involved in the mining industry in Western Australia, then had moved to Rutherglen, Victoria and cut timber for the mines at Ballarat before returning to Italy in 1905. In 1907, after approximately one year in Ingham he came to Innisfail and acquired from the Mourilyan Syndicate a sugar farm in the Moresby District, south-east of where the present old Martyville Road passes over the Moresby Creek. It was a scrub farm in those days. In fact it was the first sugar cane farm in the Moresby District. It is now owned by Mr A. Conatrino & family. Antonio Tonta's son, Matteo arrived from Ingham in 1908. Antonio and Caterina Anulli also left Macknade and came to the Moresby farm. Antonio Tonta, meanwhile, had sent for his wife and family to come to Australia. Communication being bad at the time, when Mrs Tonta, with her son Antonio jnr. and daughter Caterina, arrived at Mourilyan Harbour on the 1st of January, 1910, there was no one there to meet them, Mr Tonta being unaware that they had already arrived. The harbour master was very kind to them and allowed them to stay in a coal shed at Mourilyan Harbour and even gave them food, but after three days they decided not to wait any longer and to walk to the farm. To do this they had to walk along the tramline all the way from the Harbour to the Mill and then, after receiving directions, walk approximately another three miles to the farmhouse. Antonio Tonta, his son Matteo, Antonio Anulli and his wife, Caterina, were already there and one can imagine the joy of the reunion and the relief that everyone was safe.

In 1911 the Tonta family moved to Ingham where Caterina later married Mr Fomiatti. Mr Anulli remained on the farm and eventually bought it. He was joined by Laurence and Maria Pensini and family after they sold their farm in Macknade. Records indicate that Lorenzo Pensini was a resident of the Mourilyan area in 1914-15. It appears from the records that in 1917-1918 Dad Pensini became partner on the farm. The road was just a bush track at the time. The children attended first the Mourilyan State School then the Moresby State School when it opened in 1915.

Dad Pensini always had marvellous rapport with his neighbours. Some of the earliest settlers at Moresby (known then as the Italian settlement) were the Martinuzzi family, the Davanzo family, the Dalla Vecchia family, the Guglielmi family, the Squarci family, the Beccaris family and the Reguitti brothers and later the Cao brothers. Some of these Dad Pensini knew from the time he was living at Macknade. One of his closest friends was Carlo (Charlie) Dalla Vecchia. He had arrived in Australia (Herbert River District) in 1890 with his father Basilio Dalla Vecchia. On the same ship and also going to the Herbert River District were Mr Beccaris Snr. and Mr Eugenio Carello, though the Carello family went to Home Hill before coming to the Innisfail District. The Beccaris family were also good friends from his days in the Herbert river District. Giovanni Beccaris was Best Man at his wedding and Mrs L. Beccaris was present at the birth of his youngest child, Joe.

After the 1918 cyclone the area of land along Boogan Road was subdivided and considering the farm at Moresby to be too small to support such a large family, Dad Pensini and his father-in-law, now a widower, sold the Moresby farm. Dad Pensini bought a large farm on what is now Boogan Road, which was just a dirt road then. The farm is now owned by the Sciacca family. In approximately 1921-1922, part of the farm was given up when the North Coast Railway and then the extension of Kate Boylan Road divided the property. In 1923, at the age of forty-three years, Mrs Pensini, beloved wife of Laurence Pensini passed away.

In 1925 I married Louis. I had arrived in Australia in 1921 with my parents, Carlo and Luigia Fremondi and my younger sister Luigia Rosa (Mrs Gina/Jean Lissa). We first went to the Herbert River District where we stayed a few weeks, as my father had friends there from his early cane cutting days. In early 1922, January was the slack season there, Dad decided to come to the Innisfail district where there was work to be found felling scrub and clearing land. We left Lucinda Point and disembarked at Mourilyan Harbour. From the Harbour we travelled to Mourilyan along the tramline by means of an open carriage with seats. I can remember being hit by grasshoppers which frightened me at first until Dad said they were harmless. We had to wait at the Mourilyan Hotel for transport, to carry us and our luggage to Maifredi's farm at Boogan, which was sold to Mr Alfio Borzi and which is now the property of the Russo family of Cowley.

At the Mourilyan Hotel were several farmers and workers from the Mourilyan area, including the man Lorenzo Pensini, who eventually became my father-in-law. While in the hotel lounge, my father asked me to sing for some of his friends who were at the hotel. Mum and I sang several duets and I also sang solo items. The lounge quickly filled with people. Lorenzo Pensini, who himself was a musical, apparently was impressed because, although he did not introduce himself at the time, he went home and raved about me to his wife and family. That was what my husband told me after we were married.

I first met Lorenzo's son at Mr Maifredi's residence. We moved to Moresby as Dad soon got work on the farm adjacent to the Beccaris farm, which was owned by Mr Miskovic, Mr Martinac and another partner and is now owned by Mr Livio Croatto and family. Then we moved to the farm close by (now the Cali farm), which was at the time owned by the Cao brothers. One day Mr Alberto Cao asked me and my sister to go for a walk to visit the Pensini family at Boogan. I then met Mrs Pensini for the first time and also met other members of the family. I still had not been introduced to Lorenzo Pensini Snr. as he was not there at the time.



Emilia and her sister Gina taking smoko to the cane-cutters

I was introduced to him later, when his sons had decided to give him a party for his birthday and all the neighbours were invited. The Pensinis were marvellous hosts and we all enjoyed the party, especially since the sons all played music very well and could play several instruments. They had only one button accordion and all took turns with that, while the others played other instruments. At the time they were all members of the Mourilyan Town Band (a brass band), but Louis, who later became my husband, was playing the violin mostly and the accordion when it was his turn, though he played the cornet with the brass band.

The Fremondi family and the Pensini family met after that on occasions such as weddings and christenings and also at social functions which were held at the Mourilyan School of Arts building on the Mill Site, Mourilyan.

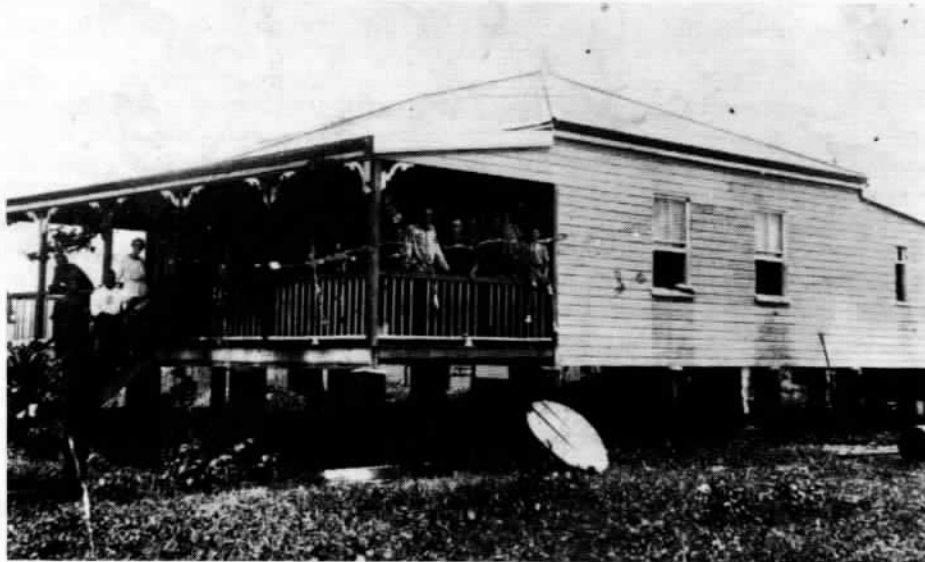
When Louis and I were married we lived for the first few months with my father-in-law and those of his sons who were still single at the time. Unfortunately, as my mother-in-law had passed away two years previously, I did not have the pleasure of her company. At the time I was very young and almost afraid of my father-in-law, who appeared to be so serious and stern. Later I got to know him better and realized that, though he was an intelligent man, he had a good sense of humour and enjoyed jokes. He loved good music - he actually played the accordion by ear - and he enjoyed good company. At times he was short tempered, but I never heard him use bad language or blasphemy. One incident which occurred stays in my mind. He was having difficulty in starting the motor of his car. He accidentally bumped his head on the radiator and in anger threw the crank handle into the cane. He was already dressed to go to Innisfail, so he had to go down to the boys who were working in the shed to ask them to find the crank handle

for him. It took the boys about half an hour to find it and they couldn't help laughing when the car started instantly. Dad himself burst into laughter and, in good humour again, went on his way. Dad used to go to Innisfail on business, but was always pleased if he happened to meet old friends like Mr Revelchione or Mr Dalla Vecchia and he would talk happily about it when he came home. Also, I became less afraid of him when I heard from other people that my father-in-law was praising me whenever he talked to his friends. He liked my cooking and he praised my housekeeping ability. There was never any argument or disagreement between my father-in-law and me or my family. We always enjoyed perfect harmony.

After a few months my husband began cutting cane at Messrs. Cantoni and Ramponi's farm on the South Johnstone Road (now owned by the Calleja family), so we moved to the barracks there. The Pensini brothers all played in both the brass band and their own orchestra for functions, so we still kept in touch.

The next year my father-in-law gave the cane-cutting contract to my husband and we moved into the Pensini barracks. When the cane-cutting season was over my father-in-law came to the barracks and asked would we be willing to shift back into his home and would I resume the duties of cook and housekeeper. As well as free board and lodging for Louis, me and little Iole, he then paid me good wages for my work. I was kept very busy, as single men employed by Dad Pensini also ate their meals with the family in the dining room.

My father-in-law and all his sons were very industrious and did all their own repairs to farm implements. The work in the fields in these earlier days was done by horse drawn-ploughs and scarifiers, etc. My father-in-law owned several draught horses, also one horse to pull the dray and two saddle horses, one chestnut and one piebald. All the horses had pet names. Dad Pensini and his sons were good riders. Dad did all the work on the harnesses and saddlery himself. He enjoyed helping me in the kitchen sometimes also. He was quite a good cook and he even taught me a few dishes which were part of the cuisine of the Valtellina. We often ate mushrooms which he collected from his own horse and cow paddock. Every year for the festive season he took it upon himself to prepare two huge plum puddings each in a large linen cloth, which he boiled in a large cast iron boiler on the stove. One was for Christmas Day and the other was for the New Year celebrations. For these plum puddings he would get fresh suet from the butcher. The puddings were really delicious, with all the sultanas, dried fruits, nuts and spices. He always made a great fuss on New Year's Eve, spending a fortune on fireworks.



At the Pensini's Boogan residence, no-one ever went short of food. We had an abundance of good fresh milk from Dad's own cows and eggs from his own poultry. He also had a sty where he kept domestic pigs, which were slaughtered in winter in order to make salamini (sausages) etc. His friend, Alfredo Guerra of Babinda (now 102 years old and resident in Cairns) who was an expert in this field, used to come and help him with the smallgoods. Later on, when Mr Guerra moved to Cairns, my father-in-law asked Celino Ghietti to give him a hand with the smallgoods. Dad had both a beautiful front garden and also a very good vegetable plot, which he tended with the help of his sons. He had lots of fruit trees established (mainly citrus) and

also managed to grow figs and a grapevine which he had trailed along the front verandah. A grapevine in the Innisfail District was probably unique in those days. He even had a pepper tree, though I never used pepper from it. Water was plentiful, supplied by his windmill. He also had a tank to collect rain water. His store-room and his cool cellar were always well-stocked, as he had quite a large family and also entertained a lot. His cool cellar was under the bungalow style house and was particularly well made, with concrete top, walls and floor and with concrete steps leading down to the floor. Access to the cellar was obtained through a doorway near the bottom of the steps. As there were no refrigerators in those days, items such as butter, smallgoods and drinks were kept in the cellar.

Neighbours flocked to the Pensini residence, particularly attracted because of their love for music. People came on week-ends from the Mourilyan Mill seated on forms in an open wagon pulled by a locomotive, just to hear the music and admire little lole dancing. I recall that among the friends of the Pensini family from outside the area were the Tenni family of the Cairns area and the Poggioli family, the Grindes family and the Savier family of the Atherton area. The Pensini family and these families visited each other whenever the opportunity arose.

Dad Pensini also had a bocce rink. Dad and the boys enjoyed playing cards or draughts during the slack season and when it was raining. In the evenings Dad often played cards or draughts with his employees. He was a wizard at draughts. He also was considered a fair snooker player. When the paddock became less necessary, with tractors replacing horses, Dad Pensini allowed the paddock to be used for recreational purposes. He had kept a grove of trees at the North-Western corner of the paddock which had for some time been used as a picnic ground by the people of Boogan. The Southern part of the paddock was turned into a soccer field. Also, the saddle horses were replaced by a Fiat car which was one of the first four cars in the Mourilyan area. The other cars were owned by Mr Dillon, Mr Castor and Mr De Giovanni.

As well as being intelligent and talented musically, the boys were very athletic. They were good riders and good swimmers and I remember Lawrence stacking lager cases to quite a height, then moving the stacks backwards and forward until the stack tilted back far enough for him to land on the ground with a backward somersault. They used to compete in racing and jumping. They enjoyed lively discussions about which was the best horse, which was the best make of cars, etc. There was always good natured banter and competitions of all sorts, "brain-teasers", as they were called in those days. The boys all got on well with each other and enjoyed friendly competition.

It was during that time that Dad Pensini showed me personal mementos, such as his wife's medical certificates from Italy and from Australia and her badges. He spoke a lot about his wife. She must have been a wonderful person, a very quiet and intelligent lady, who submitted without a complaint to roughing it as a pioneer in a new country. Both she and her mother, who was also qualified, worked as midwives, both in the Herbert River District and the Innisfail District. Among the babies delivered by them were those of the Beccaris family, the Cataldo family, the Parella family, Rita Vardanega (now Mrs Laurie Ring), Alfredo (Fred) Pagano and Eleonora Pagano (now Mrs Micale). He also spoke often of the sad loss of his children. Giovanni, Margherita and Maria Caterina all died at an early age. He also told me of the time he walked from Mossman to Macknade. For part of the way he used the newly formed telegraph line as a guide, walking south along the crest of the Basilisk Range. When on the Cardwell Range just before it starts to slope down toward the Ingham area he was surrounded by natives who formed a circle around him and started dancing and chanting. He thought the end of his days had come, but suddenly one native started talking vociferously to the others in a strange language and then he said in English to Dad "You Laurie! You good man! You go!". Dad never knew who he was, as all were painted and looked alike to him.

My husband and his brothers told me about the 1918 cyclone. When the winds started to get strong the boys at first thought it was great fun. They had made a groove in the ground and used it as starting line. Each had an empty kerosene tin and one of the boys stood at the side acting as a starter. At the word "Go!" they would release the tins and the boy whose tin reached the finishing line first was declared the winner. They could smell curry from the kitchen, as their mother was cooking curry and rice at the time. They were called inside to have tea, but the winds were continuously getting worse and the top part of the two storey house was blown down, taking with it a man who worked for the family and lived with them and who had decided to get

under the blankets. He later emerged, miraculously unharmed. After the top storey blew off, things started to fly around so they all took shelter under the table. Then a beam or rafter fell down and the force broke one of the legs of the table, so the family members held on to each other and went into a cutting in front of the house where there were some wagons and they sheltered to some extent from the strong winds beside the wagons. When the strong winds stopped, Dad Pensini went up to the house. Before shifting to the cutting he had had the presence of mind to put bread and a box of matches in the oven to keep them dry. He managed to make a light and wave it to signal the rest of the family to come up to the house. Not having experienced a cyclone before, they did not know that the calm was due to the eye of the cyclone passing over. Then the wind came back from the opposite direction stronger than before. It was just as well, however, that they had not remained there as they could have been killed. After the cyclone the boys walked to Silkwood to make sure the Tonta family was safe and to render assistance if necessary.

To give an insight into the nature of the man who was my father-in-law I will tell you that the tramway that connects with the tramway beside Enchong Road was built with Dad's permission on his own land. Other farmers had not agreed to give up any of their land, but took advantage of this tramway to send their own cane in once it had been established. Being good-natured and friendly toward his neighbours, Dad did not mind.

When the Boogan State School was established in 1929 there was no residence for the school teacher, who had to board at the Castor Hotel in Mourilyan. Dad therefore built a house opposite the Boogan School to accommodate the teacher and his family.

In 1930 Louis and I bought the Boogan Store. We still saw Dad when he came to buy goods or to visit. He would usually stay with us for lunch and I would make sure I would cook one of his favourite dishes.



At the age of seventy-six years old Dad Pensini decided to retire and sold the farm to three of his sons, Stefan, Laurence and Louis. He went to live in one of his houses in Mill Street Mourilyan. He cooked for himself and occasionally visited us and stayed for a meal. He enjoyed his meals with us. He would not have any sweets, however. He used to say sadly that in his youth he loved ice-cream and could not afford it and now that he could afford it he could not have it because of his diabetes problem.

Dad remained at his Mourilyan home until December, 1949, when he was taken to the Innisfail Hospital, where he passed away on the 31st December, 1949. He was eighty-one years of age.

He was laid to rest in the Innisfail Cemetery with his dear wife. A concrete tomb with granite headstone marks their grave. They were both pioneers. They had both worked very hard and, in so doing had, like others of their kind and of their day, made a vital contribution to the development of this great country of ours, the benefits of which are being enjoyed by the present generation. Yes, ours is their legacy. May they rest in peace.

I wish to thank all those, too numerous to mention individually, who helped my daughter, Iole, to collect the historical information required.