THE INDEXING OF VICTORIAN FOREIGN INWARDS PASSENGER RECORDS

by Kathleen Gervasoni and Ann Gervasoni

A large number of volunteers are currently assisting Archival Heritage (formally known as the Public Records Office in Victoria) index the Foreign Inwards Passenger Records from 1852 to 1923. This index will be of great assistance to those researching their Italian Family History.

Shipping into the Port Phillip District began about 1839. The records of the passengers these ships carried can be found at "Archival Heritage" at either the City Search Room, 318 Little Bourke Street, Melbourne, which specialises in Shipping and Immigration Records, or at the Laverton Search Room, 57 Cherry Lane, Laverton. Many Italians and Swiss-Italians are listed in these records.

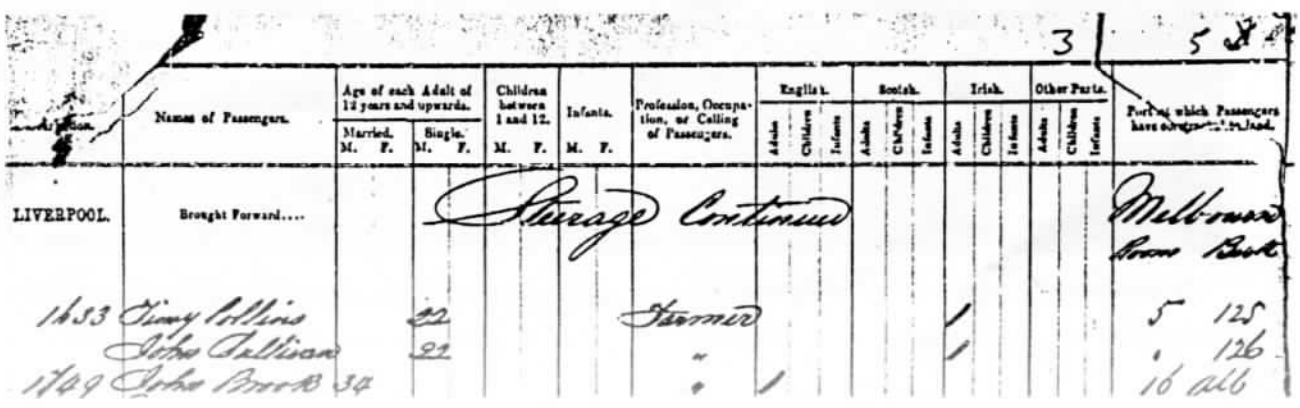
These Shipping Records provide a wealth of information for family historians. Recorded by the Immigration Clerk is the name of each ship entering port, the name of the captain, the month and year of the ship's arrival in Victoria, the surname, given name or initial, age, nationality and sometimes occupation of each passenger, the tonnage of the ship and a record of any deaths or major incidents on board.

Unfortunately, the detail provided in the records depends upon the conscientiousness of the Immigration Clerk writing the ship's list. Sometimes passengers were mentioned only in passing and all that was recorded were statements as "23 steerage passengers" or "5 foreign passengers" or "14 Chinese".

Unassisted passengers from United Kingdom ports are already listed in a Card Index System arranged alphabetically by family name, year by year. Each card lists the name of the ship, month of arrival, as well as the year and page number on the ship's passenger list. Many early Italian immigrants travelled to an English port such as Liverpool for embarkation to Victoria and are therefore listed as unassisted passengers from United Kingdom ports.

In the near future it is hoped that the Unassisted Passengers Index from Foreign Ports: 1852 - 1923 will be completed. These records will be put onto a computer data base, thus making it even simpler and less time consuming to search for your Italian ancestor's records.

However, many difficulties can arise when searching the records. The original documents are often difficult to read, which can lead to inaccuracies in transcribing records. Holes may have developed in the parchment or names written on crease lines which now render them almost impossible to decipher! The old english and foreign scripts used in days gone by add to the difficulties experienced by the transcribers. In addition to these problems, the shipping clerk may have been a careless writer, forming his letters in various ways, even on the same page. There can be confusion between J, I, F, T, m, n, u and V, to name only a few. If your Surname begins or includes any of these letters, you may have to try several spellings of your name before it is found in the Indexes! Also, Italian names were often mis-spelt by Australian clerks. Gervasoni, for example has been written as Jervicomly, and Polinelli as Polly Nellie!

Researching your Italian Family History using the Shipping Lists of Foreign Inwards Passenger Records from 1852 to 1923 can be quite an adventure! The Indexes being developed will make this task much simpler, and many help you solve some of the mysteries concerning your Italian forebears'journeys to Australia.

[Kathleen Gervasoni spent 18 months working as a volunteer transcribing the Foreign Inwards Passenger Records.]