

'PIONEER' VENETI IN GIPPSLAND AND THEIR ROLE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ITALIAN FARMING COMMUNITY

by
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Anna Davine is a PhD student in the Department of History at University of Melbourne. Her thesis is Italian Speakers in the Walhalla Gold Mining District – 1865-1915. The following article has been taken from her Masters thesis The Veneti in Central and West Gippsland 1925-1970. This thesis attempts to capture the lives of early veneti in the Gippsland area and the role of chain migration on the development of the community. It examines the continuities and change in migrant life, the interplay between the two and the dynamics involved in the evolution of a migrant community.

Italian emigration to Australia between 1924-1939 mainly consisted of single or unattached men and their subsequent work choices often led to the development of migrant clusters in the Victorian countryside in the interwar period. Frequency in change of work and varying occupations were characteristic before a migrant eventually settled. Personally organized processes existed where initial or 'pioneer' immigrants to Australia had settled in particular areas and had formed core migrant clusters. While economic need was always the underlying reason for emigration, the process was not random and, on their arrival, most later and post Second World War immigrants moved along well-defined paths laid down by kin or friends who had preceded them to Australia.¹ This process is commonly referred to as 'chain migration' and has been a noted feature among migration groups worldwide. In Central and West Gippsland the role of 'pioneer' settlers and small migrant clusters of *veneti* [people from the Veneto region] was crucial to the development of a strong Italian dairy farming community.²

The *veneti* who settled on dairy farms in the Gippsland area prior to the Second World War retained links with their districts of origin in Italy and traditions and after the War a secondary migration chain brought new blood and change to the migrant clusters. Continuity of traditions and customs within the migrant clusters of traditions and customs cushioned the impact which a new environment would necessarily have on the migrant's life. This helped him make some sense of his new life in Australia. While living in a remote rural area could be isolating and difficult, the existence of small clusters of *paesani* [people from the same village] softened the harsh reality of the transition from life in Italy.

Prior to 1939, Gippsland was predominantly rural with dairying, pig raising and potato-growing the main occupations. Economic progress

in the area was affected by poor roads and the consequent difficulty in getting primary produce to markets. Most of the area was bush and scrub needing a lot of effort to make the land work. It was an ideal scenario for the *veneti* who first went to the area, as it provided economic opportunities for them.

The Italian migrants who lived in the Trafalgar/Yarragon farming district before the Second World War were almost exclusively *vicentini* [people from the district of Vicenza] or *bellunesi* [people from the district of Belluno], but migration after the War saw the arrival of an increasing number of *vicentini*, fewer *bellunesi* and a large group of *trevisani* [people from the district of Treviso].³ However, many postwar immigrants were drawn to Gippsland, not only by a nucleus of kin and *paesani* already established within a support system, but also by a 'push' factor which continued to force males from the same communities in the Veneto to work away from their village of origin to support their families.

A number of individuals and their families provide a picture of the migration process and the importance of certain individuals within the migrant clusters in a migrant community's development. The Parise and Moscato families were two examples and their stories are typical of many early Italian settlers.

Cirillo Parise was born in Pianezze (Vicenza) in 1899, the youngest of 12 or 13 children. He was a soldier during the First World War and afterwards he sold fruit around Marostica and surrounding districts, an occupation he had undertaken before the War. His father had died and his family collectively had three *campi* (fields - of approximately 1.2 hectares) and, as there were family tensions, he decided to go to the United States of America. However, at that time entry restrictions were being imposed on southern Europeans and he therefore decided to

migrate to Australia instead. Cirillo borrowed some money and, along with several others from his village, left Italy on the *Orvieto* for Australia, arriving in 1923. Over a number of years, he worked in the sugar cane plantations at Babinda Queensland and then in Victoria, he cleared and cut timber near Mildura, tended horses on a wheat farm at Donald and worked on road construction at Colac. As a single male, unencumbered by a wife and family, his mobility permitted him to travel quickly to wherever he heard there were work opportunities.

In 1927, Cirillo arranged for a girl he had previously known in Italy to emigrate and marry him. Antonietta Frigo was chaperoned by his nephew Giacomo (Jack) Moscato, and the marriage took place at St. Ignatius Church, Richmond, on the day after their arrival.⁴ After the marriage, they travelled together to Colac and, while the two men worked on the construction of the Apollo Bay Beach Forest Road, Antonietta fed and washed for 4 or 5 Italian men who were also working on the project. In 1928, they moved to the Yarragon district only after their employer had obtained a government contract to asphalt the Princes Highway.⁵

Jack Moscato was born in Pianezze in 1905 and prior to his emigration lived with his mother and five siblings. He was sponsored by his uncle Cirillo Parise and arrived on the ship *Regina d'Italia* with Antonietta in 1927.⁶

Early migrant settlers such as Cirillo and Jack took advantage of any economic possibilities for their further advancement, whenever the occasion arose. In 1928, they had the opportunity to lease and later purchase from the Closure Settlement Board approximately 94 acres of mainly uncleared farmland at the foothills of the Strezelecki Ranges. The previous lessee, Charles Veith, had been a returned soldier who had failed to make a success of the farm and had advised the Board that 'I am unable to make a living from the block for my family'. The property was transferred from Veith to Parise on a walk in-walk out basis, with the agreement that the lessee was to pay as purchase price only the monies in arrears to the Board, but not the unpaid land account balance. The land may have been cheap but, while some was cleared, it was rabbit infested and contained 15 acres of timber country and 12 acres of bracken.⁷

Shared households were significant in the development of the migrant clusters. Kinship ties



Wedding photograph of Cirillo and Antonietta Parise, 1927. The two groomsmen are Giovanni Frigo [left] and Jack Moscato.

and support from *paesani* provided the only sense of community most early immigrants experienced, and it provided a system of support which often saw several families living together in one household. Other families often lived within close proximity of one another. Often, several males lived under the same roof until they were joined by their families or married. Mixed households could contain a married couple and a male relation. This was the arrangement between Cirillo and Antonietta Parise and Jack Moscato, who shared a household and worked as an economic unit, with each person contributing to the work arrangements and needs. In 1932, Jack Moscato married by proxy Santa Zuliani from the Friuli region. It was the beginning of a long and successful association of both families with the Gippsland district.⁸

Antonietta Parise and Santa Moscato are examples of the women within the migrant clusters who contributed significantly to the emerging settlement, not only by providing another pair of hands, but by being the hearth of the household and providing a solid foundation within it. Historical studies have tended to emphasize the movements and contributions of men towards the migration process with women's role as being secondary. Furthermore, a

patriarchal attitude within the community of *veneti* tended to undermine and undervalue the contribution of women's work in the economics of the household unit.

After her arrival in the Yarragon district in 1927, Antonietta Parise recalled that she had (apart from her husband and his nephew Jack) no contact with other Italians in her first three years in the district. In her narrative, she reflected on the excitement she had felt when contact was made with later arrivals. On early farms, life for migrant women involved hard physical work, economic survival, isolation and loneliness, and Antonietta recalled that 'I saw only sky, cows and land'. The language and cultural gulf between *veneti* and the local host community did not always prevent attempts towards friendship and goodwill between farming neighbours. Antonietta referred to the occasional visits of Australian neighbours and their wives, but the visits were awkward and never very successful, and the visitors eventually stopped calling.⁹

Within the migrant community, leadership qualities held by certain individuals became clearer and these men became informal leaders, financial advisers and mentors among the *veneti*. They were men who had advanced their positions economically in the migrant community to such an extent that their advice and support was

sought by other immigrants, and new arrivals deferred to them and accepted their counsel. They became natural leaders through the respect they earned by their economic and material success and, by helping others achieve their aspirations, advanced the interests of the whole community.

Well established migrants like Parise and Moscato assisted, not only kin or *paesani* after their arrival in Australia, but also *veneti* from other districts or provinces. They also advised them in financial matters and in dealings with the host community. In particular, after the Second World War, they sponsored relations or friends to Australia and provided work for them on their farms.¹⁰

On occasion, the established *veneti* acted for fellow migrants who were themselves not in a financial position to sponsor family members or friends to Australia. It was possibly also an unspoken obligation among Italian migrants generally. This was particularly so after the Second World War when the new arrivals were not just *vicentini* and *bellunesi* but also *trevisani*.

This was Jack Moscato's role in how the system of sponsorship and process of wider assistance functioned.¹¹ After the Parise/Moscato partnership dissolved in 1948, Jack Moscato purchased several other farms around Yarragon and his prominent



Bert Newman at the wheel of an automobile with Agostino Zuliani [left] and Cirillo Parise in the back seat. The men are on a farm in Corryong in Gippsland, c1930.



Jack Moscato during his early days in the Gippsland bush, c1929, pictured standing outside his 'home' and attending to the domestic chores. Note the food safe, the 'wardrobe' and the washing board. The top photograph is annotated by him in Italian and translates: 'At seven o'clock in the morning, when the sun calls me, I get up and happily leave my small home to go to the bathroom thinking that the beginning of my working day is fast approaching. [Signed] Giacomo.'



Alle sette del mattino quando
il sole si schiariva, surto
felice dalla mia piccola caseta
per recarmi in stanza da
toilet — per ^{30 da} pensando che
d'averina l'ora di ricominciare
il lavoro. ^{30 da}
Giornata

position among the *veneti* meant that he provided support and work for a steady stream of immigrants newly arrived in the area. In 1950 he sponsored several families. One was his nephew Oreste Parise and family. Moscato settled the Parise family on one of his farms, employing Oreste and his wife as farm labourers, and later entered into a sharefarming agreement with them which lasted until 1956 when Oreste and Rosa Parise bought their own farm.¹²

Provision of finance was crucial in helping new arrivals make a start. Jack Moscato, and his wife Santa, had a reputation for lending substantial amounts of money to new arrivals, most often without security, and expressing complete confidence and trust in their borrower's ability to



Italians of the farming community in Gippsland gathered for the baptism of Maurice Girardi. Included are members of the Girardi, Parise, Moscato, Colpo and Pizzato families.

repay the loan. They were also known to provide the outstanding balance between a bank loan and the immigrant's own funds to enable the purchase of farmland.¹³ It was understood among the Australian community that *capitani*, men like Jack, were useful to the immigrant community when 'you wanted influence or to buy land'.¹⁴

In this way, Cirillo Parise and Jack Moscato provided links and contacts for new arrivals. When the Parise and Moscato partnership was dissolved in 1948, Cirillo and Antonietta Parise moved to Melbourne and purchased six shops in Brunswick Street Fitzroy but still retained a dairy farm at Trafalgar which was sharefarmed.¹⁵ The Parise family lived in one Fitzroy shop and rented the others out, while also

taking in boarders, mainly *veneti* newly arrived from Italy. The significance of boarding houses in the initial periods of migrant settlement has been a common feature among many immigrant communities and a crucial factor in providing accommodation for single men newly arrived from either Italy or another area of Australia.¹⁶ The *trevisani* brothers Orfeo and Ernesto Bragagnolo arrived in Melbourne in 1949 and boarded with the Parise family for a number of years, and were later joined by their younger brother Giovanni in 1952.¹⁷

During his time in Melbourne, Cirillo Parise worked in a transformer factory in Fitzroy which was owned by the Nicoletti family, which owned several hill farms in the Yarragon district (but lived in Melbourne) and had, at different times, provided work opportunities for a number of *veneti* living in the district.¹⁸ In 1956, the Bragagnolo brothers pooled their resources and, with some financial assistance from an uncle, purchased Nicoletti's 129 acre farm at Yarragon. Ernesto and Giovanni worked on the farm, milking cows and clearing the land while Orfeo, reluctant to live in the country, continued to work in Melbourne, but joined his brothers on weekends to help with the farmwork. Orfeo later married and settled in the district.¹⁹ Cirillo and Antonietta Parise moved back to the Traralgar area in 1954 and purchased more farm land which was sharefarmed by new arrivals.²⁰

Certain families among the more successful *veneti* became focal points for socialising and getting together. The Parise and Moscato household became a place where the *veneti* (both *bellunesi* and *vicentini*) could meet and socialise, and this practice continued in the postwar period, long after the two families had divided their farming interests and established separate households. In the years between the Wars visits occurred mainly on Sundays with most families travelling by horse and jinker, as few *veneti* owned or drove a motor vehicle. Visiting occurred between the morning and evening milking sessions and most families living within a reasonable distance maintained a regular contact with each other.²¹ *Bocce* rinks were prepared on a flat area near the farmhouse and, while the men played and enjoyed a glass of wine, the

women chatted inside and the children played.²² Core families also provided a base and sustenance for lonely single men and for itinerant workers searching for work, in particular during the depression years.²³ The establishment of *bocce* rinks on a number of farms continued in the postwar period, further fostering a social tradition that had commenced in the interwar years among the *veneti*.

Emigration by the *veneti* to Australia was generally a well-planned individual process and the sponsorship system saw a number of farming clusters develop in Gippsland. Certain pioneer settlers maintained a conduit between the Veneto and Australia and their support and maintenance of traditional customs and practices provided new arrivals, particularly those arriving after the Second World War, with a support base which enabled them to get onto their feet and become established economically. Cirillo Parise and Jack Moscato were not the only prominent *veneti* in their community but are examples of how the migration process worked, how migrant clusters occurred and how a migrant community developed.

Jack Moscato died in 1972. Antonietta Parise died in 1995. Cirillo Parise died in 1996. and Santa Moscato died in 2000. ■

Notes

¹ C.Price, *Southern Europeans in Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne 1963. This challenges Handlin's outdated view of the mass migration from Europe as one where the migrant was stereotyped as a victim of circumstance, naïve and passive. See O. Handlin, *The Uprooted*, Little Brown & Co. Boston 1973 p. 6.

² The Central and West Gippsland area lies to the east of Melbourne and extends roughly between Traralgon and Drouin. It is flanked on the north by the Baw Baw mountains and to the south by the Strzelecki Ranges. It contains a large expanse of fertile flat and undulating farmland bordered on two sides by steep hills and bush. Trafalgar and Yarragon are neighbouring townships in the area.

³ Number of *vicentini* 1924-39: male 21; female 9

Number of *bellunesi* 1924-1939: male 14; female 11

After WW2: over 120 families of *veneti* lived for some time in Gippsland.

⁴ Antonietta Frigo born Canove (Vicenza) 1903. Cirillo and Antonietta Parise had two children: James born 1928 and Mary born 1930.

⁵ Italian Historical Society (IHS) Audio Tape 51.1 & 51.2, Cirillo and Antonietta Parise. Interviews with Mary Zaltron (Parise) 1997 and James Parise 1998.

⁶ Carlo Moscato 23 October 1996.

⁷ After World War 1, the Closer Settlement Scheme was an attempt to place ex-servicemen and their families on the

land. In many cases, it proved to be a failure, as the land was often unsuitable for farming and the men did not have sufficient farming skills.

VPRS 5714, unit 900. Parise was the 'lessee' but farmed in partnership with Moscato. The purchase price was 437 pounds 6 shillings and 7 pence. In 1937 the lease was transferred to a Crown Grant; Parise and Moscato were registered as tenants in common in equal shares.

⁸ Giacomo Moscato knew his wife's uncle, Agostino Zuliani and the marriage was arranged through him. Santa Zuliani was born Ziracco (Udine) in 1910. Jack and Santa had two sons, Carlo born 1937 and Elio born 1942.

⁹ IHS audio Parise, op.cit.

¹⁰ A sponsor was to guarantee work and accommodation for the new immigrant for a period of two years after his or her arrival.

¹¹ This was also the case with Cirillo Parise and others

¹² Interview Oreste & Rosa Parise 1998; Questionnaire Maria Morello 1998.

¹³ Interview Gino and Albina Cortese 1998

¹⁴ Interview Frank Wall 1998.

¹⁵ Interview Divina Grigoletto 1998; Giacomo and Divina Grigoletto were the sharefarmers.

¹⁶ L.Jenkins, *Il Potere della Terra - A social History of Italian Settlement at Lismore*, Northern Star Printing 1993 noted the significance of the Nardi boarding house in Lismore in the 1920s in providing accommodation for migrants, p.19. The importance of boarding houses in the processes of chain migration has been noted also in American studies. See D.Hoerder, 'From Migrants to Ethnics: Acculturation in a Societal Framework' in *European Migrants: Global and Local Perspectives*, New England UP, Boston 1996. This writer's own paternal grandparents ran a boarding house in Chicago (USA) in the period prior to 1925.

¹⁷ Interviews John, Ida, Lina and Rina Bragagnolo 1998

¹⁸ Francesco Nicoletti was from the Trentino region but had married Concetta Tomasi, a native of Conco (Vicenza). During the war years, the Nicoletti farm provided work for Angelo and Santa Girardi from Conco (Vicenza). In the early 1950s they gave work to Aldo Dalle Nogare, Attilio Bagnara and Gino Cortese (all from Conco). Elio Bordignon and Vittorio Alberton from Bassano del Grappa (Vicenza) and Santa Grande from Vallonara (Vicenza) worked at the farm before it was purchased by the Bragagnolo Bros. (Treviso). Concetta was first cousin to Aldo Dalle Nogare.

¹⁹ Ernesto married Rina Faoro in 1957, Giovanni married Rina's sister Ida in 1960 and Orfeo married their cousin Lina Faoro in 1959.

²⁰ IHS audio Parise, op.cit.

²¹ Milking times varied seasonally. They were generally between 5 am and 8 am and 4 pm and 6 pm. Early spring, until March/April, was the busiest period. Springtime meant calving and feeding of calves. In October/November, silage was cut from fresh grass and packed. Later, in December, hay was baled and stored.

²² *Bocce* is similar to lawn bowls and is generally played outdoors.

²³ Interview Divina Grigoletto 1998. She cooked for single men who wanted to be fed *polenta e pollastro* - maize meal and chicken.