

## 'LITTLE LON'

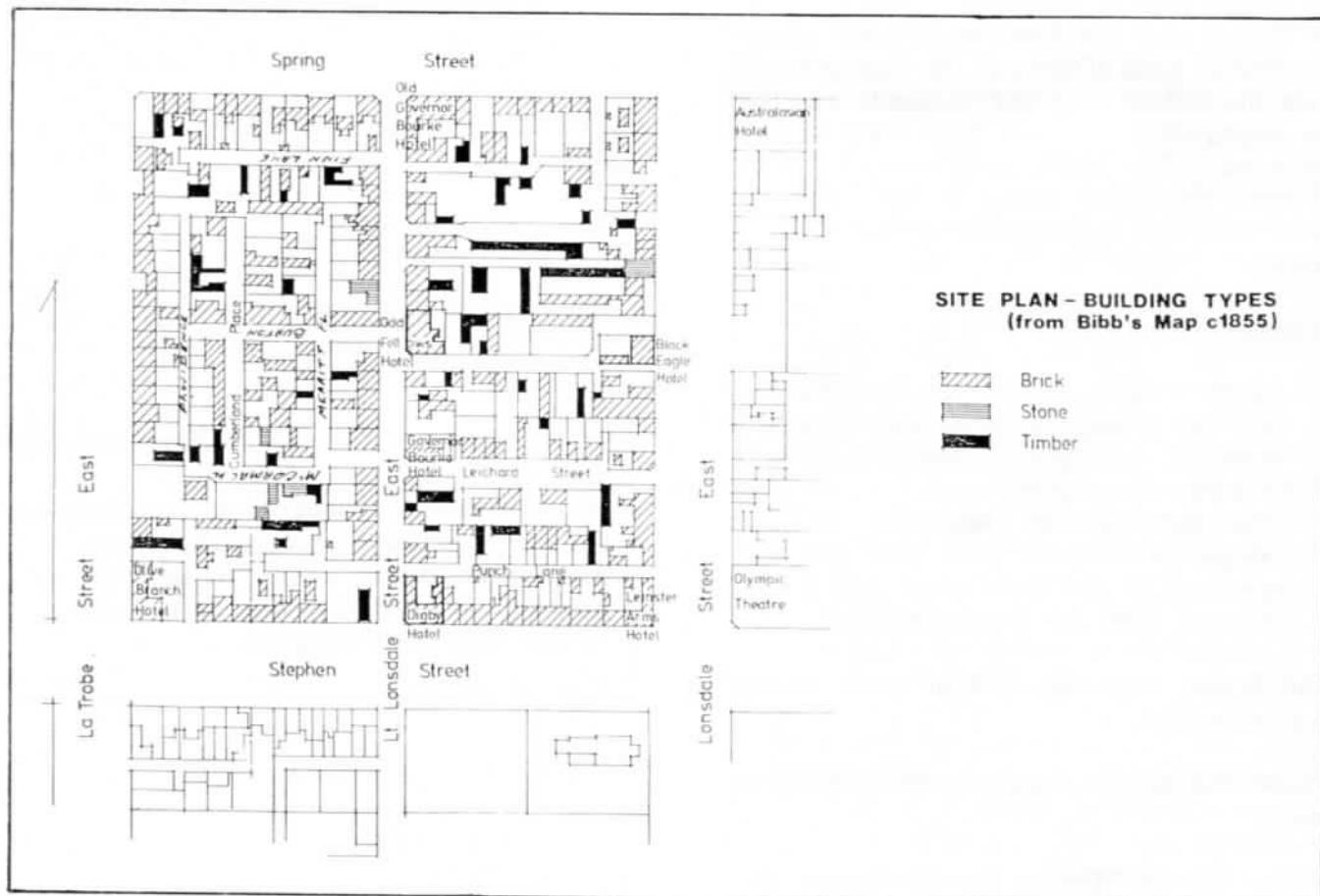
by Mark Donato

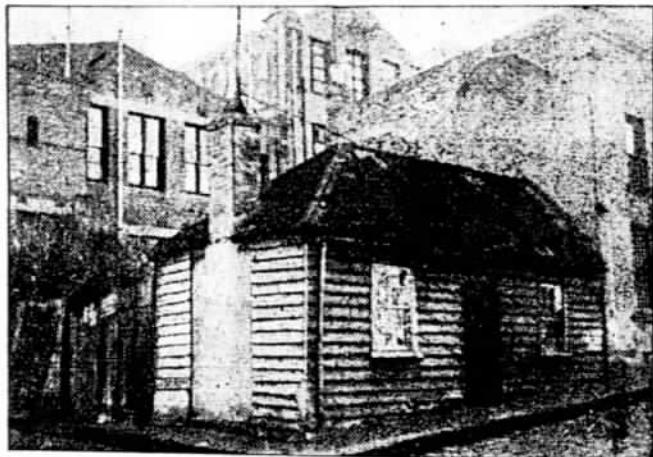
*Mark Donato is a member of the Italian Historical Society and a secondary school teacher. His great grandparents settled in 'Little Lon' in the 1880s. Mark's interest in the area derives from stories told by his family, the Bracchi and the Cerbasi.*

'Little Lon' is today just a memory to people born before 1940. It was a notorious working class area and although little trace of it is left today it is a significant part of the early fabric of Melbourne life. As a poor working man's area it attracted migrants as their first stepping off point and as such has strong links with the early Italian immigrants. In 1913, Constable George Scott, of the Victoria Police, described the area to a Joint Select Committee:

*That quarter of the city ... is occupied by Assyrians, Italians, Indians and Chinese; there are no Europeans there. The men mostly work as ice-cream vendors, street musicians and hawkers, and the Assyrian women follow the occupation of white workers.<sup>1</sup>*

'Little Lon' was of course Little Lonsdale Street. It is one of those narrow streets that run across Melbourne like an afterthought far removed from Hoddle's broad city streets, thirty metres wide. Much more than a single street, it was the area bounded by Spring, Lonsdale, La Trobe and Stephen (Exhibition) Streets. Extending further west it took in other lanes crossing Little Lonsdale, such as the exotic sounding 'Celestial Lane' and 'Exploration Lane'. The area was a maze of lanes, alleys and small 'right of ways' between buildings. Apart from this area, Melbourne has lost forever many of these lanes as high rise buildings have been erected over the space below. As the following map shows, the area was a concentration of small housing blocks separated by small alleys, some only wide enough for one person to walk through at a time<sup>2</sup>.





Tess and Mary Hayes' house.

The area underwent a number of phases of development. Prior to 1847, there is no recorded settlement, but in that year the land was subdivided into 20 lots and sold at public auction. The first buildings date from 1848, and include small two roomed cottages, stables and workshops. Between 1855 and 1880 the area was completely built up with many existing buildings being improved. The small lanes behind the main street frontages were lined with small cottages and shops, many of them with only two rooms<sup>3</sup>. An example of this pre-brick housing is shown above. At the time of compulsory acquisition this was one of the oldest timber houses in Melbourne dating back to the first subdivision of the area.

During the period 1880 to the 1920s, the area underwent a change as small industry developed, consisting of food processing, furniture making and metal working shops. A number of new buildings were also erected, brick structures of two and three storeys.

It was during this time that Carlo Bracchi, an Italian immigrant, built an ice-cream factory and family home in Cumberland Place.

In the early 1900s there were two schools in the area but by 1936 the Catholic School closed due to lack of numbers and the advanced years of Sister Veronica, the Head Teacher.

In 1930 the Church of England school, Hornbrook, was closed due to lack of numbers and became a squat for young people, who made and sold crumpets on a small stove. During the depression the Melbourne City Mission fed and housed men in the building on the corner of 'Little Lon' and Exhibition Street, which later became the Post Office. Another mission on the corner of McCormack Place had a stained glass window with the inscription '*need not creed*'. During the 30s and 40s more factories took over.

On the 10th of June 1948, the Commonwealth Government compulsorily acquired the site. Although the area was said to be a slum and the houses small, the acquisition of the site in the 1940s deprived Melbourne of the last of its inner



The following children were photographed in the boys yard of St. Joseph's College in 1910: Nata Palermo; Anita Bracchi; Vicki Amad; Adele Haddad; Vera Dearsley; Bella Argenzio; Brightie LaGruta; Alma Bacash; Effie Attalah; Maudie Malouf; Joe Amad; Alec Calill; Waddie Amad; George Bell; Freddie Lutchens; Reg Bradley; ... Amad; Katie Lutchens.

residential areas. There is some irony in this when we consider that today an attempt is being made to rekindle the vitality and vigour the city lost since it became just a commercial and employment area. Recently the State Government and Inner Melbourne Councils have attempted to re-populate the City. The stated aim is to "restore the cities population of early this century ... and stop Melbourne becoming a wasteland at the end of the week"<sup>4</sup>. In 1921, 103,200 people lived in central Melbourne.

In 1992, the figure had slumped to 60,400. Of course in the 1920s the city population was quite large compared to the overall population of the state at that time. Many of the Italian immigrants of the 1880s settled first in the 'Little Lon' area and then moved out to areas like Carlton, Fitzroy and Middle Park. A survey of Post Office Directories, Sands and McDougal directories and the early electoral rolls show a range of occupations - fruiterer, cooper, tailor, wine house keeper, sculptor, labourer, musician, manufacturer and ice cream vendor.<sup>5</sup>

**Post Office Directories, 1892 :**

Carlo Pescia	110 Spring Street	Winehall.
G. Bonetti	207 Spring Street	Cooper
W. Galetto	1 Cumberland Place	Icecream.
Gagaro Bros.	McCormack Place	
Punaro Bros.		
G. Cinquegrana	78 Lt. Lonsdale Street	Music string importers.
Di Giglio Bros.	113-115 Lt. Lonsdale Street	Musicians.
P. Melfi & Co.	115 Lt. Lonsdale Street	Music Company.
F. Francisco	Exploration Lane	
P. Arcaro	Exploration Lane	
F. De Modena	Exploration Lane	

**Post Office Directories, 1895 :**

S. Raffaello	Cumberland Place.
G. Goarallo	Cumberland Place.
D. Vietto	Cumberland Place.
C. Clerico	McGrath Place.
V. Galito	McGrath Place
C. Bracchi	McCormack Lane.
J. Capana	McCormack Lane.
E. Curcio	McCormack Lane.
D. Miglionico	McCormack Lane.
Gargaro Bros.	McCormack Lane.
V. Lapintina	28 Exploration Lane.
F. Trinchinella	28 Exploration Lane.
A. Leone	28 Exploration Lane.

**Electoral Roll, 1903 :**

Ambrosio Edward	159 Lonsdale Street	Bootmaker.
Bonetti Antonio	110 Lonsdale Street	Independent means.
Fasoli Vincent	110 Lonsdale Street	Winemerchant.
Zanardi Mary	45 Lonsdale Street	Restaurant Keeper.
Valli Antonio	55 Lonsdale Street	Fruitseller.
Rinaldi John	55 Lonsdale Street	Winesellers.
Lazzarino Carlo	110 Lonsdale Street	Contractor.
Cavallaro Hannah	115 LaTrobe Street	Home duties.
Muschiali Hannah	117 LaTrobe Street	Home duties.
Dedini Joseph	177 LaTrobe Street	Labourer.
Battiani Charles	350 LaTrobe Street	Letter Carrier.
Bracchi Carlo,	Cumberland Place	Manufacturer.
Argenzo Antonio	20 McGrath Place	Musician.
Clerico Maddalena	102 Little Flinders Lane	Home duties.
Perugia George	308 Elizabeth Street	Artist.
Perugia Paul	308 Elizabeth Street	Sculptor.
Monigatti Fedele	171 Exhibition Street	Winemerchant.
Bruni Antonio,	206 Exhibition Street	Wine House Keeper.
Russo Felix	28 Guildford Street	Fruitseller.
Virgona Giuseppe	28 Guildford Street	Fruitseller.
Sartori Constance	11 Punch's Lane	Housekeeper.

The area at the turn of the century was a concentration of diverse activities, and a diverse cultural mix and yet this group appear to have coexisted in harmony. During the archaeological excavations at the Commonwealth redevelopment site in 1990, a small leather bound note book was found in the remains of the Odd Fellows Hotel. The diary detailed the feelings of a Chinese man, possibly called Wah Way, for an Italian woman named Franca who lived at 38 Cumberland Place. The entry shows Mr Wah had trouble with English, he wrote "*I love you Franca. Give us a Ghiss*"<sup>6</sup>.

Naturally, the Italians and their neighbours had families, a fact which is often forgotten or ignored as most commentaries examine the poverty and the fact that 'Little Lon' was Melbourne's red light district until the late 1930s.

There were enough children in the area to warrant two schools and as the following photo shows, the children and their families must have mixed socially. Present at the party were the offspring of Australian born, German, Italian, Lebanese, Chinese and Irish.



*Mamie Bracchi, one of the guests at the party, identified the following people: Billy Argenzio; Bertie Dearsley; Phillip Torbey; Edna Dearsley; Brightie Lagruta; Mamie Bracchi; Bella Argenzio; Nata Palermo; Marza Amad; Vicki Amad; Maudie Amad; Arthur Dearsley; Henrietta Argenzio; Emily Sedewei; Anita Bracchi; Amadeo Argenzio; Joseph Argenzio; Kate McDonald (Gye); John ...; Winnie Lee; Peter Bracchi, Maria ...; Waddie Amad; Minnie Haddad; John Gye; Nellie Lee.*

The photo is of John Gye's birthday party on the 17th March 1913. The party appears to be a grand affair. The white table cloth and cake-stands do not agree with the image of poverty that is often associated with the area. Also of note are the patriotic flags and bunting.

Photographs of children during this time are fairly rare, especially compared to the videotapes and photographs we have of our families today. The fact that photographs of children are rare is all the more sad when you consider that many children did not survive childhood. Life expectancy was shorter compared with today, but especially for mothers and children. In the 1850s life expectancy was 50 years, by 1871 things had not changed all that much, male life

expectancy was 50 years and female 52 years. Infant mortality in the 1850s was 140 deaths per 1000 live births. Maternal mortality was high and associated with the numerous pregnancies women had (the average was 6.8 births per life time). The result of this was that often a wife would die and a husband would return to Italy, remarry and start a second family. For example, Carlo Bracchi married twice, his first wife died twelve months after childbirth aged 20 years. His second wife died aged 42 years having had four children. Tom Cerbasi's father died when they lived in America. His mother returned to Italy and married Joseph Vignola. They came to Australia and had three children. Frank Curcio married Josephine Evangelista and had six children. When Josephine died, Frank returned

children. When Josephine died, Frank returned to Italy and married Filomena Germino and started a younger family of three children. The Curcio, Cerbasi and Bracchi families intermarried.

The deaths of mother and child, the lack of fluency in English and the cultural isolation of these people must have created stress for their families and forced them to rely upon each other. A survey of Births, Deaths and Marriages indicates the extent that these early families intermarried.

Children and babies suffered from a variety of illnesses, infantile cholera, inflammatory diarrhoea. Every summer many Australians suffered from typhoid but the greatest killers in Melbourne's urban area were tuberculosis and diphtheria. Other causes of death were measles, whooping cough and small pox. In 1874 the Victorian Compulsory Vaccination Act was passed but disease still ravaged Victoria with small pox epidemics in 1882 and 1884-5.<sup>7</sup>

In 1882 there was a Royal Commission to fully examine Melbourne's sanitation. An outcome, after much debate, was the establishment of the Metropolitan Board of Works in 1891.

Melbourne's citizens understood the relationship between disease and sanitation and concluded the solution lay in government control of a health infrastructure.

*We are of the opinion that, as the metropolitan district is divided into a large number of self governing municipalities no general scheme of deep drainage can be successfully executed except under the control of the Board of Works.<sup>8</sup>*

It is interesting to note that one hundred years ago only a government body could undertake and coordinate such works, whereas today government instrumentalities are being exposed to private consortiums and competition.

Prior to the establishment of the Board and the construction of underground sewerage, Melbourne had a series of gutters that took away the raw sewerage which ended up in the Yarra.

*These gutters are crossed by little wooden bridges every fifty yards. When it rains, they rise to the proportion of small torrents, and have on several occasions*

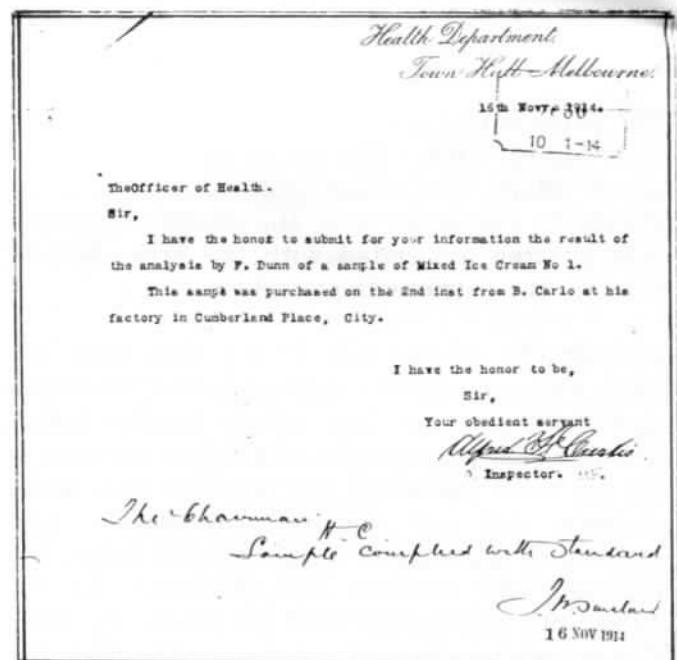
*proved fatal to drunken men.<sup>9</sup>*

The 'Little Lon' area was not serviced by underground sewerage but by cess pits and night soil collections, both not up to the task, particularly when heavy rain moved raw sewerage from cess pits across yards and down alleys and streets.

*In many of the suburbs a large proportion of the channels are still unmade; the liquid sewerage from the houses passes sluggishly along natural channels in the ground, here and there accumulating and stagnating, and everywhere soaking into and polluting the soil ...<sup>10</sup>*

Melbourne did come to grips with its sanitary problems due to the Metropolitan Board of Works, the creation of health departments and the development of a human and physical infrastructure to coordinate and control the problem. As the following certificate indicates, the Melbourne City Council was regulating health conditions in the Bracchi ice cream factory, by 1913. Documents show that the Council concerned itself with health regulations, worker safety, the quality of the product and the registration of the premises for food preparation.

So by 1914, when the photograph of the children was taken, Melbourne had in place many of the health standards we consider essential today. It should be remembered that it took some time to develop an infrastructure, standards and to set in place the mechanism to police them.



Carlo Bracchi arrived in Melbourne in 1881. He sold ice creams from a handcart walking Melbourne's streets. Early Post Office directories show him living in 'Little Lon' from 1883. He established himself quickly and by the 1890s owned an ice cream manufacturing business. He also built a two storey home in Cumberland Place. Although he came to Australia on his own, he subsequently brought out his brother Costantino, and after the Great War, the six children of his sister Agata Maggi.

During this time street vendors were unpopular with the authorities and equated with buskers. However, it must have been profitable since Carlo quickly built the factory and also operated food and entertainment stalls at the Eastern Hill market (site of the Southern Cross Hotel).

The factory was a far cry from the mechanised food factories of today. It was mechanised but there is a great gap in the chemicals and machinery used then and now. For example the freezer room had walls twelve inches thick made from cork and sawdust insulation. The chemical used to freeze and cool the liquids was ammonia, which was quite dangerous. If a leak occurred, as it often did, it was necessary to soak a handkerchief in vinegar and put it around one's face before attempting repairs.

To make ice cream, the mixture was placed in a large container resembling a concrete mixer. The container was enveloped in cooling coils, connected to the ammonia pumps. As the mixture was freezing the container was rotated by a series of overhead pulleys and leather belts. Patents for this system were granted to Carlo Bracchi on the 2nd August, 1922. Today the power applications have changed but the process is very similar.

Prior to the introduction of domestic electric refrigeration, homes used ice boxes and Carlo's supplied block ice. To make this ice, large metal buckets, covered in pitch were filled with water which had been filtered by allowing sediment to settle in a tank using alum. The buckets, which were grouped in bundles of either 3 cwt or 6 1/2 cwt, were then taken through a brine solution and kept at -6° C. As the liquid froze they were pulled along the tanks by a 1/2 ton electric hoist, then pulled out of the solution and quickly upended. The large blocks of ice were then sent to a storage room.

Carlo Bracchi had a number of horse drawn carts, hand carts and petrol driven trucks. The

horses and hand carts were not housed at Cumberland Place but on a vacant block in McCormack Place. This area doubled as a wood yard in winter. The hand carts and horse carts were ornate and brightly coloured, painted and varnished. The horse drawn carts were 6'x 4', and the horses had tassels around their necks.



*Carlo Bracchi's Ice Truck.*



*A Motley Ice-cream cart, similar to those used by C.A. Bracchi.*

The factory underwent a number of changes. Apart from ice, ice-cream and gelati, the factory also made butter and margarine, known as 'coco butter'. When war broke out Carlo's sold the rights to the ice cream factory to Sennits. The combined effects of the 1930s depression, the loss of markets during the war, the death of Carlo Bracchi and subsequent payment of probate all weakened the business.

The compulsory acquisition of the site by the Commonwealth government finished the

business. The ice cream equipment was sold to Stan Baker of Bulla, makers of dairy products, and the vacated factory and house were used by Kans Foods until the demolition of the site.<sup>11</sup>

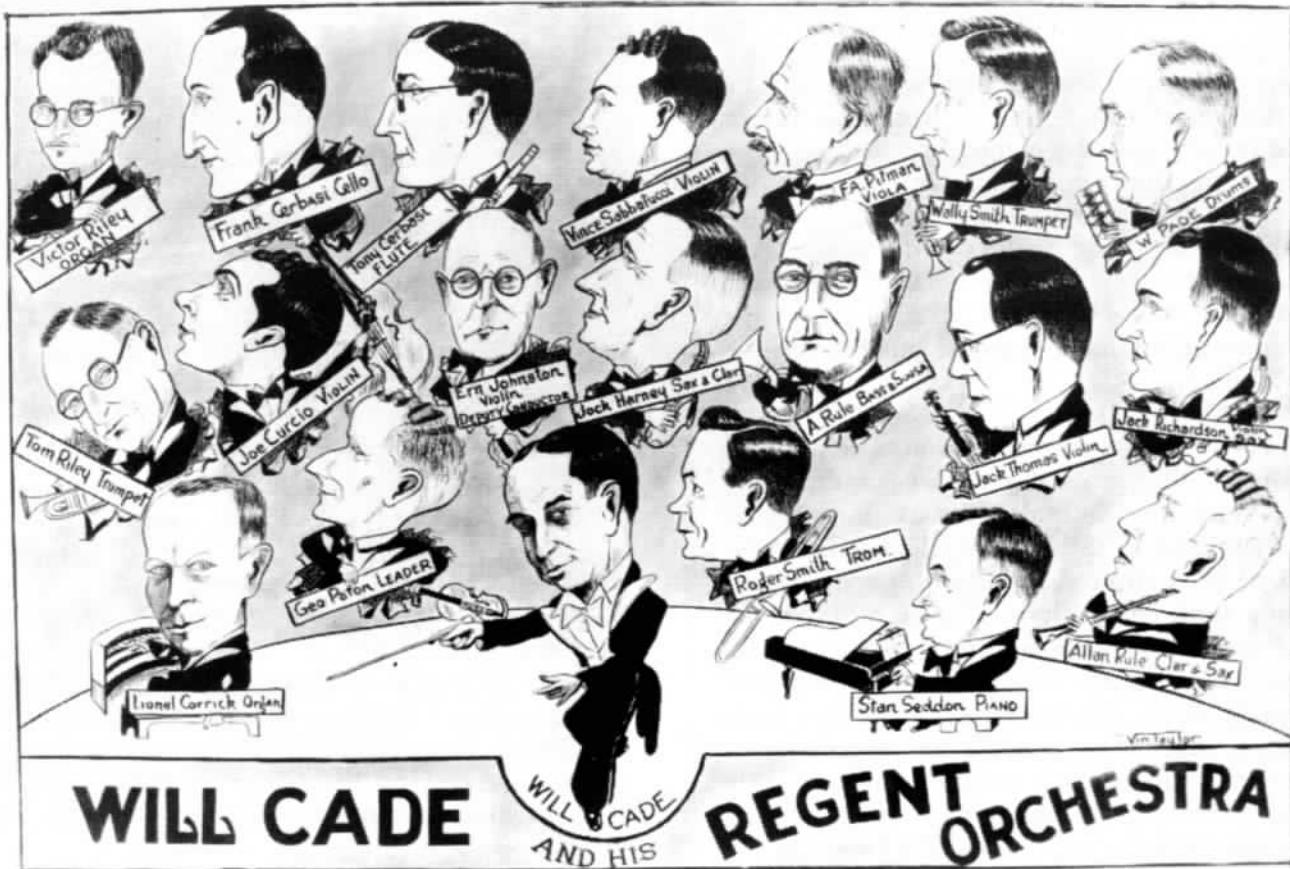


Carlo Bracchi's house and stables in Cumberland Place.

In 1881 there were just 947 'Italians' in Victoria, all but 59 of them were males. In 1901 the number had only increased to 1525.<sup>12</sup> Although little is known about this group, their lives can be traced through official records (naturalization, births, deaths and marriages) and advertisements in newspapers (musicians, wine and food vendors), and through official reports.

A contemporary police report clearly demonstrates that the buskers were a source of concern.<sup>13</sup>

Many of the musicians came from Viggiano (prov. Basilicata). Some worked as buskers, others played music on Melbourne's Bay steamers and inter-colonial shipping. They travelled widely, playing in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and New Zealand. The following list of Italian musicians were well known in Melbourne and some of them also lived in 'Little Lon': Di Giglio (also worked as agents for others); Leone; Briglia; Barille; Cinquegrana; Cerbasi; Gagliardi; LaGrutta; La Battaglia; Ricco & Vignola. A review of marriage records shows that many of these families intermarried. Often the children of these musicians went on to play in orchestras and bands in the 1920s and 1930s.





In interviews with the children of *viggianesi* musicians, a common memory is watching a parent playing in the silent picture theatres and in the orchestra pits of theatres in the 1920s and 1930s.

These were the days of The Regent, The State Theatre, Capitol, Plaza, Athenaeum, Victory and Bijou theatres. Many of the *viggianesi* and their children played in such bands as Cecil Bois' Metro Salon Orchestra, with Will Cade, Daniel Mas, Ned Tyrell and Henry Penn at the Victory, and G. Vignola at The Eclipse in Port Melbourne. Some like Vincenzo Ricco and Ezio Kost had their own orchestras.

Today busking is licensed and acceptable and seen as part of a process of livening and humanising our city; however great attempts were made in the past to rid the city of buskers, spruikers and hawkers thought to be lowering the tone of the city. When Frank Curcio first came to Melbourne he sold balloons in the street. His grand daughter Emilia recalls that they would not talk of 'those days'. Clearly hawking helped the family establish itself but it was an activity the children outgrew and wanted to forget.

It would seem that Melbourne has always had something of a struggle with orderliness or respectability and the less orderly elements. There is an intolerance of the loud and less respectable but at the same time a recognition that a city lacks vitality without acceptance of all the dimensions of human activity.

Today Southbank and the Yarra developments are seen as a success. They are clean, controlled, new and they attract visitors. Swanston walk, however is less of a 'success' with council about to ban spruikers and sandwich boards because they lower the tone of Swanston Street.<sup>14</sup> It will be illegal for spruikers in doorways to entice people inside and broadcast information into the street. The display of boards will be permitted only under special circumstances. According to an article in *The Age*, Commissioners want to turn Swanston Walk into a "promenade of upmarket cafes, bookshops, boutiques and other quality retail outlets"<sup>15</sup>

This is not new. Melbourne wrestled with this problem last century. Of course having made the city very orderly and 'proper', the city was considered characterless and lacking in life in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. In the 1880s,

busking was equated with begging and discouraged: however it was, for some Italian musicians, a means of establishing themselves when they first arrived in the colony.

There were vigorous attempts to stop busking, hawking, displaying goods on pavements and loitering, and to tighten up liquor licensing laws. This was partly a response to the gangs of larrikins that roamed the streets at the turn of the century and also due to the lack of security people felt when they travelled on foot.

It was not until Melbourne installed lighting and people began to travel by car or public transport, and people moved out from the city to the suburbs, that the city began to change its character and people felt more secure.

*By 1924 lanes which had once hidden a 'criminal class' were lined by factories rather than cottages. Shopkeepers who had once been outraged by Collingwood larrikins or by city prostitutes had fled to the new suburbs across the river. Fewer Hotels stood at street corners. Melbournians moved about by tram, train or car rather than on foot<sup>16</sup>.*

Prior to these changes Melbourne did have a threatening side to it. 'Little Lon' evolved as an area and had by the late 1920s begun to change from housing to factories.

The seamy and more threatening side to 'Little Lon' is captured in the 1880s Australian detective story, *The Mystery of the Hansom Cab* by Fergus Hume. Much of the plot and background deal with the brothels and sordid parts of Melbourne. Hume takes the reader through the dark alleys, gambling dens and sly grog joints. In the following extract a detective takes a client through the back lanes of Melbourne.

*Turning off Little Bourke Street, the detective led the way down a dark alley, which felt like a furnace, owing to the heat of the night ... keep close to me whispered Kilslip ... we may meet some nasty characters here ... they kepted [sic] for safety in the middle of the alley, so that no one could spring upon them unaware, and they could see sometimes on the one side, a man cowering back into the black shadow, or on the other, a woman with disordered hair and bare bosom leaning out of a window trying to get a breath of fresh air. There*

*were also some children playing in the dried up gutter, and their shrill young voices came echoing strangely through the gloom, mingling with a bacchanalian sort of song a man was singing, as he slouched along unsteadily over the rough stones. Now and then a mild looking string of Chinamen stole along, clad in their dull blue hued blouses .. here and there comes a stream of warm light through an open door, and within, the Mongols were gathered around the gambling tables, playing fan tan, or else leaving the seductions of their favourite pastime (smoking opium), and gliding soft footed to the many cookshops, where enticing looking fowls and turkeys already cooked were awaiting purchasers. ... led down another and still narrower lane, the darkness and gloom of which made the lawyer shudder, as he wondered how human beings could live in them.<sup>17</sup>*

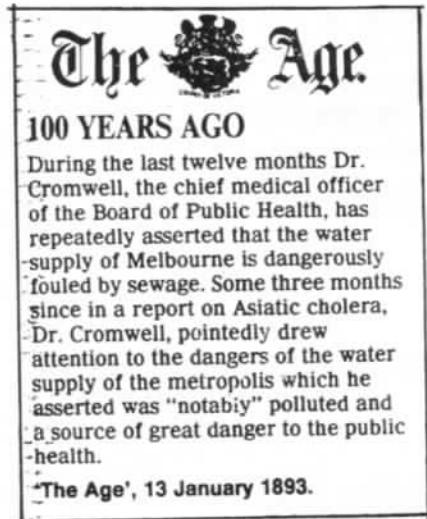
An Italian is described in the story but the description is not a positive one:

*... in the centre of the room was a round deal table, upon which stood a guttering tallow candle, which but faintly illuminated the scene, and a half empty bottle of Schnapps, with a broken cap beside it ... in front sat an old woman with a pack of cards spread out before her, and from which she had evidently been telling the fortune of a villainous looking young man ... he was dressed in a greasy brown velvet coat, much patched, and a black wide -a- wake hat, which was pulled down over his eyes. He looked like one of those Italians who retail ice-cream on the street, or carry round organs with monkeys on them, and his expression was so menacing and scowling.<sup>18</sup> It seems that it is not just post war migrants that have suffered from stereotyping.*

Even in the 1920s 'Little Lon' was not completely safe. Mr Jack Murphy, an employee of the Carlo Bracchi ice cream factory, was set upon in an alley off Burton Street, and had his eye kicked out, the thieves ending up with only one shilling. Interviews with people who lived in the area from the 1920s to 1940s balance this image of the area with many warm memories and friendships. Although the housing was small and cramped, one resident recalls that the backyard was ample and had a large fig tree growing in it. Much is made of the prostitutes who lived in the area, most had moved out by the 1930s but a few remained until the war. In

1941 Mary 'Picford' was still on the East side of Cumberland Place and 'Lady Mary Doody' was still on the corner of 'Little Lon' and Burton Street. The area was notorious as Melbourne's 'Red Light' district but this was just one dimension to the character of 'Little Lon'. Residents were aware of these activities but did not see it as pervasive.

For many people the area was home and many of the problems associated with it were problems of the times. When interviewed in the late 1940s, Tess and Mary Hayes, owners of the timber cottage in Cumberland Place, said: "This area used to have a bad name ... some of these streets were not pleasant; but everyone has always been kind to us. No one ever molested us, or made us feel afraid". Melbourne has grown and changed and a suburban sprawl has developed which has brought with it its own problems.



<sup>6</sup> N. Abjorenson, *The Age*, 1 June 1990.

<sup>7</sup> Source of Statistics: V.H. Arnold, *Yearbook 1973 Centenary Edition*, No. 87, CBCS Victorian Office, Melbourne, 1973.

<sup>8</sup> *Progress Report Royal Commission on Sanitary Conditions of Melbourne, 1889*, Victorian Parliamentary Papers, 1989, Vol. 11, ppv 111-xv.

<sup>9</sup> R. E. N. Twopenny, *Townlife in Australia*, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Grant & Serle, *The Melbourne Scene, 1803-1956*, Hale & Ironmonger, p 187.

<sup>11</sup> I am indebted to G. E. Donato & C. A. Bracchi for their recollections.

<sup>12</sup> R. Broome, *The Victorians: Arriving*, Fairfax Syme, 1984.

<sup>13</sup> A report to the Chief Commissioner of Police, August 1888. Public Records of Laverton, Victoria. (A copy of this report and others can be viewed at the Italian Historical Society.

<sup>14</sup> *The Age*, 13 April 1994, p 5.

<sup>15</sup> *The Age*, 13 April 1994, p 5.

<sup>16</sup> G. Dunstan et al. (Ed), *Outcasts of Melbourne*, Allen & Unwin, 1985.

<sup>17</sup> Fergus Hume, *Mystery of Hansom Cab*, Hogarth Press, 1985. pp 102-103.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p 102.

I am indebted to A. May for giving me the documents concerning Carlo Bracchi and the M.C.C. Health Department.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> N. Abjorenson, "The city's wicked past", *The Age*, Tuesday 5 June 1990.

<sup>2</sup> Recollections of M. Owen and G. Donato, interview with M. Donato 4 September 1992.

<sup>3</sup> A. J. Ryan in association with K. C. Edmonds, *Historical and architectural development of the Commonwealth Centre Site*, Department of Administrative Services, 1979, pp 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> *The Age*, 21 January 1993.

<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to Bette Leone Maiuto for compiling this source and making it available.