

Building blocks of settlement: Italians in the Riverland, South Australia

By Sara King and Desmond O'Connor

The Riverland region is situated approximately 200 km. north-east of Adelaide and consists of a strip of land on either side of the River Murray from the South Australian-Victorian border westwards to the town of Morgan. Covering more than 20,000 sq. km., it encompasses the seven local government areas of Barmera, Berri, Loxton, Morgan, Paringa, Renmark and Waikerie.¹ The region was first identified as an area of primary production in 1887 when two Canadian brothers, George and William Chaffey, were granted a licence to occupy 101,700 hectares of land at Renmark in order to establish an irrigated horticultural scheme. By 1900 a prosperous settlement had developed in the area for the production of vines and fruit, and during the 1890s Depression other 'village settlements' were established down river by the South Australian Government to provide work for the city-based unemployed.² During the years between the foundation of the villages and the First World War there was intense settlement, especially around Waikerie, Loxton, Berri and Barmera, as the area was opened up and increased in value.³

After World War 1, the SA Government made available new irrigation blocks at Renmark and other localities in the Riverland area to assist the resettlement of more than a thousand returned soldiers. A similar scheme operated in New South Wales, where returned servicemen were offered blocks in Leeton and Griffith, in the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area.⁴ The period after World War 2 saw further settlement of returned soldiers on fruit blocks in the Riverland and new irrigation areas were developed to cater for this growth. In the 1950s and 1960s large numbers of migrants, especially Greeks and Italians, settled in the area, often buying the blocks of retiring first world war soldier-settlers.⁵ Today the Riverland is among South Australia's strongest regional economies. The wine industry is leading the way in this economic boom, with the Riverland now contributing half of SA's wine grape production, equating to more than one quarter of Australia's total production. Concurrently, citrus exports have increased markedly, as has the export of fresh stone fruit and vegetables.⁶

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According to the 2001 census, 252 persons in the Riverland were born in Italy and 1,025 claimed to have Italian ancestry, amounting to 2.5 percent of the population. Renmark has the highest Italy-born population (79), followed by Loxton-Waikerie (70), Berri (32) and Barmera (29). The largest concentration of people with Italian ancestry is in Renmark (266).

The South Australian census of 1891 shows that four Italy-born persons – probably the one family, since they consisted of two adults, one male and one female, and two children – were present in the county of ‘Hamley’, which included newly-established Renmark. Subsequent censuses do not record their presence, so they might have been itinerants who at the time were journeying along the Murray from Mildura. It is only in the census of 1933 that the presence of Italians is recorded as a clearly identifiable settlement group in the area. The fact that there was an increase from no Italians in the Riverland at the time of the 1921 census to a total of 69 in 1933 (Waikerie 38, Berri 20, Loxton 9, Renmark 2) not only mirrors the large increase in the number of Italian settlers in SA in the late 1920s (from just 344 in 1921 to 1,489 in 1933) but is also an indication of the harsh reality of the Depression, which compelled 55% of SA’s Italians to look for work in rural areas of the State.⁷ The newly-arrived Italians wandered South Australia taking on horticultural work, mining, fishing and wood-cutting. In the Riverland they found employment as grape pickers, farmhands on fruit blocks, labourers with the SA Waterworks Department and as road construction workers for Waikerie contractors Tiller and Jacobs.⁸ When work was scarce they went to Queensland to cut cane or laboured on the land in the Adelaide Hills where, for example, the future SA Premier Thomas Playford was known to employ Italians in his cherry orchard. Those who wished to settle on a block in the Riverland were sometimes told that they were not wanted: Giuseppe Nussio and Giulio Brazzalotto, two Trevisani who obtained approval in 1930 to lease a Riverland property from a soldier settler, encountered the prejudices of the Returned Sailors and Soldiers Imperial League and of some Labour parliamentarians who in State parliament denounced the transfer of the land to Southern Europeans who were not ‘of pure white blood’.⁹

Two Italians who left Waikerie in the 1930s before eventually returning to settle there were Joe De Vito and Nicola Ricciuto. In 1937 they went to Melbourne where they entered into a partnership selling fruit and vegetables from a shop in Richmond. The business was successful but the outbreak of a polio epidemic forced them to close their shop and return to Adelaide.¹⁰ Before the outbreak of the war Joe De Vito returned to Waikerie where he and his wife Iolanda established a fruit growing and packing business. Despite the close proximity of Loveday internment camp just outside of Barmera, the Italians in the area were not interned during the war, although they were continually monitored. Mrs De Vito remembers her fear when the military came to their house, confiscated their radio and gun, and required them to report to the police station every week. As part of the war effort they sold their pumpkins and oranges to the army.¹¹

In the 1950s the new wave of post-war Italians often travelled to the Riverland for temporary work, stopping only for the vintage or for the fruit picking season in a calendar of profitable year-round seasonal work that took them as far away as the cane fields of northern Queensland or to Victoria for asparagus cutting and tobacco growing. In South Australia groups of Italians made up teams of pea-pickers and earned good money harvesting crops in Port Pirie, Port Germein, Noarlunga, Myponga and Goolwa. Those who were attracted back to the Riverland used the capital earned from seasonal work to buy their own properties, often relatively cheaply, from ex-soldiers, as had happened in Gippsland where a number of Veneti bought farms at low cost from soldiers who had been given land under the Closer Settlement Scheme.¹²

Chain migration in the post-war years has seen the settlement of several village groups. In Renmark there is a long chain of families and other *paesani* from the town of Rosarno in the province of Reggio Calabria whose first links with the Riverland can be traced back to February 1952 when eight Italians from Rosarno, a short time after their arrival together in Melbourne on the 'Hellenic Prince', were sent from Bonegilla to pick fruit in Renmark.¹³ Although they subsequently travelled to other parts of Australia to work, this first impression of Renmark remained with them, as a place not unlike their home town in Calabria on

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account of the climate and the kind of agricultural work available, citrus cultivation, with which they were already very familiar. Eventually some of these eight returned to Renmark with enough money to purchase a fruit block. One ended up sponsoring his whole family, his parents and twelve brothers and sisters, and later others from Rosarno followed. Today they are a close-knit family community, such that the second generation members too have very often chosen a marriage partner from among the group.

What is noteworthy in this migration pattern is that for many Italians who arrived as assisted migrants in early 1952 the Riverland and Mildura were the first horticultural and farming communities that they experienced in Australia, and it was a purely fortuitous encounter, which depended on the availability of seasonal work at a time when Australia was beginning to enter a recession. The Commonwealth Employment Service officers in Bonegilla knew full well that fruit picking was a temporary stop-gap measure that aimed to reduce the numbers that were building up in the migrant camp and to give the impression that employment opportunities were available.¹⁴ The hundreds of Italians who arrived on the 'Hellenic Prince' on 24 January 1952 found that, as assisted migrants, they had no choice but to accept the seasonal work on offer in the Riverland and elsewhere. From this one ship alone a total of 387 Italians were placed in the 'River Districts' of South Australia.¹⁵ The resulting large numbers of Italians on the land at that time prompted Melbourne consul Luca Dainelli to go to the Riverland and Mildura to see the situation for himself. In his report to Rome in March 1952 he listed the districts where Italians were then engaged in seasonal work, and their numbers: Waikerie 19; Barmera 188; Berri 189; Renmark 189; Mildura 450.¹⁶ Keen to show Rome that the new Assisted Migration Agreement was a success, Dainelli spoke in glowing terms of the working conditions, the mutual respect shown by employers and employees, and the 'very satisfactory' rate of pay of between nine and thirteen pounds per week awarded the pickers. In his report to Rome a day later he was more forthright in expressing his concern for the employment prospects of the Italians at the end of the harvest and for their inevitable 'despondency and demoralisation' when future individual work placements might not be forthcoming.¹⁷

The Italians, however, were willing to travel and take on any job that was offered. Bruno Romeo, from Reggio Calabria, was another of those who arrived on the 'Hellenic Prince' and was sent first to Bonegilla and then to Barmera in February 1952. At the end of the vintage he went to Queensland to cut cane, then returned to the Riverland to pick grapes again, after which he spent six months in Victoria hunting rabbits, building fences and doing odd jobs on farms. He too believed that the Riverland climate reminded him of Calabria, whereas Queensland, he thought, was too hot and Victoria too wet.¹⁸ For six years he worked on a fruit block in Winkie, between Barmera and Berri, until, in 1959, he had saved enough money to buy his first block at Lyrup, east of Berri, where he grew stone fruits and grapes. Other Italians later settled in Lyrup and gradually created another very close community, this time of migrants from the towns of Cervaro and Cassino in the province of Frosinone (Lazio): the Minchella, Recchia, Di Cerbo, Curtis, Franchitto and Valente families. These and other Italians from Cervaro had been the most successful itinerant pea-pickers of the 1950s and their wanderings throughout South Australia as a micro community in those years have resulted in the establishment of a broad network of relatives and *paesani* who eventually chose to settle down some in Lyrup and some in towns as far apart as Murray Bridge, Myponga and McLaren Vale.

Arguably the most well-known Italian names in Waikerie are the Della Zoppa, De Vito and Ricciuto families. Giovanni Della Zoppa arrived in Port Adelaide in 1927 from Cercino in the province of Sondrio (Lombardy) and was joined by his brother Domenico a year later. After doing some wood cutting in the Adelaide hills, they moved to Waikerie where they found labouring work on the roads and then on local blocks. In 1934 Giovanni was joined by his wife Domenica Bigioli and their two sons Arno (9) and Nilo (7). Their first home was a Nissen hut with bags, painted white with lime, on the floor and ceiling. In 1939 the two brothers and their families moved to Queensland to the cane fields but when war broke out, fearful of being interned, Giovanni returned with his family to Waikerie where he obtained orchard work. After the war Giovanni, Domenico, Arno and other relatives reunited and bought land close to one another in Waikerie and grew citrus and stone fruit. Today the Della

Zoppa families own thousands of acres in the district and have diversified into dairying, sheep farming and vegetables growing.

Giosuè (Joe) De Vito also landed in Adelaide in 1927. Born in Tufo (province of Avellino, Campania) he arrived as an unaccompanied sixteen-year-old and met up with his father Cosmo (born 1886) who had arrived in Australia several years before and was at the time working for a Mr Stokes in Waikerie. After a short time as a farm labourer on the outskirts of Adelaide Joe too moved to Waikerie where he managed to find employment on the fruit block of a local land owner, George Fulwood.¹⁹ In November 1931, during the Depression, Cosmo De Vito decided to return to Italy, but his son Joe stayed on in Waikerie. Five years later Joe paid a brief visit home to marry Iolanda Lepore from nearby Prata di Principato Ultra (Avellino). The fruit growing and packing business that Joe began to develop in Waikerie in the late 1930s expanded in the post-war years to include a major transport service. While bringing up six children Joe and Iolanda became active in the local community, raising funds for various charities, the local Catholic church and the Waikerie Italian Club.²⁰ Following Joe's death in 1979 the family's large business interests have been managed by sons Cosmo and Tony.

Equally well-known in Waikerie is the Ricciuto family. The earliest settler Nicola Ricciuto, like Giovanni Della Zoppa and Joe De Vito, also arrived in Adelaide in 1927 and like Joe De Vito he originated from Campania. Nicola, from Fragneto Monforte (province of Benevento), was 19 when he landed in South Australia and began picking peas at Noarlunga south of Adelaide.²¹ He took on other labouring jobs clearing scrub and picking fruit in the Adelaide hills and subsequently met Joe De Vito who convinced him to go to Waikerie to pick grapes during the vintage. Later, when Nicola heard that there was good money to be made cutting cane in Queensland, he travelled to the cane fields where on piece work he was able to earn as much as three pounds a day. After returning to Adelaide he left for a brief visit to Italy where he married Iolanda De Vito's sister, Carmelina Lepore. Joining up with Joe and Iolanda De Vito, in 1937 Nicola and Carmelina embarked on their short-lived business venture as greengrocers in Richmond, Victoria. Once more Nicola turned to seasonal work in

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South Australia to earn a living and now to support his wife and young family. It was only in 1948 that he was able to afford his first block of land, at Ramco, a small settlement just outside of Waikerie. It was a rundown block that nobody wanted but through hard work Nicola made it a successful enterprise, which enabled him in subsequent years to purchase more land and to earn the respect of the local community as a successful horticulturist.²² In the 1980s Nicola handed over the running of the business to his son Murray, who is the father of Adelaide Crows footballer and 2003 Brownlow Medal winner Mark Ricciuto. When Nicola died, aged 93, in 2001, Mark gave one of the eulogies, which might well serve as a testimonial to many Italian migrant grandparents:

‘Looking back at it now, Nonno taught us the most important parts of life. He taught us about respect [...]. He taught us to have a high work ethic [...]. Strength is something Nonno prided himself on. [...] Nonno taught us to be generous [...]. He taught us to have a good sense of humour. [...] Nonno was a unique man. He was a man who at the age of 19 had the courage to leave his homeland. A man who was prepared to work day and night to provide for his family. A man who was always looking to give not to take. Nonno has been the perfect role model for us all’.²³

Most of the first-generation Italians who settled in the Riverland came from an agricultural background in Italy. They either had had small mixed farms that were owned and run by the family or they had been share-farmers or farm labourers. Not having English language skills meant that they had little choice in the kind of employment available to them in Australia. Many chose the land as opposed to factory work because of a strong desire to be away from the city. As difficult as rural life could become, there was always an ingrained love of the land and of outdoor work. City living for these settlers was never seen as a satisfactory or satisfying alternative. At the same time, many can recall the immediate hardship that they experienced when they arrived in Australia. In Italy they may not have had any money but they did have a roof over their heads and the support of their extended family nearby. By contrast, in the initial phase of their settlement in Australia often the kind of work that they followed meant that they had to live where they could, in the pickers’ quarters, in sheds without floors, without any electricity, heating or cooling. For some this was a grave step

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backwards from what they had known in Italy. Here in Australia they did have money in their pockets, but in the words of many they lived like animals – one family lived in the back of a truck, another moved into a rat-infested house, one woman was called a ‘princess’ because her husband had bought them a caravan in which to live. Often the work was demeaning and they were seen as peasant workers, dirty and ragged in their work clothes, even if they came from *famiglie benestanti* (well-to-do families) in their homeland. Their resolve - or ‘instinct’ as one informant said – to succeed and go home with some money, or at least to send money home to help the family, was what kept them going.

Many did not consider that they might live the rest of their lives in Australia. The move to Australia was seen as something that would help solve a short-term problem and as soon as they were able to return home they would. But things turned out quite differently. Some cite their greed, or the dogged determination to make as much money as possible, as something that kept them here: what was originally the attractiveness of earning some money became a desire to save enough money to buy perhaps a motorbike and then a car or more land ... so they would stay another year to reach that goal before returning home. In the meantime they would marry (loneliness was a very real by-product of the long working hours and geographic isolation), then inevitably children would come along and 40 years later they were still here. Over time some have been able to continue to buy land, expand their holdings and then eventually employ workers themselves. Such families now own very large holdings and enjoy economic security and, in addition, recognition and influence in the broader farming community.

Where previously the Italians in the Riverland were engaged in a wide variety of agricultural pursuits, from vegetable growing to wheat and sheep farming to viticulture and the production of citrus and stone fruit, in the last decade many have turned their blocks mainly into vineyards, because of the lucrative contracts that have been offered by the large wineries. Recently, however, prices have dropped, to the extent that those who have not increased their property size have found it difficult to compete. Some have been upset to see a lifetime’s hard work amount to very little, and this is especially the case when the second

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generation has not been involved. The parents themselves in some instances have encouraged their children to acquire a good education and find work away from the land where day to day life is less difficult and more financially secure. By contrast, those Italians who have handed on their property to the second and third generation have seen their holdings grow and have benefited from the expertise of the educated younger family members. Especially now that many new regulations have been introduced and the knowledge of new technologies is inevitably part of today's rural life, the second generation's language skills and schooling have helped to keep the family business in step with new developments. One informant in Waikerie said that without the help of their son they may not have continued on the land because today there are so many new things to learn.

Finally, what can be said of the 'Italian community' in the Riverland? It is, in fact, difficult to talk of an 'Italian community' because of the distance between individual towns, the lack of time to spend on socialising when work is a seven day a week commitment, and because of the diverse regional backgrounds of the Italians in the area. There are close-knit village and regional groups but attempts to form all-inclusive Italian Associations have not been particularly successful. In 1980 the Waikerie Italian Community Club was established in the nearby Ramco Institute building. The Club brought together local Italians who wished to play bocce and have a venue for dances and dinners. In 2001 it closed its doors due to lack of support. An Italian Club was also established for a time in Glossop but it too eventually closed when community enthusiasm for the initiative waned.

Ironically, if part of an Italian Club's function is to help maintain the language and culture of its members and strengthen their attachment to Italy, this function is now being performed in the Riverland by RAI International, whose satellite radio and television transmissions reach and are enjoyed by many of the ageing first generation Italians. Furthermore, given the present-day improved economic circumstances, some of the retired and semi-retired Riverland Italians now pay visits to their home town and, as tourists, to other parts of Italy that they had not seen before. It is also not uncommon for them to be visited here by friends and relatives from Italy. All of these avenues help them to be informed of happenings in their

birthplace, especially events of particular interest to them that affect rural Italy, such as the severe drought that occurred in Italy last year.

¹ Office of Local Government, Dept. of Immigration, Local Government and Ethnic Affairs, *Australian Regional Developments. 18. The Riverland Experience*, AGPS, Canberra, 1989, p. 1.

² Wilfred Prest (ed.), *The Wakefield Companion to South Australian History*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town, 2001, p. 299.

³ R.M. Gibbs, *A History of South Australia. From Colonial Days to the Present*, Peacock Publications, Blackwood SA, 1984, p. 148-9.

⁴ Tito Cecilia, *Un giardino nel deserto*, Centro Studi Emigrazione, Rome, 1993, p. 25; Rina Huber, *From pasta to pavlova. A comparative study of Italian settlers in Sydney and Griffith*, University of Queensland Press, 1977, p. 56.

⁵ Office of Local Government, Dept. of Immigration, Local Government and Ethnic Affairs, *Australian Regional Developments. 18. The Riverland Experience*, p. 1. For a study of Italians and Greeks in Renmark see Graeme Hugo, 'Post-war settlement of Southern Europeans in Australian rural areas: the case of Renmark, South Australia', *Australian Geographical Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2, October 1975, p. 169-81.

⁶ The Riverland Development Corporation, *Strategic Directions for the Riverland of SA*, Berri, 2002.

⁷ Graeme Hugo, 'Patterns and Processes of Italian Settlement in South Australia' in Desmond O'Connor and Antonio Comin, *Proceedings of the First Conference on the Impact of Italians in South Australia*, Italian Congress & Italian Discipline, The Flinders University of South Australia, 1993, p. 42.

⁸ Jean M. Nunn, *History of Waikerie. Gateway to the Riverland*, The Waikerie Historical Society, Waikerie 1994, p. 261.

⁹ Desmond O'Connor. *No need to be afraid. Italian settlers in South Australia between 1839 and the second world war*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town SA, 1996, p. 97. Sadly, and surprisingly, even in the 1970s negative opinions were still being expressed in relation to the presence of Southern Europeans in the Riverland: 'The increasing number of Southern Europeans of peasant stock in the area could lead to a lowering of standards: they and their families are prepared to accept lower standards, and they are making little contribution to local community activities' (George Randall Woolmer, *The Barmera Story. A History of Barmera and District*, Barmera SA, Barmera Golden Jubilee Committee, 1973, p. 82).

¹⁰ *The River News*, 3 September 1986, p. 5.

¹¹ Interview with Rita and Iolanda De Vito, Waikerie, 11 Nov. 2003, conducted by Sara King.

¹² Anna Davine, 'Pioneer Veneti in Gippsland and their role in the development of an Italian farming community', *Italian Historical Society Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 2, July-December 2002, pp. 20 and 25. Closer Settlement was a policy of settling land closely, so that in a normal season a holding was just large enough to support a family comfortably. See Wilfred Prest (ed.), *The Wakefield Companion to South Australian History*, p. 111.

¹³ The eight were: Carmelo Albanese, Domenico Michele Albanese, Domenico Salvatore Albanese, Domenico Arruzzolo, Salvatore Brilli, Pasquale Catalano, Pasquale Ferraro and Pasquale La Rosa.

¹⁴ For the history of Bonegilla see Glenda Sluga, *Bonegilla: A place of no hope*, History Dept., The University of Melbourne, 1988.

¹⁵ Information obtained from database compiled by Desmond O'Connor of 38,000 Italians in South Australia 1946-1971, National Archives of Australia Adelaide Office, Aliens Registration Cards, D488 Boxes 1-3.

¹⁶ Memorandum from Luca Dainelli, Italian Consulate, Melbourne, to Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Rome, 3 March 1952 (Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Ministero del Lavoro e della Previdenza Sociale, Busta 473).

¹⁷ Ibid., Dainelli to MAE, Melbourne, 4 March 1952.

¹⁸ Interview with Bruno Romeo conducted by Sara King, Lyrup, 11 July 2003.

¹⁹ 'Joe De Vito 1.1.11 - 29.5.79', *The River News*, 14 June 1979, p. 8.

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²⁰ 'Iolanda celebrates 60 years in Australia', *The River News*, 11 April 1996, p. 8.

²¹ 'September 1 marks historic occasion for Nick Ricciuto', *The River News*, 3 September 1986, p. 5.

²² Ibid.

²³ Text of eulogy kindly supplied to Sara King by Carolyn Ricciuto.