

## Via Venetia! Memories of Italian Life in Kilcunda remembered by Guerro & Mary Mabilia and Irma Coldabella Storti, compiled by C. Landon

A number of Italian people who settled in Kilcunda in the 1920's all came from way up north in the mountains bordering on Austria, many of them from the same the same small town of Racuaro. They were the Mabilias, the Stortis, the Caldebellas, Morescos and others, many of them cousins, and some others who lived in Wonthaggi like the Cailes.

Guerro Mabilia was one of the early ones to come. He was only two years old when he came out on the ship *Re d'Italia* in 1926 with his mother and brother to join his father who had come out "with the rest of [the men]" earlier. The little family went to Adelaide first where Guerro's father was waiting for them. They were there maybe two or three years when the father decided to join his brother in Wonthaggi and work in the mines.

"My father stopped [in Kilcunda] instead of working in Wonthaggi because he got a job straightaway, and worked here all his life. My brothers and I followed him into the mine. So I started in on the mining here. And stopped here, too."

"There were lots of Italians here and they all worked in the mine," says Guerro's wife, Mary Lunardi, who was born in Wonthaggi, but whose father came out 'with the rest of them' just like Guerro's father did. "Well, that's all they knew how to do."

"Did I bloody work in the mine?" interrupts Guerro. "I started at the brace at the Kilcunda mine when I was fourteen. We weren't allowed down the mine until we were seventeen. I worked here all my life. Oh, it was hard work! We drilled with the hand drill. You're working all the time. The seam itself was about as high and wide as the table here. You had to take the coal out and you got so far and then you had to blow out some more so the ponies could keep

going. Then we had to lay rails for the skips. The skips had to be pulled in right to where the two or sometimes three men were working on the coal. As you went in, the nearer you got to the team of men who were working on the board you spoke to the pony. You'd say, whoa... Every time you're down in the mine you test the sound. You tap the roof and listen to the sound of the thud. If it's hollow it's dangerous and if it's solid it's safe and you can keep going. We put the props up under the hollow sound. The pit ponies... if ever there was going to be a bad fall, the horse knows. He stops. He won't go unless you get in front of him and pull him. He knows."

Guerro and Mary now live on a hill with panoramic views overlooking the Bass Straight one block away from where he grew up. The Mabilia's original family home was on a block of land backing onto a gully where many of the Italians lived back in the twenties and thirties.

"They all had little huts," explained Guerro.

"Lots of little huts around here where, when we came here, single men had their huts. Down the bottom here. In the gully. They were on crown land, just huts they'd make themselves, one room with a bed and table and a fireplace. Some of them came up to Mum's for food."

Irma Coldebella Storti, who came to be with her father in 1931 when she was three, remembers the gully: "Even though we lived in nothing more than shacks really when we first came to Kilcunda, we didn't want for anything. We had it all. We were happy. We came to a community and made do, but it was wonderful. My father came here before us and then he came back to Italy and he got married and then I came along and then..."



“My father had this little old house here that they used to find this drift wood along the sea shore and patch up the little sheds one piece on top of the other and, anyway, by the time he finished we had a comfortable sort of a house with different rooms for different people more or less and we were happy really. There were about four rooms, and a kitchen. We had a main light – a big Aladdin lamp, really big one that gave lots of light, gas or kerosene lamp – in the kitchen and candles for the bedrooms. No electricity. And Mum used to say, ‘Oh, I am happy with that. When you go to bed you don’t need a light.’”

The northern Italians, or *Veneti*, as Irma calls them, came here from a subsistence existence where they were used to working day and night on steep stony slopes just to put food on the table. So the gully they called *Via Venetia* in Kilcunda was a step up and they created a true Italian community there.

“We called it *Via Venetia*,” says Irma, “because in the winter when there was a big rain, the water down there came right up to our door step.

“You wouldn’t hear a word of English where we lived. And they would talk so loud. Such big noise. It’s just their way of living. Let’s see. How many families lived there? There would have been about ten houses all occupied. They all had children. And then there were the boarders. And we were in and out of each other’s

houses. We had nothing else to entertain us so we would sit outside around the fire in a big group and have a chat and tell stories and sing. And then we also had a cow – everyone had cows – and we used to make this cheese and we used to do it in groups. Like, say, it was my mother’s turn to do it for a week, so all the milk would go there and she’d do it, and maybe the week after it was at someone else’s house.”

Women made the cheese and pasta and *polenta*, but the men would make the wine and grappa and kill the pig. From the pig would come the *supressa* and *salami*.

“The men would kill the pig and hang it up high. We would go watch. It was just nothing. We were used to it. We would only do it in the winter months: June/ July. We would rear the piglet into a pig and then it would be time to kill it. You partnership this pig with someone and then it comes time to kill it. The two families would get together to do it. Of course, friends would come and help. So, it was all together. There’d be wine, and then the *polenta*. It would be like a festival sort of thing. Always a big social event. Pig killing meant a get together. And always a bit of a feast. We did the work and then the food would be payback. And the kids would always be there and we would have the time of our lives along with the others. And the singing. There was always singing. That’s all gone now.”

But there are a lot more stories...



Members of the Ballara and Cato families with Maria Fazio present. Maria Fazio, Cristina Miano, holding baby, Reg. Corrado and Maria Mollino, (Cristina Miano) on a country outing. Woodliff, Victoria, 1928.

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