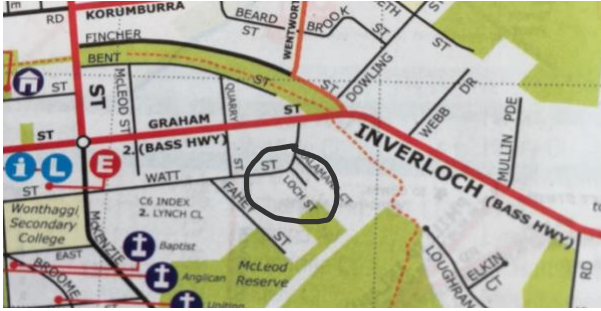


PLOD ESSAY: Ciconte Close

Changing the name of a street in Wonthaggi – or anywhere – is quite a process. On the 6th February 2020, the Bass Coast Shire Place Naming Committee met to consider Road Naming, specifically re-naming the short southern section of Loch Street, in Wonthaggi.

A year earlier, in February 2019, submissions for a new name had been called for, and in March Irene



Williams, the Wonthaggi & District Historical Society Secretary, wrote a letter on behalf of the society requesting that the street in question be renamed either *Ciconte Close* or *-Lane* or *-Place*. Five months after that, in September 2019, the Naming Committee accepted the proposal, but had to send out letters to all interested parties asking for feedback on those possible names. They also had to seek advice from Geographic Names Victoria. It was a month before these letters went out, and one week later, a majority of Committee members met again and voted in favour of the name *Ciconte Close*, but that wasn't the end of it.

An advertisement was placed in the *Sentinel Times* in November 2019 advising of the agreed name change and calling for any other submissions. A non-compliant submission was received, and the customer was invited to submit another suggestion should they wish, but no further correspondence was received. Finally, *Ciconte Close* was registered with GNV in December 2019 and then in February 2020 further information was received from the Property Department. Finally, in May 2020, an article in the *Sentinel Times* announced the fact that Loch Street was to be re-named *Ciconte Close* and that the signpost would be up soon. Soon passers-by began to notice the new name, *Ciconte Close*, at the new round-about at the end of Watt Street.

Irene Williams was chuffed. In the 1970s when she was teaching at

the Wonthaggi Tech, Irene met Gino Ciconte in her Year 7 class. Gino, almost every day, had an excuse for why his homework wasn't done: "I had to help my Dad, Mrs Williams," he'd say.

Irene soon found out that although Gino's father had worked in the mine full-time from 1950, after it closed in 1968, he took up casual work with farmers around Wonthaggi, and he expanded his garden in his back yard as well as on an acre of crown land behind his house and down a rather steep hill, which he had rented from the council for \$11 a year. Because she was curious about Mr Ciconte's garden, Irene thought she would drop in and sample some of the produce, which she found was superior. Immediately, she became a regular shopper there. She would call out, "I'm off to Ciconte's!" when leaving home to go there. She never said, "I'm going to Loch Street."

"You went to the back of the house where Mr Ciconte had an open shed," she recalls, "and where there were vegies that he grew that you could buy. The benches full of produce were at the side. Sometimes no one was there, but I often saw him walking up from the crown land, and then we invariably had a good chat. If he didn't come up, you just put the money you owed for what you wanted to buy in a box on the counter. People always put their money in, never took any out. No one ever cheated. In those days, in the 70s, people were honest with each other."

Mr and Mrs Ciconte – Domenico and Fiorina, or Raffaella as her family called her – had been creating and tending the garden since 1954. Raffaella came to Wonthaggi in 1952 with her three daughters to join Domenico, who had come 18 months earlier to find a job and a place for his family



Domenico Ciconte in his glasshouse

to live. [She had also come to re-join her mother and father, but more about that later.] Lina, the middle child, says she was five when she came out with her mother. Her older sister, Maria, was nine and her little sister was about eighteen months. Later two brothers were added to the family, one of which was Gino. Lina remembers that they lived in a commission house on Beard Street at first, which was better than any place they had ever lived in before: brand new, freshly painted with electricity and running water and heating.

“But,” she said, “my parents’ dream was to buy their own land where they could grow their own food, milk their own cow, have their own chickens and be self-sufficient. They had been brought up that way in Italy. So, very soon they found the house on Loch Street. It was an old but beautiful house, with a bay window, and long veranda. They bought the house. It had some sheds, barns and land. It didn’t matter to them how old the house was as long as it had the land.”

Many Italian migrants from families especially in Calabria had never owned any land of their own. The way it had worked in the Province of Catanzaro where Dom was born and where his family had lived for generations was that the Padroni owned the land that people like Dom’s father lived on and worked in exchange for a large percentage of everything they grew. As Lina explained, “If you had two pigs one was for you and one for the Padroni. Same with cows, eggs, chooks, sheep – milk the sheep made, cheese.” It had been that way since the Middle Ages. To own land had forever been an impossible dream for many Italians. When migrants came to Wonthaggi, it was first of all, to escape abject poverty between and after the wars and it was usually to work in the mine in order to make enough money to acquire their own land.

“In Calabria, we had a good climate for growing vegetables and fruit. Same as in Wonthaggi. We made lots of tomato sauce, the passata,” Lina says, “With the pig we never wasted anything. Once we had slaughtered it and butchered it, the only thing left of it was the stripped bones for the dogs. We made lard for cooking that would have lasted all year. We made the salami, the prosciutto, the pancetta, sausage... They made a kind of jelly that they cooked the trotters in and let it set. My parents did it every year until they got too old. We do it even now, but we don’t raise our own pigs anymore. We order the meat from the butcher for making the different delicacies and we hang it all down in our cellar or cantina in the basement. It’s still a family event making the passata, pickling the olives and vegetables, storing the eggs and potatoes. The grandkids come and help with the bottles... This happens all around the country and Australians have

learned how to do it and it is becoming a tradition in their families, too. I never made the cheese, but when my parents and grandparents were here, the cow produced milk and the milk became cheese. My mother used to be the cheesemaker. Putting up all the provisions for the year was a family, even a community, tradition with the Italian people in Wonthaggi.



Lina and her daughter making the sausage together

“When we were living in what is now Ciconte Close everybody would come together, all the friends and uncles and cousins and we would work and then have a giant feast. The Uncles were my father’s brothers who eventually followed him out to Australia, but that is another story. There was lots of food, lots of wine, lots of food. We girls had to help our mothers put the food on the table, bring out the coffee and the vino, lots of vino, lots of singing. Then they would go back to work. It lasted a whole weekend. Everybody was telling the others how to do things. ‘Don’t tie it like that, do it like this,’ especially with the salami where all the air had to be completely pressed out of the skin or the meat would spoil. So, the finished salami had to be firm. If Dad would see that one of the salamis was soft, he would tell his brothers off. We never made wine and no grappa, but Mr Marrotta made the best wine and grappa, so there was plenty for the weekend.”

Lina’s father, Dom, was born in 1917 in a small town called Soriano. He was the fourth of seven children, all boys... Maria Sacco, Lina’s older sister, tells the story of her father’s life in Italy to Sam Gatto, who wrote it up:

“Dom was not sent to school. He almost certainly helped his impoverished family working on the land from soon after he could walk. At the age of eight he was ‘apprenticed’, for want of a better word, to a local landowner or Padroni, to watch over his animals while they were grazing. The young ‘garzone’ was given food and lodging

and the family a small amount of farm produce for his work.

“One autumn day, some of the animals he was pasturing broke into another person’s farm and caused a lot of damage. The farmer’s wife reprimanded him and threatened that her husband would deal with him when he came back. The little boy, frightened that he would be beaten up, ran away. He did not go back to his home because he feared that his father would also punish him. He was about nine years of age when this happened.

“He slept rough that night. The next day he ran into some grape pickers, who were going to their next job, and attached himself to them. They took him with them, and he worked picking grapes and doing odd jobs for them. Children working in this way was not uncommon in the Calabria of the 1920s. When the grape picking season ended, Domenico was near Lamezia Terme. With money in his pockets, he went and bought some cigarettes, claiming they were for his father. While in the company of some older

boys he lit up and was seen by a lady on a mule, who told him off for smoking. She asked him who he belonged to, but he would not say. When he refused to say where he lived and where he was going, she took pity on him and told him to go with her. He went. The kindly lady had gone to visit her husband, who was in jail in Lamezia, and was now on her way home. Walking and riding on the mule she and the young boy arrived in Platania, near Conflenti.

“In the meantime, Domenico’s father had gone to look for him. When in Lamezia, exhausted he fell asleep in the Lamezia Terme railway station. He was rudely woken up by the carabinieri and arrested for not having his papers with him. In jail he learned of the whereabouts of his son, Domenico, from the lady’s husband. When Domenico’s father’s papers arrived and he was released, he immediately went to Platania to fetch his son. Domenico begged his father to allow him to remain with the family, who had been very kind to him and was willing to look after him. The father saw that his son would be looked after well and reluctantly agreed.

“Domenico became like one of the family and worked for them until he grew up, did military service (two years) and then was conscripted to fight in the Italian Army in World War II. He was wounded and went back home to recover.”



There Domenico met Raffaella Sacco. He fell in love – a love that never wavered for sixty years – and married her.

Raffaella’s father, Nicola Sacco, was also from Calabria, but it would be years before Domenico met him because he was in Australia and had been there without his family since 1924. Nicola Sacco had served in the Italian Army in the Great War. After the war he married Petronella, who gave birth to his two daughters, but the impoverishment in Italy was intolerable, so he left for Australia looking for a better life for himself, his wife and two daughters. He promised to send for them as soon as he could afford to.

When Nicola landed in Australia, he had no real idea where he would end up. At first, he went to Sydney, but he was encouraged to go to Wonthaggi where there was work in the State Coal Mine, which prosperous then, but it wasn’t long before the economy worsened, as it did all over the world and Nic Sacco found himself caught up in strikes and lay-offs, which meant there was no extra money and, anyway, it was no time to bring his wife to Australia from the other side of

the world. In the end, Nicola was not re-united with, Petronella, until after World War II, but the reunion was complicated. By this time, he and his wife were basically independent of each other and his daughters had grown up, married and started their own families. Petronella had been living with Raffaella’s family and when Nicola finally sent for her to join him in Australia, she wouldn’t agree to go unless Raffaella, Domenico and their three daughters would follow.

“In fact,” says Lina, “life in Calabria was so difficult then after the country had been decimated by the second war – no work, no money – and it was sensible to leave if you could. So, my grandmother was convinced to go to her husband. When she got to Wonthaggi, she set to work getting Raffaella – my mother – and all of us to come. She did all the paperwork. My father came on his own in 1950 to set things up for Mum to come in 1952 with us three girls. Many Italians came to Wonthaggi during the 1950s. I remember that when Dad got his car, he was continually being asked to drive to the docks in Melbourne to pick up this family or that one.”

When Domenic, who watched his wife and girls disembark at Station Peer in Melbourne, brought them to Wonthaggi, they were welcomed by Nicola and Petronella Sacco. Lina said, “Mum [Raffaella] recognised my grandmother who had come out only a couple of years earlier, but not her dad. Because

My grandfather had left for Italy when she was only two, when she saw him again, she didn't know her own father. It had been so many years since she had seen him, and he seemed like an old man. It was a shock, but a shock many migrant families have gone through."

Shock or no shock, Wonthaggi seemed a place of the family's dreams and the love affair with this town that began then has never diminished. Dom and Raf Ciconte were welcomed by the entire community. They knew everyone. Dom said his customers were the best people in the world, that you could trust them. Those customers of his were like family. Their garden – the Italian garden where you could get the best vegies became an institution in the town.

Dom and Raffaella lived at Loch Street until the very end. "As they got older," Lina says, "they downsized the market garden, but they still had the glass house, still grew tomatoes in the glass house right until the very end. The family tried to convince

them to move to a more manageable place, but Mum took me aside and said to me in Italian, of course, 'Look, we've got to tell you something. You're Dad and I, we don't want to look for another place. There is nothing better than here. This is the place we love, and we want to stay here.'"

Raffaella died in 2000 and Domenico, bereft, in 2007.

"After Mum passed away, my dad fell in a heap," said Lina. "Then he went downhill, but we kept him home until the very end. He would spend his time in the glasshouse not really working, but feeling he was doing something with his hands in soil. Right up until the very end."

The property at the end of what is now Ciconte Close has never been sold. It is still in the Ciconte family. The new name of their road honours an extraordinary family with a classic story that should not be forgotten.

-C.R.Landon with an addition by S. Gatto



Raffaella and Domenico Ciconte