

# Italian POWs and the local friendships they formed

FASSIFERN residents are assisting amateur historian Joanne Tapiolas in writing the history of a time during World War II when Italian prisoners of war worked on the district's farms.

The Italians were captured in the north African campaigns of 1940 and 1941 and were then shipped to a number of countries around the world for the duration of the war.

"The assistance of locals is integral to the project," Joanne said.

"I am most appreciative for the efforts of Christine Timmarsh from the Templin Historical Village. Christine has supported the research in many ways by making phone calls, sending letters, following leads and asking questions."

Joanne is Townsville based and the scope of her research covers ten prisoner of war centres in Queensland: Stanthorpe, Nambour, Gympie, Gayndah, Texas, Home Hill, Kenilworth, Kingaroy, Monto and Boonah.

"The search for the site of the Army Headquarters in Boonah highlights the importance of local knowledge," Joanne says.

"The National Archives offered up a site plan for Q10 Prisoner of War Control Centre Boonah but there were no street references."

Eric Behrendorff employed an Italian POW and put the next piece of the puzzle together saying that the centre was in the old

Railway Street and another piece of the puzzle emerged with the corner of the cordial factory in the photo. And Murray Maudsley from Bunburra also contributed his memories of the site.

"Local knowledge and word of mouth is pulling together the stories and memories of the district's residents and along the way, photos, letters and embroidery are brought to light 71 years later," Joanne says.

The first Italian POWs brought to the district were taken to farms in July 1944: Benedetto Ierna and Giuseppe Venturilli to the Kelly brothers and Vincenzo Manca and Oranzo Mazzotta to DG Horan.

In the next three days, POWs were delivered to the farms of ED Joyce, Moffat Brothers, FF Kerwin, JJ Dwyer, A Behrendorff, JW Evans, O Hill, H McGregor, TM Mc Grath, PF Dwyer and AE Henrichson.

Records indicate that at least 94 Italian POWs worked on 30 or more farms. They were withdrawn from the district on February 1, 1946.

Joanne continues: "The footprints of these Italians have been left in the memories of the farmers and the farmers' children."

"This collection of stories and reminiscences will be featured as part of my research and the project's website: [italianprisoner-sofwar.com](http://italianprisoner-sofwar.com)

"Oral histories are valuable



Looking down Railway Street from High Street with site of Q10 PWCC Boonah on left.

ber me still!

While the stories and history are part of a bigger project "Footprints of Italian Prisoners of War in Queensland 1943-1946", the collection of Fassifern stories and POW history will become a separate local history.

"There is no doubt many more stories to record and photos in personal collections that are yet to surface," Joanne adds. "Penny Wright from Frenches Creek has also become involved with this history providing valuable links with residents."

Penny passed on Laurie Dwyer's details and in a subsequent conversation, mention



The view down Railway Street, today.

to eat spaghetti properly with a Boonah for the Gaythorne Prisons

cordial factory. Dover and Sons now occupies this site on the corner of Railway Street and Yeates Avenue."

A chance meeting between Joanne and Graham Neilson outside Flavours Cafe, added another piece to this puzzle. Tucked away in Graham's office is a framed photo of Railway Street taken from Mt Carmel in the 1930's. And there in the photo's centre are the buildings: a row of sheds which was leased by the Army for use as a Prisoner of War Centre.

Christine Timmarsh uncovered another 'hidden' gem. A photo at the Templin Museum, taken from High Street, features



Domenico Masciulli and Francesco Pintabona Rosewood Christmas 1944

primary sources and need to be recorded as part of a district's history. While documents and government archives provide the 'black and white' versions of events, it is the personal stories that add the 'colour'."

Stories already featured on the website are: Eric Behrendorf's 'His Name was George', Judith Lane's (nee Rackley) 'Fa La Nina, Fa La Nanna', Michael Joyce's 'Grubbing Lantana', Pam Phillips' (nee Niebling) 'The Giovanni Izzo Story'.

Stories which will be featured in the future include: Laurie Dwyer's '... Don't Run Away', Carmel Peck's (nee Dwyer) 'Peter and Paul' and Ian Harsant's 'Do you remem-



Dwyer Family Photo 1945  
Back: JJ Dwyer, Margaret Dwyer, Des Dwyer, Grandma Kelly, Front: Laurie Dwyer, Pietro Romano, Carmel Dwyer, Michael Dwyer, Paolo De Propertis.

was made of one Italian POW, Benedetto Ierna who returned to the district post war. Joanne has since made contact with Berto's family in Brisbane and so another perspective emerges about the history of POWs in Queensland.

"What has been learnt about this time in the Fassiferni's history is that farmers and their families welcomed the Italian prisoners of war onto their farms and into their home," Joanne explains.

"Initially, the relationship was one of boss and worker, according to the terms and conditions of the scheme.

"In time, the Italians became part of the families and communities.

"The POWs taught locals how

twirl on a spoon. A schoolboy gave English lessons to one Italian. Gifts were crafted by the Italians such as sandals and coin pouches. POWs missing their bambini sang lullabies to babies and washed and plaited a little girl's hair. One farmer took the Italians on an 'illicit' trip to Brisbane while another took them to Christmas lunch in Rosewood.

"And Ron Niebling and Giuseppe Miraglia left their 'mark' in the district when they wrote their names in the concrete footings of a windmill at Moogerah.

"Not all placements were 'good' fits and these stories are also told."

While it is 71 years since the Italians boarded a train in



Researcher Joanne Tapiolas caught up with Ian and Coral Harsant of Warrill View for a chat about Francesco Pintabona.

oner of War & Internment Camp in Brisbane, memories have not faded over those years.

"Ian Harsant spent 50 years trying to find Frankie (Francesco Pintabona) and an embroidered cushion cover made by Frankie and the hut he lived in are reminders of his time at Warrill View. Carmel Peck told me that many people today do not have a knowledge of this history. But Laurie and I still talk about the potato cakes our Peter [Pietro Romano] cooked for us and how we used to race home from school on Canteen Truck days, because Peter and Paul always brought us a treat from the canteen. If I had to sum up my memories, it is that the Italians enriched our lives".