

REMEMBRANCE DAY 2017

Gympie families' fondness for the Italian men who worked on farms during WWII POWs left lasting impression

LOCAL residents are writing Queensland history by recording and sharing their memories of the Italian prisoners of war who worked on Gympie farms from 1944 to 1945.

The *Gympie Times* published an article August 12 (*If Only Photos Could Talk*) and since then, researcher Joanne Tapiolas has been taken on a walk back in time as local farming families share stories, mementos and photos of their Italian POWs.

What is clear, is that photos can talk.

Giving names to the people in a group photo taken in front of Bill Beattie's farm house at Calico Creek, has been a collaborative effort.

Leita Boswell (nee Beattie) identifies herself seated in the front row and her sister Merle being held in the back row. Leita remembers that one POW was a bit of a troublemaker and took to her father with a brush hook, and a bit of digging has not only turned up this man's name, Guglielmo De Vita, but identifies him as the man with the beard. Leita remembered the young boy as Wesley but it was Lynne Wilson who added his surname: Wigzell.

Lynne also identified Vern Wilson in the photo and one of the Italians on the Wilson's farm; Bernardino Patriarca.

The Italians at Vern Wilson's Calico Creek farm were very fond of children and Doug Wilson has letters from these men.

In one letter, Bernardino wrote on May 4, 1946, "...Glad to hear that your children have not forgotten us yet. You can't imagine how hard it is for us to leave this country without seeing your lovely children once again. Last night in my dream I was with your children to play to, but it was a dream only".

Doug says that they loved



GENTLE MEN: Italian Prisoners of War at Beattie's Calico Creek farm, Queensland. Standing back: hidden with hat Vernon Wilson. Standing centre: young girl in centre Merle Beattie, man with beard Guglielmo De Vita. Far right: Bernardino Patriarca. Sitting: young boy Wesley Wigzell, young girl Leita Beattie, far right Antonio Mezzapelle. Background: Beattie home. (Courtesy of State Library of Queensland, John Oxley Library) PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED

their spaghetti and that he ate so much during those times that he has never eaten it again.

Mooloo was also home to a number of POWs and Alex Miles remembers that, "nearly every Sunday all the Italian POWs from all the farms within walking distance (up to 5 miles away) would come to our farm. Marino was a barber in Italy and the Australian barbers gave them short back and sides haircut. They didn't like that so they came here. Marino cut hair all day; he charged them so many cigarettes for a haircut".

Alex Miles and Noela White (nee Wyllie) have keepsakes which tell of the everyday history about what the Italians did in their spare time.

Noela has one of the belts made from the cellophane wraps from cigarette packets and Alex the workings of a ring made from a florin.

Heading to Goomborian, Jim Buchanan's father Neil kept a farm diary at Red slopes offering a unique window into the past.

arrival: "March 7 1944. Spent half a day preparing Coogooloom [house] for reception of POWs... The new men are causing great confusion so far and no headway has been made in grasping their language. Hot fine day". Followed by, "March 8 1944. Boss & two new men chip most of new papaws near mangoes. Two men make fair impression, but are obviously very soft after years off work. Language difficulty partly overcome". And he wrote of their departure: "Jan 1 1946. New Year's Day but a sad day at Red slopes. Took the three POW to town and said goodbye. Farm is now badly understaffed with no prospects of further employees".

On the Knowles farm at Ross Creek, were two Italian sailors and Kathy Worth (nee Knowles) remembers her dad's stories: "Dad loved fishing and would take them to Tin Can Bay fishing with him but apparently they were not to leave the farm. They were frightened of fire flies as well. Dad said that when they saw fire flies for the first time they were

scared. They told Dad how they called into the night. "boss, boss, is that you boss".

Young boys at the time, Keith Buchanan remembers a little wartime ditty, "Come to Abyssinia will you come. Bring your ammunition and your gun. Mussolini will be there. Shooting bullets in the air. Come to Abyssinia will you come." while Barry Mason relates a common joke of the day, "How would one address tall inebriated Italians? Hi(gh) tiddy I-tyes!"

The Italian POWs were scattered throughout the Gympie district and every memory helps build a more comprehensive picture of daily farming life during wartime and the experiences of farmers and the POWs.

There are stories of illicit stills, POWs plastering the cracks in walls with newspaper to keep out creepy crawlers, a farmer being caught at a cafe with his POWs, a cricket match at the POW centre in Gympie, handmade kites, homemade pasta and too much pasta.

The red uniforms of the POWs and the Army canteen



GOODBYE TO REDSLOPES: January 1 1946 - Salvatore Scicchitani, Angelo Amante and Vincenzo Cannavo. (From the collection of Jim Buchanan). PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED



Tony Franco and Giovanni Itrace at Ross Creek via Gympie (from the collection of Kathy Worth [nee Knowles]). CONTRIBUTED

van with provisions of cigarettes, chocolates and items civilians didn't have access to are two prominent memories from those times.

Others who have contributed to this history are Dr Elaine Brown, Ian McConnachie and Beth Wilson (Gympie Library).

Joanne Tapiolas says that her walk back in time has opened up a new understanding of a scheme

which placed 1500 Italian POWs on Queensland farms.

These stories, photos and mementos also reinforces that the Italian POWs have not been forgotten. Memories and stories will be featured on the project's website: italianprisonersofwar.com and if you have any further information to share contact Joanne Tapiolas at joannetappy@gmail.com.