

Introduction

BY ADA (DE MUNARI) CHOAT

A generation has almost passed, that of the early Italian immigrants in the Innisfail area, beginning in 1895 and extending to about 1938 ie just before World War II.

In this book we have recorded the stories of a small number of those early Italians. This is not an exhaustive history of early Italians or early Innisfail, rather we hope to show how they fitted in and adapted to the society they found, how they contributed to Innisfail and the Johnstone Shire, and how they and their descendants benefited from such a momentous journey to such a different land, climate and culture.

Prior to European settlement, the Johnstone shire was home to the Ma:Mu people, comprising five clans, each with a distinct culture and legends, but having a common language.¹

European settlement in Innisfail dates from 1880 (H.G. Scheu a cedar-cutter and J.N. Stamp on his settlement Stockton, and T.H.Fitzgerald on his sugar plantation at Innisfail Estate), with Fitzgerald regarded as the founder of the sugar industry in the district and thus the township of Geraldton named in 1883 and renamed Innisfail in 1910.² Surrounding districts were quickly opened up for farming and timber-getting. Meanwhile the township(s) offered opportunities to merchants, prominent among whom were Chinese from the Palmer River Goldfields.

In 1884 Cristoforo (Christie) Palmerston Carandini, whose father was Italian, cut a track from Innisfail through to the tablelands beyond which became the Palmerston Highway and the Atherton Tablelands.³ However the history of Italians in Innisfail really begins with Basilio Dalla Vecchia. Basilio had arrived on the *Jumna*, a vessel chartered by the Queensland Government in 1891 to bring the Italian settlers selected by Townsville businessman Mr. C.V. Fraire, a naturalised Australian from Piedmont in Italy. Of the 335 on board 113 went to Macknade in the Herbert River district while 153 went to the Burdekin district and the remaining 69 to Bundaberg.⁴ From Macknade a group came north to Innisfail: first Basilio Dalla Vecchia and family, followed by Antonio Davanzo (married to Maria Dalla Vecchia) and later, Giusto Basso. Ignazio Pavan (married to Maddalena Dalla Vecchia) joined them still later. Another early arrival was Lorenzo Pensini, who bought land in the Goondi Mill area in 1895, although he did not live in the area until 1913.⁵

From then until the mid-thirties a steady stream of Italians arrived in the Johnstone Shire. Most of these immigrants were helped either by Basilio and his son Carlo (Charlie) or by Mr. Rizzo who owned a boarding house in town. Before 1924 Italians arriving in the Innisfail district had to disembark at Mourilyan Harbour then walk to Mourilyan to be put up for the night by a local farmer in his barracks. After 1924 with a rail service through to Cairns they would usually get off the train at the Innisfail station and spend the first night at Rizzo's boarding house. If not sponsored and supplied work by a relative they would then end up working for the Dalla Vecchias or being directed by them to a place where they could find work.

Most of these early Italians were escaping poverty and the early rise of Fascism. Some of them may have been war-weary after the 1914-1918 War. Some may simply have been adventurous travellers. For all these the end of open immigration to the USA. would have meant that they had to go either to South Africa, Argentina, or Australia, and many chose Australia. All of them were undoubtedly looking for a better life for themselves and their children and many wished to help their parents at home by remitting small amounts of money on a regular basis.

Common threads running through the stories are arriving virtually penniless, working extremely hard, saving to buy a farm or business as quickly as possible, the disbelief and shock at internment, and the eventual success of most. Whilst assimilating relatively quickly they also kept alive distinctive aspects of their culture such as language, music, and diet. They found many kind and tolerant Australians but unfortunately some prejudice as well. Those who worked on farms had difficulties because of the 75/25% British Employment Rule.

By the forties, many Italians owned farms or were self-employed businessmen, (eg builders (Campi, Romano), delicatessens (Saraceni, Oliveri, Magnanini), boarding houses (Rizzo, Brunello), grocers (Pensini, Lo Giudice), pharmacists (Torre, Lagana), butchers (Bandiera), a spaghetti factory (Danesi), bus service (Cali), sawmill (Romano), cabinet-maker (Gagno), dressmaker (Nunziatina Puccini) and doctors, including De Luca, Bianchi, Cargiulo, Piscitelli and Rigano. Grocers Sorbello, Lo Giudice, and Pensini and a baker (Rolesi) served the large Italian population of the Mourilyan area, while Mr. and Mrs Scuderi ran a milk-bar on one side of their house and an important shoe and saddle and bridle repair business on the other side. Mr Ferruccio Guerra ran the Italian Club. At the southern end of the shire, in the small town of Silkwood, well-known examples were Vadala's grocery store, Speziali's Bus service and Cartage, and the Maria Creek Brickworks (Tarditi Bros.). Today we have a vibrant community of different cultures in Innisfail and the Johnstone Shire, which has arisen naturally over the years and forms an harmonious whole in which Italians and their descendants have played a large role.

Unfortunately for reasons of space we could not include a story from every early Italian immigrant and hope that descendants of all Italians (and of other immigrants) will recognize in these stories elements of their own parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents lives. We hope that this volume will stimulate the publication of further immigrant's stories.

¹ Personal communication, Victor Maund, Innisfail.

² J.W. McRobbie, "Innisfail: It's History in Brief", Innisfail Centenary Celebrations Committee, 1973.

³ "Christie Palmerston". Eacham Historical Society, 1985. p 4. Also see Paul Savage. Christie Palmerston, Explorer. Records of North Queensland History No 2, James Cook University, 1989.

⁴ Galassi, Ferrando. "Sotto La Croce Del Sud – Under the Southern Cross: The Jumna Immigrants of 1891". Townsville, James Cook University, 1991, pp 75-116. Also see Ilma Martinuzzi O'Brien, "Italian Pioneers", *The Australian People: An Encyclopedia of the Nation, Its People and Their Origins*, General Editor Dr James Jupp, Angus and Robertson, 1988, second revised edition, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp 489-490.

⁵ Douglass, William A. *From Italy to Ingham: Italians in North Queensland*. Brisbane: Queensland University press, 1995.

A PICTORIAL HISTORY OF

Early Italian Settlement

IN THE INNISFAIL DISTRICT



THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Italian settlement in the Johnstone River district started to become important at the beginning of the twentieth century. The early settlers came from only a few specific parts of Italy, and the culture of the communities they formed was shaped by their different regional traditions. The first significant migration flows to the district were from the Veneto and Sicily, and they were soon joined by people from Piedmont, Lombardy and Friuli. Before long there was also a significant group from the Island of Elba and other parts of Tuscany.

During the 1920s the numbers of new settlers expanded greatly, and the Innisfail area became one of the major Italian-origin areas in Australia, with settlers from most parts of Italy.



Lorenzo Pensini, 1866 – 1950. The first recorded Italian farming activity was in the Goondi mill area, where Lorenzo Pensini with Giuseppe Bassanelli and Lorenzo Cocchetti leased land, although Pensini did not live in the district until some years later.

Photo courtesy of Iole Arici.



In Mourilyan the Dalla Vecchias were the first family of Italians, being settled before 1905. They were joined by other Venetians from Halifax who were Jumna pioneers, the Davanzo, Basso and Filippi families, and later the Pavans. Maria Dalla Vecchia, who married Antonio Davanzo, a fellow Jumna pioneer, is here photographed circa 1900 with her four daughters, from left Lucy (obscured), later married to Sam Arcidiacono, Matilda married to Marino Tarrone and then Giuseppe Solinas, Letizia who married Luigi Martinuzzi, and Chiara (partly obscured) who married Peter Martinuzzi.

Photo courtesy of Ilma Martinuzzi O'Brien family collection.



One of the first Sicilian cane cutting gangs in the north, photographed in 1907 near Gordonvale. Many of the cutters settled in the Innisfail area. Cutters are, standing: Giuseppe Riso, Pancrazio Pagano, Carmelo Di Blasi, Cateno Perrone, Buzzuro and cook unknown; Front row are: Salvatore Pagano, Salvatore Arcidiacono, Rocco Perrone. Photo courtesy of Pancrazio Rustano.



Settlers came from Friuli before World War I, among them Enrico Croatto on the right with other early cutters.

Photo courtesy of Rina Cali.



Cooking for the gang working on Gregorio Sciacca's and Mick La Spina's farm were sisters Emilia and Luigia Fremondi (later married to Luigi Pensini and Adolfo Lissa). Cutters were from left Salvatore Vasta, Angelo Spoto the ganger (who always wore a fob watch), Giovanni Lizzio, the farmer Gregorio Sciacca (without a cane knife) and his brother Giuseppe Sciacca.

Photo courtesy of Iole Arici and the Italian Historical Society.

BUILDING A COMMUNITY

In the early days community life was more centred around the smaller townships such as Mourilyan, Silkwood, Daradgee, South Johnstone or Mena Creek than it is today. Local venues were the school, the church once it was built, hotels and clubs such as the Italian Progressive Club in Mourilyan and the Mourilyan School of Arts and Paronella Park, to name only some. Among the regular events held were the Liverpool Creek Picnics, the Mourilyan sports and foot races, and various street parades over the years.



One significant early event was the visit to Innisfail in 1925 of the Italian aviator De Pinedo who landed his seaplane in the Johnstone River. This was one of the most photographed events of the time, as people came from miles around to see the wonder. Innisfail residents gather on the riverbank to welcome De Pinedo.

Photo courtesy of Alf Martinuzzi.



Some of the identities welcoming De Pinedo, from left Domenico Beccaris (partly obscured), Luigi Martinuzzi, Charlie Dalla Vecchia, Giuseppe Cantamessa of Ingham, Father Clancy, Captain Valli, Ferruccio Guerra, and Barbera.

Photo courtesy of Alf Martinuzzi.



The first Silkwood school, opened in 1916 on land provided by Giusto Basso, was destroyed in the 1918 cyclone. Among the first pupils were three Basso children.

Photo courtesy of Joey Kelly.



The 500 yards race at the Mourilyan Italian Club Sports on 17th April 1926. Mr Sam Pagano is in the foreground, judging the winners.

Photo courtesy of Elenora Micala.



The Italian Progressive Club in Mourilyan was the centre of many social activities over the years. In 1924 when this photo was taken, Sid Dalla Vecchia, who had a shop in Mourilyan, was the Secretary of the club.

Photo courtesy of Garrone and Renna families.

Mourilyan Catholic Church Building Fund

A DANCE

WILL BE HELD IN THE
MOURILYAN ITALIAN CLUB,
Saturday, 30th January, 1932

Good Floor. :: Good Music.

Tickets, 2s. 5d.

W. R. BOWEN, Hon. Secretary.

BALLO

Sara tenuto nel **MOURILYAN PROGRESSIVE CLUB,**
Sabato, 30 Gennaio, 1932
 In Honorio Della Proposta Chiesa Cattolica di Mourilyan.

BUONA MUSICA. :: BUONA SALA

Venite tutti a divertire persona sera

2s. 5d. TICKETE 2s. 5d.

W. R. BOWEN, Secretario.

"ADVOCATE" THE INNISFAIL FRONTIER

A flyer advertising a fundraising dance in 1932 for the building of the Mourilyan Catholic Church.

Photo courtesy of Ilma Martinuzzi O'Brien.



A festival in Innisfail in 1946 or 1947.

Photo courtesy of Anna and Ross Cali.



Procession passing the Innisfail Post Office on the occasion of the Gymkhana on 28 September, 1940.

Photo courtesy of Celest Benedetto.

To Town AND Back

Getting around was no easy matter when roads were few and mostly unmade, and the wet season turned creeks into torrents. Horse and cart was the usual means of transport, until the mill infrastructure of train tracks for hauling the cane had the additional benefit of the push-pull trolley for personal transport. The arrival of the motor car in the early 1920s coincided with growing prosperity, and before long cars were widespread. Soon they were supplemented with bicycles and buses. Substantial bridges ensured all weather crossings, with a notable exception being the ferry on the road to Flying Fish Point.

The number of cars appearing in family photo albums attests to both the popularity of the car and the prosperity of the district.



A crowd celebrating the first train to cross the bridge over the North Johnstone River.

Photo courtesy of Freda Mangano.



Mrs Ariotti and her two sons riding on a push-pull trolley at Mourilyan circa 1920.

Photo courtesy of Ilma Martinuzzi O'Brien.



The Martinuzzi family with their new Studebaker Light Six Tourer on the farm at Mourilyan in 1922.

Photo courtesy of Alf Martinuzzi.



The Silvio's Studebaker on the left and Biffi Ghietti's Ford on right, straddled by Alavinia Silvio circa 1940.

Photo courtesy of Olive Zaffonato.



Luigi De Munari and Luigi Bortolo beside the Ford Prefect which made such a difference to the De Munari family's life.

Photo courtesy of Ada De Munari Choat.



The ferry crossing the Johnstone River, with the hospital in the background.

Photo courtesy of Mary Casolin.



The Cali taxi on the left and that of Fiumidanesi on the right at the Innisfail Catholic church in the late 1930s.

Photo courtesy of Anna and Ross Cali.



The first of the Cali buses operating out of Mourilyan, c 1940. Josie and Jean Cali are in front centre.

Photo courtesy of Josie Vecchio and Jean Musumeci.



A flooded river and cane train bridge.

Photo courtesy of Rina Cali.

DAILY LIFE

Migration separated families, and many immigrants experienced loneliness as family and friends were left behind in the old country. In the absence of the extended family, neighbours and paesani became the new family. Life cycle events were occasions for friends to come together to create or reinforce family ties.



A baptism party for the Cristaudo and Privatto families, involving also the Cardillo and Reitano families. Frank Cristaldi is pictured smoking at the back.

Photo courtesy of Joe Cristaldi.



Virginia Coco's birthday party in 1935 at the Coco farmhouse in Boogan. Virginia is centre front, Iole Pensini on her left and Amalia Fremondi on her right, with Mr and Mrs Coco on either side. Children on the steps from left top are John Maifredi, Yoland Valmadre, Jacqueline Valmadre, Mary Maifredi, and on the right Sergio Bombadieri, Olga Bombadieri, Salvatore Vitale, Jack Valmadre, Mariuccia Vitale, Virginia's sister, and Olga Valmadre.

Photo courtesy of Iole Arici and the Italian Historical Society.



First Communion at Mena Creek Hall for, from left, Clara Cavin, Rose Suner, Ada De Munari, Rose Cucinotta, Mary Brincat, Nita Cucinotta, Margaret Crowley and Elettra Cavin. Luigi De Munari is talking to Mrs Cavin in the background.

Photo courtesy of Ada De Mun.

Giuseppe Ovideo (Beppi) Sartore died in a car accident in May 1956. Both Beppi and Dino were part of the extended DeMunari family. A popular young man, Beppi played for the Boogan Soccer Club, with Dino as captain. Members of the club marched in front of the hearse from the Catholic Church through town to the cemetery.

Photo courtesy of Ada De Munari Choat.





First communion of Modilia and Oslavio Silvio, circa 1930.

Photo courtesy of Olive Zaffonato.



The Cali family enjoying their new gramophone, 1923.

Photo courtesy of Josie Vecchio.



Women's work was hard cooking for the men in the pioneering days. Luigia Fremondi nee Maranesi arrived in Australia in 1921 and soon after began cooking for cane-cutting gangs in Moresby and Boogan until her husband, Carlo Fremondi, bought a farm at No 1 Branch, South Johnstone in the mid 1920s. Here she is photographed taking smoko out to the men in the fields.

Photo courtesy of Iole Arici and the Italian Historical Society.



Men digging sand to make a new road through the bush.

Photo courtesy of Elenora Micale.



In 1931, Luigi De Munari, aged 22, in his bedroom on the back veranda of Emilio and Gietta Zaffonato's home on their farm at Camp Creek Rd., midway between South Johnstone and Mena Creek. A sister's love and care are evident in the neatly-kept room with flowers on the desk. At this desk Luigi studied English and wrote letters to his parents, brother and sister in Italy.

Photo courtesy of Ada De Munari Choat.

THE SUGAR INDUSTRY

The sugar industry and its prosperity was the foundation of the community. In the early days of the establishment of the industry, well before mechanisation, cane farming was extremely labour intensive.



Cane gang who cut for Stitt and Spina. From left, Alec Stitt the farmer, Francesco Lanzafame, Salvatore Lanzafame (original owner of the photo), Leonardo Sorbello, Alfio Sorbello, Alfio Battiato, Leonardo Sorbello the ganger, and cousin of the other of the same name, Giovanni Nicholosi, Toffi the cook, Alfio Leotta, Francesca Cantarella and Giuseppe Malaponti.

Photo courtesy of Noreen Marino given to her by Salvatore Lanzafame.



Sometimes even the children joined in doing the farmwork.

Photo courtesy of Elenora Micale.



Typical cane cutters' barracks. Alfio Cali on horseback in the foreground.

Photo courtesy of Josie Vecchio.



Men putting down tram trucks.

Photo courtesy of Josie Vecchio.



Hauling hand loaded cane trucks on portable tramlines.

Photo courtesy of Egidio Campagnolo.



Giacomo Pezzutti, second from right, and fellow members of the gang cutting cane for farmer Joe Schuster in the 1930s. All members of this gang came from adjacent parts of Friuli in north eastern Italy.

Photo courtesy of Jeff Pezzutti.



Each new tractor signalled rising prosperity. Here are Beppi Sartore and Luigi Bortolo on Luigi De Muneri's Caterpillar.

Photo courtesy of Ada De Munari Choat.



Giuseppe Borsatto, squatting centre, is pictured with fellow members of his cane cutting gang in front of their barracks.

Photo courtesy of Santina Bortolanza.



This crack cane cutting gang was photographed on the verandah of the barracks in 1927. From left back row are: C. Danesi, P. D'Urso, G. Pappalardo, V. Barbagallo, A. Barbagallo. Front row from left are: R. Spina, A. D'Urso (ganger), A. Sapuppo, G. Palazzolo.

Photo courtesy of Salvatore (Ted) D'Urso.

TOWN BUSINESS

Between the wars many Italian businesses sprang up in the smaller surrounding townships as well as in Innisfail, meeting a wide range of requirements and serving all sections of the local population, both Italians and others.



Salvatore Caltabiano with a customer and daughter Rosina in front of his hairdressing store in Tully in 1936.

Photo courtesy of Rose Nucifora.



The Pensini store at Boogan, erected in 1940-1941 to replace the first Pensini store which was on the other side of the road. After cyclone Winifred the business closed and the building, after repairs, became a private residence.

Photo courtesy of Iole Ariaci and the Italian Historical Society.



The building industries expanded as the district grew, and gave rise to many Italian enterprises. Italians were skilled craftsmen, and their businesses in sawmilling and cabinet making were renowned. The Romano Brothers Builders were here photographed in front of houses they built in Scheu Street. From left are Angelo Pietro, his wife Prima, Dante, Moses at the wheel, and Rita in Girl Guides uniform, circa 1925.

Photo courtesy of Lyn Callegari and Sharon Sawdy.



Umberto (Bert) Gagno ran the Innisfail Joinery works between the wars.

Photo courtesy of Ilma Martinuzzi O'Brien from Lucy Gagno.



The boarding house on the corner of Ernest and Lily Streets owned by Francesco Cantarella, circa 1932.

Photo courtesy of Noreen Marino through John Spina.



Inside the Vadala Drapery Store.

Photo courtesy of Angie Lo Monaco.



Speziali's bus service business also included a fuel depot and cartage of coal for locos. Giuseppe Galetta was a partner. The third generation of the Speziali family still run a garage (mechanics only) on the original allotment of the bus service.

Photo courtesy of Angie Lo Monaco.



Cement and brick construction was an Italian specialty. This house at 23 Mourilyan Road was built by Emilio Campi circa 1924.

Photo courtesy of Darwin Campi.



The Vadala business in Main Street, Silkwood began as a grocery shop and later expanded to include a Billiard Room, Hairdressing Salon and yet later a drapery business.

Photo courtesy of Angie Lo Monaco.

Passat
RECREATION

Canecutters sang snatches from operas or popular songs on their verandas in the evenings, and families and friends made music with accordion and violin. On holidays a variety of sporting activities included shooting, fishing and picnicking. The beach was another activity for relaxation, and Etty Bay the favourite location.



A local football team in 1950s.

Photo courtesy of John Spina.



Family group picnic at Etty Bay circa 1940, with Ottavio Silvio holding bottle in centre. Also present are Modilia, Oslavio and Alavinia, and Nanni and Elio Guglielmi.

Photo courtesy of Olive Zaffonato.



Sam Pagano driving his truck behind the trees at Etty Bay, the ever popular beach.

Photo courtesy of Elenora Micalè.



Pensini men and friends setting out for a soccer match.

Photo courtesy of Iole Arici.



Pagano family and friends setting out for a picnic in two boats.

Photo courtesy of Eleonora Micalc.



Getting bait for fishing.

Photo courtesy of Eleonora Micalc.



Hunting was both a recreation and a means of adding variety to the family table. Dino and Beppi Sartore and Luigi Bortolo after a successful shooting outing in the scrub. Note the fruit orchard in the background.

Photo courtesy of Ada De Munari Choat.



Most families had a swimming hole nearby. Este De Munari is shown here enjoying a dip.

Photo courtesy of Ada De Munari Choat.



Three Pensini musicians, from left Emilia Pensini nee Fremondi, Antonio Pensini and Luigi (Louis) Pensini.

Photo courtesy of Iole Arici and the Italian Historical Society.



Ottavio Silvio, right, in white shirt and tie, with Luigi Guglielmi and Dino Signorini at ETTY Bay, circa 1946.

Photo courtesy of Olive Zaffonato.

THE IMPACT OF WAR

A major watershed in the life of the community was the Second World War. While the war disrupted most people's lives, for those of Italian origin these years were especially poignant as many of the men were taken to internment camps leaving wives and children behind to manage as best they could. Others were sent away as conscripted labour.



Silvio Lissa, who served in the Australian Army during World War II. He attained the rank of sergeant, but did not serve overseas, instead being sent to internment camps to act as interpreter for Italian internees.

Photo courtesy of Lina Torre.



Group of Innisfail residents receiving the Cavaliere medal for military service in Italy during the Great War of 1914-1918, when the Italian and British nations were allies. Northern Italy was a major theatre of the war and millions of Italians lost their lives fighting against the invading forces of the Austrian and German armies.

Photo courtesy of Corrie Torre.



Others were conscripted into the civilian labour corps and sent down south or into the interior during the war. Photographed from left are Nucifora, Patane, Cerolo, Leonardi, Barbagallo and Gangemi.

Photo courtesy of John Patane.



Wedding plans were disrupted by internment and then conscription into the Civilian Aliens Corps for many young couples in north Queensland. Mario Sardi from the Island of Elba in Tuscany and his fiancée Alfia Patane who was born in Sicily, photographed not long before Mario's internment. They were not able to marry until 1945.

Photo courtesy of Roseanne D'Urso.



During the Second World War a significant percentage of those of Italian origin were interned from the district, and taken to camps such as Loveday in South Australia. Among the mementos of those days is the diary written by Mario Sardi of South Johnstone which is being prepared for publication. Reproduced here is the inside cover of his diary, showing the huts where the men lived, their recreation areas, and the barbed wire.

Courtesy of Roseanne D'Urso.

The Canecutter Monument

A MONUMENT TO THE SUGAR PIONEERS OF THE JOHNSTONE SHIRE

BY BARBARA BORTOLANZA

On the banks of the Johnstone River stands a magnificent work of art, The Canecutter, a tribute to the early pioneers of the sugar industry. The sugar industry in Innisfail was established with the help of many migrants, one distinct group being the Italians.

Dr Domenico Rigano had established a medical practice in the 1930s in Innisfail. With the post war influx of Italian migrants to the Innisfail area, Dr Rigano and a few other Italians decided to form an Italian Committee to help develop cultural ties between the Italians and the other Australians. In 1957, this committee sponsored the celebrity concert featuring the world famous tenor, Luigi Infantino, as an activity during the Sugar Festival.

One day in 1958, Dr Rigano and some friends were discussing over their usual Saturday morning beer what should be done for the forthcoming Queensland Centenary. They wished to honour the pioneers of the sugar industry and at the same time they sought to create a bridge between the Italian and Australian communities in Innisfail. Dr Rigano then decided a monument to commemorate the early sugar pioneers was the best way to achieve this.

Sydney artist Mr Lamberto Yonna suggested the canecutter as a symbol of the sugar industry, as mechanical harvesting was being introduced and forwarded many sketches to Innisfail for approval.

The final sketch was then sent to Carrara, the Italian centre world famous for marble statuary. The Chamber of Commerce in Carrara was then asked to recommend a panel of the best sculptors. Some designs were then sent back to Innisfail, which resulted in Professor Renato Berratta being chosen by the committee. The Professor, who was well known in Italy and France for his work, was delighted that he was asked to sculpt the monument.

A public meeting was then convened on 7th December 1958 in the RSL hall to approve and comment on the project. Seven hundred and forty circulars had been given to people of Italian extraction in the Innisfail area. Not many people attended the meeting, but those there had the courage to go ahead. A committee of 20 men was selected, including Dr D Rigano (President), G Cali (Secretary), A Catelan (Treasurer) S Pagano (Senior Vice President), G Canale (Assistant Secretary), O Rinaudo and P Bruschi (Junior Vice Presidents), and Presidents on Canvassing Sub-committees, C Farinelli (Mourilyan), G Ballini (South Johnstone), S Nucifora (Innisfail), C Pasinetti (Goondi), A Catelan (El Arish) plus additions to the Sub-committees.

The Johnstone Shire Council and Mr C J McPherson, the Director of the Queensland Celebrations were approached and preliminary arrangements for the project were made. The Premier of Queensland, Mr G F Nicklin, accepted the honour of unveiling the monument.

Total cost of the pioneer monument was approximately £5000/-/-. The marble monument cost of £3500/-/- was to be paid in sterling funds while the freight from Italy to Townsville cost £357/-/-. With the goodwill of the Federal Government, the committee received a permit to bring the monument into Australia duty free as a work of art. Most of this money was raised by fund raising undertaken by sub-committees members. A great deal of paperwork was done by the Shire Council, the Queensland Government and the Federal Government. The committee also had to keep in touch with Professor Berratta on the progress of the monument.

Adjacent to Fitzgerald Park at the junction of the North and South Johnstone Rivers was where the Shire Council approved the site for the memorial to stand. The Council assisted the committee by widening the road, as well as building concrete footings and depositing additional fill. On 2nd September 1959, the concrete base was poured by a workforce of 14 men. These men poured 50 tons of sand and cement in the rain for the platform of the monument.

Originally the monument would be shipped from Italy to Sydney with the Flotta Lauro Line but this arrangement was changed, as it was cheaper to have it go direct to Townsville with the Amerskerk of the Holland Australia Shipping Line. Delayed by a prolonged shipping strike and bad weather which forced the ship onto a sandbank in Townsville Harbour, the 32 crates which made up the 12 ton statue arrived in Innisfail on 7th September 1959 by rail from Townsville.

To erect the monument in Innisfail, Professor Berratta recommended Mr Pietro Bertolani. Mr Bertolani migrated from Italy to Brisbane two months earlier and was made available for the committee's needs by his employers, P J Lowther & Sons, monumental masons of Brisbane.

The monument resembles a life size canecutter standing in an erect position, approximately five feet nine inches (1.75m) tall. He holds a stool of cane in his left arm while a brass cane knife in his right hand depicts the motion of the cutting of the cane. The monument stands on a square block, 14 feet (4.3m) high and attached to it are inlaid panels depicting the everyday scenes of canecutters, which include smoko break and the loading of cane. Four brass waterbags are used as fountains, which spout water into shell-shaped collectors. The water then flows through eight fish-like gargoyles into a large octagonal receptacle at the base of the monument, which has a diameter of 15 feet (4.6m).

The railing encircling the monument represents stools of cane with attached cane knives, water bags and files – tools used by the canecutters. Four reflector lamps were built in to illuminate the monument at night. With the introduction of mechanical harvesting the committee wished to show information about canecutters by combining water bags, cane knives, files and cane stools into the monument.

The purpose of the monument is shown by two short inscriptions – one side in English and the other in Italian. It reads:-

TO THE PIONEERS OF THE SUGAR INDUSTRY
DONATED BY THE ITALIAN COMMUNITY OF INNISFAIL DISTRICT
ON THE FIRST CENTENARY OF THE STATE OF QUEENSLAND
1859 – 1959

AI PIONIERI DELL'INDUSTRIA DELLO ZUCCHERO
DONATO DALLA COMUNITA ITALIANA DEL DISTRETTO DI INNISFAIL NEL
1 CENTENARIO DELLO STATO DEL QUEENSLAND
1859 – 1959

A great majority of the Italian migrants who had settled in the area regarded Australia as their homeland. This is supported by the Latin inscription, UBI BENE IBI PATRIA which when translated into English means, Where life is good, there is your fatherland.

On Sunday, 4th October 1959, before the monument was unveiled, 22 ladies paraded the streets of Innisfail in typical colourful costumes of the provinces in Italy. They were led by the Innisfail Citizens Band and followed by a car, which had three children sitting on the bonnet. One child was holding a miniature cane knife, while the other two girls scattered petals. Premier Nicklin arrived and the ceremony began with the band playing the national anthem, God Save the Queen.

At 10.38 am the Premier of Queensland, Mr G F R Nicklin cut the red, white and blue ribbons, which separated the monument from the crowd of three thousand people. Mr Nicklin then unveiled the monument by pulling a rope, which permitted the red, white and green material to fall and reveal the monument. As the monument was unveiled the band played Advance Australia Fair. Waltzing Matilda was played as the official party inspected the marble work of art.

Mr Nicklin stated "This is a great pleasure to me to have the opportunity not only as Premier, but as chairman of the Queensland Centenary Committee to unveil the first permanent memorial to our centenary in Queensland". (Evening Advocate, 5th October 1959).

As the monument was a tribute to the pioneers of the sugar industry, 96 guests were accommodated in a special enclosure for the unveiling. These men and women had been in the Innisfail district for 45 years or more and were over 65 years of age. A minute's silence was observed when Dr Rigano announced that James Michael O'Brien, one of the pioneers who was to attend the ceremony had been tragically killed in a traffic accident the previous Saturday.

The members of the official party who addressed the public included Mr Nicklin (Premier of Queensland), Alderman W Fulton (MHR), Mr P Byrne (MLA), Mr G F Wordsworth (MLA), Senator Maher, Cr E H Webb (Chairman of the Johnstone Shire Council), Mr Ben Foley (President Queensland Cane Growers Council), Dr D Rigano (Chairman of Innisfail Italian Centenary Committee), Cr W C Ah Shay (Chairman of the Innisfail Sugar Festival Committee), Mr J O'Loughlin (President of the Innisfail RSL), Mr S Pagano (Pioneers) and Mr G Cali (Secretary of Innisfail Italian Centenary Committee). Dr Rigano acted as master of ceremonies throughout the speeches. While addressing Councillor Webb, Dr Rigano requested him to take charge of the monument on behalf of the Shire Council, which he gratefully accepted.

Newspapers and radio from all over Australia reported the unveiling of the monument, with representatives from the Evening Advocate, Cairns Post, Fox Film, Tableland, Australian Broadcasting Company, Women's Weekly, 4AY and the Italian paper La Fiamma. However, one newspaper which had a good circulation in North Queensland, the Courier Mail, failed to recognise this event. Dr Rigano, on behalf of the committee sent a letter to the editor. In return he received a letter sent from the acting editor explaining that because of a misunderstanding, the item was not placed in the paper. A short article about the monument was placed in the paper at a later date.

After the unveiling ceremony had finished, the pioneers and official guests were invited by the Italian Committee to lunch at the RSL Hall. At the lunch, the only person who addressed the 300 people, Senator Maher, moved a vote of thanks to the women for providing an excellent meal.

The Pioneers Monument, better known as The Canecutter is one of Innisfail's most unique attractions still visited by many tourists. This marble monument is more than just a work of art – it is a symbol of reconciliation, integration and assimilation of cultures, a tribute to the men and women of the sugar industry and a magnificent memorial of which the descendants of the Italian Community can be justifiably proud. The Italian Community, through the initiative of Dr Domenico Rigano, dedicated this monument to the pioneers of all races who through their persistence and hard work, developed the sugar industry in this area into the thriving commercial venture that it is today. All these migrants were responsible for bringing about the social and economic development of Australia in the Twentieth Century.

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Women in the provincial costumes of their places of origin on the occasion of the unveiling of the Canecutter monument on 4 October, 1959.

Photo courtesy of Tina Bortolanza.