

# Year of the Millionth Migrant

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## **Pix Magazine Special Feature 3 December 1955**

### **Year of the Millionth Migrant**

#### ***Planners have colossal scheme to increase Australia's population to 20-million by 1970***

Postwar migration, Australia's greatest social and economic experiment since Federation, has concluded a crucial and history-making phase. After 10 years of carefully planned immigration, figures suggest that the nation's daring, long-sighted concept of our future development will be realised. That is why we have chosen migration as the theme of this year's PIX annual.

This year saw the completion of 10 years of a free, assisted, and unassisted passage scheme that aims to boost Australia's population (now more than 9-million) to 20 million in the next 15 years. It was the year of the millionth migrant.

The experiment has called for much more than majority political approval. Its success has depended largely on the willingness of Australians generally to throw their weight behind the program and make it really work in the human sense. For Australians it has been a history-making adventure into the unknown on a scale never before attempted by any nation except perhaps the United States in the middle of the 19th century.

Its net result, on latest available figures, (September, 1954) has been to increase

population percentages over prewar totals by: Australian Commonwealth Territory (Canberra) 139 pc, Northern Territory 127 pc, Queensland 30 pc, New South Wales 24 pc, Victoria 31 pc, South Australia 34 pc, Western Australia 36 pc, Tasmania 27 pc. Natural increases in population are, of course, included. Last year 115,000 migrants came to Australia. The figure for the current year, which ends next June, has been set at 120,500.

Of all migrants to Australia, 48.8 pc have been British. This has not been an accident. Planners have fixed quotas so that the predominantly British complex of the Australian people is not changed.

Planned immigration began in 1946. It began with an agreement with the British Government to provide free and assisted passages to people in selected categories, including Commonwealth servicemen and their dependents, who were urgently needed to meet a desperate demand for labor in an Australia where the wartime boom in industry had been maintained in a postwar expansion. The scheme had many critics.

#### **Fears of a labour over-supply not realised**

Local fears that the incoming labor force would deprive some 700,000 returning Australian servicemen and servicewomen of jobs were soon proved unfounded. But from the hour the first shipload of British migrants landed in Australia in 1947, Federal, State and civic sponsors of the scheme found they had problems. As the plan extended to include European migrants and displaced persons, problems grew. Basically they were: Transport, accommodation, employment and - from the migrant's point of view the most important - assimilation.

During the war the British Commonwealth lost some 13-million tons of its prewar shipping

tonnage of 20-million. To meet the shortage of shipping needed for a migration scheme on the scale planned, both the British and Australian Governments spent millions of pounds renovating old ships. The United States Government made former troopships available. The International Refugee Organisation helped with funds.

Every day this year an average of 350 new Australians landed at Australia's major ports. Housing was not so simple. The flow of migrants began at a time when even local housing demands could not be met. To overcome this, the Commonwealth Government established hostels and holding centres for migrants. It gave top migration priority to carpenters, plumbers and others skilled in the building trade.

Housing remains a major Australian problem, but the new Australians seem to have met it best. With secure employment, often available to both husbands and wives, the newcomer has turned his first attention to finding a permanent roof.

Largely as a result of the migration program, home-construction in Australia reached 80,000 in 1954, rose to 98,000 this year. Most of the migrants have bought or built their own homes. Since the program began more than 200,000 migrants have passed through hostels and holding centres. At present 26,000 of them - less than 3 pc of the total who have come here - are using this type of accommodation.

Employment has not been a major problem. Immigration Minister Harold Holt says, "One great challenge has been to regulate the intake to avoid placing undue stress and strain on the community. Planning therefore has always been against a background of current economic trends."

During the war money was plentiful and manufacturing industries expanded. Industrial bottlenecks developed after the war and it became necessary to direct assisted migrants to their own form of employment. The skilled

migrant was largely the answer. Proportionately, the new Australian has turned out a more highly skilled worker than the Australian. Of all migrants who will have reached here by the end of this year at least 130,000 are skilled tradesmen.

More than 29 pc of male workers who arrived in Australia last year were craftsmen. This compares with an average of 20 pc among Australian workers as a whole. Only 67,000 male migrants have been classified as rural workers. Many of these have been brought out for State works and to meet labor demands in places like the Queensland canefields.

Assimilation has probably been the most difficult problem. In the early stages, Australians, who pride themselves on their open hearts and open minds, showed a reserved welcome to the migrants. They were different. While the front door was open to them as visitors, it became another matter when Australians had virtually to take them into their own homes. It was even more disturbing for the migrants.

Since one of the vital policies of the scheme aimed at preventing foreign community settlements, the language difficulties often bewildered the newcomers.

Some aged people found themselves totally incapable of adaptation to the new way of life. Displaced persons have included a proportion of people, warped mentally, who have found the promised land a tarnished version of the golden glory they expected. In desperation, some even have committed suicide. But the majority have proved themselves willing learners.

In 1953-54 more than 38,000 new Australians enrolled in migrant educational classes, 35,000 took correspondence courses, and the Australian Broadcasting Commission and the Immigration Department issued nearly 350,000 booklets to migrants who sought to learn the English language through radio classes.

## Australians at fault

In part, assimilation difficulties have been the fault of Australians who in conservative, independent fashion have tended to regard all migrants with something of a charitable goodwill. It is true that the Australian Government has spent £28-million on assisted passages. But it is also true that in the 10 years of migration, of the 911,532 people who arrived in Australia by March this year, 412,510 paid their fares and those of their families. They brought £83.5 million in funds. Most of these have come in family groups. Apart from British families, they have been predominantly Maltese, Italian and Dutch. High on the list of migrants are Germans, Austrians, Greeks and Triestians. It is in the latter group that the plan has come under considerable fire.

Criticism is levelled at the Government for its failure to get a more even ratio of men to women. Among British, Dutch, Maltese and Italians, family groups reduced the ratio so that there are only about 1 pc more males than females. Among the others male predominance rises from 13 pc for Germans and 25 pc for Austrians to 46 pc for Greeks. But these figures could be misleading, especially for the Greeks. Often a male migrates and waits until he has a home before he brings out his family.

## Quarrels over women

The frequent appearances of new Australians in court on charges that often stem from quarrels over women or arise from excessive drinking have been blamed on the fact that many single men find themselves unable to adjust themselves to a normal way of life. Language barriers, custom differences, shyness and uncertainty all have played their part. Much is being accomplished through the rapidly growing "let's get together" influence of organisations like the Good Neighbors' Movement and the New Settlers' League.

Emphasis on the court appearances of new Australians gives an erroneous picture.

Latest figures involving a comparison between 10,000 registered new Australians and 10,000 old Australians over the age of 16 reveal that convictions against registered aliens were 34.4 pc fewer than those against Australians. Eliminating females, conviction rates were: new Australians 59.2 per 10,000 Australians 117.1 per 10,000. A high proportion of the new Australian crimes has been committed by displaced persons who came to Australia before the war.

But in the main it has been a grand experience for Australia. The newcomers have brought their own way of life and have adapted old-world cultures to our needs. The arts particularly have received an enormous impetus from the migrants. They have brought with them skill and technical know-how.

State by State the story is almost identical. In New South Wales, the £400-million Snowy scheme, the boom in industrial expansion that is sweeping the State owe their impetus only to the labor force that has come from overseas.

In Victoria, 65 pc of the men who built the £18-million Eildon Dam for power and irrigation to step-up food production were new Australians. More than half the labor force at the Rocklands Dam project that will safeguard the Mallee wheat area against droughts are new arrivals. At Morwell, where Victoria is building a £10-million brown-coal gas plant to pipe gas 80 miles underground to Melbourne, 80 pc are workers from 30 different nations.

Critics of the scheme still like to point out that while 911,532 migrants came to Australia, between January, 1947, and March, 1955, 205,531 people left during the same period. But Immigration Department officials point out that for statistical purposes, everyone leaving Australia for more than 12 months is registered as a departure. Australian tourists who returned after that time could account for the major proportion of these.

The number of migrants who have returned totals slightly less than 4 pc, and most of these have been British. Officials point out that the

teenage-early-twenty influx in family groups has more than offset the loss of normal increase that might have been expected from 35,000 marriages that never took place during the depression years.

One of those who went back was migrant No.1 Englishman Frank Docketty, now living at The Furrows, Walton-on-Thames, Surrey. He says, "Australia is a grand place and the people are real people - genuine, free, easy and human. One day I'll smell the gumleaves again, boil some billy tea, see the waratah, hear the kookaburra laugh, and be called a Pommy. It will be good."

## **Italians' Part in Riverina**

by Trevor Langford-Smith, BA, MSc, Research Fellow in Geography, National University

### ***Irrigation Area would probably be in a bad way today but for the industry of new Australians.***

The Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area, commonly known as the MIA, is the richest farming region in Australia. Its 25,000 people produce fruit, rice, meat and wool to the value of more than £8-million a year. Its modern towns of Leeton and Griffith are bustling, prosperous. Commercial travellers who visit the area say Griffith is the best business town in New South Wales.

The area is quite a show place. It attracts not only tourists but scientists and overseas visitors who come to see "how it is done." Australians may be proud of the MIA. But not many know that one farm in every four is owned by a new Australian of Italian origin, nor that around Griffith, the larger of the horticultural areas, half the fruit farms are "Italian" owned. And what is more significant, but for Italian migration the MIA would be in a bad way today. Many of the farms which now look so productive would be abandoned or converted into larger pastoral holdings.

#### **Not always prosperous**

The MIA has not always been prosperous. It was first settled in 1912, when neither the farmers nor the government officials in charge knew much about irrigation. Experience came the hard way. In the process hundreds of settlers failed and lost their farms, while millions of pounds of government money had to be written off as irretrievable loss.

After World War I soldier settlers swarmed to the area and it looked as if development was really getting under way. But most of them knew nothing about farming and many were

quite unsuited to farm life. Added to this, farm areas were too small, rents and rates were too high, often the wrong crops were grown and there was trouble over markets. Great credit is due to the settlers who struggled through these bad times. Today many of the area's most successful farmers are ex-soldiers and their sons.

Although there were a few Italians among the early settlers, they passed unnoticed for some years. Then one or two of them made good and persuaded relatives in Italy to join them. Gradually the movement grew and by the middle 20's the older Australian settlers were beginning to take notice.

Many Australians of the period were suspicious of foreigners, and farmers on the MIA were no exception. Why, it was argued, should Australia construct a great irrigation scheme for the benefit of peasants from other countries who were content to work like slaves and live like animals? Typical of this period was a meeting of ex-soldiers in 1927, when a motion protesting against the admission of Italians to the area was defeated by 41 votes to 39. Fortunately, liberal opinions prevailed and Italians continued to arrive.

Then came World War II and, strange to say, hostilities between the Allies and Italy appear to have done much to moderate racial prejudices in the area. For it became apparent that, apart from one or two hotheads, all the Italians wished for of life was to make a success of their venture in a new land. Right through the war years they worked steadily - many of them as farm-laborers employed by Australians.

Because of the unfortunate early years of its history, there was a rapid turn-over in MIA horticultural farms up to about 1945. A settler would move in, work hard for a few years, then lose heart and either sell his farm or forfeit it to the government. After the war the movement was out rather than in. Old Australians were reluctant to try their luck on farms that had failed so often in the past. Things could have been bad for the MIA.

Then it was that Italian industry and patience really began to make themselves felt. Italians took over farms that nobody else seemed to want. Some of these farms were in bad shape and suffered from all kinds of problems, including that curse of irrigation - salt in the soil due to high watertable.

There is no doubt Italians have done well on MIA farms. It is often said this success is due solely to the fact that they think of nothing but work and are prepared to live at a standard no Australian would tolerate. To test the truth of such theories and to see how Italian and Australian farmers compared in farming methods and living standards, a detailed survey was recently made of more than 60 MIA horticultural farms. The farms were not selected, but were taken at random.

The results of the survey are most interesting. In at least 90 pc of cases it was impossible to tell, without prior knowledge, whether a farm was being worked by an Australian or an Italian. The orchards and vineyards were cared for in the same way and the same kinds and quantities of farm implements were used. There was no difference in mechanisation.

### Comparison pleases

It is a popular belief that Italian homes tend to be dirty and that housekeeping methods are primitive. Certainly there were dirty houses - but half of them were Australian! As a measure of living standards, houses were classified in three groups according to quality of building, domestic appliances and cleanliness. Although slightly more of the really first-class homes were found to be Australian-owned, Italians owned more of the "medium" group, and the proportion of sub-standard homes was the same in each case. The Italian sub-standard homes were in general cleaner than the Australian!

As a measure of the "stability" of the population, a sample check was made of the number of grown-up children of MIA farmers who had left the area. Of 45 Australian children more than 15 years of age, 15 had gone to live

elsewhere - seven boys and eight girls. Of 59 Italian children, only three had left - all girls who had married!

Without question Italian MIA farmers are a credit to the Australian farming community. Are they really assimilating, and changing from new to old Australians? This question was well answered by a successful Italian settler of long standing, who remarked quite seriously, "You know, the trouble with the MIA is that too many dagoes are coming here!"

## **Builder**

### ***New Australian has Territory's biggest home-building contract***

Dynamic, hard-working Italian Edmund Zamolo stepped off a migrant ship in Sydney a little more than five years ago with less than £1000 in his pocket. Today he holds the biggest home-building job in the Northern Territory - a contract for 100 homes at a cost of £420,000.

He expects to finish the contract six months ahead of schedule, start on construction of a prototype concrete-brick home he claims would revolutionise the building industry in North Australia.

In the seven months he has been in Darwin he has built up a hard-working force of 35 men, nearly all from his homeland - his only two Australian employees are electrician Ron Fraser, of Brisbane, and his secretary, Kathleen Strong. He runs a big joinery-works where his houses are partly prefabricated.

Keeping his team of workers happy in Darwin was one of his big problems. The Government helped him out with accommodation, but he was not satisfied with the meals available. He turned part of his home into a workmen's mess, hired cooks and began turning out first-class, Italian-style meals twice a day.

The war smashed Zamolo's father's building firm, killed his father, sent Zamolo into prison camp. He saw the war out as manager of a sawmill for an Englishman in Kenya. "After the war," he says, "I found a very different Italy from the old one. I migrated to Australia with an Italian firm which was building 100 houses at Cooma for the Snowy River scheme. Then I transferred to Brisbane."