

# Book explores Nelson's Italian history

Nelson's own Little Italy - The Wood - is well known for its tomato-growing Italian community, the core of which was established in the opening two decades of last century. But, as a new book reveals, the story of the city's Italians stretches back much further and includes now forgotten communities of gold miners and fishermen. Here, authors **Karen Stade** and **Karen Price** tell the story of the book's gestation.

**P**asta, Prayer & Promise, the story of Nelson's Italian Community 1860-2014, launched this week, is the result of five years of research.

As authors, we have had long connections with The Wood, and well remember when the inner city neighbourhood was a sea of glasshouses, when Italian was heard regularly in the neighbourhood, and when tomatoes could be bought at small street stalls in front of Italian homes.

When we began researching the history of the Italian community five years ago, we thought it would be a cut and dried story of Italian chain migration to Nelson from the turn of the 20th century and the development of The Wood as one of New Zealand's top tomato growing regions.

We quickly discovered far more to the story than even the present day Italian community knew. We spent many hours hunting down long lost details in order to produce a comprehensive chronicle of Italian migration to the region from start to finish.

Our research took us back to the 1860s when individual Italian men found themselves in New Zealand chasing gold. Many washed up in Nelson having already tried their luck on the goldfields of Otago and, before that, Australia and California.

With scant records remaining of those who arrived during the gold rush, tracing the footprints of individuals proved difficult unless they featured in the newspapers of the day.

Stefano De Filippi was one such individual. Arriving in 1862 he worked on the goldfields of Wakamarina before joining forces with a band of fellow Swiss Italians to work a claim at Lyell.

The venture proved successful and the consortium was often reported in newspapers, making their exploits traceable today.

Others however proved trickier to follow. An example of this is the Porcelli brothers who appear to have arrived during the 1860s, setting up businesses in the growing colony.

Francesco opened an oyster saloon, the equivalent of today's fish and chip shop, which his fisherman brother, Leonardo, kept supplied from his oyster beds.

The Porcellis remain forever part of Nelson's recorded history after Francesco unwittingly allowed two of the infamous Maungatapu murderers to stay with him overnight in 1866 following their murderous rampage on the Maungatapu track.

His evidence at the subsequent trial was translated and reported at length in the *Nelson Evening Mail*.

But in 1867 the brothers are recorded as sailing from Nelson and disappear from the written record. Where they went and why is open to conjecture. A small community of Italian fishermen who made the port area their home from the 1860s proved easier to investigate.

Seaman Antonio Bagnato arrived in Nelson via Hokitika and made his way to Nelson, where he lived in Haven Rd and started fishing. Anglicising his name to Wett ('Wet' being the English translation of Bagnato), Antonio married an Englishwoman, Filistea Durham.

Their colourful home life was often reported in local newspapers, allowing this life in Nelson to be pieced together. A chance online comment allowed his descendants in Australia to be traced and this story completed.

Many of the missing details needed came from chance encounters and random comments which connected pieces of the puzzle. It became a matter of being historical detectives and much of the early story was found by matching small entries from the Papers Past website, with snippets from interviews with descendants. Sometimes chance discoveries or meetings with people revealed small clues that helped flesh out the book.

The story became somewhat easier to trace from the turn of the 20th century when instead of transient men passing through following opportunity as the miners had done earlier, the Italians now arriving in Nelson began to settle permanently and call for others to join them.

Brother-in-laws Francesco Pingiario and Pasquale Fiatarone are early examples of the migration which occurred. The pair originally worked in New Zealand as street performers but when misfortune struck and their performing monkey ran away, the pair made their way to Nelson sometime in the late 1890s and appear to have become involved in market gardening.

Initially they would have grown crops agreeable to an English colonist, and it was only later on when tomatoes increased in popularity that they, and others who followed them, began growing them on a commercial basis.

Francesco and Pasquale, like Domenico Merlino and the Sannazzaro brothers, had market gardens in the Victory area. But others such as Mariano Gargiulo and Giacomo Persico preferred the sunnier area of The Wood for their gardens when they arrived in the region.

From the early 1900s a string of Italian men followed these initial families, many of them from the same small villages of Southern Italy. Some lived and worked elsewhere first, North America, South America, France or Australia, before turning their feet towards the relatively unknown New Zealand. A few simply arrived here by accident when travel plans went awry.

But increasingly, as word of the opportunities on offer in Nelson spread, wives, children and other relatives joined those already settled in the growing Italian community and a chain migration from southern Italy to Nelson gathered momentum. While men worked to save the funds for their family's passage to New Zealand, they also sent money back to support them. This pattern of migration was clearly evident in Nelson from 1905 - 1930.

Often wives were left in Italy with parents or other family members to ease the struggle of supporting themselves during their husbands' absence. The wait to be called out by a husband was often years, in some cases, nearly a decade. Some were permanently parted when death or a change in circumstances prevented couples from reuniting.

By the early 1930s commercial tomato cultivation was proving to be a profitable enterprise and The Wood became known for its tomato gardens, many of them owned by Italian families. As part of the chain migration, young male relatives were called out to assist in the family gardens.

The Vitetta Brothers, a well-known musical trio aided many others, sponsoring men from their extended family back in Saponnara di Grumento (now Grumento Nova) and providing work for them on their arrival in Nelson. The brothers, Giuseppe, Vincenzo and Giovanni, were professional musicians who accompanied silent films playing in Wellington and Nelson.

However, the introduction of talkies forced them to turn instead to tomato growing. Many families who arrived during this time still have relatives in Nelson today, so collecting information became relatively easier, although untangling family versions of stories from some of the documented accounts sometimes required diplomacy. Additionally, while some families had very good recollections of their family history, others had many questions about their fathers' or grandfathers' passage to New Zealand. Answers came through an unlikely find.

Several research trips to Wellington to examine documents at Archives New Zealand, Te Papa and other historical institutions were required. It was on one such trip to Archives New Zealand that we came by chance across full transcripts of statements made to the



Authors Karen Stade, left and Karen Price with their book *Pasta, Prayers & Promise* the story of Nelson's Italian Community. Photo: MARTIN DE RUYTER/FAIRFAX NZ



Early Italian fisherman, Antonio Wett.

Enemy Aliens Authority by Nelson's Italian residents in 1940.

During World War I, Nelson's small Italian community received the support of its adopted city when Italy entered the war on the side of the Allies.

Fundraisers for the Italian Red Cross and Italian Widows and Orphans Fund were endorsed and supported by the wider population and the Vitetta Trio played at patriotic concerts and events. It was a very different story in World War II, when Italy sided with Germany. The much larger Italian community now found its adult members branded as enemy aliens, even if they had been naturalised or, in some cases, had sons serving in the New Zealand Army.

As enemy aliens they were forced to adhere to restrictions on travel, communication, employment and property ownership, and endured gossip and anti-Italian sentiment.

Each Italian resident was interviewed by the authorities and asked a series of questions determined to discover how much of a risk they posed to the nation.

Those deemed most dangerous were classified 'A', while those considered no threat were 'E'.

A few considered high risk were interned on Somes Island in Wellington Harbour. The most high-profile Nelson Italian internee was Paolo Casa, who was on the island from July 1940 until his release in January 1944.

Casa died in 2001 still denying he was one of the most ardent Fascists in the Dominion and harboured anti-British or anti-New Zealand sentiment.

The recorded transcripts of the Aliens Authority's interviews proved to be a goldmine in answering many questions in family histories but access to the files was no easy matter.

Being sensitive war records they were embargoed till 2040 and we had to apply for special permission from the Chief Archivist to access the material.

The interview transcripts helped solve many mysteries around individual migration stories. Why and when a family member first came to New Zealand, details of family left behind, where they first lived and worked in Nelson, Fascist beliefs, and much more, was revealed.

We were able to tell a number of families' things about their ancestors they knew nothing of. Sometimes the information contradicted what families had believed for decades had happened and other

times it filled in gaps. It often connected families in ways we hadn't realised and helped build up a more comprehensive picture of the reasons why those early immigrants had left their home villages and families and travelled half way around the world to establish themselves here.

The official files outlining the Government's case against Paolo Casa was one of the most interesting research aspects of the project, and there were a mountain of reports, letters and interviews in his enemy alien files to wade through. His internment still vexes the Italian community but it has been left up to readers to decide which version of the story to accept. It's the first time the official side of the story has been told.

There are many firsts in the book. Included is a history of tomato growing in the region, something which has never been documented previously and shows the role of the Cawthron Institute in assisting local growers develop technologies which became widely adopted in the industry throughout New Zealand. As well as a chronological history, the book also includes the individual family histories and photos of 32 families who

arrived prior to WWI, many of which have never appeared in print before. The history of this community has always been an oral history which was progressively being eroded with the passing of successive generations.

At the moment there's very little in the existing historical record despite the Italian community's contribution to Nelson and what is there is sometimes inaccurate and skewed to individual points of view. As "outsiders" to the community we've taken a very neutral stance and reported the story as we found it through research, interviews and detailed analysis of historic records which have probably never been studied as a group of documents before.

The result is a full story of Italian immigration to the Nelson region from the 1860s to today, documenting changes in attitude towards Italian immigration from the first Italians who anglicised their names to better fit in, through to 2014 and the renaissance of all things Italian.

This is a result of increased internationalism, the embracing of different cuisines and recent local events such as the Rugby World Cup and the

Italian Food Festival. While the project has taken many years to complete, we believe the book is a worthy tribute to the community which gave us such ready access to its memories and memorabilia.

We also feel the telling of the Italian story, which has so long been woven through the fabric of Nelson's history, is long overdue. It's been a privilege to have played our part in finally recording and preserving that story for future generations.

The launch of *Pasta, Prayer & Promise* will be celebrated by the Italian community this weekend, followed by a public launch at the Masonic Lodge on Tuesday May 5 at 5:30pm and a Wellington launch at Club Garibaldi on Friday May 8.

*Pasta, Prayer & Promise* - the story of Nelson's Italian community, 1860-2014. Authors: Karen Price and Karen Stade. Book details: 448 pages, colour throughout, hardcover with dust jacket. Design and layout: Karen Price, Contexo, Nelson. For more information/photos contact: Karen Price, info@contexo.co.nz or 027 238 1819.

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