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John (Giovanni) SANNA

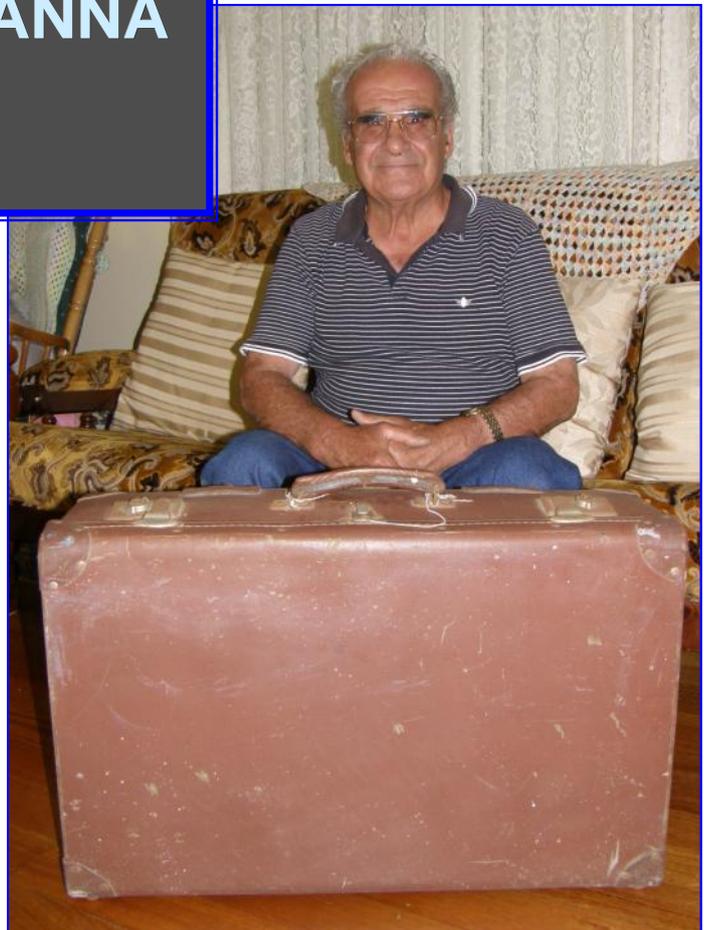
His life in timber

John (Giovanni) Sanna, arrived at Port Melbourne in 1955 aboard the Italian migrant ship SS *Aurelia*. He was 25 years old. All his possessions were in one brown suitcase. Inside were the things that his mother had packed — a blanket, pillow slip, clothes, and two sheets. So began John's life in Australia.

In the 1920s, John Sanna's father went from the Italian island of Sardinia to America for 9 years with the idea of making money and then returning home. This he did, returning in 1929. These were Depression times, and Mr Sanna was able to purchase land in Sardinia and became a successful farmer and landholder.

John was born in 1930. At that time, Sardinia was a quiet place and people farmed sheep, cattle, pigs, wheat, grapes and vegetables. Now in 2014, it is a very touristy and expensive place to live. John, the oldest son of the family of three boys and two girls, had an elementary education and an ambition to be a farmer like his father.

When John was 18 years old, he was called on to spend 18 months in the Italian Army, returning home when aged 21 years. He then worked for his father for several years.



Almost 60 years after his journey to Australia, John Sanna still has this old brown suitcase safely stored in his shed in Orbost. Photo 2014, John aged 83.

John had decided to do as his father had done, to go overseas and make money and then come back home to Sardinia and purchase some land and become a farmer.

After the Second World War ended, many young men were keen

to emigrate or at least to go overseas and earn some money. John joined the queue of men applying to go to such countries as South Africa (to work in the gold mines) or to Australia. A friend of John's said "go to Australia" so the next day he put his name down and waited. Some months later, he passed the three-day medical examination and interviews. He also had references from the police, the shire and the local catholic priest. At that time, about 700 men from Sardinia applied to come to Australia. Only four from John's home town were chosen and John was one of them. **So began John's life-changing journey.**



In 1955 John sailed to Australia on the SS Aurelia with a group of other young Italian men. From left: Antonio Dese, Batista Mascia, Enzo Murra, John Sanna, and Sebastiano Marras on board the Aurelia.

Fremantle was their first landfall in Australia. Here, they were really pleased to be able to speak their own language with local shop owners.

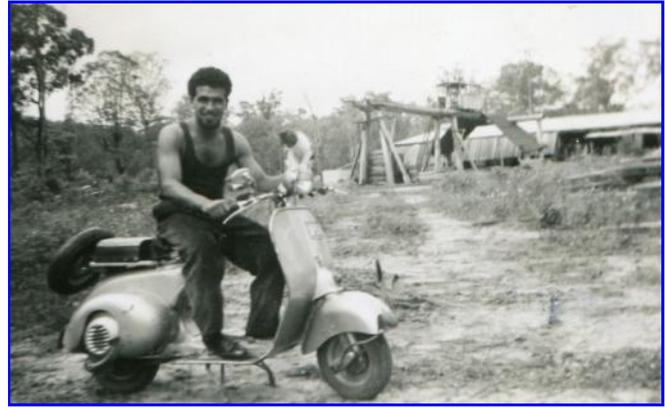
After arriving at Port Melbourne, he and his shipboard mates were sent to Bonegilla Migrant Centre in north-eastern Victoria near Wodonga. John's intention was to get a job as quickly as possible, not just any old job, but a good permanent job. The Italian government had assisted John's migration, and this money had to be paid back in monthly instalments. It was to take him about one year to pay off this debt.

After about 15 days at Bonegilla, John decided to go for a trip to Wodonga. It was on this day that some of his mates were offered jobs in North Queensland as cane cutters. John missed out. Then he had the offer of a job working on a large rural property along the Murray River, but he didn't get to go there either because a large flood came along and again he missed out.

Next, John and three mates (Pasqeli Sanna, Raymond Tatti and Salvatori Parchedu, all from Sardinia) got the offer of working in a mill in Gippsland. They thought that it would be a flour mill, but instead it turned out to be a timber mill.

They came by train to Bairnsdale and then by bus to Lakes Entrance (which they thought looked good) and then on through the bush to Orbost (with driver Ron Hall assisted by Ray Legge). At Orbost Post Office, Tom Stevens picked them up and took them to Club Terrace, arriving at a remote timber mill in the bush.

Like many thousands of European migrants coming to Australia at that time, John spoke hardly a word of English.



John had his photo taken sitting on a Vespa scooter which was owned by another Italian mill worker. John and his mates worked at the Club Terrace mill for about 18 months. This mill was managed by Bob Armisted and his son Gordon.

Added to this handicap, John could not drive a vehicle of any kind.

He tried to learn English by correspondence but this was very difficult. Eventually, he found that the best way of learning was by mixing with people. He describes Club Terrace as a friendly place "*just like a family, everyone mixed together. We had dances once a month.*" Indeed, some years later after he had left Club Terrace, John and his mates continued to return to Club Terrace for the dances.



In front of the Club Terrace School - Pasquali Sanna (not related to John), Salvatori Parchedu, John Sanna, and Raymond Tatti.



Australian food was very difficult to get used to. For their first Xmas, John and his mates decided to do their own thing and roast a pig. After much asking around, they eventually bought a young pig from Jack Green and roasted it on an open fire with a stick cut from the bush. “We even made the table ourselves and got some beer, and together we toasted our new life in Australia and our first Xmas here.

“Italian food was hard to get, pasta was poor quality and very starchy. It was just like glue when cooked. One day, we threw some onto a wall and it just stuck there. We all laughed. Olive oil for cooking was also very difficult to get. We were told that it was only for medicinal purposes and came in small bottles.”

In the 1950s, Italian men tended to wear their hair longer than Australian men. John found it difficult to tell the barber that he did not want his hair cut short. He was afraid of coming out of the barber shop with a “short-back-and-sides”. He also wore a beard which was unusual in Australia at that time.

John and his mates used to come to Orbost for shopping. There were other Italians here, all cutting sleepers for the Victorian Railways, so John decided to give sleeper cutting a go.

In March 1957, he went into partnership with Eugeno Mannina and Pasquale Sanna (no relative but also from Sardinia). They bought their outfit (a swing-saw, a 4 ton Austin truck and a Ford Major tractor) for £1,000.

Initially they used a cross cut saw for falling and cutting into lengths, but after a year, they got their first chain-saw. This was a “Danarm” which they bought in Bombala. It was very heavy and had a lever for a clutch. Later, they upgraded to a “McCulloch” chain-saw, and then from 1981 used “Stihl” only.

Their original swing-saw cut only on one side of the sleeper at a time. This was very slow because the sleeper had to be turned over several times. Afterwards, they upgraded to another swing-saw which could cut two sides at once.

As well as sleepers (10 ins. by 5 ins. by 9 ft.), they cut cross arms for the State Electricity Corporation. These measured 4 ins. by 4 ins. by 9 ft. and paid much better than the sleepers. **“We did well with our SEC contract.”**

At that time, John estimates there could have been about 85 sleeper cutters in the Orbost district, mostly Yugoslavs, Italians and Austrians. Some of them came here after working on the Snowy Mountains Scheme.

After three years, John’s partnership with Eugeno and Pasquale split up and John joined Alf Zuccolo in a partnership which lasted from 1960 until both men retired from sleeper cutting when the industry closed down in 1993, a total of 33 years. Carlo Scussolini joined the partnership in 1972 and stayed with them to the finish.

They started off cutting in the Youngs Creek area but later worked in many different places in the bush, carting their sleepers to the Orbost Railway Station. If all went well, they could produce as many as 100 sleepers a day. They were men who worked hard and were proud of their product.

The timber industry was enormous during the 1960s, with lots of mills and sleeper cutters. **“Orbost was a rich town with lots of businesses. The whole place was really buzzing.”**

In his early years in Orbost, John boarded at Dr Kerr’s old house (built c.1894) in Raymond Street



Longtime partners, Carlo Scusolini, John Sanna, and Alf Zuccolo with their last cut of sleepers in 1993.

This photo was taken to commemorate the day when wooden sleepers were cut in the Orbost district for the last time. It was also on this day that John retired from the timber industry.



In the 1950s and 1960s, there were several boarding houses in Orbost where single men could get board and lodging. They were homes away from home. This photo shows Pasqueli Sanna, Carlo Scusolini, John Sanna, Salvatori Porchedu, and Raymond Tatti.

which had become a boarding house. It was called "Monaro House".

It was here that John met his wife to be, Theresa Gatehouse and they were married in 1965. Incidentally, John and Therese have lived all their married life in a house which is right next door to "Monaro House" in Raymond Street. John was later able to purchase "Monaro House" which was unfortunately condemned and demolished. He still has some of the timber, windows and doors from this historic house and has retained the (now enormous) old trees which the Kerrs planted over 100 years ago, including a gigantic Bunya Pine and a Morton Bay Fig.

Although John and Therese and their three children (John, Jamie and Viv) have visited Italy and Sardinia several times over the years, their home is most definitely in Australia. John never fulfilled his young man's dream of going overseas from Sardinia, earning money, and then returning home to buy a farm. Instead, he made his home in Australia. He did however become a farmer in that he leased land at Club Terrace and Cabbage Tree Creek and ran Hereford cattle for some years.

Of the four young men from the same town in Sardinia who came out on the same ship in 1955, all stayed in Australia and did well. In 1961, one of John's brothers, Frank Sanna also migrated to Australia and came to work in the saw mills. Like John, he also lives in Orbost.

Now aged 83, John leads a life of active and healthy retirement as a long-time volunteer for Orbost Hospital and a member of Rotary.

Reflecting on changes that he's seen in Orbost since arriving here in the 1950s, John commented, ***"It's very different now, lots of new people. Also, the pubs are much quieter than they used to be."***

"I have enjoyed every minute of my life here. I still take every opportunity to go out into the bush."

John retains his Italian accent and his love of the food from his homeland. ***"Australia is wonderful now with food from all over the world. It's a very different place from when I came here in the 1950s."***

- May Leatch, January 2014

