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An Interview with Lucy Saini

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An Interview with Lucy Saini

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- .so they'd leave at 16 and they didn't go back because if they went back they would arrest them, put them in prison.

Q: Oh right, that was the Italian army in the 19th century. So when he [Agostino Giumelli] came out as a 16 year old he came by himself or with anyone else in the family?

No on his own.

Q: That was a incredible adventure, wasn't it?

He was prospecting for gold in West Australia.

Q: Of course the gold rushes were on over there?

They eventually shot off to Queensland and there they used to make charcoal. There was a charcoal burner. He used to tell me all about - they'd put the timber up into like a pyramid and cover it over with sods of soil and then they'd set it alight.

Q: What part of Queensland was that?

Oh up the - - - - Chiligo.

Q: Right up north? Did he ever do any cane cutting up in Queensland?

No, not that time.

Q: So did you hear why he came to Marsfield? Did anyone ever tell you that?

Well - no, I really don't know why he came to Marsfield. It was all Crown land, he must have heard that there was land for sale. And he bought six acres.

Q: So that was old Field of Mars common that was released for sale? Where exactly - could you explain for the tape where exactly that land was?

It was on the corner of Colloden and Waterloo Road, Marsfield.

Q: And what did he do with the land? How did he use it?

Oh he turned it into an orchard. First it was grapes, then citrus and - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - and then peach trees, peaches, apples, mostly peaches.

Q: Home built variety of all sorts of trees. And with the grapes would he make wine do you know?

Oh yes they always made their own wine. (Laughter)

Q: And did he ever tell you about getting produce to market in those very early days. Was it difficult?

Oh horse and cart. We had a fairly big cart with one horse and we used - course there was no decent roads it was all clay, they were all wooden cases and the horse could only pull about 80 of these cases so if they had around 80 I would take a load into where the RTA is now there was a big shed there and I could take say 20 or thirty cases into there and unload them into this shed and the next morning my father would pick them up from there because the bitumen road started.

Q: So when you say the RTA could you explain where that is?

(Voice aside) Corner of North Road and Blaxland Road, Top Ryde. That's the one you mean.

That's right.

Q: Thank you Carol. I should have said in the introduction that some of Mrs Saini's family are here Carol and Elsa. We'll talk to them later. Okay now when your father was first there in the very early days did he ever take produce down by the Lane Cove River? Did he ever mention that to you?

Oh yes. That was our day out. (Laughs) When we'd go out De Burgh's bridge. (Laughs). That was our day out.

Q: To De Burgh's bridge?

Yes.

Q: Can you tell me about what those days out were like?

Oh well we were always busy. Because I had to milk the cow. My job was to milk the cow, feed the horse, feed the chooks, feed the pig. Light the fire. That was before I went to school.

Q: So you were born there on the orchard in 1907 and it was -

- three of us were born there, there was no hospitals.

Q: Very busy life?

One at Eastwood was opened. My brother was eight years younger than me and he was born there and there was a Nurse Lawless, there were three sisters. The Lawless's

Q: St Edmonds.

That's right. They founded St Edmonds and they lived on the corner of Balaclava and Waterloo Road and they were all midwives. My two sisters were all born at home.

Q: Who was the oldest?

Doris.

Q: and could you tell me about your home. Your very earliest memories of it. What was it like? How big was it?

Oh my father built it all hand done. Oh it was quite a nice home, two bedrooms, dining room, big kitchen, eating kitchen of course. Great big one. The first stove we had was the old fashioned one. You lit a fire underneath, there was an oven half way and then the open fire on the top.

Q: An oven underneath?

There was a fire underneath, an oven on the top of that and then the open fire where we cooked on the top.

Q: Oh, I don't think I've seen one of those.

No, it was just the oven really, the fire - - - - - - - - we lit the fire underneath. That was the first one. Then we went on I think to the - - - - stoves I think.

Q: So was it a weatherboard building?

Oh yes, yes. Dad did all his own building, we built all the sheds, when - when (Laughs) when I was old enough cause - I think I was brought up as a boy.

Q: To do all the work?

We used to make our own slabs. You'd cut the tree down and make your slabs. Make your own palings, make your own posts, all hand done.

Q: So your father would cut the tree down? With hand - that saw - - - -

Yes I've got the cross cut saw out here. Kept it.

Q: Have you? Did you ever help doing that?

Did I what?

Q: Did you help? (Laughs)

(Laughs) I sure did.

Q: That could be a dangerous job for a small child.

(Laughs) The cross cut?

Q: What would you have to do?

Oh well dad would get on one end and I'd be on the other.

Q: Oh God! Were they really big trees there do you remember?

Oh yes, oh yeah, they were big trees all right. (Laughs)

Q: On the block of land he had his six acres he was clearing was forest that had never been farmed before.

Yes he cleared it and the parts he'd - - - - - - - - would have been - he trenched it.

Q: Now can you explain what that means?

The trenching. Of course there was a lot of clay around here so he did most of this at night time, he'd dig a trench about 3 foot deep. He'd put the clay, what he'd dug out on one side and he'd put the clay in first and then he'd put the topsoil on the top, the good soil on the top. We had about two acres of that, that had all been trenched by hand. Trench after trench.

Q: And why did he do it at night, because it was cooler?

Yes. No time in the day to fit all the jobs in.

Q: And that's where he planted his grapes?

Yes. That was the vineyard. And the clay was on the top and the good soil was underneath.

Q: Have you got an idea as a child was it a good area for farming, was it good soil, an area that could produce good -

- oh well it was very clayey, it's clay here too. But still there's a lot of mulch and manures and fertilisers. We used to get the manure down from, up Wellington. It used to come in big truck loads. By rail and then we'd go in, in a horse and cart and bring it back.

Q: Did that have anything to do with the Eastwood Co-operative or did your father get (overtalk)

Oh yes we were shareholders of that.

Q: So you probably remember when that started, in the early 1920s.

(Laughs) I sure do.

Q: Oh - right. So you've got a farm that produced fruit and grapes, you had a cow, but cows just for your own use.

Only one cow.

Q: And a pig. Just one pig, or a number of pigs?

No one pig. They used to kill their own pig for years, they killed their own pig and they gave that up. They'd make their own wine and their own bacon.

Q: And what about the chooks was just that for home consumption?

Well we were self supporting because there was no shops, there was nothing.

Q: So they'd grow their own vegetables?

We had well water, there was no water. We had to walk to the hand pump.

Q: And they'd grow vegetables for their own use as well?

Yes.

Q: What things would have to be bought besides the manure, do you remember any food having to be bought much?

Oh yes, flour. Flour we used to buy by the 25 bags of 50 pound bags.

Q: Now your very earliest memories as a child were you speaking Italian or English?

No, no, see my father had come out here at 16. By the time he married he was 36 when he married. He spoke English. So none of us. Anyway you wouldn't be game to speak Italian, they'd call you ‘dago’ (Laughs).

Q: Oh right. What about your mother? Didn't she speak - she didn't speak Italian to you?

Not often, no.

Q: And did they speak Italian to each other?

Not very often. No. None of us spoke Italian.

Q: So you don't know any Italian?

(Laughs) In later years after the Second World War when a lot of Southern Italians come out Mr Hernshaw, Eric Hernshaw who was a member of parliament. Of course I was I suppose in my twenties then, and Keith Freeman who was the Police Inspector in Eastwood. They'd come and ask me if I would be a Justice of the Peace so I could help the Italians. (Laughs) I said, 'I can't speak Italian.'

Q: Isn't that interesting. They just assumed you could.

So I learnt. I learnt a bit. I can read better than what I can speak I think.

Q: Where did you learn it, who did you learn it from?

Oh out of books.

Q: Oh I see. Oh right.

See there was nothing. Of course this is in later years after the second war but in my early days there was nothing, we had nothing. I only did three years in sixth class because I was too young to leave and the high school was at Burwood. Well you had to walk to Eastwood station and get the train and down to Burwood.

Q: So you grew up speaking English and did you feel as a child that it wasn't desirable to speak Italian in the outside community. Did you have that feeling?

Oh yes you wouldn't let on you were Italian. No. No.

Q: So you'd feel that there was prejudice against you from people?

Oh definitely. Yes. You'd be called a ‘dago’.

Q: And how about with the name, you know with such an Italian name, did you still feel that barrier with people even though (overtalk)

It's always been there. Yes.

Q: And your parents thought this as well of course. Did they ever speak to you about it?

No, not really, they just accepted it. (Laughs). Like we had to.

Q: Did you feel resentment that you're born here, you're as Aussie as anybody else and yet you felt there was this bias against you? Did you feel resentment about that?

Well yes, always because I always got on fairly well at school with the teachers, I was very popular (Laughs). In fact I think I was the teacher's pet. I got all the conduct prizes. Because then the 'dago' come out (Laughs) would be a big of jealousy.

Q: Oh the kids would say that? Now could I talk to you about Marsfield Public School, that's where you went to school. Do you remember your very first day when you started?

Yes, scared stiff. (Laughs)

Q: Oh were you? Oh. And you walked to school?

Oh yes - to Marsfield? - I walked home for lunch too. We had an hour for lunch and I'd walk home.

Q: So how far were you from the school?

Oh I suppose it was - I lived in Culloden Road, well I'd come round to the Epping Road and go there, I suppose it was a good 20 minutes each way.

Q: So yourself and your sister went off together?

No my sisters they were at Epping school. See Marsfield only went to the third class and they went to Epping. One was six years older than me and (aside) your mother was four years older.

Q: That's Elsa's mother your referring to?

That's right, yes.

Q: So you went off to school -

- I'd be on my own.

Q: And you got on very well with the teachers, you got on all right with the other kids apart from the 'dago' bit?

Oh yes, but they'd get a bit jealous because Mr Carradice was the teacher then and he really did favour me.

Q: I've heard a lot about Mr Carradice, what are your memories of him?

He was a wonderful teacher, really good. Very popular.

Q: When you were at school did he have that big map of the playground people have told me about? Could you explain what that looked like?

It was a big map of Australia [the world]. With a flag there - we'd salute our flag. Yes, very good teacher, but he taught, when I was there the whole - when I first started school it went to third class. There was only Miss McMahon then. And then I went to Epping and they opened it up to sixth class, that's when Mr Carridice come in. And he taught the whole six classes.

Q: So you went to Epping for a while.

I went to Epping public. Yes when they opened it up to sixth class I went back there for another couple of years.

Q: I see till you'd finished school.

Yes, and then I was too young to leave - it was the qualifying certificate and I couldn't leave, so back to Epping School I went and did another two years in sixth class.

Q: How did you get to Epping?

I walked.

Q: Right. How far was that?

About 3 miles. Through the bush.

Q: It would have been quite thick bush, would it, in those years?

Mostly bush.

Q: Was it a road you were walking on or a track?

Track through the bush. There (Laughs) used to be tramps camped in the shed down near your place.

Q: Near Elsa's place?

Yes in the park, there was (Laughs) always.

Q: Were you scared of them?

Going to the Catholic school and there was always these tramps there in the shed, it was a shed where they kept their cricket gear. Part of it was closed, and there was a part open, well there was always some tramps there. They'd get around with their blankets rolled up and their billy can hanging on the back. So going to a Catholic school I'd come up to this little track that went through Damons, then through the top of your place, Elsa's, it was all bush of course. It was just a little track, try and get there.

Q: Scared of those tramps were you?

(Laughs) I'd be scared and I'd be blessing myself and tip toeing through so I wouldn't make a noise and they wouldn't hear me.

Q: Were they ever scary or did they frighten anyone?

No they never touched you.

Q: What was it like going to a Catholic school after having been at Marsfield Public School?

Oh they were very strict. See I spent another two years up there so I used to teach the babies, there was no kindergarten, so I was three years in sixth class, I was teaching the babies. They had the babies.

Q: Did they teach a lot of religion?

Oh no. But a good grounding it served me very well.

Q: They did teach a lot of religion did they?

Oh yes, religion, but I mean, every other subject, reading, writing and arithmetic they drummed that into you. They were very strict.

Q: Now thinking about growing up a Catholic in Marsfield and of course most of the Catholics in Australia at that stage were of Irish background. What church did you go to in those years and was religion an important part of your life?

Very much so. We used to go to Epping first and then they built St Anthony's. They opened up Curzon Hall. That was my Sunday outing. I'd go to mass in the morning and Benediction in the afternoon because I liked singing and I used to sing in the choir at church and I'd be singing all the hymns at Benediction, that was my outing.

Q: So would the whole family go or was your father too busy?

No only me.

Q: Oh just you? No one else went?

Oh well my sisters were married.

Q: And with Benediction could you just explain for someone listening to the tape what happens at Benediction? They mightn't know.

Oh - just an afternoon service really, but all the hymns were in Latin and I loved singing Latin. It was good fun.

Q: So the Benediction was at Curzon Hall was it?

Yes and Mass was too in the morning. Half past six.

Q: M'mm that's early isn't it? That's a huge building isn't it? How did you feel when you went there?

I used to play in there before. When I went to Marsfield school, Curzon Smith lived there and they had a servant and the servant had a daughter and she was at school, her and I were good friends, so after school she'd take me up there to Curzon Hall and we'd play around in the grounds. They had like a big greenery, a big fern house I suppose. You had to go up steps amongst all these lovely pot plants and that and of course I loved gardening. (Laughs)

Q: What was the servant's name?

I forget the name.

Q: So you'd be one of the few people in the district who remember Curzon Smith living there?

The girl's name was Rebecca I think. Becky somebody.

Q: And did you ever go into the house, into the building itself?

No, not into the real building. There were big outbuildings.

Q: It's a huge big building isn't it?

Oh yes. So they turned it into a chapel and I used to go to Mass every Sunday.

Q: So you've had a fairly busy life. When you were a child when you were at school would you have spent a lot of time after school doing work around the farm.

Oh yes, they'd wait for me because I had to milk the cow. Nobody else milked the cow. (Laughs)

Q: You had that talent did you?

Of being the worker. (Laughs)

Q: Did you work inside as well helping your mum, or were you mainly doing outside work?

Oh yes, yes, yes, too right.

Q: What about your other brothers, what did they do?

Well Elsa's mother, she went to work in a fruit shop at Leichhardt. Milano's. She was only, she'd left school and they had a fruit shop, these Milano's had a fruit shop in Leichhardt and they used to buy a lot of fruit from my father and he said, 'you've got three girls, you don't want three girls at home you can let one come down and help me with - help my wife in the shop'. So when my sister left school she went to live at Leichhardt and that's where she met her husband. And she was married at 19. So Emma was never home very much.

Q: Now when you left school what did you do? Did you go and get a job too?

No. I worked in the orchard.

Q: And was that what you wanted to do? Or (overtalk)

I really wanted to learn dressmaking. I've always been very interested in sewing. But I wasn't allowed.

Q: Now who stopped you? Both parents?

My father. No, my mother didn't, my father, he just wouldn't allow it, he said, 'no, because Lucy's got to help at home.' So Lucy did the ploughing and the horse work, I did the lot.

Q: So you were really doing a man's work?

I've always done a man's work, yes.

Q: Now how did you feel when you left school and you wanted to go and do the dressmaking, were you rebellious?

You daren't disobey your father. Not in those days.

Q: Did you say to him, 'look I'd rather be doing something else'?

(Laughs) I had a friend who was learning dressmaking and her mother had come over and asked my father could I go with Rita. 'Oh no' says my father, ‘Lucy's got to work here at home.’ So Lucy worked at home.

Q: Did you get rebellious at all?

No. No. I've always been the obedient daughter.

Q: M'mm - sounds like you were too obedient. (Laughs)

I was. Yes, unfortunately. Doesn't pay to be really too obedient.

Q: No, so you stayed there and worked very hard?

I did, yes.

Q: Now what about discipline in the family? They were very strict the parents?

My father. Oh no, my mother wasn't strict but my father was. You didn't wait to be told twice you did it. (Laughs)

Q: And everyone in the family was the same they were all very obedient?

Well there was no one left see? Emma was married at 19 and my eldest sister she was married the same year so there was only me and my brother was 8 years younger and he was absolutely spoilt.

Q: Oh - I was wondering if he did a lot of work. (Laughter) He didn't? Oh (laughter)

No he didn't . (laughs)

Q: Elsa's shaking her head over there. (Laughs)

He's the worker that's suffering today from a bad back. (Loud laughter).

Q: I suppose you think you should have the bad back. (Laughs)

No I really have worked hard, foolishly probably. But when you're young and strong, I liked being strong. I enjoyed it. I used to plough - - - - or whatever and whistle and sing all day, didn't worry me. Worries me now with a bad back. (Laughs) Not walking too well.

Q: But you're strong and capable.

I am strong. Yes.

Q: But after a while you actually got to like doing the farm work and you enjoyed it?

Well there was no alternative. I wasn't allowed.

Q: Now let's hear now for a moment about the - your interaction with the community. You're old enough to remember World War One probably not very much.

Yes I remember.

Q: What are your memories of that and how (overtalk) your grandfathers were affected?

He used to come over, he lived with another uncle. He used to come over to me every day. I was seven, and I could read the paper. My grandfather would come over.

Q: Is this your mother or your father's side.

My father's side.

Q: He'd migrated as well?

Oh yes, later. Oh yes they're all buried out in the Field of Mars. And grandfather would come over and I'd read the paper to him. He was interested in the war because he was in the war of - - - - in Italy against the Austrians.

Q: So he was an old soldier?

He was an old soldier, yes. Yes. That's where I learned to knit in the First World War. We used knit socks for the soldiers.

Q: Which side were you knitting for? (Laughter)

In the First World War the Italians were the - - - -

Q: Not right at the beginning, they changed sides in the middle.

In the First World War? Oh I don't remember that.

Q: Oh no you'd be too young. So you didn't feel - you didn't have that feeling of being on the enemy side, being very young of course, you didn't have that.

Oh no - yes that's when I learned to knit, and still knitting.

Q: Do you remember about the war, perhaps the celebrations at the end of it?

Oh yes. But we weren't allowed out. My father was very strict and - - - - - - - - at home and being the obedient daughter I was at home.

Q: After World War One in 1919 there was the big flue epidemic. Do you have any memories of that?

Oh yes. I remember that.

Q: How did that affect people in Marsfield?

Oh I lost quite a few of my friends.

Q: They died?

Yes.

Q: Oh really.

Martha Contessa. Elsa wouldn't remember. Yes they died. Martha Contessa. She had four children, she died and left these four children and they became so neglected we all started looking after them.

Q: Oh dear. That was in 1919?

Yes.

Q: Do you remember people with the masks?

Oh yes, I wore it myself. I remember the masks.

Q: And did anybody in your family get ill?

No.

Q: Where did the Contessa's live?

Balaclava Road.

Q: And the four children were left, their father was busy working I suppose.

Yes, the mother died. The four children used to be the cleanest and tidiest in the school and after the mother died to become - he married again and she just neglected them. So that's when I started to look after them.

END OF INTERVIEW