

# The Visocchi Family

*Clarrie Neal*

*Compiled by Clarrie Neal from information provided by Margaret Nelson, Mimi McLister, Alfie, Ron and Roy Visocchi, and from details gathered from a book written by Phillip McInnes.*

The story of the Visocchi family in Australia began when Giuseppe 'Joe' Visocchi left Italy to work with his uncle in his shops in Fife, Scotland. He was to spend some 14 years in Scotland, its people having a lasting effect on him. He developed a deep affection for all things British and in later life it was often said that he was more British than the English were. As he had done in Scotland, he insisted that English be the language spoken by the family here in Australia.

Joe was born in Atina in Italy, and with his brothers became a successful businessman with several shops in Scotland. In 1919 he married Rosa Rosetti from Casalattico, and she joined him to live in the Leven area of Scotland. It was here their first six children were born, with their first son Attilio born in 1921, followed by Annie-1922, Linda-1924, Doris-1926, Ronnie-1927, and Amelia-1929, who from the day she was born was known as 'Mimi'.

The great depression of 1928 saw Joe and his family lose everything they owned; he was bankrupted. Joe felt that with a little more cooperation from his brothers they could have saved their businesses, but it was not to be. He felt disgraced, and to get as far away as he could from his brothers, he decided to emigrate to Australia.

It was decided that he would travel alone to Australia with the family to follow later. Joe found life in Australia during the depression was just as tough as in Scotland and had to travel to outback Queensland as a timber cutter to get money to send back home to the family.

In September 1929 the family left England on the *Orontes* bound for Australia. The eldest son Attilio, eight years old, recalled how the ship called in at Naples and they had the opportunity to see their grandparents for the first time. It was an exciting time as the grandparents came on board, but he could not understand why this young girl who came on board with the grandparents just wanted to play with him. Like most young boys he did everything possible to avoid her. It was to be much later in life that he realised that this girl was his sister Anna, and that she had been sent as a young child to live with the grandparents in Italy, a common practice with Italian families in those days to maintain close family ties. Attilio was to write later just how much this episode pained his conscience, that he had shunned her and behaved so badly. Many years later when she came out to Australia to live, he was so pleased to be able to apologise for his behaviour.

When the ship finally arrived in Sydney, Joe was a very happy man as he welcomed his family and he was able to hold his daughter Mimi whom he had never seen.

Joe had arranged accommodation for the family in Woolloomooloo, but having great difficulty getting work, he set up a hand pushed cart, selling home made ice cream. The family soon found that life in the inner city was not for them, and decided to move out into the country. All the family's belongings were loaded onto a Model Ford, and with Rosa and the two youngest children on board, set off for Schofields.

Joe and the three eldest children travelled by train, then walked from the station to their new home at Meadowlands Estate, better known as 'Cow Flat'. After a few years of struggling to make enough to live on from his ice cream cart, Joe decided he would buy his own block of land on Carnarvon Road, and build himself a new home and a new brick factory to make the ice cream.

In 1933 the land was cleared of the bush, a shack was put up with walls of tin and hessian bags, the family living under these conditions while their home was being built. Their home was built with much help from their neighbours, Mr Cassels and Mr Roach.

Joe's ice cream runs took him to Riverstone, Richmond, Windsor, Rooty Hill, Plumpton, Berkshire Park, Marsden Park, Oakville, Scheyville, Maraylya, Cattai and Maroota. After using a trumpet for several years, he then used a cow bell to alert the neighbourhood he was in the area, the sound of the bell sending many a child scurrying off to their Mum or Dad to get a penny for an ice cream.

From the cart he sold any surplus vegetables from the family garden, and also bottles of Noons soft drinks. In those days all soft drink bottles had a deposit, Joe accepting the bottles as payment for an ice cream. He often arrived home loaded with bottles, with barely enough room to sit in the cart. Sometimes he would not return home until 10.00 pm, and Rosa and the older children would have to help unload the cart, clean up and pack things away.

It was also at this time the family grew with the birth of Alfred in 1934, Harold in 1936, Roy in 1937, Margaret in 1939 and the youngest son John in 1941, making a total of 11 children.

All the children had their chores to do, bringing in the horses and cows that, as the area was mostly unfenced, roamed freely all over the district. Then there was milking the cows, feeding the pigs, chopping firewood, helping their mother with the washing and ironing and in the vegetable garden which now extended over two acres.

Mimi recalled times when her father would pin a lot of money to the inside of her coat pocket and ask her to go and bank it. The nearest bank was at Windsor so she would catch the train, but if she was running late coming home and missed it, there wouldn't be another one for three hours, so she would walk the train tracks home. Margaret remembered when the family had the only telephone in the area, the neighbours would come to use the phone, or the children would deliver urgent messages to their neighbours.

Although times were hard the family knew how to enjoy themselves, with their impromptu concerts involving all the family, including Joe with his bagpipes. The family owned an Italian made pump organ that is now an exhibit at the Riverstone museum.

The Visocchi children all have fond memories of their schooldays, playing with children from the Roach, Cassel, Sullivan and Jocelyn families. All the Visocchi children attended Schofields Public School, the name Visocchi appearing on the school rolls for more than 50 years.

In the 1940s Joe had a new cart built by Harry Williams the blacksmith in Riverstone, and had a sign built over the factory that read 'Visocchi and Sons, Ice Cream'. Although each of the boys started out in the ice cream business, none were to carry on, a source of disappointment for Joe.

Joe continued to buy blocks of land in the Carnarvon Road area as they became available, and was able to give each of his 11 children a block of land for their own use.

Of all the children only the first born was given an Italian name - Attilio. The remaining ten were all given English names, evidence of Joe's fondness of the Scottish people and their traditions.

So that he could join the Australian Army in the 1939 World War, Attilio changed his name to Phillip McInnes, as he believed the name Attilio Visocchi would make it very difficult for him to enlist, particularly with Italy siding with Germany. Attilio, now Phillip, was to do Australia proud with his Army service, serving in the Middle East, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, New Guinea, Borneo, then with the Special K force in the Korean war, and again in the Vietnam war in the 1960s.

Joe Visocchi died in 1974 and was buried in the Riverstone cemetery, alongside his wife Rosa, who had passed away in 1953 at the age of 54.

The Visocchi families, whether be it from their Italian ancestry, their years in Scotland, their religion, Joe and Rosa's ethos on hard work, or the families' togetherness, can feel justifiably proud that they have all become good Australian families.

### *Making ice cream* As told by Roy Visocchi

'Tidlio' Visocchi bought all the dry ingredients from Charlie Knight's store in Riverstone, and in later years from Wally Wood when he owned the store. The ice used was packed in hessian bags with sawdust and delivered twice weekly from Blacktown to Schofields on the afternoon train. The children would drive the horse and cart to the station to collect the ice. There would be three or four blocks of ice, each measuring 1 metre x 500 mm x 150 mm.

The mixing of the ingredients was done in a steel cylinder, 230 mm diameter and 900 mm deep. This cylinder was placed in a much larger wooden cask that was lined with ice and sprinkled with salt, the salt lowering the freezing point temperature.

The dry ingredients were mixed in the cylinder with boiled sterilised milk and stirred to a smooth mix. As the mixture froze against the cylinder wall, a small spade was used to pare the frozen mix from the wall to the centre of the cylinder and the process continually repeated for more than an hour till all the mix was frozen. The steel cylinder was transferred from this cask to another cask in the cart that was pre-packed with salt and ice, thus keeping the mixture frozen throughout the day while it was being delivered.

The recipe for 'Tidlio' Visocchi's ice cream has passed on with him, but there are still stores in Scotland today with signs that advertise for sale 'Visocchi's Ice Cream'.

### *Making salami*

The family made their own salami, a rarity in those days but today a very popular smallgoods product. They farmed their own pigs, and when one was ready a neighbour was engaged for the slaughtering. It was always a week-end job as all the children were required to help.

After slaughter the pig was laid out on a sheet on the ground and covered with hessian bags that had been boiled in a 44 gallon drum on a nearby fire. The hot bags were continually changed to soften the bristles; when soft enough it was the children's job to remove the bristles using jam tin lids as scuds. The intestines were removed and cleaned in a tub to be used as the sausage casings.

After the carcass was cleaned, the fat was removed and placed in kerosene tins to be boiled down for lard. The carcass meat was removed, cut up and minced in a hand mincer, and then mixed with all the herbs, mint, oregano, garlic etc. Using a funnel this mixture was then forced into the sausage casings and the ends tied.

The salami sausages were then hung in a small smoke house in the back yard and smoked for up to two weeks. Several cured salami sausages were then pushed into the lard in a kerosene tin where they could be kept for several months and used as required.

Roy also remembered how his mother loved to cook with olive oil; that the only place where it could be purchased was from the chemist, and how expensive it was. How the times have changed, today it is cheap, sold in every shop and supermarket, and used in every household in Australia.

### *Other memories* as told by Ron Visocchi

Ron Visocchi's first memory of life in Australia was of how excited the family were when they arrived here from Scotland, having not seen their father for more than 18 months.

He recalled his father not being content to use a bell like the other ice cream vendors. He used an old Army bugle that not only attracted the attention of all the children, but could also frighten many of the animals in the nearby paddocks of Cow Flat. He said the bugle was a popular talking point for the locals and is still fondly remembered today.

When the family moved to Carnarvon Road they lived in a shed and a bag walled shack while their house was built. The shed in later years was used by Joe to make and store his home brew, a popular pastime for many families in the war years as the hotels would only open at 4.00 pm and closed at 6.00 pm. Ron recalled it was dangerous to enter the shed at these times, and one night hearing several bottles explode.

Joe decided to start a vineyard and make his own wine. Word soon got around the area that Joe was bottling the wine, Ron recalling some of the locals often coming across the creek after being turned out of the hotel at 6.00 pm to get their bottle of wine on their way home. They thought it was great, but Ron said it was awful and described it as a purple sludge. Ron said years later when he worked at the Meatworks he was often jokingly referred to as the son of a bootlegger.

He remembered several of the horses that Joe used to pull his cart around the district, all plodders that did the job and were responsible for many humorous, though sometimes unpleasant experiences. When his first horse looked like dying, Joe discussed his options with his neighbours, who suggested a good clean out with Epsom salts and castor oil, after all it was successful on the children. Of course a much larger dosage was required so the mixture was prepared in a beer bottle and poured down the horse's throat. The treatment proved successful, the horse after passing a lot of wind and much liquid manure, fully recovered and saved Joe the expense of buying another horse.

Another horse known as Jimmy was renowned for his reluctance to venture out with the cart, but when turned for home would run all the way, knowing there would be a meal waiting for him. One night coming home through the Vineyard bush Jimmy collided with a tree and overturned the cart. Joe, though badly shaken was unhurt and able to walk the horse home, returning with the family next day to retrieve the cart with its bent posts and dangling roof.

Another story concerned the grey horse, old and reliable and a real plodder, until the day a swarm of bees landed on the cart. The grey galloped all the way home along the Richmond Road from Berkshire Park to Carnarvon Road, Joe becoming very excited as he related the day's events to his family at home.

Ron also recalled the standard answer Joe gave when asked why he had so many children "*stock is better than money*". Another incident was the day a member of parliament was to make a speech in Riverstone and to rally the locals Joe was invited wear his kilt to play the bagpipes, accompanied by Pop Roach on his drum - a memorable day.