

AUSTRALIA - THE EARLY YEARS - 1923 TO 1926

This is a short extract from the extensive family history collected by Frank (Melbo) Provera. The first part is recounted in later life by Edda, his elder sister, and then Frank himself takes over. It begins with the then ten year-old Edda's account of the journey of Mrs Provera and her children from Italy to Australia to join her husband and then goes on to tell something of their subsequent life in Queensland. The family was accompanied by their mother's brother Giovanni Girola (Uncle) and a family friend Giovanni Piacentino (Jack).

Edda:

We arrived at Fremantle on Wednesday the 30th of May 1923, on what was Frank's second birthday. (Frank adds at this point that in hindsight, 'it was not a bad present for myself as a two year-old to be presented with a new country in which to live for the rest of my life'). The ship continued its journey to Adelaide and then on to Melbourne where we went ashore for some sightseeing in the city. We came across an Italian cafe in Lonsdale Street, later known as Molina's and now The Latin, and we took the opportunity to have a lunch of spaghetti - a change in diet from the English fare on the 'Orsova'. (Here Frank comments that 'at this time, only about four miles away in East Brunswick there was a five months' old baby girl whom I was destined to meet for the first time some 25 years later.')

Our next stop was Sydney, where we disembarked as the ship was scheduled to discharge cargo for a few days. The Queensland passengers were transferred to a smaller passenger ship, the 'Wyandra' for the rest of the journey to Brisbane and North Queensland ports. At Townsville, the passengers for Ingham left the ship and we continued our journey for another day to Cairns where we met our father. We stayed overnight in a hotel in Spence Street before catching a train the next day for the 31 mile trip south to Bellenden Ker. There we stayed in the house on our father's and his partner's farm for a month before moving to a nearby barracks. Frank's 'cot' consisted of a stretcher made from a couple of bags fixed over a wooden framework.

Shortly after our arrival father left the partnership and formed a canecutting gang with



Passport photo for Australia, April 1923. From left: Edda (10), Leno (12), Frank (2) and Caterina Provera. Courtesy of Frank Provera.

Uncle, Jack and others to cut cane for the 1923 season in the Bellenden Ker area. Our mother did the cooking and washing of work-clothes for this large gang of men on an outside improvised wood-burning stove. This must have been quite a burden for a young woman in a strange land with such a different climate and surroundings, an unfamiliar language, and far away from all her relatives and friends.

My brother Lino and I were soon enrolled in the nearby one-teacher school where we began to learn the new language and school customs. After school we were often told to go and look for firewood for the kitchen stove - a job we enjoyed doing since there was so much of it on the uncleared farm headlands [the borders of the paddocks where the ploughs turned] and nearby bushes. This was quite different from our experience at Mirabello, our town in Piedmont, where we had to hunt high and low over areas which had been denuded of forests many years before. Regular deliveries of groceries, meat and bread were made to the farm and barracks from Babinda, but occasionally when there was a slip-up in deliveries, Lino and I had to walk the three miles to Babinda and back to pick up some bread for the day's meals before going to school that morning. There were no refrigerators or even ice-chests on the farms in those days.

Early in 1924 our father sold his share of the farm at Bellenden Ker, and with Uncle and Jack, bought a small farm from a Mr Warner for £700. It was in an area known as Block 67, about two miles east of Babinda. Some cane had already been planted and land had already been partly cleared of forest to extend the area under cane. The house, or rather shack, was fairly small, with a couple of bedrooms and a sort of kitchen. After tea Uncle and Jack used to go across to a neighbour's farm barracks to sleep. The partners immediately built another house for £100. It was put up on high blocks necessary because of floods in wet weather and made of timber and galvanised iron. The top floor had three bedrooms and two verandahs, downstairs a kitchen and eating area on floor boards, the rest mother earth. The dish-washing and laundry bench was just outside the house, beside a well built by the partners. We obtained water from the well to supplement our tank water during the drier part of the year. After the previous year's accommodation at Bellenden Ker, this new house was a luxury.

In March a baby was due so our parents went into Cairns for mother's check-up. This was

rather fortuitous since mother was put into hospital immediately and Aurora was born on Sunday the 12th of March 1924. She was a true 'Australiana' as our father used to say, proud that one of the children had been born here. Aurora was not given a second name, though our father did suggest that perhaps she should have been called 'Orientina' after the Orient Line ships which brought migrants to Australia. However better judgement prevailed and this option was discarded. (Aurora is the Italian word for 'Dawn').

With our youngest family member 100% Australian and our father already having fulfilled the minimum residence term of 5 years in Australia for naturalisation, on the 12th of August 1924 our father, mother and their three children born in Italy were naturalised at Babinda, and Certificate No CC295 was obtained from Brisbane in due course. The closest resemblance to Frank's real name on this certificate is 'Melba' - possibly the officer concerned got his second name 'Melbo' confused with Madam Melba.

There was not enough work on the farm to keep the three men fully occupied, so during the cutting season two worked with a gang whilst the other attended to farm duties. In 1925 the partners received a set-back on their farm due to a mill worker's strike against the use of too many Italians or foreigners as canecutters. After some six weeks of negotiations between the unions, the mill, the farmers and others concerned, an agreement was reached that no more than 25% of foreigners would be employed as canecutters in gangs.

Frank:

By this time, as a four year-old I was beginning to be aware of my existence and to remember my surroundings - our house with steps to the upper level, hens and roosters under and around the house, cane fields and the men working in them, clearing scrub for new paddocks and so on. Lino and Edda went off to a place they called 'school' most days of the week and came home talking a strange language called 'English'. Aurora would crawl or walk around the house and occasionally tumble down the steps. She would also hide when we had visitors. One evening I was determined to sleep in the fowl-house with a pet rooster I had been following around the yard most of the afternoon. After much persuasion by Uncle, I eventually returned to the comfort of my bed upstairs.

By 1926 I was following the men around the paddocks trying to do odd jobs. One paddock partly cleared still had many tree stumps in it and could not be worked with horses by the conventional ploughing and planting procedures. Under these conditions in order to get a cane crop and hence some income as soon as possible, cane was planted by hand-digging furrows about one foot long, six inches wide and six inches deep. A spade or mattock was used for this and after planting two sticks of cane about one foot long in each furrow, it was covered with dirt. By the time the cane grew to maturity the following year, it was hoped that the tree stumps would have decayed sufficiently to make access with the usual horse-led implements easier.

A sugar mill tramline of the usual 2ft gauge passed in front of our house and sometimes on a Sunday afternoon we would walk along the tramline for a few hundred yards to visit a farmer nearby. This was the Macaroni family and we would enjoy eating the watermelons which they grew on the headlands of their paddocks. If we wanted to visit friends further down the tramline we could hook up a horse to an empty cane truck, put a few boxes on it for seats and let the horse take us to our destination.

One afternoon out of sight of the house, Lino tried his first cigarette but after a few puffs, he decided he had had enough for a few years. He

gave me a puff also and that was enough for me for a lifetime.

By the middle of 1926 I had turned five so it was off to school with Lino, Edda and a group of their friends. Babinda school was fairly large with several rooms and at first I was a little upset at being separated from Lino and Edda. On one occasion I wandered around during school hours looking in every room to see if they were still there. Getting to school was a two-mile walk following the dirt road and the mill tramline to Babinda, then crossing the Babinda Creek on the road bridge just before reaching the township. We had a bit of excitement one morning when one of the girls walked across the adjacent railway bridge instead of the road bridge. A train suddenly appeared around the corner and she had to make a sudden jump onto the sand below. Fortunately the bridge was a low one and she was not injured.

The walk home from school in fine weather was more interesting in that we used to go along the water's edge of Babinda Creek (when it was not in flood) for about a mile and a half and then climb up the bank and cut across the cane fields to get home. At least this way we did not have to walk past the dead horse under a tree near the tramline which became the situation later in the year. In mid-December our welcome seven weeks' school holidays started and this took us through to 1927.



Mirabello Monferrato, the town of origin of the Proveras. Courtesy of Frank Provera.