

GIUSEPPE CANTAMESSA

by

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Giuseppe Cantamessa (1892 - 1947), cane-farmer and internee, was born on 9 March 1892 at Conzano, Piedmont, Italy, the son of Pietro Cantamessa and Giustina, nee Garrone. In 1907 Giuseppe came to Australia on the SS Bremen to join his father who was working in north Queensland. Although his father returned to Italy in 1909, the young Cantamessa settled in Ingham on the Herbert River, where there was already a growing Italian community. He took up sugar farming at Ingham and became a naturalised British subject in 1913. In 1918 he married Piedmont-born Maria Alda Fiori of Babinda, north Queensland. They were to have five sons, two of whom died before reaching adulthood.

Frequently called upon to represent the Italian community, in 1925 Cantamessa gave evidence before the State royal commission which investigated the social and economic effects of increasing numbers of 'Aliens' in North Queensland. When prejudice against Italians intensified, particularly in the northern sugar districts, a "Gentlemen's Agreement" between the Australian Workers' Union, the Australian Sugar Producers' Association and the Queensland Cane Growers' Association, gave preference to British cane cutters by restricting the employment of those of non-British origin. Cantamessa campaigned against the definition of "British cutters" as those of British blood, which excluded naturalised British subjects of other



The marriage of Giuseppe Cantamessa and Maria Alda Fiori was celebrated at St Monica's Church in Cairns.



Well integrated into the wider community, Giuseppe Cantamessa served on numerous local organisations. Above, in the premiership team of the Inglebrook Tennis Club in 1927, Cantamessa is seated on the right. Below, seated second from the right, he was photographed with other members of the Herbert River Cane Growers' Association.



backgrounds. An Italian Association of the Sugar Industry, of which Cantamessa was briefly the President, was formed in 1931 to protect the interests of those of Italian origin in the Sugar Industry. A good organiser and a fluent speaker, he advocated moderation and conciliation, and worked to bring about industrial harmony.

Eventually producing an average cut of 2000 tons on 'the most improved sugar property' in the district, Cantamessa was chairman of the Herbert River District Cane Growers' Association and an executive-member of the Cane Prices Board at Macknade. He represented Ingham from 1929 to 1936 on the Queensland Cane Growers' Council, and in 1931 was consulted over the preparation of a new Federal sugar agreement. An active member and office holder in most local sporting clubs, he was District Vice-President of the North Queensland Life Saving Association, Patron and President of the Bowling Club, and also at various times an active member of the Tennis, Football, Golf and Cricket clubs. Cantamessa had taken part in the relief work for victims of the Herbert River floods in 1927 and was associated with several charitable appeals. Elected to the Hinchinbrook Shire Council in 1936, he served on the district's first Labor administration until his forced resignation four years later.

Italy declared war on France and Britain on 10 June, 1940. Next day Cantamessa was interned. In his unsuccessful appeal, heard on 24 August, he denied any interest in 'foreign politics', asserted his loyalty and pointed out that his eldest son had enlisted in the Militia in 1938, being the first of Italian background in the Herbert River district to volunteer. The authorities lacked concrete evidence that he held fascist sympathies, yet a donation to the Italian Red Cross during Italy's Abyssinian campaign in 1936, his opposition to British Preference in 1931 and his leadership qualities were the grounds on which he was detained. He remained in custody for more than three years, being held in internment camps at Gaythorne, Queensland, Hay in New South Wales and finally Loveday in South Australia. He was released on 10 November, 1943 but restricted to his farm until 20 March, 1945. Cantamessa's internment is an extreme example of the treatment received by many British subjects of Italian origin in north Queensland during the Second World War.



Giuseppe Cantamessa after his release from internment camp.

Survived by his wife and three sons, Cantamessa died of a cerebral tumour on 27 March 1947 in Brisbane Hospital and was buried in the Ingham cemetery; his funeral cortege of 200 cars was the largest seen in that town. His obituary in the Herbert River Express noted his "honourable service to those he represented" and recorded that "he discharged his duties to his adopted country faithfully and well".

Sources:

Royal Commission appointed to Inquire into and Report on the Social and Economic Effect of Increase of Number of Aliens in North Queensland, Report PP (Qld) and QSA, PRE/A849; Internment file, G. Cantamessa, CA 753, BP242/1, Item Q6446; Townsville Catholic News, 1 August, 1947; Herbert River Express, 5 April, 1947; Townsville Daily Bulletin, 28 April, 1931; Archbishop Duhig correspondence, (Catholic Diocesan Archives, Brisbane).