

## THE SCENT OF OUR ISLAND

It all began in 1949. Seven men and four women in the prime of their lives sailed from Genoa to Australia on board the ship *Ugolino Vivaldi* on 28 July 1949. They were a group of friends, all from Capoliveri, one of the main towns on the Island of Elba situated in the Ligurian Sea, opposite Tuscany. Their hearts were full of sorrow for leaving behind the loved ones, knowing that it would take many years before they could be reunited. In their suitcases, some tied up with a string, they packed their best clothes and filled them with the hope of a better life and work opportunity in Australia. Their names were: Gennai Gualberto, Corrado De Angelis, Baldo Sardi, Franco Sardi, Giuseppe Muti, Giovanni Conci, Pietro De Stefani, Giuseppina Muti, Libera Conci, Leonia Conci and Liana Muti Conci.

Many other people from the same town had migrated to Australia in the 1920s and 1930s. Most of them spent long years of hard work cutting sugar cane in North Queensland. In the letters they sent home, which were read out to everybody in the town, most of them would speak well of Australia. So, after the Second World War, it was natural for many others to follow in the footsteps of their *paesani*, many of them sponsored out by relatives.



*Cane cutters from Isola d'Elba in north Queensland in 1930s.*

The anguish of leaving their hometown became stronger for these young people on approaching the waters in the proximity of their island, after a day at sea. They decided to say goodbye again to their loved ones in a true 'navigator's way': by sending a message in a bottle, consigned with a prayer to the waves of the deep blue sea they knew so well. The message read:

*On board, 29 July 1949*

*Dear Everybody,*

*First of all let us hope that good fate will be on our side for this brief message to reach you. You will be comforted to know that we are all well. At this very moment, 10.30am of the 29th, we are navigating next to the Island of Capraia and we can smell the scent of our dear island. We always think of you. Goodbye, we hug you all with lots of love.*

La Capraia is an island near Elba. The message was signed by all and placed in an envelope with this address: *Please deliver to the people of Capoliveri who remember us.* On the back of the envelope they wrote: *From a group of emigrants to Australia who left Genoa on 28.7.49 on board the U. Vivaldi.* The bottle with the message was thrown overboard and followed by eyes filled with tears.



*A map of the Tuscan Archipelago with the Island of Capraia north-west of the Island of Elba.*

After a few months the bottle was caught in the nets of a fisherman from the Island of Elba. The entire population of Capoliveri, who fondly remembered them, read the message. The letter was finally given to Silvana Giusti, the sweet-heart of one of the signatories, Gualberto Gennai. It was an event remembered by many on the island for a long time.

Silvana and Gualberto married a few years later and settled in Melbourne. The message was forgotten until recently when it was found together with other family papers by Gualberto and Silvana during a recent visit back to Capoliveri. It is now in Melbourne where it has brought together some of the original members of the group who now call Australia home.



Three members of the original group of young immigrants from Isola d'Elba reunited in Melbourne in 1999. From left: Gualberto Gennai, Corrado De Angelis and Baldo Sardi.

Bordo 29.1.49  
 Corrado tutti  
 Speriamo aver tutto che il caso  
 sia stato favorevole e noi nel  
 farvi giungere queste brevi righe  
 che vi serviamo di conforto  
 poiché possiamo assicurarvi che  
 stiamo tutti bene. In questo  
 momento a pensamenti  
 ore 10.30 del 29  
 di fianco alle Copie  
 quindi sentiamo  
 dello, vostro, cose, etc.  
 amo sempre e ci  
 con tutto il vostro  
 Affari Gualberto  
 Corrado

Per favore da consegnare  
 a Capoliveri che ricordano  
 CAPOLIVERI  
 ISOLA D'ELBA  
 - Livorno -

M. VIVALDI  
 28.1.49  
 Uscita  
 della  
 Uscita  
 della  
 Uscita  
 della

A. BLANETTI, ROMA - Long. 127 cm 50 - 48 - 12 - 1.400 lire

The message written on board the ship Ugolino Vivaldi in 1949.