

BONEGILLA MIGRANT RECEPTION AND TRAINING CENTRE – Brian Bell

I have frequently heard interviews with Italo-Australians on the SBS Italian radio broadcasts and many of them have spoken of their time at Bonegilla. It was only a name to me and I had no idea where it was. When I was recently in Albury, the Tourist Information Centre advised me that Bonegilla Migrant Reception and Training Centre was located at Wodonga and was now open to the public to tour through.



Bonegilla features the remnant huts and buildings of “Block 19”, one of the original 24 accommodation blocks, and other buildings that once covered an area of 130 hectares. The original complex was built as the Bonegilla Army Camp during the Second World War. It became the Bonegilla Migrant Reception and Training Centre in 1947, and until 1971 served as Australia's largest and longest operating migrant centre. It was the first Australian home for more than 300,000 post-war migrants from over 50 countries.

Most of the immigrants would arrive by ship from Europe and then be put on a train from Melbourne to a siding at Wodonga, in the middle of the bush. It must have been a stark start to their new life.

Each of the 24 separate accommodation blocks comprised of several long huts arranged around a central kitchen and dining area, with showers, a laundry and deep pit latrines. The corrugated iron huts, being typical of Australian Army huts of the period, were unlined with ventilation gaps between the roof and the walls.



Each person received an allocation of linen and grey woollen blankets as well as crockery, cutlery and other items that they would need during their stay.

The Centre's facilities included a large hospital, three churches, movie theatre, library, primary school, canteen, butcher, barber, police station and three banks. The administrative area provided a paymaster, social services, CES, customs,

alien registration and an information centre

In the early years, women and children were housed separately from the men until huts were partitioned into cubicles for families. In the latter years, huts were modified to accommodate family groups. Large families were sometimes allocated adjacent cubicles.

Each block at Bonegilla had its own kitchen and eating-places. The Department of Immigration followed dietary guidelines similar to those used by the Army. Migrants queued for food but ate at small tables.

Chaplains and church associations helped cater for the needs of co-religions. The church groups offered solace and opportunities for developing new social networks

From what I have read, generally Bonegilla was a happy place, as many saw it as an important place in their start in a new country. In July 1952 however, 3000 Italians at

Bonegilla rioted, as they were angry at the delays in the officials finding jobs for them. Normally there were only minor delays in finding jobs for the immigrants, however, the high unemployment levels at the time made it difficult for them to be placed. The rioters approached Mr. Harold Holt, Minister for Immigration during his visit to Albury to make him aware of their plight. Dr. L. Danelli, the Italian Consul, was despatched from Melbourne to Bonegilla to help placate the Italians.

My wife and I spent a couple of hours at Bonegilla and it was fascinating. A lot of it has been pulled down now, but most of Block 19 is still standing. Whilst we were there, we met a lovely elderly German couple there who had spent some time at Bonegilla. They had very fond memories of their time there. The only negative that they spoke of was having to eat mutton so often and how the smell pervaded the whole camp. They said that they had not been able to eat lamb since.

Our own teacher and Dante Committee Member, Astrid Pennisi stayed there with her family in 1955 after arriving from Trieste on the Paolo Toscanelli. They spent six weeks there while waiting to be transferred to Wacol (another migrants' camp) outside Brisbane. Astrid also remembers her parents complaining about the smelly mutton and they too, would never eat lamb because of it. Quoting Astrid: "come to think of it, I don't like lamb either."



If you are ever in the Albury/Wodonga region, please take time to visit the park to either reminisce, or learn first-hand, about a rich period in Australia's history that strongly contributed to the multi-cultural fabric of today's Australia.