

## **Digital narratives of migration: creating a transnational network**

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### **Introduction**

In this presentation I explore the question of how to present research on migration and settlement of a group of Italians in the digital space and how it can become part of a transnational network. To answer the question I look at four aspects:

- the role of oral history in the context of migration studies and address the critique of using personal testimony as historical evidence
- the methodology of an oral history project involving second-generation members of families whose parents emigrated from the Veneto to Adelaide, South Australia in the late 1920s
- the steps towards creating a website that communicates the history of the Veneto market gardeners from the late 1920s to the 1970s
- the potential of the website as a tool for communicating narratives of a community's history of migration and settlement

A note: this oral history project has two lives, two purposes and two audiences. It began as a small personal initiative and developed over ten years as a community project in collaboration with the Veneto community. Now in a different context, it is the basis of my doctoral thesis which I began 15 months ago. A community oral history project: two purposes and two audiences. *There are links to the plenary panel session yesterday and issues of co-production of knowledge and how to present research.*

### **1. Oral history and questions about personal testimony**

Scholars have critiqued oral history practice as useful historical evidence. They have distrusted the reliability of memory, issues of subjectivity and the veracity of the account of individual experience. This view has been part of the environment in which oral historians have operated since the 1970s when oral history was first developed as an academic discipline. At that time, oral history scholar Thompson defended the role of oral history and promoted the interview as vital data in the production of historical knowledge:

*Oral history ... can give back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place (1978).*

Combined with archival documents, government records and policies and newspaper articles, oral history interviews provide the historian with evidence of details of people's lives not usually represented in accounts. Since the 1970s, scholars have developed oral history theory and practice, ways of interpreting the content of interviews and new mode of creating and presenting knowledge as history. New technologies have expanded oral history theory and practice for recording, preservation, transcription, analysis, use and dissemination of knowledge. As technology develops, so does the capacity of oral history as a tool to provide documentation and present history to different audiences.

### **Oral history and migrant narratives**

Oral history is an obvious means to record and interpret first-hand accounts of the experience of the processes of migration and settlement. Migrant narratives provide the memory of the lived experience and the relationship between the interviewer, narrator and the 'listener' build an understanding of what it means to be a migrant within a historical context. The narratives and oral histories of individual migrants provide personal evidence. In a collection of interviews they contribute a small-scale investigation and details of the experiences of migration and settlement across a group or community.

In the 1970s when oral history as a discipline and technology was developing as an international movement, a time that coincided with the early Australian Government's first multicultural policies. Initiatives were undertaken to document migrants' stories sometimes using content of oral history interviews in written texts eg "The Immigrants" by Lowenstein & Loh, published in 1977. The National Library began collecting oral histories of migrants. However, in this period the Italians who had arrived in the 1920s or 1930s were generally not represented in commissioned migrant oral history projects because they had either died or were already elderly. Fortunately a few studies carried out in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, analysed Italian migration in South Australia in the inter-war period using some oral history interviews. These studies included research by O'Connor, Cosmini-Rose and others. More specifically Sara King examined the contribution of Italian people to agriculture and the wine industry in South Australia using oral history interviews.

## **2. The creation of the oral history project with the Veneti**

In 2006 I began a project to explore Italian market gardeners in the western suburbs. It became an oral history project with second-generation members of Veneto migrant families who settled in Adelaide and established commercial market gardens from the late 1920s to the 1970s.

A total of 46 oral history interviews have been collected to date. This includes two recorded in the last two weeks with members of families who returned to live in the Veneto in the late 1960s. In 2007 I met the son of a Veneto migrant who had arrived in Adelaide in 1927 and established his market garden close to a number of other Veneto farmers.

A few years after arrival, they had created neighbouring market gardens in a bounded geographical location eight kilometres west of the city of Adelaide. Within eight years, wives and children joined the men. Two married by proxy, and three men returned to Italy in 1934, married and resumed life in Adelaide with their new wives.

A mud-map led to the discovery of a “hidden” history of a group of 17 men and one woman who emigrated from the Veneto between 1926 and 1928 at a time when the economic and social circumstances for welcoming Italian migrants were unfavourable.

The oral history project adds new knowledge to the study of Veneto communities in Australia through its focus on a specific group identified as a market gardening community in inter-war years in Adelaide. The Veneto community is one of the oldest Italian regional communities in South Australia with origins dating back to the 1920s. O’Connor referred to the *veneti* in his study of Italian migrant communities in South Australia up to World War II (O’Connor, 1993) and he also provided an analysis of the clubs and associations of the *veneti* in South Australia. Other research of *veneti* in Australia include a national study by Baldassar and Pesman’s (2005) and two studies of *veneti* who lived in regional Victoria correlating to the same period of 1920s – 1970s.

Sons and daughters of the Veneto pioneer market gardeners represented on the mud map are the subjects of the majority of the collection of oral history interviews in this study. Most interviewees are in

their 80s and 90s. Some have died since the first interviews recorded in 2008. Some are recorded in dialect with assistance from members of the community.

The process of collecting interviews involved consistent questions which built evidence of the “shared social identity” and occupational identity

Questions asked of interviewees included:

- Why had parents decided to emigrate from the Veneto in the 1920s?
- Why did they begin market gardens? Why in the same location?
- What vegetables were grown? Where did the farmers sell the produce?
- How much land did families lease? What were the proportions of glasshouses?
- How were women and children involved in the market gardens.
- What jobs were allocated to children?

Other questions related to the formation of community or “micro-structures” or “informal networks and bonds” that migrants develop as Castles & Miller refer to in maintaining identity and culture.

Questions about the experience of World War II revealed that families of all interviewees had been affected in some way. Women and children were left to maintain the market gardens when the men were conscripted as civilians to the war effort in the Allied Works Council in remote locations. Newspaper searches show that at least two market gardeners were fined for moving from their suburb without reporting to the local police.

The accounts of the sons and daughters of the pioneer market gardeners in the oral history interviews demonstrate that this was a history of a community of migrants who were closely connected through their origins as *veneti*, as market gardeners and as families building a future in Australia. Interviews were recorded with market gardeners from other Italian families and two Anglo-Australian families who farmed in the same area as the *veneti*. The Anglo-Australians particularly represent an outsider perspective of the Veneto community and their contribution to the local economy as market gardeners.

Abrams emphasises the particular role of oral history in featuring both the individual and the wider context:

*No other part of the history professions takes this interest in how communities from the family up to the nation – remember themselves, digging up their past to elaborate the evolution of identity (Abrams, 2016: 23).*

### ***Interest within the Veneto community***

A number of strategies were tried to disseminate the knowledge of the Veneto market gardeners and their narrative – public events drew considerable interest from the Veneto community. Presentations to local history groups with collaboration from some community members were successful because people were interested to learn about the history of the Veneto market gardeners and their work and family lives. These events gave back to the community their history. However, an exhibition, workshop or presentation are limited in their capacity to transmit history beyond the actual events.

### **3. The project develops ... and moves to a website**

When the number of interviews had grown to 25, the personal stories and information about the migration, settlement and reflections of the second-generation family members formed a strong narrative with definite themes.

The collection of oral histories of the Veneto community of the market gardeners was becoming a valuable source of information about migration and settlement and important to share beyond the community. The question most often asked about oral history projects was the same one asked at this point. How to disseminate this history? It is well known that the majority of oral history interviews are preserved and consigned to archive shelves. Writing a book was out of the question because of costs. And a book is always a snapshot in time.

It was clear that the digital space was an option for dissemination. Oral historians have been increasingly using digital tools to present aural recordings in complex modes with searchable databases across a body of recordings since the 1990s. Websites were featuring content compiled from audio, transcripts, interview logs to assist with searches, and also digitised photos and documents.

A modest grant from the local council made it possible to develop a website to upload recordings of the interviews and other digitised items to present the narratives of the Veneto community. Also included are family biographies authorised by the family members, and family photos previously only available in individual homes. In addition, maps identify the two provinces in the Veneto region and the location of individual Veneto market gardens in Adelaide's western suburbs.

#### **4. Potential of the website to transmit narratives of migration and settlement**

A year after it was launched in 2014, the State Library of South Australia selected the website for preservation for the National Library of Australia. Its web archive Pandora identifies online publications and websites for their national significance and for long-term access.

The website continues to grow with the addition of new interviews and other material. Transcripts will be added. With technical assistance it has been possible to extend the capacity and sections of the website have been translated into Italian. This increases its accessibility to a wider audience – a form of a transnational network that includes families and comuni in Italy.

**What is distinctive about the website?** What is its capacity in the context of migration and settlement? It is a tool for delivering information about the migration and settlement of the Veneto market gardeners. Unlike a book, it is a “living” document. The recordings, photos and other documents can be accessed in Adelaide or in Italy or anywhere at any time.

Early evidence suggests that it is an effective tool. Apart from families both in Adelaide and in Italy who use the website to listen to interviews there are other examples of it being an efficacious tool.

- The local council in Adelaide has used the website as an example of presenting accessible local history.
- The *sindaco* of one of the main *comune* in the Veneto from where the market gardeners emigrated will link it to the *comune* website.
- An Italian member of the *Trevisani nel Mondo* will use content from the website to write two articles about the lives of the men and women who emigrated from villages in the province of Treviso.

- A school teacher has described the benefits of the website because it compiles a suite of resources – recordings, transcripts, photos and other documents relating to the impact of migration in a single location on the Internet.

At this early stage of my studies it appears that the website is a useful tool with application as a component in a transnational network with potential for other communities to disseminate narratives of migration.

From a personal interest to a community project the data collected in the oral history interviews became the basis for a website that provides a global audience with a small scale study of the shared social and occupational identity of a migrant community. I continue to work on the project in the community recording interviews, giving presentations and adding information to the website.

Further study will include analysis of the content of the oral histories and the development of metadata to allow future scholars to search and use the research.

We know that the focus of younger generations will be on social media and there may be less interest in retrieving information and research from books. The website may need to incorporate more multimedia with Facebook, Twitter and Instagram or use audio on photos as one oral historian is currently using in a cloud collection to complement long-form interviews.

## **Conclusion**

To return to my earlier note, this study originated as a personal interest and became a dynamic community project and now forms the basis of my PhD. The website is an accessible resource that gives back history to the community. It is also a tool that presents a narrative of migration and settlement, a community, its occupation and sense of place over fifty years to a wide audience. The use of technology extends the authority of the oral histories, taking them from the archives to the Internet to a transnational space.



The photo of Johnny Marchioro's fifth birthday represents a hidden history. It's a visual acknowledgement of the value of collecting oral histories. Of this group of Veneto-Australians, seven out of those ten children have been interviewed. They represent the new generation, the narratives of their parents who emigrated from the Veneto in the late 1920s, and the group here of seven different families. By moving this photo and the stories out of

family archives onto the Internet anyone can access this history at home, in a library, on a bus, or in a bar down the street in Prato.

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