

Italian pioneers in Adelaide

“The Messenger”, June 1986, page 17

Once upon a time there was a family who lived in a railway carriage ...

Once upon a time ... it always begins like that, doesn't it? There was once a large expanse of grasslands, fields and sandhills, bushes that went almost down to the sea, a lazy river, the Torrens, which lost its way in a salty marsh, full of mosquitoes. It was in the south-west suburbs, a few kilometres from the famous green belt of the city of Adelaide

The first migrants whose names people still remember were Piovesan, Berno, Tonellato, Ballestrin, Laio etc Unlike the Australian regions with cattle and sheep farms, this land was dedicated to horticulture. There were a series of glasshouses of which you can still see some examples today. For one of the pioneers, to take one example, began their life in the following way ...

Secondo Tonellato came to Adelaide in 1927 from the Province of Treviso. He worked for a boss and when he felt he could stand on his own feet in 1925, he bought a train carriage which had accommodated King George VI when he visited Australia [in 1927].

Our Secondo had to provide decent accommodation for his family who came to join him. He paid for the transport of the carriage which was placed at the end of the existing Fergusson Avenue, Kidman Park. The carriage was beautiful as his sons recall today. Inside it was upholstered with leather and there were etched hunting scenes on the glass. The compartments were used as bedrooms and a dining room. There was even a shower! The family cooked outside in a shed.

In those years, the land was not as it is today. The unpredictable River Torrens, which in dry times was like a creek painted on canvas but played up when it freely flooded the land destroying the harvest of the farmers there. In 1937-1938 an enormous embankment was built in the Kidman Park area while the land near the mouth of the river remained marshy, bushy and full of snakes for some years.

As the years passed, Tonellato built a new home for his family. From 1954 and for some years, the famous carriage served as lodgings, a place of safety and welcome for many new migrants who in increasing numbers, looked for stable accommodation in the area. It was a great shame that it was not preserved as a precious memorial or marker [for the community]. In the end, it was completely destroyed by fire.