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FONTY'S POOL

Generations of children and adults alike have enjoyed swimming in this glorious pool, all thanks to one man's determination.

In the early 1920s, Lee Fontanini's grandfather Archimedes (Archie) Fontanini transformed the dam on his farm, near the Western Australian town of Manjimup, into a palatial freshwater pool, complete with pontoon, diving board and a children's wading pool. For generations, Fonty's Pool was the local public swimming spot for residents of the South West timber and farming community. In 1955, when Lee was born on the family orchard 200 metres from the pool, she followed previous generations of her family in spending all summer at Fonty's.

I was a very active child and when I wasn't riding my horse or my bike, I was at Fonty's Pool. After I got off the school bus I'd be rushing home to get my bathers on. I was six years younger than my older brothers and sister, so I mainly went there with a whole swag of cousins, especially Stephen, who was the same age as me. We'd walk up the dirt road eating bread and jam and when we got hungry we'd go home for food or go to the orchard and grab an apple or a plum.

Louie, my family's boxer dog, always came with us to the pool.

If he got bored he'd pinch your towel and there'd be this trail of kids chasing him to get it back. He was a very cheeky dog and we all loved him.

I can't remember learning to swim, but like most other people in Manjimup, I attended the government swimming lessons at Fonty's Pool. I can only remember being able to swim at this lovely pool so close to our orchard property that was part of Pop and Nana's original farm.

Pop had a strong presence at the pool and everyone would come and say hello to Fonty; that's what all the locals called him. He sat in the same spot by the pool each day, behind a small bench next to the storeroom. He'd have a large bottle opener in his hand to open the Cottee's drinks he sold. The drinks weren't refrigerated, so they were always a bit warm. Passiona was my favourite, lovely and sweet. Pop loved to watch everyone having fun at the pool and people would come and sit with him while their kids played and swam. He may not have seen someone for five years but he always remembered them. He had a great memory.

When I arrived in the world in 1955, Pop had been in Australia

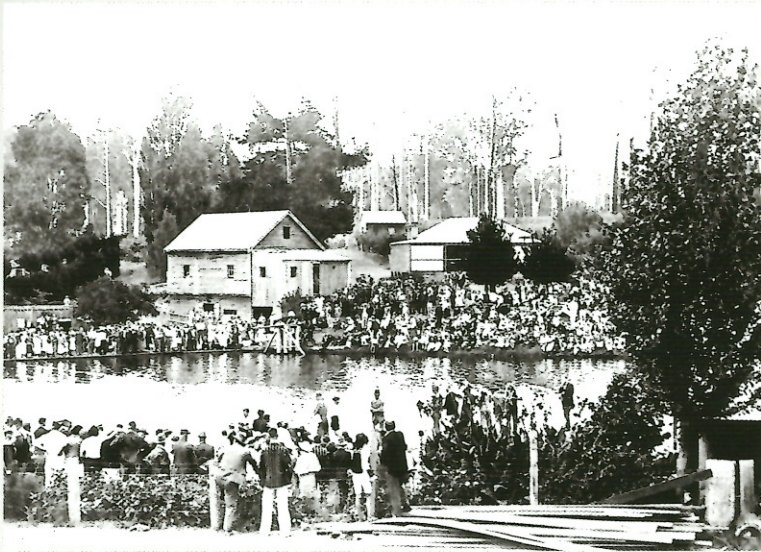
for 51 years: 'a land of opportunity' he called it. He was born at a place called Giuncugnano, near the Tuscan town of Lucca in central Italy, in 1880; his family were subsistence farmers. When he was 12 he was orphaned and at 16 he went to France and found work on a farm, where he learned building and masonry skills. At 20, he served his mandatory three years in the Italian army and volunteered to go to China, where the Boxer Rebellion had erupted.

When he came home after the war, things were pretty grim in the area where he lived. He'd heard there were opportunities opening up in Australia, so he got on a boat and landed in Fremantle, Western Australia, in 1904.

For the first few years he worked at a timber mill in Greenbushes, north of Bridgetown. He learned English and grew vegetables. When the government opened up land in the virgin forest area south of Bridgetown, he went there with a surveyor and selected 160 acres (65 hectares) and bought an additional 300 acres (120 hectares). He sent for his brother Germano (Jack), who came out from Italy and secured another 160 acres >



Photographs WA News, Helm Media. **From top** Fonty's Pool offered a great place for a post-Christmas picnic on Boxing Day in 1936; fed by a natural stream, the pool covers almost an acre (about 4000 square metres) and has a winter flow of 44,000 litres per hour.



of land next door. Importantly, a stream ran through both properties.

Pop cleared the swamp to grow vegetables and also used part of the land to build a dam. A large karri tree was pulled across the creek and soil was built up around it to form a wall. This was the only dam around in those days, and his family and other people in the community used to swim there. In the early 1920s the locals asked my grandfather to turn his dam into a public pool and charge an entry fee, as there were no rivers near Manjimup where one could be built. This was the beginning of Fonty's Pool.

To make it more like a pool, he lined the bed of the creek with gravel and concreted around the sides. He didn't actually concrete the whole floor of the pool until 1961. It was almost an acre in size, held 18 million litres of fresh water and had a winter flow rate of 44,000 litres per hour. The water flowed into the pool from the creek through a 24 inch (60 cm) pipe and nine smaller pipes in the wall. There were three overflows. The water was clear and fresh but if you'd been in there for a long time you'd get cold, so to warm up we'd lie down on the hot concrete path alongside the pool. It was always a favourite thing to do. The water was usually warm on the top and cold on the bottom, but when there were lots of people in there it got stirred up and the cold water would come to the top.

Pop and his wife Lucy, who was from Austria, also created extensive lawns and beautiful gardens with ornamental and flowering cherries, displays of

From top Archie Fontanini received an MBE for creating this popular community facility in his own backyard; today, the pool is part of a leisure and accommodation complex; little has changed over the years since Archie built the pool.

hydrangeas, roses, viburnum and various creepers, as well as plum, pear, cherry and apple orchards. The pool was officially opened in 1925 and from then on, it was the place to be in summer. It was where swimming lessons and school carnivals were held, and where people like my father's brother Charlie turned into a state swimmer.

When I was growing up in the 1960s, Fonty's Pool and gardens were still considered the showpiece of the South West and tourists flocked there. Pop introduced trout to the pool and when the tourist buses arrived he'd put on a show. He'd go to the edge of the pool and throw bread to the trout. He had a long poplar stick to keep the ducks away while he was feeding the trout, but after he was finished he'd throw the ducks some bread.

My favourite spot at the pool was definitely the diving board. It wasn't like diving boards at other pools. It was made of karri wood and specially crafted at the Pemberton timber mill. It was a pretty solid plank that had been weathered, oiled and painted with a non-slip paint. It was elevated about seven feet (two metres) above the water on two concrete pillars and there was a ladder up to it. The water was only about six feet (180 cm) deep under the diving board but we seemed to manage not to hit the bottom.

It didn't bounce as high as a regular springboard so you quickly learned to take the right number of steps to get a really good lift to do a half-somersault dive. If you wanted to create a big splash when you did a 'bombie' you had to get a really good run-up along the board.

One year I went to Canberra for a school excursion and we spent an afternoon at the Canberra Olympic Pool, which had a diving pool with a big tower and a springboard. I did the same run-up on the springboard as I did at Fonty's Pool, followed by a big bounce, and I got thrown all around the place. It had so much more spring than the karri plank at home! We had great fun on Fonty's board doing backflips, 'horsies' and bombies and sometimes we used to fight on the board. We'd push each other aside to get to the front and people would end up toppling into the water.

The school swimming carnivals at the pool were fantastic and everyone was always excited when the big day arrived. The only thing I wasn't happy about was that I had to go to school on the bus and then come back to the pool with the rest of the school. The old cork swimming ropes would be connected and six lanes set up in an area that was 55 yards (50 metres) and we'd all gather on the lawn in our house teams of red, yellow, blue and green. I always did well in the swimming events and in the diving because I spent so much time on the board and knew it better than anyone else. My sister also broke quite a few swimming records and used to win school trophies.

In 1971, when I was 15, Pop was awarded a gold medal from the Chamber of Commerce in Lucca for gaining distinction in his new country and being a worthy ambassador for his homeland. A reporter who asked him how he felt about getting the award recorded his response, that he was human

and enjoyed some flattery about the pool, but the enjoyment from his work had been more rewarding. The year before that he had received an MBE honouring his contribution to the community and tourist industry in the area.

While he was the driver behind the pool and the beautiful grounds, I don't think he would have achieved what he did without the support and help of his wife Lucy. Pop lived till he was 102, but Nana died when she was 74 in 1954, the year before I was born. I'm sad I never met her, as people have told me she was an amazing, hard-working woman who was integral to creating the farm and the pool from scratch, as well as bringing up five children. I'm sure Pop would have been proud of what they did, but he would never have said that aloud to anyone. His satisfaction was from watching people having fun.

Fonty's Pool has always been part of my life and it still astounds me how a man from Italy who came to Australia with no English and almost no money created such an amazing asset for the community. It's no longer in the family, but the present owners have done a fantastic job of improving the facilities, while retaining the pool and original building. And the wonderful thing is that I still live 200 metres from the pool in my family's original home, so whenever I feel nostalgic I just wander down the road and sit by the water just like Pop did. ■
This is an edited extract from The Memory Pool: Australian stories of summer, sun and swimming by Therese Spruhan (NewSouth Publishing, 2019). Visit fontyspool.com.au