

Radi i štedi: Auckland's Dalmatian growers in an Age of Prejudice and Prohibition

They call us foreigners and we are oppressed

No voice to answer in their language; so we drift distressed

Sway back and forth in our desire to please

Like lost ships at the mercy of wild stormy seas.¹

At the turn of the twentieth century, the population of Dalmatia faced several challenges. Its small cultivatable zone, unpredictable climate and unreliable yield, outbreaks of Phylloxera, and population boom from 1840 made life difficult.² These environmental challenges would have been entirely manageable were it not for Austrian, and later Italian, imperial control. Political contingencies, like the monopolisation of resources, influences of European capitalism, and economic exclusion crippled the livelihoods of many Dalmatian families. The combination of these 'old' and 'new' factors prompted waves of Dalmatian emigration. In New Zealand, an emerging trade in Kauri gum was particularly attractive to new migrants. However, Dalmatians in Aotearoa were often met with contemptuous reactions to such pursuits. This article explores how the ousting of Dalmatians from gum-digging inspired a transition to market-gardening and wine-growing and examines how Dalmatian winegrowers in Auckland responded to the challenges posed by prohibition and prejudice.

Gum-Digging to Make a Living

From 1894-1899, the number of Dalmatian gumdiggers increased simultaneously with broader migration trends.³ There was no cohesive campaign to recruit Dalmatians to work on gumfields. Rather, as Frank Kinkella testified before the Royal Commission on the Kauri

¹ Ante Kosovich, 'Dalmatinac iz Tadjine' ('Dalmatian in Exile')

² Andrew Trlin, "Once Despised Now Respected" (Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 1979), 15.

³ Trlin, 70.

Gum Industry it was a more organic occurrence, “three or four Austrians [Dalmatians] went ashore in Sydney, and found their way to the New Zealand gumfields...These men wrote to their friends, and got their nephews and relations out, and the new arrivals acted in a similar way...”.⁴ Dalmatians were often blamed for industry ‘gluts’, and Auckland merchants were criticised for accepting their business. In 1899, one gum-digger wrote to the *New Zealand Herald*:

“Of course after clearing out the gum...these...locust-like [Dalmatians]...create desolation elsewhere...Auckland merchants do not care what dire poverty these Slavs are bringing on our own people so long as it brings them an immediate profit.”⁵



The year before, a Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Kauri gum industry had made comments to the same effect, and upon its recommendations, the Kauri Gum Industry Act 1899 was passed, allocating Crown reserves to British and Māori diggers.⁶ Dalmatians looking to remain in the industry now had to purchase licences to dig on private reserves,

⁴ Royal Commission on Kauri-Gum, *Kauri-Gum Industry (Report And Evidence of the Royal Commission On)*. (H-12, Wellington: Appendix To The Journals Of The House Of Representatives, 1898), 40.

⁵ “The Chamber of Commerce and Austrian Gumdiggers”, *New Zealand Herald*, March 6, 1899, 7.

⁶ Royal Commission on Kauri-Gum, 8; Kauri-gum Industry Act, 1898, secs.5-6.

develop their own, or become ‘British Subjects’ by naturalisation.⁷ However, this was also a point of hostility. Regarding the ‘Austrian Influx’ the *Observer* reported, “Our right to exclude undesirable aliens is indisputable...And unless we are prepared to be swamped by inferior races, we shall continue to enforce it.”⁸ Popular barrages did not discourage Dalmatians from becoming New Zealand citizens, rather, it fuelled a subsequent parallel shift away from the gumfields and into other land-based occupations.⁹

From the Marshes to the Markets

In the following decades, Dalmatian horticulture and viticulture flourished. A former orchardist, Victor Sunde explains the transition to growing, “It was what they knew, where they came from...they had vineyards, olives, figs...”¹⁰ It is no coincidence that the development of many of the early blocks were concentrated around West Auckland gumfields, as many residents would habitually dig and trade at Waikomiti (Waikumete).¹¹ Vines, orchards, and vegetables were often grown concomitantly. Louis Dean recounts that “Tomatoes and beans were planted in between vines just to make a living.”¹² Stephen Yelaš, one of the country’s pioneer viticulturalists depended on the sale of vegetables to survive while his vineyards matured. It was still slim pickings, as his first crop of potatoes and cabbages were railed to central Auckland in 1899 at a loss and his Wellington-bound table grapes only just covered freight.¹³ Other families, such as the Vella, Nola, Borich, Sunde, Marinovich, and Vodanovich, followed similar trajectories as commercial growers.¹⁴ In

⁷ Stephen A. Jelichich, *From Distant Villages: The Lives and Times of Croatian Settlers in New Zealand, 1858-1958*. (Auckland: Pharos Publications, 2008), 63.

⁸ “The Austrian Influx”, *Observer*, January 28, 1899, 2.

⁹ Jelichich, 63.

¹⁰ Victor Sunde, Interview by Smita Biswas, Auckland, February 3, 2011, Dalmatian Genealogical and Historical Collection. Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections OH_1210_002_c.

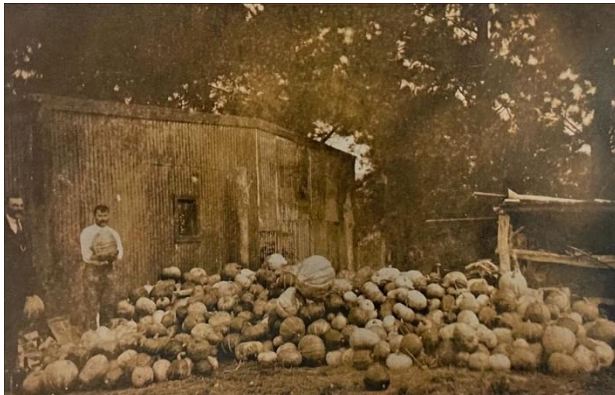
¹¹ Jelichich, 88.

¹² “Dalmatian Growers Share a Rich Heritage” *The Orchardist*, 2004, Auckland Libraries DGHS-035.

¹³ Jelichich, 104-105; “Pleasant Valley Vineyard” Ref.84/4 Dalmatian Archives and Museum, p.61.

¹⁴ “Dallies in the Valley”, Auckland Libraries, DGHS_035A_Oratia, 36.

Swanson, Josip Franich grew tobacco in his orchard's off-seasons.¹⁵ While many saw these horticultural pursuits as beneficial to the public, winemaking was far more controversial.



Šimun Ujdur and pumpkin crop, Birdwood Vineyards, Swanson, circa 1900-10s



Josip Franich's drying shed, Swanson, circa 1909

Establishing a Wine Industry

The early twentieth century was a challenging time for winemakers across the board. In 1895, viticulturalist Romeo Bragato was invited by the Crown to assess the feasibility of establishing a wine industry in New Zealand.¹⁶ Due to his Dalmatian birth, Bragato's reports lauded the nation's pioneering 'Austrian' winemakers and maintained that most soils in New Zealand were suitable for winegrowing.¹⁷ In 1910, the *New Zealand Herald* described West Auckland vineyards as "...a way of converting once despised gumlands into highly profitable country...".¹⁸ Despite the glowing impressions these accounts create, growers were struggling to make a living from wine. Dalmatian winegrowers were caught in the double bind of prohibition and prejudice.

¹⁵ "Tobacco Growing.", *Auckland Star*, June 19, 1919, 11.

¹⁶ Jelcich, 99.

¹⁷ Jelcich, 99; Trlin, 85.

¹⁸ "Auckland Wine Industry", *New Zealand Herald*, April 26, 1910, 7.



An aerial view of a vineyard and mixed orchard, with packing shed, Oratia.

The Prohibitionist's Plight

From 1894, each electorate facilitated a vote whereby electors could vote for 'no-licence', 'reduction' or 'continuance' of liquor traffic in their district.¹⁹ In 1908, 'Eden Borough' which included a substantial portion of West Auckland, became a dry district.²⁰ As a result, four hotels in the district were closed, including the Henderson Hotel (now 'Falls Hotel').²¹ Winemaker Ivan Sunde Snr. argued that the 1908 vote killed the fledgling wine industry.²² Unsurprisingly, Dalmatians overwhelmingly voted for continuance in the 1911 national prohibition referendum. Their combined vote was enough to tip the result, which was 1631 votes shy of a 60% majority.²³ Yet temperance victories remained the burdens of winegrowers, who were encouraged to turn their grapes into jam, raisins, or prioritise commercial fruit-growing.²⁴ Reforms made it that much harder for commercial winegrowers to survive and the expansion of the Eden Borough in 1918 to include all of Henderson was a significant blow.²⁵ Sunde recalls, "...we couldn't sell to our neighbour... and for about 25 to 30 years...we had to deliver our wine to Auckland [city] and bring it back again...we did sell it to our next-door neighbour because that's ridiculous....[and we would] sell it very

¹⁹cIan Dougherty, *Without Compromise: A Brief History of the New Zealand Women's Christian Temperance Union*. (Auckland: New Zealand Women's Christian Temperance Union, 2013), 6.

²⁰ Dougherty, 7.

²¹ "Doomed Auckland Hotels" *Dominion*, June 28 1909, 7.

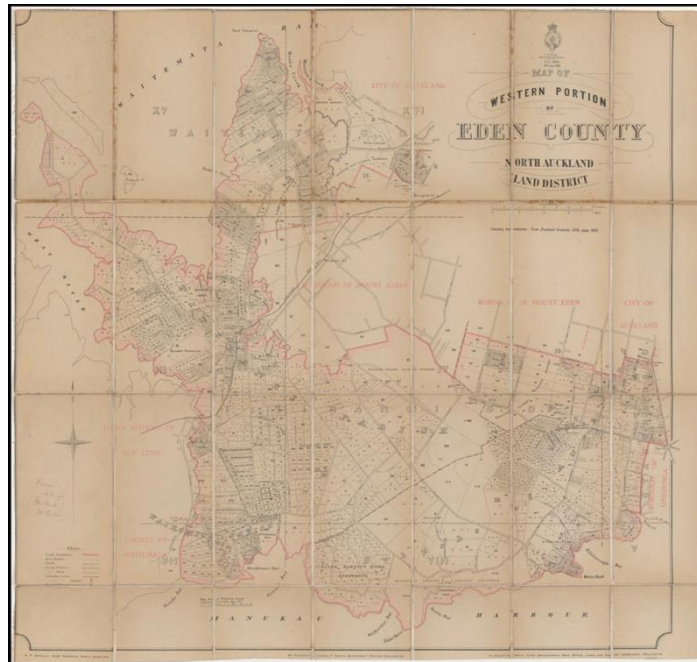
²² Jelichich, 90.

²³ "Winemakers Unite to Save Infant Industry", *Wine Review* 3, 1966, 20, Dalmatian Archives and Museum, Box 9-9/3.F2 Trlin Collection; Dougherty, 7.

²⁴ "Winemakers Unite to Save Infant Industry", 20.

²⁵ Trlin, 86.

cheap...”²⁶ However, such illegal sales drew heavy scrutiny to Dalmatians; reports of 'Austrian Sly-Grogs' and gumfield wineshops occupied tabloids.



1920 Map of Eden County, stretching from Hillsborough to Henderson

Viticulture vs. Vitriol

Even though Dalmatians were, in large part, united with critics on the issue of industry controls, they were blamed for facilitating ‘the devil’s work’.²⁷ First came a nation-wide crackdown on ‘adulterated’ or ‘fortified’ spirits, or ‘cheap fakes’. Though it was both Bragato and the Dalmatian-led Viticultural Association who called for these reforms, Dalmatians were rumoured to be the chief perpetrators – their wine unaffectionately termed ‘vile’ ‘Dally-Plonk’.²⁸

In 1914 Prime Minister Bill Massey introduced the Licencing Amendment Bill, stating:

I propose to ask the House to agree to an amendment...dealing with the manufacture and sale of what is called Austrian wine...north of Auckland. I have never seen the stuff, but I believe it to be...one of the vilest decoctions... from what I have learned it

²⁶ Sunde Oral History Interview.

²⁷ Jason Mabbett, "The Dalmatian influence on the New Zealand wine industry: 1895–1946." *Journal of Wine Research* 9, no. 1 (1998), 21: 15-25; Jelich, 101.

²⁸ Trlin, 86; "The Wine Scandal" *The Northern Advocate*, July 29, 1914, 6.

is a degrading, de-moralizing, and sometimes a maddening drink to many people who use it.²⁹

Upon the passing of the amendment, wine could not be manufactured for sale without an annual winemaker's licence, issued at the cost of £10, to those of 'good character'.³⁰ Wine could only be sold in one place, by the manufacturer, at a minimum quantity of two gallons (nine litres) – far too much for the average consumer.³¹

War is Declared: 'Austrian' Aliens and Internment

Dalmatian winegrowers were given little time to respond these changes, which were implemented amidst the uncertainty of World War I. Britain's declaration of war on Austria-Hungary in 1914 left Dalmatians in limbo, as many thought they were Austrians.³² War Regulations of 10 November 1914 expanded the definition of an enemy alien to include any person "who would have been an enemy alien had he or she not been naturalized".³³ Consequently, many Dalmatians were interned in camps or put to work for the country. Philip (Filip) and Dick (Dominik) Sunde for example, having arrived to Aotearoa on Austrian passports, were forced from their Oratia vegetable plots, and put to work draining swamps and building dams.³⁴ In 1916, suffragist, prohibitionist, and President of the Anti-German League, Lady Anna Stout, appealed for further measures, urging a boycott of all German and Austrian goods in New Zealand.³⁵

However, many Dalmatians were beset by the 'Austrian' identity that had been ascribed to them. In 1914, 150 Dalmatian residents met in Auckland and formed the Croatian Independent League, renouncing Austria-Hungary and announcing public support for New

²⁹ New Zealand, *Parliamentary Debates*, Legislative Council and House of Representatives, 1914, 829 (William Massey, Prime Minister) <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.32106019788683&seq=863>.

³⁰ Trlin, 89; Mabbett, 21.

³¹ Trlin, 89.

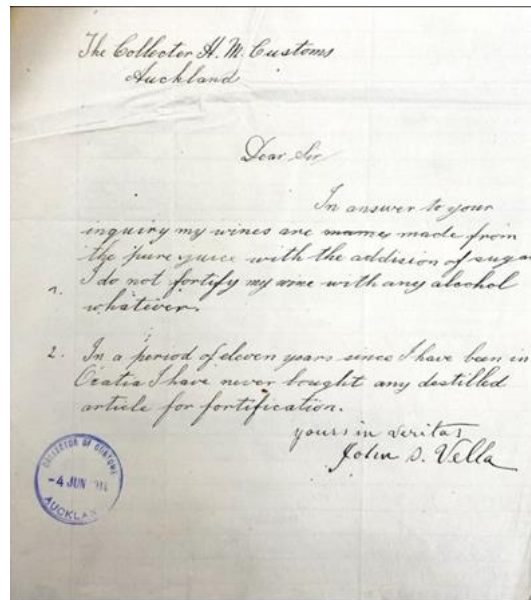
³² Sunde Oral History Interview.

³³ Judith Bassett, "Colonial Justice: the Treatment of Dalmatians in New Zealand during the First World War." *New Zealand Journal of History* 33, no. 2 (1999), 158.

³⁴ "Oratia", Auckland Libraries DGHS_35_Oratia, 13.

³⁵ "Anti-German League", *Wanganui Herald*, June 27 1916, 5.

Zealand joining the British war effort.³⁶ On 1 August 1914, in a protest action outside the Austrian Consulate, they publicly burnt the Austrian flag.³⁷ Despite being considered ‘enemy aliens’, Dalmatians raised considerable funds to support the Allied war effort, and about 400-500 were willing to fight for the Crown – though only 55 were accepted.³⁸



John Vella's letter in reply to the Minister of Customs following an official inquiry into fortified wines 1914

The Viticultural Association Regroups

At the end of the war, the dazzling prospects of a New Zealand wine industry had been crippled by restrictions and ongoing political lobbying against wineries by brewers.³⁹ To protest these restrictions, winegrowers came together to “defend their livelihood and demonstrate how their efforts had increased the nation’s wealth”.⁴⁰ In 1919, delegates of the Viticultural Association proposed that cheap land in the Auckland district be used for the resettlement of soldiers, who could be employed as winemakers.⁴¹ When the Association was reformed in 1926, Šimun Ujdur became president; six of its seven members were

³⁶ “Yugoslav Centennial Souvenir Booklet 1979”, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections JTD-038-0326, 31.

³⁷ “Yugoslav Centennial Souvenir Booklet 1979”, 31.

³⁸ “Yugoslav Centennial Souvenir Booklet 1979”, 31.

³⁹ “Dalmatian Growers Share a Rich Heritage”.

⁴⁰ “Winemakers Unite to Save Infant Industry”, 20.

⁴¹ *Report of the Industries Committee; Together with Minutes of Evidence* (I.-12., Wellington: Appendix to the Journals of the House of Representatives of New Zealand, 1919), 234.

Dalmatian.⁴² With the advocacy of the association, politicians became rapidly more aware of the industry's challenges, and attitudes towards wine, and Dalmatian winegrowers, shifted.

Early Dalmatian settlers in Auckland, and nationally, overcame much adversity. Whether on the gumfields, in the gardens, in the orchards, or the vineyards, the work was strenuous, the land difficult to cultivate, and most work was done by hand. Consistently, Dalmatians faced another kind of hardship, as their contributions, nationality, and loyalties were consistently questioned. Additionally, they were criticised for their 'difference,' tight community links, and their strong cultural identity was often framed as 'stubbornness' or 'failure to assimilate'. Behind these empty narratives, lie not only rich stories, of perseverance, of entrepreneurship, of inter-connection, but also an insight into the exclusivity of New Zealand national identity at the time.

⁴² Jelich, 102.

Images

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