



## Bonegilla Migrant Camp

### Video Transcript

**CHRIS TAYLOR:**

From what I recall from a couple of years ago a lot of people were alert and alarmed about a new Citizen Test. There were claims that it was unfair and discriminatory. But at least migrants today can prepare for their new life as an Australian from the comfort of their own home. For many of our first migrants, Down Under 101 was in a much more forbidding place.

That National Treasure lies on the banks of the Murray River in Victoria.

This is Block 19, Bonegilla Migrant Camp, about 15 ks down the road from the town of Albury. These buildings are all that remain of Australia's largest and longest running migrant camp. It was the start of the new life for a wave of European migrants who changed this country, forever.

**(Archival) ARTHUR CALWELL v/o:** You're very welcome.

**CHRIS TAYLOR:**

In 1947 immigration minister Arthur Calwell tagged them 'New Australians', but 'Old Australians' had other names for them.

They called them 'Reffos' and 'wogs', not very PC I know, but back then, official policy was to attract white, Anglo-Saxon immigrants – British people. Europeans who could barely speak a word of English – not in my back yard.

They were sent to camps in the middle of nowhere.

Imagine starting your new life in a spartan ex-army camp.

Oh, it's a bit firm.

It was stinking hot in summer, freezing in winter, there was no family accommodation, pit latrines out the back, shared bathrooms and laundries. Geographically half a world away from home. Culturally, on another planet.

Government propaganda painted a rosy picture of camp life – kids explored, mums washed and umm, dads helped each other stay clean. And of course everyone learnt to speak English.

**(Archival) TEACHER v/o:** Good evening everyone.

**(Archival) CLASS:** Good evening.

**(Archival) TEACHER:** Point to the door.

**(Archival) MALE STUDENT:** I point to the door.

**(Archival) TEACHER:** Put the hat on.

**(Archival) FEMALE STUDENT:** I'm putting the hat on.

**(Archival) CLASS sync:** She puts her hat on.

**CHRIS TAYLOR:**

Ah yes you could always spot a 'New Australian' back then. They were the ones continually pointing at things and always putting hats on their heads. That film was the government spin. The residents saw life very differently.

They were isolated. Families were often split up when fathers had to take jobs interstate. Boredom was a huge problem. Then there was the food. Back then we liked our meals simple. Dinner was meat and three veg – boiled within an inch of their lives – maybe a splash of tomato sauce for extra flavour, all washed down with a cup of tea. Now Bonegilla's residents weren't asking for haute cuisine, just a little continental flavour. Eventually all their combined frustrations boiled over.

Something had to give.

Giovanni Sgro was one of the leaders of a riot over the grim depressing conditions.

**GIOVANNI SGRO:**

Two days before the revolt, three young people had killed themselves, commit suicides, although they tell us they die of natural cause, but we didn't believe them. So we started the demonstration from Block 11 to walk to the administration office. On the way there we broken a few glasses and we burnt a couple of barrack – few things, but once we got there we saw four tanks, military tanks with over 200 soldiers there against the ordinary migrant who demand the jobs, because the condition here was so horrible, we couldn't stomach any longer.

**CHRIS TAYLOR:**

Fortunately the Bonegilla Riot of 52 was quickly sorted out. The employment and boredom problems were gradually solved and they were soon allowed to cook the food that they liked. Just think how many Italian, Greek, Latvian, Hungarian, Swiss, even German restaurants that we take for granted today, had their beginnings here in the kitchens of Bonegilla.

Our massive post-war immigration program was the most significant of the 20th century. More than 40% of us have a parent who was born overseas, and all up we speak more than 200 languages.

Between 1947 and 1971, more than 300,000 migrants got their first taste of Australia at Bonegilla. Today, there's a one in 20 chance that the person sitting next to you passed through here or is descended from someone who did.

And that makes Bonegilla Migrant Camp a National Treasure.