Joseph Delprato
By Diane Sterne

He was an unobtrusive man living in the mountains above Coalmont, B.C. Even though he was a coal miner and gold prospector, many also knew him as a talented musician. Joseph Delprato was born Giuseppe Delprato to Joseph Delprato and Marie Scranz on May 28, 1890 in Macugnaga, Italy. This picturesque, mountain village is located in the Piedmont region at the base of Monte Rosa which is the second tallest mountain in Western Europe. Macugnaga sits near the border of Switzerland. While the town is famous today for its winter sports, its original attraction was gold mining. It is no wonder that Coalmont and Blakeburn felt like home to him.

Macugnaga, Italy

The Granite Creek Preservation Society became interested in Joe when we were asked to be custodians of his cabin located off the Blakeburn Road. And so began the search for information...

Delprato Cabin, 2020

Just shy of 17 years, Joe boarded the Pretorian and arrived in Halifax, Nova Scotia with $10 in his pocket on February 7, 1907. He sailed third class with his older brother Felice Delprato who was 18. Both young men were headed for Sandon, B.C. Years later, Felice became well-known as the owner of the Krao Silver Mine. In 1920, he was photographed with 1,000 ounces of silver from his mine. Felice died on September 27, 1950 and is buried at the Kaslo Cemetery.

Felice (Felix) Delprato

The 1911 census shows Joe living in a mining camp in Kootenay. Many of the men there were Swedish. According to Don Blake ("From Dust to Dust" page 103) Joe "learned to speak Swedish before learning English. ...he worked for Columbia Coal & Coke Company and then Coalmont Collieries until 1930. After the big explosion he quit the mines but worked part time on odd jobs around Blakeburn and Coalmont for the company. During this time he got into placer mining and worked a claim on Granite Creek for many years. Whenever anyone asked him how he was doing his answer was always the same 'making enough to get by on'."

Joe became a Canadian citizen in 1926. He had already been working at the Blakeburn coal mines for many years. Hugh Hunter of Princeton, prepared Joe's citizenship papers. Dr. Sheffield of Coalmont, and Mr. D. McLean, Manager of Coalmont Collieries Ltd. vouched for his character. Joe was described as 5 ft. 9 in. with brown eyes, black hair and a dark complexion. He had no police record and was single with no children.

Joseph Delprato

Joe was a member of a Blakeburn band. He played the violin and saxophone, with Joe Vickers on drums, Bob Barrass on the piano and/or accordion, and Grant Stewart also playing saxophone.

Joseph was known for carrying a lard pail with pebbles in it which he carried on his way to work in Blakeburn. It is said he could be heard from quite a distance away. The purpose of it was to keep dangerous animals at bay. It was similar to the concept of bear bells that many use today.

On January 31, 1935, the Princeton Star reported that Joe discovered an avalanche that killed his placer mining partner, Joseph Danish, and Danish's wife, Pearl. According to the article, Joseph and Pearl lived in a "frail structure, made of poles and packing boxes. It stood on Granite Creek, at the foot and mouth of a funnel-shaped ravine, which sloped sharply upwards, 1,500 feet." The cabin was known as the "George Smith Cabin." Joseph and Pearl Danish are buried at the Granite Creek Cemetery.

In 1943 Joe co-owned the Delprato-Hayes Prospect on coal seams near the number 7 tram tower at Barnes Flat (there was a sawmill there owned by Frank Barnes). When Joe became too ill to continue, he signed over his share to his friend, Vittoni and it became the Hayes-Vittoni Prospect until 1949. It is interesting to note that Battista Vittoni was also from Macugnaga, Italy. He was six years older than Joe and arrived in Canada on May 8, 1906 on the Huronia which landed in Montreal. Vittoni died in Princeton in 1969.

For many years, and up until his death, Joe lived in Coalmont. His home was located on Front Street behind the Coalmont Emporium. Both the Emporium and Joe's house are no longer there.
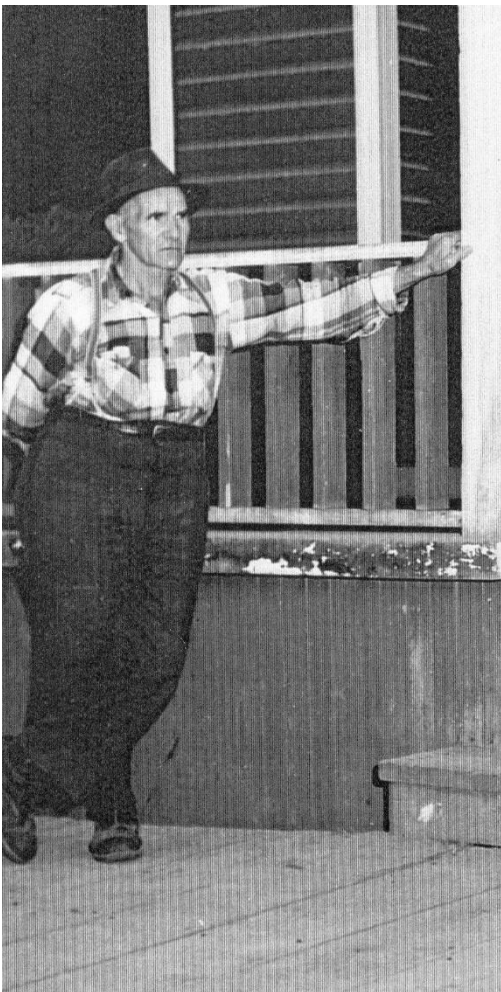

Joe Delprato's House in Coalmont

Like many miners, Joe suffered from Silicosis which affects the lungs. It is considered an occupational disease occurring when one breathes in dust that contains silica which is a tiny crystal found in sand, rock, or mineral ores like quartz. Over time, silica can build up in one's lungs and breathing passages. This leads to scarring that makes it hard to breathe. Joe also suffered from Bronchogenic Carcinoma.

On December 28, 1973 Joe passed away from his ailments. He had no living family in Canada but did leave behind him two sisters and thirteen nieces and nephews, all in Italy except one in Switzerland. All were entitled to part of his estate which was valued at $5,194.65. Sadly, there is no grave over which we can remember Joe. He was cremated in Penticton and his ashes were buried in an unmarked grave in an unknown cemetery.

While his life story isn't extraordinary, Joe played a part in building the identity of our province. He has no family to honour him with memories, so we, the Granite Creek Preservation Society, will adopt that role. Joe has left us a cabin deep in the hills above Coalmont which will keep his legacy alive. His music no longer echoes in the mountain air, but we will ensure his memory lives on.

Joe Delprato in front of the Coalmont Hotel