

BALME

the village of the mountain guides

by Giorgio Inaudi

Ecomuseums and museums in the territory of the Valleys of Lanzo.

Very few are the places, in the entire range of the Alps, where mountains rise up so high from the plains to enclose with their mighty sweep a secluded basin as perfectly shaped as that formed by the valleys of Lanzo.

Nowadays, the visitor can enter the valleys of Lanzo through a long tunnel. In the past you went over the gothic bridge of Roc, or of the Devil, which to this day, after nearly 700 years, marks the boundary between the plains and the mountains, a realm so near and yet so different.

Although encircled by mountains, the valleys are not isolated for that. The bleak ramparts that surround them are not impervious to cultural and socio-economic change, which goes wherever people go — and mountain-dwellers have always been great walkers. There have always been contacts with the capital Turin, as well as with the countryside of Canavese, with the valleys of Savoy, of Susa, of Orco and many others where the people of the valley were pushed in their search for work.

The fate of the valleys of Lanzo is indeed a curious one. Cut off from the main routes in the Alps, they have always been subject to change and innovation, resulting in a complex culture where perpetual transformation has always complemented the strong continuity of past memories and traditions. Unlike the valleys that lead up to the main Alpine crossings, the valleys of Lanzo do not feature spectacular remains from Roman or mediaeval times, like turreted castles or venerable abbeys. Apart from the ancient bridge in Lanzo and the imposing tower of Aymone in Challant, the monuments you see in the valleys (fortified houses, towers and monasteries) are not so much survivals from the feudal past but humble, low-key expressions of a rural civilization. This applies to the Customs Tower of Ala, to the castles of Mezzenile and Usseglio, to the Castagneri Tower House in Balme, and to the large number of sanctuaries, churches and shrines that have been built in the remotest hamlets, each with its own fresco, its own story, its own legend. They are humble witnesses — today often mere relics — of a culture deeply rooted into this land, where it has survived uninterrupted in a way that has few parallels elsewhere, and in some aspect lives on to the present day. In most other places, the traditional culture was swept away by the new economic and social modes of life; in others, more isolated, it has gradually died out with the nearly total extinction of the community whose expression it was for centuries.

In the Valleys of Lanzo, by contrast, memory and a strong attachment to the past have allowed this culture to be handed down still practically intact to the present day. It is a collective lore deriving from the century-old daily struggle of villagers against an environment that offered few resources and was often hostile. The features of this mountain civilization are still prominent in the everyday life of these mountain people and have found an autonomous expression by the creation (more or less spontaneous) of little local museums. These “places of memory”, as it were, are scattered all over the valleys, born of and expanded by the enthusiastic research of local scholars who collect the humble yet precious objects of life in older days, nearly always donated by the local people themselves.

These museums call for an attentive sensitivity; they contain no works of art or celebrated masterpieces that one “must” see and photograph — only to run somewhere else afterwards. It is a good idea to visit these “places of memory” after visiting the village, which is often an open air museum in its own right; it is no waste of time to stop and talk to the caretaker, to relate with the exhibits comparing them with one’s own memories.

You are thus led from the world of miners to that of blacksmiths, who made nails and locks; from the art of stone cutting to that of wood carving. You can experience the devices contrived by generations of villagers during centuries of adaptation to a mountainous environment, where snow may sometimes reach up to the windows, where the crops did not always ripen by harvest time, where after every harvest you had to re-build the inclination of the sloping fields, where sometimes even firewood was a luxury that could not be afforded. You can see images of a simple but deeply religious cult, rooted in the sense of the land and in the cycle of seasons, in the permanence of remote ancestral rites.

The faded photographs of that time show images of local festivities, of death, of hunters’ adventures and of the occasionally dramatic events related to mountain guides and the pioneers of alpinism. The path goes back in time and space, from the woods covering the valley slopes to the steep rocks that rise up to the mighty glaciers; from the stone-carvings left behind by the earliest settlers to the *art nouveau* holiday homes of the Turin gentry during the *belle époque*.

This is a path that the museums of the valleys of Lanzo suggest not only to visitors from outside, but also to those who are at home in the valleys. The former will find their own paths, and that of their elders; remembrances far away in time but still present in their family memory. The latter, the local inhabitants and particularly the young people, can perhaps pause to think, before beginning or continuing on other paths — forward, this time — remembering that, in our valleys, the path always rises.

THE VALLEY

The few English mountaineers who have visited the valleys of Lanzo must certainly have been struck by the position of the village of Balme in the Val d'Ala, surrounded on all sides by steep rocky ridges and dominated by the grand rock wall of the Bessanese, which fills the head of the valley. This was the home of the great Italian guide Antonio Castagneri.
(W.A.B. Coolidge, "Alpine Journal" 1890)

Balme had its moment of glory between 1800 and 1900 when many of its inhabitants became professional mountain guides and led the pioneers of mountaineering from Turin and the whole of Italy to the discovery of the highest peaks in the Western Alps. The people of Balme became the protagonists of an epic that we can follow today through collections of old photographs, written documents, posters, memorabilia, dioramas and contemporary mountaineering equipment. But the museum of Balme wants to tell an older story too: the story of how a small community settled in an alpine environment, grandiose but harsh and often hostile, where winters last eight months, snow can cover up the windows, where the crops cannot fully ripen, and even fodder for the animals had to be painstakingly hand-picked from the rocky walls that overhang the village.

The events of the Balme community tell a story that is remote and often tragic, spanning from the foundation of the village by shepherds from Savoy to the mediaeval immigration of miners from Bergamo and Val Sesia, down to the time when the mining activities came to an end and subsistence became entirely dependent on large-scale commerce with adjoining Savoy. The people from Balme became used to crossing over in winter as well as in summer, going through ice-bound passes over three thousand metres high, carrying on their backs heavy loads of rice, salt, coffee and tobacco. At the start of the classic age of mountain climbing, in the second half of the nineteenth century, they were among the first to offer their services as mountain guides, quickly acquiring a considerable reputation. Skiing, too, was introduced to the Alps in Balme at the turn of the century, and the village held for decades pride of place among the fashionable holiday resorts in Piedmont.

The golden years of Balme are now a distant memory, but the village retains all its charm for those who can appreciate the value of an intact environment and of an alpine culture that has survived intact to this day, living on as a spontaneous expression of folk culture through use of its own francoprovençal language, its music, its dances, and its traditional costumes.

The museum portrays this culture. It follows the history of Balme and its people, complemented by a brief guide to the nature and traditions of the surrounding area.

THE PEOPLE

Where rocks speak

The houses of Balme are tucked under precipitous cliffs, and the very name of the village understandably comes from the francoprovençal term *barmess*, which means “shelters under a protruding rock.” The settling was first mentioned in the 13th century, although it is probably much older. Some evidence suggests that the area was already inhabited in the Neolithic area, such as the mysterious boulder in Bogone incorrectly called “druidic altar”. This boulder features large round cavities connected by grooves to a central stump at the top of the rock. Round cavities of varying size have also been found in several other spots within the area, as well as in nearby valleys.

But the rocks of Balme also carry hundreds of other inscriptions, which depict more recent times. They are writings by shepherds, usually young boys who used to climb with their goats up the great crag that overhangs the village — a cliff on the sunny side of the valley, typically free of snow, that would provide some meagre but precious grazing in the short winter days. Many of these inscriptions eloquently testify to the mountaineering skills the young people of Balme were forced to acquire, perched as they are on precipitous and nearly inaccessible spots. They contain names, dates, and sometimes comments on the weather (*fog's rising, it's cold...*), maxims of simple wisdom (*we've all got to die...*) and they were probably also used as reference points for orienteering in bad weather, and also as a way to somehow mark one's presence in the area.

Sometimes they follow ancient decorative motifs, such as the rosette or the sun disc, which go back to prehistoric times. These patterns were carved on the rock by means of a nail, using the inseparable wooden bowl as a guide for drawing circles. Among these carvings there is a puzzling stone disc, found many years ago among the debris of an avalanche, characterized by a hole in the middle and decorated with five differently-shaped sun discs.

Other inscriptions, like that carved at the *Crest dou Djinévré* by the brothers Martinengo Cianin in 1866, now in the museum, carry the names of those who built a daring passage perched on a precipice across an otherwise impassable ravine. Others bear witness to a simple religious faith, like that of a shepherd who greets everyone with the promise to see them in Heaven — if they will get there.

When the wheel did not exist

Before the road was built in 1887, in the whole townland of Balme there was no path that supported transport on wheels. Everything had to be carried on man's back, since keeping a donkey or a mule was a luxury that few could afford. Since the earliest times, a special technology had been devised for transporting the goods necessary to the local economy, based on livestock breeding and subsistence farming.

The fodder was carried on man's back in great bales weighing 50 to 100 kilos, called *courdàïess*, which were tightly secured to a wooden frame, called *fraskéri*. The *garbìn*, a cube-shaped basket with a niche for the head, was used to transport particularly heavy material. Compared to the *cabàssi* (pannier), which was used to transport lighter loads, it had the advantage of not forcing the bearer to lean forwards, allowing him to breathe freely. It was used, among other things, to carry manure or the earth used every spring to level up the steeply sloping fields.

The sledge (*la lli*) was used to transport manure, hay and wood, as well as stones, sand and other building materials. The model used in Balme, simple in appearance, features in fact a sophisticated technology, which minimizes the weight of the implement without prejudicing its strength and flexibility. The structure contained no nails, and was built with four different kinds of wood (maple or willow for the skates, ash for the uprights, larch for the frame and laburnum or hazel for the shafts). Also the measures of the individual parts (which vary from village to village) are the results of centuries of adaptation to the needs to a specific environment. The resulting vehicle is remarkably easy to manoeuvre and allows a single man to transport up to 400 to 500 kilos of material.

The *garbìn* and the sledge are probably an inheritance from the times of intensive mining, from the late Middle Ages to the 18th century.

The loads were not secured by knots, which would have been impossible to untie once wet or frozen, but by a particular self-blocking wooden device, called *tròi*, which ensured that the rope was locked when pulled but could be easily loosened by pulling on the free end.

Miners from Bergamo and Val Sesia

For many centuries, from the middle Ages to the 18th century, the valleys of Lanzo were at the centre of important mining activities, revolving around the extraction and processing of iron ore.

The deposits were usually at high altitudes and the ore was transported down on sledges, to be refined in the various 'ovens', which were located in each of the three valleys. The metal thus obtained was worked into locks (at Ceres) and mainly into nails (in Mezzenile, Pessinetto and Traves). The job of miner or blacksmith was a highly skilled profession, the significance of which was not only economic but also political, since from it depended the manufacturing of weapons, especially of artillery (the first cannons in Piedmont were fused in Lanzo). Besides, the practice in digging galleries and in handling explosives made miners skilled soldiers.

For these reasons, the Dukes of Savoy frequently encouraged the immigration of skilled craftsmen and entrepreneurs from the mountain areas where iron working was particularly developed, like the Val Sesia and the region of Bergamo, where some family names originate which are still widespread in the Val d'Ala, like Martinengo and Castagneri. Whole villages in our valleys were settled by these immigrants, who for a long time kept their habits and local dialect. The memory of those times lives on in the name of the hamlet *Li Frè*, literally "the blacksmiths". Based in the Val d'Ala, the Castagneri family went on to open iron mines and forges in various villages in nearby Savoy, where they became wealthy and made a reputation for themselves as manufacturers of *tola* (metal sheets). It might even be that Balme was the home of one Antonio Castagneri mentioned as a metal sheet maker (*tolaro*) in a document found in 1993 during the renovation of the Basilica of Superga, inside the globe that supports the cross at the top of the dome. The text reads: "18 July 1726. This cross was erected on top of the royal basilica, with the assistance of Mr. Pietro Giovan Audifredi of Guarene, director of these works, and G.B. Moraris, also director, and Antonio Castagneri, iron worker and G.B. Canale, smith and maker of this cross."

The iron industry gave the valleys a relative wealth, but beginning from the 18th century extraction and working of iron went into decline, both because of the competition from more abundant deposits and the gradual disappearance of woods, which had been cleared to provide fuel for the forges.

People now had to adapt themselves to survive in a narrow, rocky valley, relying exclusively on the meagre income that came from what little livestock could be kept and from subsistence farming in a harsh alpine environment. Either that, or emigrate.

At this point, the people of Balme turned to another resource: commercial exchange with nearby Savoy.

The march of the smugglers.

The village of Balme on the Piedmont side and that of Bessans on the Savoy side are a few kilometres away as the crow flies, but they are separated by a barrier of rocks and glaciers that is at no point lower than three thousand metres. Yet for centuries the two communities have been in constant contact with each other, so much so that the dialect (patois) of Bessans is much more similar to that of Balme than to the nearer villages of the Haute Maurienne.

Even today, in these two villages the word 'smuggling' is not used under any circumstance; people are more inclined to talk of 'commerce' and 'exchanges.' It should be remembered that until 1860 Savoy and Piedmont were both part of the

kingdom of Sardinia. The mountain people came and went in every season of the year, crossing the high passes of Arnass (3010 m.) or of Collerin (3206 m.) with a march of eight hours through precipitous gullies and rugged glaciers full of crevices.

Depending on the period, different kinds of commodities were transported. In the earliest phase it was above all salt from the salt mines of Provence in exchange for the rice of Piedmont, while in more recent times the exchanged goods were tobacco, coffee, chocolate, gun powder, silk handkerchiefs, olive oil and much more. The load could reach 60 kilos, depending on the strength of the man, but there are also stories of female carriers, among whom the legendary Gina dij Touni, sister of the famous guide Antonio Castagneri, who is said to have carried her load from Avèrole to Pian della Mussa, without stopping and without taking the pipe out of her mouth.

The crossings often took place at night, to elude control by the guards, and even now in Balme they tell sad stories of tragic incidents, like that of Angelo Castagneri Barbisin. In November of 1864, at the age of twenty, he fell into a crevice of the glacier of Arnass; eight days later he was taken out, frozen through but still alive — only to die a year later, eaten up by gangrene.

The hunting instinct.

Apart from the commercial exchange with Savoy, other reasons pushed the people of Balme to struggle up the mountains in summer and winter in good and bad weather. Mountain people have always been enthusiastic hunters, a passion that in the past was also necessary for survival and served to complement a diet that would have otherwise been poor and monotonous. Chamois meat was salted and dried for the winter (in patois, this is called 'berna' from the Latin 'hiberna', a simple preparation of dried meat which is nowadays produced with sheep and goat meat.) Marmots were hunted too, by digging up their dens. Even today the people of Balme consider them a delicacy, while their fat was considered very effective against articular pains.

Ibex had been nearly wiped out, before they returned in great numbers today, because the powder resulting from grinding their horns was thought to have miraculous healing powers; in addition, the cross-shaped cartilage that is found in the heart of the animal was much sought after as a powerful talisman.

Chamois blood, dried and mixed with wine, was seen as an effective tonic, and even today some hunters follow the tradition of drinking the warm blood from an animal that has just been killed, using their hands as a cup. It is not that long ago that the killing of the first chamois was considered as a kind of rite of passage from childhood to adulthood, and if a young man failed he had to face public ridicule. Hunting the marmot was for older men, to whom the best spots were reserved for laying traps (*lou grâfi*). These places were then passed on to a younger friend as a gift when it was time to abandon that activity. In the same vein, the best rifle was traditionally bequeathed to one's closest friend.

All these traditions are disappearing today, just like the hunting of chamois. The hunters' game bag is today more likely to contain boar, a species that has recently expanded so much that it is now a pest, damaging pastures and what little tillage is still in place.

Crystal hunters: the collection of Michele Castagneri Mimi.

Page 11. Crystal hunters in a period print.

Since the earliest times, the various types of crystals that can be found in moraines and in the cavities of rocks have been the object of an intense search throughout the Alps. Mountain people (but scholars too, in the past) thought that crystals were especially frequent near glaciers and assumed glaciers produced them.

In the Mont Blanc area the main types were quartz and rock crystal, which went to embellish Venetian chandeliers. In the Val d'Ala garnets were instead extracted, much appreciated for their bright red hue. They typically adorned the modest jewellery (especially earrings) worn by the women in the valley on festive days. In more recent times, the *granate* (as the valley folk call them) were used as substitutes of rubies for the cogs of watches, while from the second half of the 800's crystals from the Val d'Ala found their way into natural history collections as mineral specimens. Crystal-searching became a family speciality in some families of Balme (the Castagneri) and of Ala di Stura (the Alasonatti), who passed on the tricks of their trade from one generation to another. Bundles of letters dating back to the 19th century are still extant, in which the most distinguished natural museums of Europe vied for the best specimens. Among the crystal hunters of Balme, Antonio Castagneri *Lench* (1869 – 1926), called *Tunin dou Magister*, merits particular mention.

His son Michele Castagneri (1910 – 1978) called *Mimi*, who was for many years head of the local station of mountain rescue teams, left at his death a valuable collection of minerals, some from the Val d'Ala and others obtained with exchanges with all over the world. This collection has been donated by his heir, Giuseppe Castagneri *Piarèt*, to the museum of Balme.

Let's speak our language. (*Parlen a nòsta mòda.*)

For more than a thousand years, Franco-Provençal has been spoken in the valleys of Lanzo, as well as in the Aosta Valley, in the Piedmontese valleys of Soana, Orco and Sangone and in the lower valley of Susa. This is a Romance language spoken with several local dialects throughout a wide area roughly bounded by Lyon, Geneva, Susa and Aosta. This region, now politically divided between France, Switzerland and Italy, owes its distinctive linguistic character to the mediaeval kingdom of Burgundy. For centuries it was unified in a single state, the Duchy of Savoy, whose capital city was Chambéry.

The Franco-Provençal language, here called *patois*, is not only a minority language, protected as such by the European Union and by the Italian Republic; it also characterizes a people with a specific cultural identity, recognizable by its music, its songs, its poetry, its handicraft, its lore of rites and traditional costumes, its traditions in farming, house-building, and stock-breeding, and generally by the way it exploits the resources of a sometimes hostile environment.

The Franco-Provençal culture is first of all a specific material culture, like that of other Alpine minorities (Provençal, Walser, Tyrolean, Cimbric, *Mòcheni* etc.) deeply attached to the land, and normally transmitted orally. However, it is not without literary expressions.

Quand que a la sèira l'aria i vint brùnna
E l' primess stèiless ou spuintount an sièl,
Ou m'vinhout an mant, una pr' una
Tàntess béless tchòsess, couma d'an vèl.

Tanti ricòrd, ricòrd d'àouti tenns
Qu'ou fant arvivri lou nòstou passà.
Tanti ou sount bèli, ma que gravatèss!
Tanti ou sount brut, qu'est mièi desmentia.

When in the evening the air becomes dark
and the first stars appear in the sky
there come to my mind, one by one
many nice things, like a veil.

Many memories, memories of past times
that bring back to life our past.
Many are nice, but what a nostalgia!

Many are bad, which it's better to forget.

(from *Ricord* "Memories" by Quintino Castagneri, 1975)

The Museum of the People of the Valleys of Lanzo in Ceres is specifically dedicated to the Franco-Provençal language and culture.

Page 13. The Franco-Provençal language area (drawn by Claudio Santacroce.)

Clothes of the Past.

In the valleys of Lanzo, as in all mountain areas, the traditional costume has a very important role in local culture and even today it is worn on state and religious holidays, not only by the various folkloristic groups but also, on special occasions, by those people who want to emphasize their belonging to the community of the valley.

In the past everyday clothes were not a matter of free choice, but were imposed, in each community, through a code of behaviour that was especially strict for women. The costume unambiguously indicated which village one came from, while particular details signalled sex, age, marital status, social and professional position and sometimes even the specific village. In Balme all women and the majority of men wore the costume until the First World War; after that, the dramatic casualties among men of the valleys marked the beginning of a depopulation process, which went hand in hand with a decisive break with the traditional culture that the costume was a visible expression of.

The women's costume in Balme is similar to that of other villages in the valleys of Lanzo, consisting in a long dress tied round the waist, complemented by an apron, a multi-coloured shawl, and a lace bonnet worn very far back on the head, almost on the nape. Of particular interest was a knotted cross with three hanging strips, worn high on the neck with a velvet ribbon. The cross, golden for married women and silver for girls, is the same as that in use in the village of Bessans, on the Savoy side. Brides also wore two bands of black silk on the back.

A specific trait of Balme was the male costume (*la màii dou bort*), now widespread in the Valleys. It consists of a thick, heavy jumper of untreated sheep wool, open down the front and with a red rim, worked in cross stitch. This jumper was the everyday dress of the mountain people of Balme until the beginning of the XX century, when it started to gradually become a characteristic element of local folklore.

The men's costume was completed by a pleated and embroidered shirt in hemp, by a waistcoat and by a hat in marmot fur.

Page 14 21st May 1933. Giovanni Castagneri called *Gian Giannoùn* and Luisa Castagneri.

The times of celebration: music and dances.

Time for playing music was certainly not scarce in the long winter nights, while in the summer, during the short and frantic season of haymaking and summer grazing, the occasions for playing music and dancing were less frequent and therefore all the more appreciated. Musicians were in great demand for the feasts of the patron saint in the various hamlets, during which dance was the main highlight, after the religious procession. The most common instrument was the violin, often accompanied by cello and double bass. Earlier still, other instruments were more common, like hurdy gurdy, bagpipes, fife and drum, all documented also on the Savoy side and in other Piedmont valleys.

Page 15 25th September 1921. The musical band of Balme.

The dominance of string instruments lasted until the mid 19th century when the diatonic hand organ became of widespread (locally called *semitoùn*) followed then by chromatic accordion. With the unification of Italy and the setting up of the National Guard, musical bands came into favour, which met with immediate success and popularized a faster and more martial style. Ever since then, bands have become a vital element in village life, taking part in all public celebrations, from patron saint days to religious occasions, from weddings to funerals.

In the Franco-Provençal valleys the dance that still enjoys greatest popularity, if one excludes the recent introduction of ballroom dancing, is the *courènda*. This, like the *giga*, the *bourèe*, the *controdanza* and the *rigadon* and other dances still popular in the western Alps, go back to court dances of the 16th and 17th centuries, passed into folk tradition and not ousted by the new fashions in the more conservative areas.

In Balme, apart from a particular variation of the *courènda*, slower and more rhythmic than in the other areas of the Valleys of Lanzo, on certain occasions a particular dance is performed, called the Dance of the Seven Jumps. This is a dramatized *courènda* that symbolizes courting. Towards 1930 this dance with its melody, then remembered only by the elders of the village, was passed on to the young people by an elderly couple of the village: Giovanni Castagneri (1860 – 1948) called *Gian Gianoùn*, and Luisa Castagneri. (1862 - 1955)

The traditions of Maundy Thursday (Le sounàïess).

A curious tradition is still alive today in Balme on the evening of Maundy Thursday. The people of Balme call it *allà sounaia* (to go jingling) and it is still performed today by the young people of the village, who make a tour of the village along a pre-established path, making a hubbub with cows bells and blowing into ibex horns and great sea shells with holes in them (which in *patois* are called *lumàssess*, or 'snails'), obtaining a deep and dismal sound. It is in all probability an old pagan spring rite, surviving within Christian cult as a kind of mystery play, only traces of which remain. The shells (of the species *Charonia Tritonis*) used as musical instruments, probably came from Provence and arrived in Balme through Savoy together with sea salt, which was the object of intense commercial exchanges.

THE GUIDES

The saga of Antonio Castagneri *Tòni dij Toùni*

“I especially entrusted the safety of one of my children to Castagneri. I must highly praise his value, dexterity and solidity, even in the most perilous passes. I was utterly satisfied with the unfailing attention he displayed for my young travelling companions. I was also pleased to find in Castagneri a commendable and tactful discretion, unfortunately an infrequent trait amongst other guides however professional they may be.”

(Notes of Quintino Sella, former minister of finance, on the ascents book of Antonio Castagneri — ascent to mount Cervino, August 1877.)

The Museum of Mountain Guides is dedicated to the figure of Antonio Castagneri (1845 – 1890) called *Toni dij Touni*, one of the greatest guides of all times, of whom Guido Rey wrote a memorable biography reconstructing his life and adventures. The fame of *Toni di Touni* transcended the national boundaries, as the commemoration shows written on the pages of the London magazine *The Alpine Journal* by the famous reverend W.A.B. Coolidge (1850 – 1926) who, better

than any other, impersonates the ideal of the British Alpinist (he was in fact of American descent) as a tireless explorer of alpine peaks:

"Few English mountaineers are acquainted with the Valleys of Lanzo, which run up North-West of Turin to the Alps which divide Italy and France. But the few who have visited them must certainly have been struck by the position of the village of Balme, in the Val d'Ala, surrounded on all sides by steep rocky ridges and dominated by the grand rock wall of the Bessanese (11,917 feet) which fills the head of the valley. This was the home of the great Italian guide Antonio Castagneri, who was one of the numerous victims of the fatal season of 1890.

It is rather over twenty years since he began to go as guide, and the exploration of the Italian mountains by Italian mountaineers, in which he was one of the leaders, scarcely dates farther back. In 1867 he accompanied Count Paul de Saint-Robert on his famous ascent of the Ciamarella, but it was only in 1873 and 1874 that he began to make his mark by a series of ascents (mainly in the company of Signor Barale) in the Cogne mountains; besides the conquest of the Charbonnel (12,237 feet), the monarch of the Southern Graians. On Christmas Eve, 1874, he climbed (with Signori Martelli and Vaccarone) the Uja di Mondrone (9,725 feet), a rocky peak above Balme, this being the first winter ascent made by Italians; and in the summer of 1875 he was the leader during the triumphal progress of Signor Vaccarone's party through the Cogne and the Levanna districts, when the difficult ascents of the Grand Paradis from the Noaschetta Glacier, and of the rock needle of the Bec de la Tribulation, were among the spoils.

Page 17. 1880 (circa.) Antonio Castagneri (third from the left) in front of the door of the Gastaldi mountain shelter.

Since that time he has been in the front rank of Italian guides— indeed, I might say the chief of those Italian guides, who have devoted themselves exclusively to their native mountains. Most of his climbs were made among the ranges enclosing his native valley, every point of which he had ascended either for the first time, or by a new route. (...)

I never had the good fortune of having him as guide, but I had often met him in the mountains, first at Balme in 1883, and later nearly every summer. The last time I saw him was on the Finsteraarhorn in 1888, in company with his friend and fellow-victim, Maquignaz, and I remember well his delighted amazement in seeing so many lofty peaks and wide-spreading glaciers, all quite new to him, while young Christian Almer was able to point out to him his own home down in the green valley of Grindelwald at our feet.

A strongly built and active man, he was mainly a cragsman, gaining his experience on the steep cliffs which wall in his home; but, unlike, many of his fellows, he took to ice-work with great zest, while always preferring rocks.

In Signor Vaccarone's useful list of "first ascents" his name stands third on the list with forty-three entries (young Christian Almer and his father claiming 96 and 66 respectively), but he is far ahead of all of his Italian or French rivals, Maquignaz coming nearest to him with 31 climbs.

While everyone must feel a pang of regret at hearing that a great guide has met his end among the mountains, there is a certain fitness in such a man perishing on the great hills which he had loved and climbed all his life. And though the memory of Castagneri will long be cherished by those who knew him, it is to be hoped that the "Passo Castagneri" will preserve his name to future generations. Little did I think when from the Roche Melon Glacier I looked, just a year ago, down the steep rock precipices of this pass on to the snowfields of the Glacier de Derrière le Clapier far below, and wondered how Castagneri had managed to scale them, that I should so soon have to write an 'In Memoriam' notice of one whom his friends used fondly and proudly to speak of as "il Toni dei Tuni"!

He was 45 years of age, and leaves a young widow and four small children, all totally unprovided for. I shall be glad to receive and forward any contributions that may be offered for their relief."

(The Alpine Journal, XV, 1891, pp. 289-290).

Page 18. 1890. The three victims of the catastrophe of Mont Blanc.

On the side of the church of Balme the following memorial plate can be read:

ANTONIO CASTAGNERI

VALIANT GUIDE
FEARLESS EXPLORER OF THE ALPS
CHERISHED COMPANION OF CLIMBERS

DIED WHILE DISCHARGING HIS DUTY
ON THE 18TH AUGUST 1890
ON THE GLACIERS OF MONT BLANC
CAUGHT IN A VIOLENT STORM
AT THE FEET OF HIS NATIVE SLOPES
WHERE HE LEARNT TO RISE TO THE HIGHEST CHALLENGES

THE TURIN BRANCH
OF THE ITALIAN ALPINE CLUB
THIS MEMORIAL STONE PLACED
ON THE 24TH MAY 1891.

Some people have compared the memorial stone of *Tòni dij Toùni* to those that feature in the first pages of Herman Melville's masterpiece, where the whale men of Nantucket are remembered who died in the most remote areas of the ocean in the discharge of their duty; a sorrowful fate shared by seafarers and mountain people, faced with the same fatalism that is common to all those who live in the furthest-flung corners of human settlement.

The guides on a visit to the mountaineering Pope.

Page 19. Vatican City 26th July 1929. Diploma of the apostolic papal blessing given to the guide Michele Bricco known as *Minassèt*.

The guides of the Valleys of Lanzo had many famous clients, and amongst these there was a certain priest from Lombardy, namely Achille Ratti (1857 – 1939), who went on to become Pope from 1922 to 1939 with the name of Pius 11th. Ratti, an expert mountain climber and author of some very important first climbs (including one on Mont Blanc) was as a young man a frequent visitor of the Valleys of Lanzo, of which he had a very fond memory — even though it is said that a priest in Savoy refused him permission to celebrate Mass, unsure whether that traveller in layman's clothes was indeed a priest at all.

When he became Pope, he invited to Rome all the guides that had accompanied him in his youth, and these men went from the whole range of the Alps to the papal audience, presenting themselves, as was the habit at that time, in their full attire as mountain guides, complete with cords and ice axes.

The guides of Balme, Ala and Usseglio were accompanied on this journey by the climber Eugenio Ferreri (1892 – 1946), himself a mountain guide who also wrote about the mountains, beside holding the offices of prefect's commissioner of Balme and of General Secretary of the Italian Alpine Club (CAI). Today, a mountain shelter (*rifugio*) in the Val Grande of Lanzo carries his name.

The tools of the trade.

Mountaineers did not use an ice pick to cross the glaciers, but a *cravina*: a kind of alpenstock, a stick capped with a metal ferrule with three prongs, one straight and two hooked. This was a hunting tool, used to drag foxes and beech-martins out of their dens, but above all marmots, whose dens were excavated during their winter hibernation. The *cravina* was also used by those who had commercial exchanges with Savoy, as a tool for reducing one's speed while sliding down the steep slopes covered in hard snow — the *ràspa* technique, a way to descend that modern mountaineering manuals recommend against, but no less useful for experienced mountaineers who want to be fast while carrying a heavy burden. It consists in sitting on one's heels, resting the weight of the body (and of the load) on the metal stick, and then just letting oneself slide downwards, while controlling the speed of the fall with a greater or smaller pressure on the stick.

For climbing, the *sèrquiou* were used instead. These were a particular kind of snow-shoes once very common in the villages of the higher valley, which was a variation of the traditional model with a wooden frame supporting a network of cords, adapted to very steep ground. The *sèrquiou* are entirely made of wooden sticks, rather than incorporating a net of cords, and the frame is not round (despite the name) but consists of a strip of ash wood curved in form of a horseshoe. In this way the *sèrquiou* are much sturdier than ordinary snow-shoes and can be worn so that the tip of the shoe reaches the front of the frame: this allows the wearer to use the *sèrquiou* to cut steps in the steep slopes of hard snow. Not to be confused with the *sèrquiou* are special angled snow-shoes called *stchalât*, also in wood, but of rectangular shape, which were used to compress snow for the sledge.

When the snow was very hard, or the terrible black ice appeared, hard as glass, *grâppes* were worn (also known *grepîn*), a crude type of crampons with four or six spikes, used also for walking on the steepest grassy slopes.

The containers used included the *garbin*, or a portable tub consisting in a wooden frame secured to strong shoulder straps, made to carry a load that never weighed less than thirty kilos, and could reach fifty kilos or more. The museum holds a fragment of such a tub, uncovered near Col d'Arnâss (at around 3,000 metres) by a retreating glacier; it is probably the relic of a forgotten accident.

With no snow boots or snow glasses.

Page 21. 1880 (circa.) Climbing a slope with pick axes and *cravina*.

Shoes were a luxury for the villagers, and even hobnailed mountain boots were introduced relatively late. Earlier on, wooden clogs (also provided with nails) were worn; however, people normally went about barefooted even at high altitudes (and even on the snow!). In order to negotiate particularly tricky passages on steep rocks with a smooth even surface, people sometimes resorted to urinating on their own bare feet, to enhance the grip of wet skin on dry rock.

Before a difficult climb, climbers used to have a few extra nails added to their boots. Several cobblers (*tchalia*) in Balme catered for such needs; among them was Fedele Castagneri, called *Grisèul* (1884 – 1951) who was himself a mountain guide and made his fortune in Turin as a manufacturer of high-standard mountain footwear, even becoming a supplier for the *Club Alpino Italiano* (the Italian mountaineering association). The nails used (usually forged in the lower part of the valley) were of various types (tacks, hobnails, *tricoùni*...) and the typical pattern of hobnails was later reproduced on the first rubber soles in Vibram, only popular after the Second World War.

The glare of the sun on snow often resulted in serious ophthalmia, which not infrequently made older mountaineers nearly blind. Before the introduction of sun-glasses for crossing glaciers, the only precaution in use consisted in blackening the face around the eyes with a piece of charred cork.

Page 22. 1920 (circa.) Advertisement for a mountain boot.

'Shoes. We have discontinued the two kinds of studding described in the "Vademecum of the Young Alpinist" on page 4 and we have replaced them with a new kind at the same price. We display here the high altitude type. The hooked nails are set in pairs to enhance their stability, while leaving at the same time enough space for maximum grip.'

Mountain Guides and Holiday Makers.

In the years before the First World War, an immense social gap separated the mountain people from the tourists that visited the valleys, all of whom were aristocrats or middle class. The villagers, however, while economically comparable to the working classes in the cities, were bearers of an egalitarian culture and did not feel inferior to the holiday makers, with whom they could establish a frank relationship as equals.

It is true that guides would await with cap in hand the arrival of the mountaineering tourists at the bus stop; however, soon enough they would find themselves in a position of advantage, sharing with their customers the hardships and the humble food and shelter, with the responsibility for leading the party. Many climbers from the city were impressed by the confident ease displayed by the guides in what they perceived as a hostile environment, by their assurance in overcoming difficulties that seemed impossible; many saw in these guides the personification of those virtues that an idealising romantic culture saw in mountain folk. It often happened that between the guide and his client (and between their respective families) a bond of familiarity and friendship developed which continued in time, and would have been unthinkable in the city between people so different in social condition. Holiday makers were frequently fascinated by this simple but lively and original culture, and often men and women liked to be photographed or portrayed in the local traditional costumes, thus showing a strong interest in the local habits and traditions.

On the other hand, contact with the tourists provided some degree of refinement and education for the guides and for the inhabitants of the other valleys; sometimes, customers were pleasantly surprised by their guides' tactful attentions. In Balme, one can still today see the sea-shell with which *Gep dij Toùni* offered a drink of water to the ladies he accompanied on the mountains; people spoke with disdain of the rougher behaviour of previous guides — like *Tita Bric*, for instance, who just filled his greasy old cap at the water sping.

Page 23. Notes on the notebook of Bricco Michele called *Minassèt* from his client Domenico Riccardo Peretti-Griva, lawyer.

THE SKIERS.

1896: Adolfo Kind climbs in skis from Balme to Pian della Mussa.

The people of the Alps went on the snow with sledges and snow-shoes; skis, originally from Norway, were introduced by tourists and only later were adopted by the people of the valleys as a means of transportation.

The pioneer of skiing in Italy was Adolfo Kind, a Swiss engineer resident in Turin who, being an enthusiastic mountaineer, had some pairs of skis sent to him specially from his native country. After a first trial on the slopes of the hills around Turin, he tested them for the first time in the nearby valleys of Susa, Sangone and Lanzo.

Page 24. 1910 (circa.) Skiers towards Pian della Mussa.

When and where he made his 'first' climb is really a minor matter, but we happen to have about this a precise testimony: that of Luciano Roiti, lieutenant in the mountain artillery corps who accompanied Kind on this adventure and reported on it in the army periodical *L'esercito italiano* of March 12th 1897:

"In the trip from Balme to Pian della Mussa, in the valleys of Lanzo, in the company of two friends, engineer Kind and his son, I had the opportunity to appreciate, for the first time, the great usefulness of these skates.

The snow was still covered with a crust of frozen ice, absolutely unable to carry the weight of a man walking; even so, in spite of our inexperience in the use of these skis, we could complete the trip in less than one hour, leaving hardly a trace of our passage.

Page 25. 1930 (circa.) Ski lessons for young cadets (*Balilla*.)

On another occasion, on the 24th January, we passed in very different snow conditions the ridge that separates the valley of Sangonetto from the valley of Susa, leaving from Borgone (398 m. above sea level), along the ridge with the houses of Mongirardo, and reaching the summit at Monte Saluria, 2038 metres high. From there we descended to Giaveno. This I found especially remarkable: the leader of the party had to press the snow and trace the path with a certain effort, while the other two followed on his traces with very little effort, leaving behind them a trail of beaten snow which, in my opinion, could have supported men on foot. I have to say that my own speciality in the army suggested to me the thought that even our mountain cannons, carried on sledges, could have followed us."

Pietro Castagneri called *l'aria*, the cross-country skier “as fast than the wind.”

When skis first appeared in Balme, the people of the valleys watched with curiosity and diffidence the evolutions and probably the falls of the first skiers, but in the following years some people began to embrace this sport. During the First World War many young men from the valleys, drafted in the mountain alpine corps, had the chance to learn the basics of the sport and the survivors of the trenches, like Pietro De Matteis called *Nissòt*, Andrea Castagneri called *Brac*, Francesco Mantero called *Càchiou*, took part in the first competitions with enthusiasm.

The strongest of all was Pietro Castagneri, nick-named *l'aria* (1906 – 1967) which means “wind”, because he was as fast as the wind. “Wind” was more than once national champion, but in Balme he is especially remembered for a local exploit (as it often happens). The scene is set in the early thirties. An athlete from Bardonecchia is accused by a rival from Valtournanche to have taken a shortcut during a competition. Apparently, it was the sort of thing that happened. The two athletes agree on a challenge and choose as neutral territory the mountains of Balme. A great competition is set up, with great suspense about who would be the winner.

The first to reach the finishing line, however, is none other than “wind”, so fast that the judges had not even had the time to put up the stand on the finish. Behind the counter of the *Caffè Nazionale*, run still today by the family of this champion, row after row of trophies and medals are a tribute to his exploits.

Page 26. 1925 (circa). From the left: Pietro Castagneri nick-named *l'aria*, Pietro Dematteis called *Nissòt* and Andrea Castagneri called *Brac*.

Ski Club, trophies and Springboards.

In order to provide accommodation for the skiing tourists, hotels and guesthouses were built in Balme, as well as mountain shelters open all year (including winter), such as the hut in Pian della Mussa. The increasing success of this sport was also due to associations that were created in those years, like UGET (*Unione Giovani Escursionisti Torinese*), which had a large following among the young from the valleys who had emigrated to the city, and the SARI (*Sunt Alpes Robur Juvenum*), mostly made up of students. The latter built a mountain shelter (no longer in existence) in the area of Balme near *Laghi Verdi*.

The fascist regime too, which for ideological reasons supported sport (especially if it was organized by institutions internal to the party), contributed significantly to make skiing, originally a preserve of an affluent minority, increasingly popular among the people of the valley and the working class.

Page 27. 1935 (circa.) Prize-giving ceremony for a skiing competition at the Hotel Camussòtt; in centre Eugenio Ferreri, surrounded by the guides of Balme.

It was not long before a Ski Club Balme was formed, the athletes of which wore at first the local costume, the *màii dou bort*; later, they came to wear used footballers' jerseys, made available by the doctor of Juventus, prof. Borsotti, who owned a pretty art-nouveau villa on the edge of Balme.

In the absence of ski-lifts, what was mainly practised was cross-country or out-of-track skiing, rather than down-hill. The period between the two wars saw many prestigious contests being organized at high altitudes; these were called *gran fondo*.

Some sports were popular in those years which are now only practised on a competitive basis, like bobsleigh, sledge racing, and trampoline jumping. In Balme the bobsleigh track was the main road of the village, where only half of the

snow was shovelled, in order to allow the passage of the sledges. In the village two springboards were constructed, the ruins of which are still visible. In 1949 the ski-lifts of Pakinò were built in Balme, being the first ski-lift in the valleys of Lanzo.

MOUNTAIN RESCUE.

The mountain guards, the voluntary workers of mountain rescue.

Page 28. 1948. Torre d'Ovada: Recovering the bodies of two casualties in the mountains, arranged in their body bags (bottom left) by a Mountain Rescue Team of Balme.

The star of Balme as a leading centre of climbing and mountaineering started to wane in the years between the two world wars, mainly due to the increased motorization which made other alpine areas easily accessible in Piedmont and in Val d'Aosta. Little by little, the profession of mountain guide became less popular, because people were beginning to climb without guides (as a consequence of the increased popularity of this sport among the middle and working classes). Gradually mountain guides transformed themselves into mountain shelter guards. Another factor that contributed in disaffecting the men of Balme from the profession of mountain guide was the new obligation to attend courses as a prerequisite for this qualification. This measure was imposed by the CAI as a response to the technical evolution of modern alpine climbing, but it was hardly compatible with the traditional individualism of mountain people. After the Second World War only six mountain guides were still active in Balme.

The decline in the tradition of mountain guides did not mean, however, that the people of Balme abandoned their traditional role of custodians of the mountains. Then as now, some form of human presence is necessary in an area of high mountains where, despite the difficult ground, many are the holiday-makers, the hill-walkers and the climbers, and accidents are not rare.

For this reason, at the beginning of the 50's a mountain rescue unit was set up. (*Corpo del Soccorso Alpino*). Even before that, volunteers from some sections of the CAI had taken it in turns to remain on stand-by, and would set off promptly as soon as an emergency call was received. These spontaneous initiatives were coordinated into a single organization, which in 1954 was granted formal recognition at national level. In the villages at the foot of the valley local stations were built, made up of local voluntary workers provided with the necessary equipment to face any emergency situation. That of Balme was one of the first to be set up, on the initiative of the local alpinist and crystal searcher Michele Castagneri called *Mimi* (1910 – 1976). It was the natural continuation of something that mountain people had always done, searching for those missing, assisting the injured, and recovering the bodies of casualties. In the 1970's and 80's the team was headed by Bruno Molino (1930 – 1984), a skilful climber from Turin who had moved to Balme and was the protagonist of a number of particularly difficult rescues. After his death, a bivouac at the foot of Uja of Mondrone was named after him. The use of helicopters in more recent times has not eliminated the need for local rescue teams, familiar with the ground and indispensable for guaranteeing safety in a remote area far away from the operative bases.

Heirs of the mountaineering tradition of their ancestors (first mountain miners, then guardians of the alpine passes at the times of commerce with Savoy, and finally pioneers of Italian alpine climbing in their capacity as mountain guides), the people of Balme today fulfil their traditional role as inhabitants of an alpine village by providing a precious and irreplaceable assistance to civil defence through the National Alpine Rescue Unit.

The municipality of Balme, which at the beginning of the third millennium counts fewer than one hundred inhabitants, can warrant an efficient team of volunteers capable of offering, at any time, expert assistance in circumstances that are always uncomfortable, often difficult, and sometimes dramatic. All able-bodied men of the village (as well as many young women) work in the rescue teams from youth to old age, asking for no reward, in the knowledge that they are doing the duty that accrues, in all valleys and at all times, to the inhabitants of the highest village, as the last human presence on the way to the mountain peaks.

THE VILLAGE.

The parish church of Balme (*la Djèsia d' Bàrmess*).

The oldest place of cult can probably be recognized in the so called "Chapel of the Holy Shroud", a crude construction still visible in front of the stronghold of *Routchàss*. Already in existence in the 15th century, the chapel was deconsecrated and converted into a stable, when, in 1612, the parish of Balme was established and the first parish church was built. This was built higher up than the actual one, and must have been a very simple construction. Its only extant relic is the stone that originally held the cross at the top of the belfry.

The modern church, dedicated the Holy Trinity, was donated to the village by the Archbishop Francesco Luserna Rorengo of Rorà, who on his pastoral visit in 1769 had been moved by the sight of poverty in which lived the population of Balme, which was already then the highest parish of the diocese of Turin. The new church was built in an area then still uninhabited, protected from the danger of avalanches by the rocky crag of the Bàrma. The construction necessitated a deep excavation into the mountain, and the whole population took part in the work with enthusiasm. The church, cross-shaped and built in a simple baroque style, was consecrated in 1775 and still displays above its entrance the crest of the archbishop of Luserna and a dedicatory plate.

Page 30. 1902 (circa.) The parish church of Balme.

In the same building of the church, on the east side, the priest's house was built. The priest could in this way reach the sacristy by simply walking down a staircase, a feature that became important in case of heavy snowfalls.

On the other side, in the direction of the town, were built the rooms which now house the Museum of the Alpine Guides, formerly the seat of the town council and of the school (where the parish priest was often teacher.) More recently it hosted the musical band of Balme.

The Chapel of Saint Anna. (*Tchapèla d' Sant' Ana*)

The chapel of Saint Anna, patron saint of the hamlet of Cornetti, is cited as early as in 1674, but the modern building dates back to 1811. The cult of Saint Anna, the Mother of the Virgin Mary, is particularly widespread in the high alpine valleys and probably has its origins in the "Matres" or "Matronae", divinities of Celtic origin the cult of which has left many traces in various places across the Alps.

In the chapel are preserved many interesting *ex voto* (votive offerings), evocative expressions of popular faith which document stories of healings, escapes from danger, or wars, all dating from the 16th century to present. Some, which invoke divine intervention for the recovery of one's sick cow, represent a significant testimony of the daily life in Balme during the past centuries, with particular reference to the close relation between people and their cattle.

The feast of Saint Anna takes place on the last Sunday of July, with a solemn procession starting from the parish church. Most of the inhabitants take part in it, as well as many emigrants who return to the village specifically for this event. The statue of the saint is carried by the girls of the village; for the occasion, many villagers wear the traditional dress. Until around 1990 the procession was accompanied by a particular carillon (*la baoudàtta*), which was performed by striking the parish church bells alternatively with a hammer and with a stone.

Page 31. 27th July 1919. Procession of Saint Anna.

The main square (*l' Airàtta*) of the hamlet *Cornetti*.

The hamlet called “*Cornetti of Balme*” (*Li Cournàt*) is one of the highest permanent settlements of the valleys of Lanzo (1446 m.) and is one of the few villages that has kept its original design, spared by the demolitions that elsewhere were made necessary by the construction of the modern road.

The small hamlet already existed in the 13th century, when groups of miners and cobblers from Bergamo and Val Sesia moved here, as well as in other parts of the valleys of Lanzo, to work in the iron mines. The settlement developed slowly through the centuries. In the centre, the oldest houses are still recognizable, with the stables below ground and the windows at street level, to provide a defence against the cold for the long winter months during which people shared their lodgings with their cattle. The houses built after the 17th century, when the end of the mining activities forced villagers to turn to agriculture, are taller and are provided with long balconies for drying cereals, which were often harvested before their full ripening because of the altitude. The alleys of the hamlet (*quintàness*) are narrow and winding, as a defence against the wind and the storms, while the sloping roofs covered with heavy stone slabs give protection against the heavy snow falls.

The heart of the hamlet is the square called *Airàtta* (“little barnyard”) where the threshing of the grain took place. Here was originally the village inn, which later became a food shop. One of the houses carries the crest of the Castagneri (still today the most common surname in Balme), featuring a chestnut tree sometimes accompanied by the Latin motto *pasco bonos pungoque malos* (“I feed the good and prick the bad”), with reference to the chestnut husk. In one of the alleys you can still see the cobbler’s sign, where mountain climbers would go before a difficult climb to have some nails added to their boots.

The Fountain of the Horn (*Batchàss dou Corn*).

The basin of the so-called “fountain of the horn (*corn*)” is of relatively recent date, like the ibex horn above it, but its name goes back to very ancient times. It is related to the name *Cornetti*, attested as early as in the 13th century as the family who gave their name to this hamlet.

The very cold water of this fountain, said to be particularly good, comes from a spring gushing out in the wood on the far side of the stream, which in earlier times was connected to the fountain by pipes made of larch wood joined together (*bournèl*).

In front of the fountain is an old stable, still in use today, overhung by a simple fresco representing the Virgin Mary with Saints. The unusual spaciousness of this room allowed it to be used as an isolation area during epidemics. The last time it happened was in 1919, for the outbreak of the so-called Spanish influenza. A fine wooden parapet adorns its side, inscribed with the owner’s name: CASTAGNERI GIO PIETRO.

In 1995, the main “street” of this hamlet was paved with consummate skill by an elderly inhabitant of the valleys, Giovanni Cristoforo called *Ninètou*, who used the ancient technique of *stèrni* (broken pebbles driven into the ground) to obtain a surface capable of withstanding much better than modern materials the movements of the ground, which for six months a year is frozen to a depth of one metre.

The Gorgia Falls (*La Gòrdji*).

With the earnings of his activity as mountain guide, Antonio Castagneri was able to buy a house called *lou Gouiàt*, after the nearby pond (*lou gòi*) where villagers used to macerate hemp. He started living there in 1878, the year he got married.

At a short distance from the house, the waters of the Stura plunge in a magnificent water-fall called *la Gòrgia* (“the ravine”). The first bridge across the fall was built by Castagneri himself, on the initiative of the Italian Alpine Club, who wanted to make this attraction more accessible. A mill and some old small buildings are nearby, at the base of the steep rocks that support the old houses of Balme. In these buildings, called *li veillin*, milk was kept refrigerated by means of the icy water from the brook, before being worked into butter and cheese. A little further down, on the right bank of the Stura, an ice-room carved into the side of the ravine kept the snow stored there in winter until the following year, thanks to the icy draft from the falls.

There is also a small electrical power station, fed by the water of the Stura that falls through a pressure water-pipe. Opened in 1909 and still in operation, it is one of the oldest working power stations of its kind.

Page 33. 1920 (circa.) Holidaymakers near the *Gorgia* falls.

Hotel Camussòtt (*Lou Trutchàtt*)

The Hotel Belvedere Camussòtt, a symbol of the mountaineering tradition of Turin, made history in December 1874, when Alessandro Martelli and Luigi Vaccarone spent the night there before the climb of the Uja of Mondrone, a famous climb which inaugurated winter climbing in Italy. Back then, the hotel was still a humble inn, whose ground floor consisted of a single room serving both as kitchen and a dining room, and with a few icy rooms on the first floor. The original sign of the inn, bearing the date 1817, is still to be seen, along with the crest of the owners, the Drovetti family, featuring three spinning wheels (from the French version of the family name, *Du Rouet*.)

The hotel's rise to success followed the fortunes of Giacomo Bricco called Camussòtt, a mountain guide who became hotel owner by marrying the daughter of the last manager of the inn, and especially of his son Stefano Bricco, who set up a real commercial empire in the hospitality industry in the early years of the twentieth century, catering for the high society of Turin of that period.

The years between 1920 and 1930 were the heyday of the Hotel Camussòtt, which became a focal point for top-level sport competitions and cultural events.

The hotel register, now on display in the *Museo Nazionale della Montagna* in Turin (National Mountain Museum) records some of the most distinguished names of Italian and European alpinism, as well as celebrities from the cultural world, like Giosuè Carducci, from show business, like Eleonora Duse, and from of science, like Guglielmo Marconi.

Page 34. 1925 (circa.) Advertisement for the Grand Hotel Belvedere "Camussott."

The Barnyard Square (*Ls' Airess*)

Page 35. 1898. *Ls' Airess*. Dance for the feast of the Holy Trinity.

The name *Ls' Airess* means "The Barn Yards" and refers to the place where corn and rye were threshed, the only cereals that could be grown at the altitude of Balme (without sometimes reaching maturity). In order not to lose even a single grain of the precious harvest, the ears of corn were placed on large hemp sheets, before being flailed with two sticks tied together with a leather string. Men and women alike took part in threshing, the latter wearing large-brimmed hats in black felt for these works. In past centuries, the barnyard was also the village square, where the public dance took place on the feast of the patron saint of the village, on the feast of the Holy Trinity and the 15th of August. On these occasions the *la courènda* would be danced to the sound of a fiddle, after the priors had officially opened the dances (*roùntri lou bal*.) Some of the houses around the barnyard display, on the side facing the mountains, a massive structure in stone in the form of a church apse, or more often like the bowhead of a ship. This, locally called *tchòma*, was built to help the construction withstand the impact of avalanches, which were likely to invest the village during particularly heavy snowfalls. Today there exists an avalanche wall, which was built in reinforced concrete above the village in 1964 to protect, in some way, the lower part.

The south side of the square features a simple, rustic type of country house, with a fine door adorned with the letter 'M': this is the initial of the family name *Martinengo*, whose members were carpenters and cabinet-makers for many generations. Others among the nearby houses display similar ornaments in carved wood.

The Chapel of the Holy Shroud (*Lou Rivòt d'ii Bep*).

The alleys that lead away from the centre of the village of Balme are called *quintàness* if they are level and *rivòt* if they are in sloping. Narrow and tortuous as they are, they give protection against the wind and the storms, while the projecting sloping roofs make walking possible even during abundant snow falls.

Page 36. 1888. The mountain guide Antonio Castagneri in front of the entrance to the Chapel of the Holy Shroud.

The building facing the road with a characteristic arch is traditionally considered the oldest in the village, probably dating before the 15th century. It was originally the first chapel of Balme, and its inside features traces of frescos, representing Christ *Pantocrator* and other saints like Saint John the Baptist, Saint Peter and Saint Sebastian. The entrance was originally on the mountain side. After the construction of the stronghold of *Routchàss*, in the 16th century, the chapel was enlarged and the entrance was moved to the side of the valley, with the construction of the arch. In 1612 the parish was set up and in the following years the first parish church was built downstream, while the chapel was deconsecrated and turned into stables and cellars. It is understood that in this first early place of cult the Holy Shroud was held while being transferred from Chambéry to Turin in 1535. On the evidence of the frescos conserved in Bessans (Savoy village adjoining the territory of Balme) and on the external wall of the chapel of Voragno of Ceres, distinguished scholars have hypothesized that the relic travelled the high crossings that connect the Haute Maurienne with the Val d'Ala. According to this view, the choice of crossing the Alps through internal valleys, traditionally more loyal to the Catholic Church and to the reigning royal family, was motivated by the need to avoid possible dangers from the Valdese and the Calvinists, at a time of crisis for the Duchy of Savoy.

The stronghold of Rociàs (*Lou Routchàss*).

1909 saw the begin of the construction of the waterworks of Turin. As part of these works, the old centre of Balme was demolished to allow the passage of the provincial road to Pian della Mussa. The oven, the washing area and two ancient shrines were destroyed, but luckily the stronghold of *Routchàss* was saved, which for over four hundred years has dominated the valley high up on the rock from which it takes its name.

The construction has a defensive form, recognisable as such from the tiny openings and from the single low and narrow entrance. This leads to a rustic stone staircase and a long passage, from which many rooms lead off, which in the past were used as stables and living areas. All around there are other staircases, underground passages and cellars, partly hollowed in the rock itself. On the other side, inaccessible from below and facing the sun, the *Routchàss* has covered galleries, high up on the deep gully in which the waters of the stream run after its great jump from the falls. On a higher floor, an enormous barn held the provisions of fodder necessary for the animals during the long winters. A huge roof held up by enormous beams and covered by stone slabs of unusual thickness covers the whole building; this, in the past (before the demolitions due to the construction of the road), granted access to the fountain, the oven, the washing place and the chapel without stepping outdoors. This was not a negligible advantage considering the mass of snow that regularly falls on Balme. It was just here that, on the afternoon of the 8th January 1885, Francesco Castagneri *Minoùia* (1869 – 1916) was surprised by an avalanche that completely covered the old washing place. In five hours the unlucky man dug in the snow a ten-metre tunnel to his salvation.

Page 37. The stronghold of Rociàs (*Lou Routchàss*)

The saga of Gian Castagnero (*L'couintess d'Gian d'ii Lench*)

At the end of the corridor of the Rouchàss, a door leads to the inner rooms, all the way to a gallery which opens up to the valley. Here is conserved, etched into the rock wall, the inscription of the founder “ali 5 magio 1591 me jouane castagnero ho fato la pte casa laus deo.”

Born in Voragno of Ceres from an old family of the valley, Gian Castagneri (1550 – 1643), remembered by the people of Balme as *Gian dij Lentch*, moved to Balme where he rapidly made his fortune as a manager of mines and blacksmiths, buying himself a noble title. At the same time other branches of the family moved to Savoy, namely to Argentine and to Les Hurtières, where, always through their mining activities, they became even richer and more powerful (like the Baron Castagneri of Chateauneuf). The frescos, partly covered by plaster, represent stories from the life of John the Baptist (the baptism of Jesus and the banquet of king Erod), and were carried out for celebrating of the marriage of his son Gioanino to Anna Genoa from Ala. The marriage was celebrated in 1601 in the Rouchàss itself, thanks to a special permission of the bishop because the bride was seriously ill. Thanks to this precedent, Gian Castagneri managed to obtain autonomy for the municipality (1610) and the parish (1612) of Balme, both of which were previously attached to Ala di Stura.

Page 38. The inscription of Gian Castagnero (1550 – 1643.)

The illness of the bride must not have been so serious after all, because this marriage produced a great number of children and grandchildren, who in a short time absorbed all the other families in Balme, to the point that today the people of Balme are all, in some way, related to Gian Castagneri, and even have the same name. Strange stories are told about this ancestor, who was supposed to be of gigantic proportions and extraordinarily crafty. The dungeon is still visible, were he supposedly coined money with gold from a secret mine that he alone knew.

The Central Café.

For more than a century after its was built in 1775, the parish church of Balme remained set apart from the village, in a distant place protected from avalanches by the rocky crag called the *Barma*.

Page 39. 1915 (circa.) Pian della Mussa: Hotel Delfino.

Finally in the first years of 1900, the first constructions were built around the little square, and among these was the Central Café, then the “Hotel and restaurant Delfino”, as annex of another restaurant that had been opened in Pian della Mussa.

This was the work of Gian Pietro Castagneri called *Gianpèrou d’Bruna* (1847 – 1929), an interesting figure of entrepreneur and intellectual from these mountains. He left his village when still very young (his father died in the battle of San Martino in 1859), worked for many years abroad and returned to Balme at the age of 60. Wealthy, imaginative and well educated (he was a subscriber to the Herald Tribune), he married, had two daughters, became mayor of the village, and built not only the Central Café, but also a house in the Cornetti hamlet, on the façade of which tourists can still admire the attractive wooden parapet with the name of the owner carved on it. In the following years the Central Café was purchased by the Bricco *Camussòtt* family, owners of the famous hotel, who rebuilt it after a disastrous fire on 25th November 1991 and still run it.

The Café, which keeps various memorabilia of the traditional culture of Balme, is the headquarters of the Association of Franco-Provençal Culture *Li Barmenk*; it also hosts a traditional music ensemble with the same name, which gathers young musicians from various villages of the valleys of Lanzo. On request, it is possible to taste here local specialities for strong palates, like the Balme coffee.

I Fré (Li Frè).

Li Frè means “the locksmiths”. Indeed, this small hamlet was inhabited for centuries by smelter artisans who exploited the deposits of iron pyrites located at an altitude of nearly three thousand metres in the Vallone di Servin. The ore was extracted, carried down on sledges, and then smelted a first time in a forge, traces of which are still extant in a small

plateau below the hamlet. The iron was then transported in the lower valley where it was used for the manufacturing of locks (in Ceres) and nails (Mezzanile, Pessinetto and Traves.) In the Middle Ages, this industry attracted here and to other parts of the valleys of Lanzo a large number of immigrants, especially from Val Sesia and from the valleys of Bergamo. In the 17th century the climate turned colder, a small glacier covered the deposits and the mines were gradually abandoned, also because the charcoal necessary for processing the metal had become scarce. People had to convert to stock-breeding and to a hard high-mountain farming. In the following century the hamlet ceased to be a permanent settlement, and was only inhabited in the summer seasons during the annual climb to the summer pastures.

The houses of Frè, covered in enormous stone slabs and built with perfect dry masonry technique, testify to the stone-cutting skills which were natural to miners. One of them preserves a carved inscription, with a date (1486 GAC) that is one of the earliest in the valley.

Near the hamlet, following the indications of the nature path, it is possible to see the remains of a summer stable completely set up inside a natural hollow (*Lou Casouin*), and the tunnel of a talc mine which was in use until the end of the 19th century.

Above the hamlet is a devotional column sacred to Saint Francis; on this occasion the people of Balme gather together at Frè for a simple feast, eating *polenta* to the sound of the traditional music of the valley.

Bogone (*Bougouin*).

Page 41. The so-called “druid altar” of Bogone.

The small hamlet of Bogone was mainly inhabited in summer and autumn, as a stopping place on the path to the summer pastures. It is situated halfway along the track which winds its way up to Pian della Mussa, a few hundred metres above a charming stone bridge (the Bogone bridge); dating back to 1713, this is one of the few old bridges spared by time and by the destructive force of the stream’s swollen waters. The houses are deeply sunken into the ground on the mountain side, while the more recent ones are protected by a bow-shaped structure as a defence against avalanches, which in the winter of 1974 destroyed the ancient shrine.

Further on, near a crude stable, the *arpòsa dij mort* (“the dead’s rest”) is visible: this consists of two vertical stone slabs on either side of the path, where the bier was rested on which were carried the bodies of those who had died in Pian della Mussa. While serving as a necessary stop to rest the carriers, this stop also had a definite ritual significance.

The carved inscriptions of the *Crè dou Lou* tell a story from much earlier times. These are on the opposite side of the valley, at the top of a ridge above the fountain along the main road. They contain names, dates, and short sentences (also in local patois), as well as two mysterious rows of thirteen cups hollowed out into the rock.

Equally enigmatic, and probably more ancient still is the so called “druid altar”, a big table-shaped boulder placed a few metres below the houses, on the right side of the track to Balme. A number of small grooves carved in the rock radiate from a large stump of stone at the top of the boulder, finishing in large round hollows. It is one of a number of boulders in the Western Alps featuring such “cups”; some scholars regard it as a pre-Christian place of worship.

Chialambertetto (*Tchabertât*).

The houses of Chialambertetto cling to a huge rocky moraine that looks as if it was rumbling down from the south walls of the Uja of Mondrone. The hamlet is flanked by two steep gorges swept at every significant snowfall by big avalanches; these, however, have never hit the houses nor made any victims, unlike in every other hamlet of Balme. It is not an accident that the chapel is dedicated to the Holy Virgin of the Snow, whose celebration falls on the 5th August.

This small settlement was originally called Forno di Ala; it went on to take the name of “house” or “field” of a certain Bertetto, mentioned in documents from the 1300s. Developed in mediaeval times around a foundry for the processing of iron ore, it was an independent municipality from the 13th century to 1844; at this date it was incorporated into the municipality of Balme, in which it had been an enclave. The houses were originally a little further upstream, near the modern arch-shaped bridge over the river Stura; then, an enormous landslide destroyed the village on the 17th September 1665, and the survivors rebuilt it at a short distance downstream, where presumably there were some houses already. On this occasion the pre-existing chapel was enlarged, as shown by the date 1677 on the ridge-pole of its roof, and the entrance was made to face no longer West but South, in front of the newly built houses.

At the far end of the hamlet, near a trout weir, is an ancient furnace with a distinctive mound cover, very different from the other furnaces in the valley, usually roofed with slabs. It is probably a legacy from the first settlers: foreign miners and blacksmiths who, for a long time, must have kept their own ethnic and linguistic identity; this is known to have happened in more recent times at Forno di Lemie, another mining village in the nearby Valley of Viù.

According to tradition, this hamlet has the distinction to have produced (and to produce to this day) the finest *màïess dou bort*, the embroidered woollen jackets that are part of the traditional costume of Balme.

Molette – Molera (*L’Moulàtess – La Moulèri*)

Page 43. 24th August 1930. The restaurant of the Molette.

The two hamlets of Molette and Molera preserve in their names (It. *mola* “millstone”) the memory of the quarries where millstones were here extracted and exported all around the valleys of Lanzo. The same name lives on in the name of the Moletto family, who lived in this area for countless generations.

Molette is the first village you meet on entering the municipality of Balme. It is located immediately before an area strongly exposed to the danger of avalanches, which in earlier times would cut communications at every major snowfall, sometimes for prolonged periods. Since 2002 however, a newly-built slip road on the opposite side of the valley ensures the fitness of road conditions even with severe snowfalls.

The houses of Molera are built 200 metres higher up, on a crag which overhangs the valley. The open and sunny position earned this little settlement the sobriquet “Riviera of Balme.” Thanks to a particularly mild microclimate, trees can grow here that are unusual at this height (1500 metres), like horse chestnuts, cherry trees and walnut trees. From this hamlet, on the 24th December 1874, the guide Antonio Castagneri from Balme and the two climbers Alessandro Martelli and Luigi Vaccarone from Turin started their ascent to the Uja of Mondrone, inaugurating the tradition of Italian winter alpinism.

The two hamlets are today uninhabited during winter, but many immigrants return every weekend and in the summer months, perpetuating a tradition of human settlement on this the territory whose beginnings are lost in the mists of time.

The restaurant Bricco at Pian della Mussa.

The historical starting point for the pioneers of alpinism, rich with relics of the great season of mountain guides of Balme, the Bricco restaurant is in a particularly charming spot on Pian della Mussa, near the huts which still host, during the short summer, the cattle of the Castagneri Touni family. In May and June, the fields behind the building are the scene of a remarkable sight: numerous herds of ibex which come down to graze the young shoots, after a long winter spent chewing on the dry grass uncovered by the wind in the snow of the higher peaks.

This animal, present here since remote ages, was hunted into extinction, partly because folk superstition attributed a magic healing power to the powder of its ground horns, to its dried blood and even to the cross-shaped cartilage which can be found in its heart.

Having barely avoided extinction thanks to the protection afforded by the Parco del Gran Paradiso, for some decades now ibex have returned of their own accord to the territory of Balme, where they have found a perfect natural habitat on the steep crags of the Ciamarella and of the Uja of Mondrone.

The *Locanda Alpina* (The Mountain Inn)

The *Locanda Alpina* originates from the summer stables belonging to the family of the mountain guide Castagneri Touni, whose properties were located exactly in this first section of Pian della Mussa (called, for that reason, *La Mussa dij Toùni*).

The rooms of the restaurant contain photographs and portraits belonging to the history of local mountain climbing, especially relating to Giovanni Battista Castagneri (1895 – 1940), mountain guide and owner of the restaurant, which is still run by his family.

At the feet of the *Roc Neir*, a spur which divides the top part of Pian della Mussa from the lower part, lies the imposing bulk of the Hotel Broggi (later Savoia), an art-nouveau building erected in 1899 before the construction of the road from Balme to Pian della Mussa. At that time, the hotel was one of the grandest mountain hotels in the Western Alps. Subsequently destroyed by fire, it was re-built in its present form, and was transformed in more recent times into a summer house for a religious order.

The opposite side of Pian della Mussa (originally occupied by pastures) is covered by a wood of fir trees, which were planted to protect the springs that feed the city waterworks of Turin, built in the early 1900s; the decompression pools to be found along the road of the Val d'Ala also are part of these waterworks. These still today provide a part (albeit a small one) of the water supply of Turin. The construction of the waterworks started after the abandonment of an earlier project for a hydroelectric dam, which would have transformed the whole Pian della Mussa into an artificial lake.

Page 45. 1903 (circa) Pian della Mussa. Hotel Broggi; on the right, the huts of the *Toùni* family, later taken down and rebuilt on the far side of the plain after the construction of the waterworks of Turin.

Page 46. Panorama of Balme, in the background, the Bessanese.

Page 47. 1915 (circa.) Hotel Belvedere *Camussòtt*.

Page 48. 1899. From left to right: the mountain guide Antonio Boggiatto called *Gloria*, the parish priest of Balme, and the mountain guide Giuseppe Castagneri called *Gep dij Toùni*, at the departure of the expedition which will place the statue of the Virgin Mary on the top of the Ciamarella.