

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL

Memórias – Preserving the Stories of Lowell's Portuguese Community

Oral History Interview with Richard F. DeFreitas, February 27, 2016

Biographical Note:

Born in Lowell, Massachusetts, in 1939; son of Josephine (Cotta) and Joaquim DeFreitas; Richard F. DeFreitas's mother (1911-1994) was born Lowell her parents, Josephine (Almeida) and Francisco C. Cotta were from Terceira and were among the first communicants of Saint Anthony Catholic Church; his father (1908-1994) was born in Madeira and, at the age of eleven, immigrated to the U.S. with his parents (Ludevina and Francisco DeFreitas); the DeFreitas family settled in Manchester, New Hampshire; Joaquim and Josephine married in 1936, and settled in Lowell on the fringe of the "Back Central" neighborhood; they were communicants of Saint Anthony's, and became active in the Holy Ghost Society; Josephine worked as a knitter in the New Knit Company's factory in Lowell; Joaquim became a master mechanic at the Brox Construction Company in Dracut, Massachusetts; as a young boy, Richard F. DeFreitas attended the city's public schools and learned to play the clarinet (his father played guitar and, with a number of Portuguese men, formed a band that played in local clubs); by age twelve he played in the Portuguese Colonial Band; in the 1950s, the family moved to Chelmsford, Massachusetts, on a former poultry farm near the Chelmsford-Lowell line; by his teens at Chelmsford High School, DeFreitas was an accomplished clarinetist musician; graduated from Lowell Technological Institute with a degree in engineering; while playing in various bands in the area, Mr. DeFreitas worked in engineering for the Raytheon Corporation, followed by Ditrán, Division of Clifton-Litton Industries, producers of analog-to-digital conversion electronic equipment for the computer industry; after working at two other electronic manufacturing firms in the area, he accepted an engineering job in California he worked for electronic computer-related manufacturing firm; Mr. DeFreitas returned to Chelmsford and worked for Hybrid Systems Corporation before founding his own company DeltaLab Research, Inc. While at Hybrid and DeltaLab, Mr. DeFreitas received several patents for analog-digital conversion and audio products used in sound and musical recordings.

Scope and Contents:

Interview conducted by local historian Mehmed Ali; in addition to personal family history, this interview includes information on Lowell's Portuguese community in the 1940s and 1950s, activities at the Holy Ghost Society and Saint Anthony Catholic Church, as well as the activities of and persons associated with the Portuguese Colonial Band; there is also information on working at various factories in 1940s and 1950s Lowell and the move of the DeFreitas family to the suburbs of Chelmsford in the 1950s; much of the interview focuses on music and musicianship within the area's Portuguese community, and the various clubs where Mr. DeFreitas and other musicians played; it concludes with some information on the area's growing electronic and computer industries, including a company founded by Mr. DeFreitas in the late 1970s.

INFORMANT: RICHARD DEFREITAS

INTERVIEWER: MEHMED ALI

R=RICH

A=ALI

A: Okay, this is interview with Richard DeFreitas on February 27, 2016. And Rich thanks again for spending some time with us.

R: My pleasure.

A: So first just a little bit of background information. Where and when were you born?

R: I was born in Lowell, Saint John's Hospital to be exact, on August 31, 1939.

A: Okay, great.

R: And I spent the first thirteen years of my life in Lowell at 370 Lawrence Street, on the corner of Joiners Court. That was the outskirts of the Portuguese section.

A: Okay. All right. Great, and tell us about Joiners Court, which I always think is a fun little street.

R: Yah, Joiners Court, it's funny, they were, we were Portuguese downstairs. Upstairs was a German couple that they actually owned the building. Behind them was a French couple. Behind them was Polish-Lithuanian in the three-story block, and behind them was Polish. And then there was a little cottage that would have people of different ethnic backgrounds come in. Sometimes French, sometimes you know, in fact there was an English couple there. And then behind them, which Joiners Court you could, there was a path that would connect you to Merrill Street; they were Portuguese, Espínola, and Italians, Carnevale.

A: Okay.

R: So, and they were, Lewis was Irish, it would, the building that backed up against that little cottage you could access from Rogers Street. And I remember it was Portuguese, Irish, it was everything. It was like little Europe.

A: Interesting. How about, any stories from the Whipple when you were a kid?

R: Oh, the Whipple Café. Man I saw fights there. I saw two guys fight over a dime. Sitting at the bar one guy picks up, and the other guy said, "That's my dime." "Does it got your name on it?" Now mind you I'm only seven or eight. "No." "Well then it's not yours. It's mine. I found it." Whack, bang, table, just like a western movie. And the cops would come down with

the politically incorrect “paddy wagon” and throw them in the back and haul them off. The next day they’d be back and best friends! [Laughs]

I saw a guy he was beating up his wife there. Not, you know, he was hitting her. He didn’t really cause a lot of damage. And the cops came, she had him arrested. The next day they were walking arm-in-arm. It was crazy. And I remember when I was around six or seven there was this song, “Irene, Goodnight Irene.” And that was very, very popular tune for all the drunks in the U.S. I think. You know, they’d sing, (slurs) “Irene Goodnight.” Then they’re going on and on. Finally my father says to my mother, “We can’t stay here. We can’t raise kids here. This is crazy.” So when I was eleven or twelve they started looking around.

A: Okay.

R: Now we used to have an egg man from Chelmsford, a milkman from Chelmsford. We didn’t have a bread man, but an egg man and a milkman. And the egg man is the one that found the house we moved into on Evergreen Street in Chelmsford. It was across the street from his two-acre egg farm. (A: Okay) And we bought an old one-acre, almost an acre, egg farm with big chicken coups which we burned down and trashed. I mean the rats were scurrying all over the place. And so it was the egg man that found the place for us.

A: Was he? What was his name?

R: Taylor.

A: Taylor, okay. (R: Yup) He’s not a Portuguese guy?

R: No, not a Portuguese guy.

A: Okay.

R: It was in the Westlands [neighborhood] in Chelmsford where, well you know where East Gate Plaza [a small shopping mall] is?

A: Yes.

R: Well there was Delgarian’s Farm. (A: Yah) And then coming towards Evergreen Street there was Taylor’s Chicken Farm. (A: Okay) And then ah, DeMoulas bought all of that property all the way out to Evergreen Street, but it was zoned residential. And Ruth Delaney, who was our neighbor, fought DeMoulas and made him tear up his hot top and let it grow wild, and now it’s just a wild jungle. And I remember my father telling me he used to have breakfast with Mike DeMoulas every morning at the little café they had in the store. (A: Yah) My mother and father would go over there and he’d say, “I’ve beaten everybody I’ve ever come up against, but I can’t beat Ruth Delaney.” [Both laugh] Because she threatened that if he persisted she’d show that his, that building was on state property on one end, and at the end of the zoning on the other end and they were driving trucks around till two in the morning. And she stopped them

from driving the trucks, because said if you persist we're going to tear out the bank and you're going to have to go through the middle of the building.

A: Because the bank was on?

R: It was in, was in that building, but they were going on the outskirts out of the commercial zone. I mean she had him nailed, and she had a lot of support from the town.

A: Yah, no kidding.

R: Yup, she really, because she used to go fight causes for other people in town, you know. And DeMoulas said he couldn't beat Ruth Delaney. And she never shopped there. She refused to shop there.

A: Is she still around?

R: No, she died in an automobile accident about twenty years ago.

A: Oh okay, interesting story. Now you talked about this piece of land growing. Is it still there? So where?

R: Oh yah. You drive down Evergreen Street and it's on the right, and it's between East Gate Plaza parking lot and the street. It's wild!

A: And that was intended to be part of the plaza?

R: That was going to be part (--). That was additional parking.

A: [Laughs] Okay.

R: And I said, I said to my father, I said, "You know she stopped him, but if he had come that far he probably would have kept coming and your property would be zoned for business. You probably would have made a lot of money."

A: Right.

R: [Laughs] You know?

A: Interesting. So before your folks move to Chelmsford tell us about the Portuguese community as a whole.

R: Well we used to go to church every Sunday at Saint Anthony's. My grandmother, my mother's mother lived with us and I used to go with her. It was the late mass, the 11:30 mass. And her son, my uncle, lived next to the church. So we'd stop over there after mass. Sometimes we'd eat there, sometimes we wouldn't. It's funny, growing up in a Portuguese household I only like my mother's cooking. I couldn't stand anybody else's cooking. It took me

a long time. You know it was a big problem with me. I couldn't go over to a friend's house and have something to eat, because I just, just didn't like it.

And so we'd go to church every, every Sunday. My father and mother didn't go as often. My father was best friends, kind of best friends with Father Grillo. (A: Umhm) And in fact my father was a musician like I was, and he donated his sound system to the church when he stopped playing.

A: Okay.

R: But one day he was talking to the priest and he says, "Oh, nice family." He says, "Three boys, very good." And my father said, "Yah, I'm all done Father. I've got my family now." And Father Grillo slapped him in the face.

A: Really?

R: He said, "You can't say that to me. I'm a priest." And my father said, "That's it." He stopped going.

A: And meaning the priest was, what was his thinking?

R: Well you couldn't practice. My father said he was all done. No more kids. And the priest, you couldn't do that. You had to have what God gave you.

A: So keep on procreating.

R: Yah, but my father was involved in, he used to go to the Portuguese Civic League on Back Central Street. (A: Umhm) And he'd take me there a lot and he'd be playing cards, a game called Bisca [Bisca is a Portuguese version of the Italian card game Briscola], I think. It's like whist only it goes ace, ten, King, Jack, Queen, that's the order. I remember that. And it's like whist.

A: Okay, and how do you spell that?

R: I don't know.

A: Okay, say it one (--)

R: I don't know if it's with a P or a B.

A: Say it one more time.

R: Bisca. [Correct spelling]

A: Bisca, okay.

R: You know, and it's like a whist kind of a game, or like a, oh god, bridge kind of game, a cross between the two. I used to know how to play it, but I don't anymore. I just know the order of succession. It was ace, ten, King, Jack, Queen.

A: Okay, and this is a Portuguese game?

R: Yah, Portuguese game.

A: Okay. Okay.

R: Absolutely, and he used to be playing there every Sunday night. He'd drag me off. That's when he didn't take me to movies. Usually on Sunday night he wanted to get out of the house, because you know, his mother-in-law was living there any everything. He'd take me. He'd say, "Come on, let's go to the movies." We'd go to the Rialto. (A: Um) And I'd get (--) It was kind of an adult movie. Of course adult movies back then just meant there were no cartoons. And I'd get to see the things with George Raft and Joel McCrea and people like that, those detective things. The film noir stuff you know. And then we'd stop, we'd go to Al Mello's Drug Store, which was on the corner of Central and Appleton. (A: Okay) And we'd go in there, and we'd have, he'd have a coffee frappe, or I might have one, or a Coke. And the parking was funny. There was a walkway. It's all changed now, but there was a walkway that skirted a big, big intersection and you could park along the walkway. Even over here was all like a parking lot. And we'd drive down there. He'd park his car there. We'd walk into the movies and it was, you know, every Sunday night go to the movies. He'd take me. My two brothers were, I was four years older than the next one. (A: Okay) So they would stay home. And then when we weren't going to the movies we'd go to the Portuguese Club and he'd be playing, I'd be off banging things on the piano and just, after a while you know, it'd get boring. You know how it is, a kid, six, seven years old and you're in a place longer than a half an hour, you're done.

A: Right.

R: But he used to get involved in running the Portuguese picnics up at the Holy Ghost Park. And he used to drive up with his car to New Hampshire, buy all the booze, and stick it in his trunk. And then drive back, which was supposedly illegal across state lines. It's not anymore.

A: No.

R: It wasn't even then, it's just that you know, if they caught you and they cited you and you paid, we'll they got you. But it really wasn't legal to stop anybody from doing that. (A: Right) Interstate commerce is guaranteed in the Constitution. (A: Umhm) So I remember him, them doing a picnic, those picnics. In fact the first Lady of Fatima Feast was put together by the people from Madeira.

A: Okay.

R: And my father was born in Madeira.

A: Okay.

R: And that was I think 1949 or [19]50. It was right after the Vatican had declared that the Lady of Fatima citing was a miracle.

A: America?

R: A miracle.

A: Oh a miracle. I see, yah, yah.

R: Okay, when they made that a miracle according to the Catholic Church, they ran that picnic. And that was always in late August. Prior to that the picnics used to be two Holy Ghost Picnics in May, Saint Anthony's in June and then it was the Lady of Fatima in August. And I was in the Portuguese Band, the Colonial Band, and we'd also go to Gloucester, play the Blessing of the Fleet. Sometimes we'd go to Cambridge, and you know, the different Portuguese picnics. We'd do over five or six a year. Rehearse all year for five or six. And then they used to have the minstrel shows at the Lowell Opera House, which was a State Theater down at the bottom of, I wish they didn't tear that building down, that place inside was gorgeous. I tried to take a peek at the Crown Theater at Middlesex Street, because that used to be a movie house that I would go to as a kid. And I, I don't remember anybody changing it, and I haven't been in there. The door was closed. I'd like to go in to see if they're using the actual theater floor.

A: They're not.

R: They're not?

A: I've been in. I went in in December I think. Yah, it's just a wide opened floor.

R: They must have raised it then.

A: It doesn't even, it doesn't even look that big.

R: Well I don't think it was that big at all. It was one of the smaller theaters. I can name all of the theaters in (--) You'd go down Central Street there was the State, which was the Lowell Opera House, and there was the Rialto. You'd go up Middlesex Street there was the Crown, which became the Allen, the Capital which was next to the depot. Go down further there was the Strand. Take, go down East Merrimack Street there was the Palace that was across from the auditorium. And then you'd go to Bridge Street and there was the RKO Keith. And then there was the Merrimack Theater behind, right the street perpendicular to Bridge Street.

A: Okay, like Paige?

R: The parking lot.

A: Where the parking garage is?

R: Yah, yah, yah, that was the Merrimack Theater.

A: Yah.

R: Did I miss any?

A: And then up (--)

R: And then the Royal up at the (--)

A: The Royal on Merrimack.

R: I never went to the Royal. It's the only one I never went to.

A: Yah, they talk about it as being B movies and mainly French kids.

R: Yah, it was mostly French, yah.

A: A couple of Greeks.

R: But you know, the Rialto, I'd go on a Saturday morning. It was twelve cents. And it's funny, times were different then. You could go and you could be away from the house for you know, hours on end and nobody would worry about you. You know not today, God, it's not like today. I'd go to the movies and I'd be there on a Saturday morning, get there around 10:00. And the kids they would yell and screaming and they'd only keep quiet when it was shooting, but I got to hear no dialogue. So around 12:00, 12:30 they'd all leave, I'd stay and watch it again, because you didn't have to leave. You could buy your ticket and stay there until midnight if you wanted. You didn't have to leave. And of course I'd go up and I'd buy some popcorn, a candy bar, or whatever. [Chimes in background] You know, a quarter took you a long way back then.

A: Good.

R: And so, and if I really liked the movie I'd see it a third time. Now air conditioning, the Rialto had air conditioning and I swear to God that thing was at 68 degrees. I think they even advertised that it's 68 degrees. And you'd walk out in the summer and ah, the big blast of heat, you know. It was like about a 40 degree difference. But nobody was worried that I wasn't home.

A: Yah. Yah, yah.

R: I'd walk into the house 5:30, 6:00. You know I was gone the whole day.

A: Yah.

R: And if I didn't go to the movies we were out playing. We'd go play up at Fort Hill Park, or Shedd Park. We, sometimes we'd follow the tracks.

A: Umhm.

R: I remember, you know that bridge on Lawrence Street? There's a trestle bridge that goes out over the river and comes back in?

A: Yup, near the Lowell Cemetery.

R: Yah, I was caught on that when a train was coming.

A: Ooh. What happened?

R: We hung, we hung down. We crawled down. The train was coming very, very, very slow. And the conductor, I mean they could have stopped it, give us a chance to get off it. No, they went across the whole bridge after it was up we had to battle our way up to the top. We didn't want to fall in. I couldn't swim at the time, and then walk off. Never went on another trestle bridge.

A: Interesting. So, so back to your, back to your dad. So he had this encounter with Father Grillo?

R: Yeah.

A: And so basically he stopped going to church?

R: Well he was very upset, yah.

A: Yah. What did your father do for work?

R: He was a heavy equipment operator. He was, in fact during the war he was working at the Boston Naval Shipyard running the crane. And he wanted to join the Navy Seabees because his brother was in the service, his both brothers. One was in the army, one was in the Navy, and his brother-in-law was in the Navy. And he was, you know, he was in his mid-thirties, but he wanted to go work as a Seabee. And they told him, the war board told him, absolutely not. You are going to stay here and build ships, because he had, you know, he was a heavy equipment operator. There weren't too many back then. And he was a skilled operator and that was it. You go run a bulldozer in the Pacific and get killed isn't going to help us any. Over here building ships that will help. And as a result he had extra gas rations. In fact I have a ration book I found among some of his stuff with stamps. And he had extra, he had a private line, telephone line, which was very rare back then, because he could be called in the middle of the night to go down to work. And so he had a private line, he had extra rations for gas, and he may have gotten a few for you know, butter and sugar. I remember they had, you know, you couldn't go shopping unless you had those stamps.

A: Yah, yah. Where did he learn how to operate the big equipment?

R: You know he just did. I mean he came over here when he was eleven years old, or was it eleven? Yah, eleven years old. He never really graduated from any school here. He went as far as the fourth grade. He had to learn English, and he just picked it up working on construction.

A: Okay.

R: I mean he never studied anywhere. And he worked for George Brox, Brox Construction. He was a master mechanic in the early, early years.

A: Okay.

R: And then he stayed on as a heavy equipment operator. And he was their number one or two guy. I mean he could fill those trucks. You know, he'd be running the shovel. I worked as an apprentice for him when I was in high school. (A: Yah) I was his oiler.

A: At Brox?

R: Yah. And what happens, the oiler only works when the machine to shut down. You go grease it. So while it's working you have to be there. You can back the trucks up and all this stuff, but you're not doing any physical labor. If you're laying pipe with the back hoe, you can take the hook and put it in the pipe, but there were union rules. You know only certain, oilers couldn't do all that stuff. So Frank Brox, George Brox's brother who was the second in command every Friday afternoon, would come by and pick me up. And he'd go to my father, [speaks in deep voice] "Jack, I want your son to wash my car." Go in the car, we'd drive down to this place in Windham, New Hampshire. It was part of, outside your town hall you had permission. I got the water, the soap, the whole thing. I'd wash all the dust off his 56 Buick, you know, bring it back up every Friday afternoon.

A: So tell us about (--) Oh sorry, what about your mom. What did she do for work?

R: She worked as a stitcher in the Suffolk Knitting Company.

A: Okay.

R: And then when we moved to Chelmsford she went to work a New Knit Manufacturing.

A: Okay.

R: Okay. She'd take the bus down and take the bus back. And god I remember going shopping. When I was a kid my mother would (--) I remember trolley cars. (A: Um) They'd come right by the house on Lawrence Street there. I remember taking the trolley all the way into Lowell. And I remember when they dug up the trolleys. I was in the second grade and they dug up the tracks. And I know where all of those spikes that used to hold the rails, I know where they were

all buried. They used to dump everything in the shores of the Concord River at the end of Joiners Court.

A: Oh really?

R: Yeah. We used to dig them up. We'd get cobblestones, we'd make little play forts and we'd have the [unclear] about that long.

A: Yah, yah. Um, tell us about the community, like the marketplace of the Portuguese community.

R: Well you always went to Danny's Market, which was the Pioneer Quality Market.

A: Okay.

R: It then became the Pioneer Supermarket when he moved, but it was on Gorham Street.

A: Okay.

R: And you always went there. My father always ran up a charge, a week's worth. He'd pay. He'd go shopping he'd pay for last week, and that's how it was. (A: Okay) And they would deliver if you wanted, except my mother didn't like it, because when they didn't have what she wanted they'd give her a substitute, and she never liked the substitute. And I remember I'd go down there, I don't know at seven or eight years old. She'd say, "I want you to go down to Danny's Market." And I'd say, "Ah!" Because she didn't know it was what, almost a mile away from where I lived, not quite a mile, but I'd have to walk all the way down to Danny's Market and get what she wanted for supper. So at 3:00 I'd walk down there and there was a guy, Pat Silva, he was the butcher. And he'd try to mimic a Jewish butcher.

A: How so?

R: He'd go, "Something else young lady?" You know, and he'd break the whole store up. You know, because, "Something else," you know. [Both laugh] We'd die laughing.

A: And he worked at Danny's?

R: Yah, he was a butcher. Yah, he was (--) And then my mother said, "You got to get this rump steak." I don't even, I don't think they call anything rump anymore. And she used to tenderize it with the edge of a plate, you know, instead of pounding the hell out of it with a tenderizer. She had this plate thing. And a piece of steak was always, I mean, we used to cook it like, you know, it was like the tongue of a shoe. It was thin and it was always overcooked. Not like you'd have a steak today, but that's how they did it, you know.

A: Yah, yah. How about, what other kind of Portuguese traditions were around in the household?

R: Well we always had, we always had the church feast things, okay. (A: Umhm) And they have the Holy Ghost Feast where you get the crown, the Holy Ghost crown and you, every year two names were drawn. One for Trinity Sunday and one for oh god, I forget the name of the Sunday now. But you'd have, those two feasts were back to back.

A: In May?

R: In May. Well it would follow Easter. So it would be either early May, it might lap over into June if it was a late Easter, but it was like six weeks after Easter.

A: Okay. Okay.

R: Okay. And those were a big deal, because if somebody had the Holy Ghost crown in their house people would come during the week to see it.

A: Really?

R: Yah.

A: And would they be bringing gifts, or just (--)

R: No, I don't remember that.

A: Just kind of good tidings?

R: I think they go in there and they kneel down and say some prayers.

A: Do you remember doing that yourself?

R: I remember seeing it, yah.

A: Go into people's homes?

R: Yup. (A: Okay) And I also remember, well then I joined the Portuguese Band when I was eleven years old.

A: Eleven?

R: Yup.

A: In 1950?

R: One, 50, 51, yah. (A: Okay) And I used to get paid \$4.00 a feast. [Laughs] They paid, they actually paid me \$4.00, wow!

A: And your father, you got involved with that through your father?

R: Well I wanted to play accordion when I was growing up. And my father decided I should play clarinet, (A: okay) you know. And that's what happened. He basically made the choice. Back then the father's made all the choices, you know, and he was a guitar player. He was pretty decent rhythm guitar player. He wasn't fantastic, but he had a band where his, my uncle played mandolin and he played guitar. My father's family is from Manchester, New Hampshire.

A: Okay. So when (--) Now your father, where was your father born, in the old country or here?

R: Yah, in the old country.

A: But he came fairly young to Manchester?

R: Yah, eleven years old.

A: Okay.

R: I'll tell you that story. (A: Yah) Both my grandfathers were draft dodgers. They didn't want to fight in Angola. (A: Okay) They had no, you know, no quarrel with the people in Angola. And Madeira is off the coast of Africa. I've got the globe right there, I can show you. And we're going there in December by the way. (A: Oh good) My wife decided.

A: Have you been before?

R: No, never.

A: Oh good, good for you.

R: We're going there for New Year's Eve. So it should be exciting. It's supposed to be one of the best New Year's Eves in the world. So my father's father came over here on the boat through Ellis Island, the whole thing. All right, you needed a sponsor, a job, and a place to live. And he had a friend here. He has a job and worked in the mills and everything. He saved and saved and he sent money over to get my grandmother who had my father, his sister and his brother, he had three kids over here. She took the money and bought shoes for the kids. And my grandfather worked and worked and worked, saved, sent them more money and she took it to buy clothes. Then he finally got smart. Worked and saved and he sent the four tickets. [Both laugh] So she had to come. And then they had two more kids when they were over here.

A: Okay. Okay. So they originally settled in Manchester?

R: Yes.

A: And then why did they move to Lowell?

R: Well no, only my father moved to Lowell. (A: Oh!) The rest of the family is still up there. (A: Really?) Yah, my father moved to Lowell. He met my mother playing at a dance, Portuguese dance in Lowell.

A: Okay.

R: And they met and you know went out, so on and so forth.

A: I see. So did your grandfather, or great uncles, or anybody, were they involved in music as well?

R: To the extent that old Madeirans are all of them involved in music. I used to go up there and my uncle would take out his mandolin, and there would be a guitar there, and my father would play. And my grandfather would start singing. The Madeiran folk tunes are like singing the blues in this country, and they'd make up stories, and they'd even do this at the picnics on a Saturday night especially. They'd make up stories. Somebody would jump in and make up a verse, make up a story. And so they used to do that in the family gatherings and everything. And I remember my, my uncle had this steel mandolin. And the piece had broken and he decided yah, he wasn't going to get it fixed. Well I took that piece and I went down to Warren Street. There used to be a place that did chrome plating. And I asked the guy if he could fix it. And he said, "Yah, I can fix it. I can braise it." I said, "But can you make it look shiny?" He said, "Yah, I can chrome plate it and everything." It cost me \$15.00 and I was probably nine years old. I had that done. The next time we went up to Manchester I said, "Here." But my uncle didn't really get back into playing, but at least he had his mandolin all put together.

A: Yah. So your father kind of was from this musical environment already?

R: Yup, oh yeah. Every Portuguese family basically has that inbred. You know the ukulele, my grandfather made, used to make ukuleles. And he made at least two for me in my lifetime. And Portuguese brought the ukulele to Hawaii, (A: Umhm) and from Madeira. It originated in Madeira.

A: Okay. Okay, interesting.

R: And he used to make them. He was an alcoholic and he used to make ukuleles, and he used to make welcome mats out of old tires and strip them. And he'd run copper tubing and joined the strips, and they were great rugs. And he'd do that to support his alcohol habit. He was also, and my brother and I have tried to find the Union Leader headline and we can't find it, but he was arrested for being Manchester's biggest bootlegger.

A: Oh really.

R: He used to, my father told me he used to sleep with a gun under his pillow. He never used it, but he used to sleep with a gun under his pillow. He says he was about eighteen years old and he said the Treasury Agents would be (--) They had a small farm near a hill down on Joseph Street in Manchester and there was this, he had two farms and there were only a couple of acres in the

valley. And the revenuers would be up on the top with their Model A Fords watching all the activity, you know. He'd come home and they'd be up there. I mean it was kind of like in plain sight, and have this, plain sight, their suits and their hats. And he said they were watching and watching. And the big limousines would come down from the speakeasies and they'd be women in the back seats with blankets over their legs. And you would take the blanket off and you would put the cases under their legs, and then you'd cover their legs up again with the blankets. And they'd sell it to the speakeasies. My father said, "We used to," he says he wouldn't drink that stuff. He said, "That was, we'd distill it once and we'd sell it to them." He said, "The stuff we kept at home we'd distill it two or three times." But that stuff, oh it was terrible. And anyway, he said they raided us when they had their biggest stash. He served thirty days in the House of Correction. The judge was lenient, but he lost the farm.

A: Really?

R: Yah.

A: Do you think that led to his difficulties, his personal difficulties?

R: Yah, then he got, he probably starting drinking and everything. And I remember we had, it was supposed to be a vacation. My mother and me and my two brothers, we were going to spend a week up there and oh god, it was hot, hot, hot, August up in Manchester. And they had an ice box and it had a refrigerator, but the ice box needed ice. So he says to me, "Come on, we're going to go get ice." So they pull the wagon, he's going down to the ice house, which is about a half a mile away. I don't know if you know how ice houses used to cut the ice up in the winter and they'd put it in this room. It would last the whole summer.

A: Pack it in saw dust or something right?

R: Yah, yah, last the whole summer. So we go down and he's got this big canvas. And we go down to get the ice and he's got this big block of ice in a wagon that he's pulling and I'm pulling. And then he says, "Stay here and watch the ice." He goes into this little neighborhood bar. Now the kids in the neighborhood come and "Hey, what do you got there? Where are you from? Is that ice? Can we have a piece?" Oh god, I'm going to get into a big fight with this block of ice. Well he didn't come out for about an hour and a half and then we went home and my grandmother was furious! She said, "What took so long?" And he starts making up some stories. She said, "You went into the barroom." And he's, "No, no, no." Yah, I kind of tattled on him. [Laughs] Oh she was furious, unbelievable.

A: So was there a little Portuguese Colony up in Manchester?

R: No, in Manchester it was, I don't know if there was. There wasn't a physical colony. There was a comradery, but there was no physical colony, not like Lowell with Back Central Street. They didn't, I don't think they had one of those.

A: Okay.

R: I'll tell you John Leite may know, because he lived up there actually I think.

A: I think he was born in Manchester.

R: Yah, yah.

A: Yah. So tell us more about your father's music and maybe about the band.

R: Well my father had this group called the Rhythm Vagabonds, and they you know, they were string instruments during the Swing era where strings were not popular. Today all you have to do is know three chords on a guitar and you're a rock star. But I started playing clarinet. I studied under Billy Notini who was the band master at Lowell, who was furious when I moved to Chelmsford.

A: Yah?

R: Oh he was. He was. He was very furious. He said, "I've been grooming you to play lead clarinet in my high school band." I said, "It's not my fault," you know. Anyway, I joined the Portuguese Band, the Colonial Band in [19]51. The conductor was Abel Alves. He, he was a frustrated politician I think. Man he could talk forever. We'd get, we'd get into the rehearsal. Rehearsal is supposed to start at 7:00, it'll be to 8:30 before we start practicing I think, because he'd be talking about the committees and how they didn't want to pay us. And it was like a political speech, you know, but.

A: What committees?

R: The Holy Ghost Committee, Saint Anthony's Committee, all the Committees that would pay the band. So anyway, but he was, he was a nice guy. He helped me. I say that him and Billy Notini were the biggest influences musically in my life.

A: Okay. So I want to talk about your father's band there, "The Rhythm Vagabonds." When did it start? Any ideas?

R: [Pause-thinking] Early [19]30s.

A: Okay.

R: Probably during the beginning of the Depression.

A: Okay. And your father was born what year?

R: 1908.

A: 1908, so he was very young.

R: He was young.

A: Okay. And this wasn't a Portuguese Band?

R: Well they did, they played mostly Portuguese dances I think.

A: Oh they did? (R: Yah) So they played Portuguese music?

R: Yah, and they also played the American music. I remember seeing all these orchestrations my father had, and they'd buy it not for the trumpet, trombone and saxophone parts, but for the violin parts, because that's what he'd play on mandolin was the violin parts.

A: When they got the sheet music?

R: Yah.

A: Okay.

R: They bought, they bought arrangements, but only used the string, the string part and the chords on the guitar part.

A: Okay. Okay.

R: Of course they were only like 25 cents back then.

A: Yah. Yah. Yah. Where did they perform?

R: For church dances. There were a lot of church dances back in those times. You know churches would run (--) There were a lot of, it wasn't just Portuguese. They'd run dances at the Civic League. They'd run dances at the Colonial Band Club, which is now the Portuguese American Center, and places like that. They probably did some weddings.

A: Yah, now did they go and do any popular clubs like?

R: They didn't work in nightclubs per say. I think they just did, like the wedding bands. I worked with Steve Belida and Bob [Robert J. Knoop] and we did a lot, we did mostly weddings and stuff like that. We didn't (--) I shouldn't say that because we did a stretch where we did a single nightclub. In fact, right next door there, the Meadow Lounge. And but it was mostly functions.

A: Okay.

R: Function hall band.

A: So The Rhythm Vagabonds would have been really performing, really just for the Portuguese Community?

R: Mostly.

A: Okay.

R: And they'd play for dances, you know. That's what it was.

A: But they would intersperse some American tunes in to their (--)

R: Yah, it was probably 50/50.

A: Okay.

R: My uncle fashioned himself to be a great mandolin player until he went to Boston and heard the Russian guy. I can't think of his name now, mandolin player live, and that kind of killed it for him, because he knew he could never be that good.

A: Really? (R: Yah) And so what did he do after that?

R: Well that's when the thing started to phase out.

A: Okay.

R: He got very discouraged, because he thought he was the cat's meow. I'll think of the guy's name in a minute.

A: Yah. So tell us about the Portuguese Colonial Band. Where does the name come from, do you know?

R: I don't know. John, who was there early because his father was one of the founders, I was in the next year. And then John went off in the service for four or five years (A: Right) and I was there through that whole stretch. From the time he left to the time he came back I had become a pretty damn good clarinet player.

A: Yah, yah.

R: So he (--). The band was the reason I wanted to continue to play. A lot of people played instruments in high school and in grade school and stuff like that, but they didn't practice, they didn't care, but I wanted to play good for that band, you know?

A: Um, was there some family pressure to perform good?

R: No. No, no, no, no. In fact, Billy Notini would schedule me. It came to a point he would schedule me last. And after my lesson I would stay for an extra half hour and he'd pull out a book of duets, and he'd say, "I'm going to play the bottom line, you play the top line, and I'm not going to stop. If you get lost you got to find out where you are and jump in." And we did

that. And we did that for god, a good year and a half, two years, and then when he finally went back to the first ones we did, no sweat. He taught me how to site read.

A: Okay.

R: He really did, and that's why he was upset I left (A: Yah) to go to Chelmsford. And he, for some reason people knew. I was a hell of a lot better in my 20s than I am now. I mean age has taken its toll, but I'm still pretty good, because when we did that tape I reprised my old part. (A: Okay) I played the clarinet solo. I did the whole thing. I was still able to do it. It would have been a little better if I was a little younger, but I was still able to do it. A lot of the old timers that went on that recording they played a lesser part.

I've been active musically in the background. Now I remember being (-- We used to have these battles of bands. It was like there'd be the Colonial Band, then they'd be a band from Cambridge. They'd play. We'd play something they'd play something. We'd play something they'd play something. Then we'd take a break and they'd auction off stuff and go back and forth. And they did it at the Holy Ghost Park too. One of the feasts, Saint Anthony's Feast was always behind the church, which is now a parking lot.

A: Okay.

R: And they'd set up two bandstands.

A: Oh, they would, they would there.

R: Oh yah. (A: Okay) And the Taunton City Band was our nemesis, because, but they played, that was a city band. They used to do ten/fifteen concerts a year where we only did three or four. And John Gonsalves who was the conductor was never in front of a band that embarrassed him. That was always a good band. And he was a good friend of my father's, (A: Yup) because my father, before I was in a band, was the guy that brought him into Lowell and before the Colonial Band was formed, to play for the [Holy Ghost] Feast.

A: Oh, he would bring this John Gonsalves from Taunton?

R: Yah, the big concert band. So now we, fast forward to the Labor Day Feast, it was our band and the Taunton City Band and this was a battle back and forth. But we'd go out and we knew each other. I mean we'd go out and we'd get, we'd drink during the breaks. We would barbecue beef you know. A great day was you're sitting there in uniform and the blood from the beef was dripping on your shirt. And you're drinking and you got a big loaf of bread in that hand. And then we'd go up. People thought we were mad at each other, but we weren't. But I remember one year John and I plotted this thing. Do you know Bugler's Holiday?

A: What is it?

R: Bugler's Holiday? [Sounds it out] Okay. John Gonsalves had his son Jack Junior who was a great trumpet player. In fact he's part of this group called the Jack D'Johns. They've played

Vegas. They've played a lot of state fairs. And whenever he got up to play, he'd play, he solos from a Mexican trumpet player, Raphael Méndez, and he'd do an unbelievable job, gifted. Well one year we decided we're going to set him up. We played Bugler's Holiday. They challenged us. They played Bugler's Holiday right after. And of course they probably, their trumpets probably sounded a little better than ours. We come back we did the same thing with trombones. Now they had practiced that.

A: Meaning the Colonial Band had practiced it?

R: Yah, and they couldn't do it, because. So we do trumpet, trumpet, trombone and the conductor turns around and he yields because we had really, we set him up for that one. I'll never forget that, you know. I'll never forget that. We got the three trombones up there and they had taken the trumpet parts home and transposed them. Yah, it was, it was great.

But anyway I'm growing up playing. There was a Butler School Orchestra that I was in. That was okay. It was not much. I was getting to be more advanced than anybody my age on a wind instrument. So I go to Chelmsford and Bernie Larkin who was the band director had just died. I remember my father was rehearsing, he was playing again. He was rehearsing with this group The Three Cavaleiros. And I remember they were rehearsing and someone comes in, "Did you hear Bernie Larkin just died?" Now I didn't know who that was, but I learned who it was after. Bernie Larkin used to play what was called a "Hoodsie Hop" at the Immaculate Conception Hall behind the church, and it was every Friday night, the "Hoodsie Hop," with a big band for years and years and years. Well I get to Chelmsford High School and his replacement Jack Hann, my first rehearsal, I'm down there. I'm the last clarinet. The next rehearsal he takes me, grabs me and puts me first chair, freshman. Man, the guy seniors they were ticked off, but they couldn't play the part like I could. And, but he should never have done that, as I look back on my life, because then I became spoiled. Whenever I played anywhere I had to play the lead clarinet part, you know. And then as I got a little older it's not so important to me, but he shouldn't have done that. You don't do that! You know, it's like well I guess you do in sports. You got a tall freshman and you let him start, and all this in basketball and so on. Well they had a talent show at the end of the freshman year and Jack Hann says here, I want you to play this for the talent show. I said, "I can't play that." "Yah, you can." "Yah, I can't do it." It was this thing called "Hora Staccato." It was written by Jascha Heifetz. So I take it to Billy Notini. I says, "Can I do this?" He says, "Yah, you can do that." So we go over it. I go to the talent show and Jack Hann is playing the accompaniment on piano. And I said, "Don't take it too slow." So we go on. I won the show.

A: Really?

R: It was done by an applause meter. It was unbelievable. I was shocked when I got that round of applause. And then so the legend started. Sophomore year I was the first Chelmsford High School student in history to make the All-State Band.

A: Um.

R: There were no districts bandstands, All-State. I played in Symphony Hall under what the hell was his name? He was the conductor of the BU Band. Christian, Christianson I think. It'll (--) Wow, I'm having a tough time remembering, but I remember I played at Symphony Hall.

A: Yah. Did, aside from Billy Notini, who else were some of your mentors for learning?

R: Abel Alves. (A: Okay) And then when I was a junior in high school I got a big break. I had bought a saxophone and I was playing saxophone and Chris Powers, originally from Dracut, Chris Pappas, was rehearsing a big band. Back then you would play the circuit. You would play the Commodore, the Carousel in Manchester, Lincoln Park in New Bedford, Mountain Park in Holyoke, and then the fifth, you know, after in thirteen weeks you'd have three rounds of those plus a college date, and that included Bob Bachelor, Freddie Soterio and Ted Herbert. Those bands rotated around. Bob Bachelor became the house band at the Totem Pole, and he was replaced by Jimmy Mosher. So, but the office in Manchester, Charlie Kearns, booked all those bands. Well anyways they're having this rehearsal and he had heard me play in the Chelmsford Police Band. That's another thing, Basil Larkin, Bernie Larkin's brother was the head of the Police Band and I got to play lead clarinet in there. And he had heard me play. So he had asked if I would come down for rehearsal. I went down to the rehearsal and he hired me. Now we got to join the union. He's got five guys that aren't in the union. They got to get in the union and this is on a Sunday before the next Saturday. So on a Tuesday night me and four others go down to Dick Campbell who was the secretary of the union, he gave us the card and we paid our dues, and we got sworn in two Sundays later, but we had our cards, because back then they used to check very carefully. The business agent would come around and check cards you know.

A: Really?

R: So I had my card. I was sixteen years old, just turned and I had my union card. I've been in the Local since 1955, what is it, sixty-one years now?

A: Yah, yah. So tell us about playing some of these places back then.

R: Okay. So we used to play, we were the house band at the Commodore, and (--)

A: Tell us about the Commodore.

R: Oh the Commodore was a great ballroom. It was probably the best sounding ballroom in the country.

A: Yah?

R: For sound. And in the summer they'd open up the side doors and you could go out into the lawn, and to the patio. All the coats were (--) It was 75 cents to get in. You'd walk up those big stairs and then you'd go into the lower level, which they had all the coats and some refreshments. Upstairs they had, behind the stage they had this big bar, but it was all non- alcoholic and beautiful stage. And then when the real big bands came in like Tommy Dorsey or something like

that they'd put an extension on the stage. (A: Okay) I used to go there and catch the big bands when they came in, but it was unbelievable.

And then we'd go (--) The Carousel had two stages, one inside and one outside. I remember we played outside on one summer night and the mosquitos were bad. And John Leite, he was on the band now. I was on the band way before him, but he's on the band now playing trombone. And they melted some wax on the end of his slide and mounted a candle on there, and he's playing trombone with the candle to keep the mosquitos away. [Laughs] We had a lot of fun.

I learned a lot of things, god, traveling. I was sixteen years old and I got to (--) The Chris Powers band was, if you had just gotten off a named band like Les Brown, or Woody Herman, or Stan Kenton or somebody like that and you were looking to make a connection with another band, in the meantime Chris would put him on a band.

A: Okay.

R: So I played with some of the best musicians in the country. These names won't mean anything, but Jake Hannah who appeared on the Tonight Show many times. And anyway, these guys would come in and they'd be telling us stories. And I was sixteen years old and I'm listening to all of these stories. They told one story about Doc Severinsen. Doc Severinsen was eighteen years old, he was playing lead trumpet for Tommy Dorsey and he walks in a liquor store. And the guy said, "I'm not serving you." He said, "You are, I'm the lead trumpet player with Tommy Dorsey." "Yah, kid, sure, sure." And he was, but he wouldn't give it to him. But you know, they knew all these guys and they were telling stories about them. It was just a wealth of knowledge just listening, you know. And it was a basically a drug-free band. I think a couple of piano players might have had some marijuana time to time, but.

A: Umhm. What else can you tell us about the Commodore? Did you know the Braun Family?

R: Yah, the Braun, yah, Carl Braun, yah.

A: Do you have any memory stories about him?

R: Yah, I got a story, but. You know his sister married Billy Daniels. His sister was white and Billy Daniels was black. (A: Okay) That was a big scandal. And Billy Daniels' hit song was "That Old Black Magic." And we're on the band, and Bob LeClaire, God rest his soul, was the singer. And we'd play these medleys where you play one tune, and the piano player would modulate and somebody else would go play a solo, then we'd modulate to the last one to go out, but now and then he'd have a vocalist sing something. So he says to Bob, he said, "Sing it to him." So he goes up to the piano player, he starts singing "That Old Black Magic." Oh Carl Braun went nuts!

A: Did he?

R: Yah. "What are you trying to do? Are you trying to embarrass me? Oh god almighty. Bob said, "What? It's a nice tune." Yah that was a big deal.

A: And what happened to his sister? Martha Braun I think was her name right?

R: Yah, I think she's the one that married Billy.

A: What else do you know about?

R: No, I don't know much about her.

A: I had heard she committed suicide.

R: I heard that too, but I don't know what the circumstances are.

A: Anything else about Carl Braun, or about the Commodore?

R: Well yah, he used to, 10:00 [pm] was Waltz time. The blue lights would come on. No matter what you were doing the blue lights would come on. And we had a trumpet player that used to play lead for Jimmy Dorsey and then Tommy Dorsey, and he's up there. And Chris said, "WE got to play a waltz." And so he's yelling and Chris says, "Hey, when's the lunch man coming?" He yelled down to Chris. Chris said, "What are you talking about?" He says, "On my day gig whenever we have a break we get a lunch man. When are you having a lunch man come?" And you know, because he's ticked off, because the bands never liked to play waltzes except the real old timer. And so they got into a fight and at the end of the night Chris goes to Tony Pachado and says, "Tony, why am I yelling at you? That guy is a jerk, you know?" Oh, because he was running up comparing his list with Chris, because Chris would deviate from the list, not the names of the tunes, but the types of dances. He says, "We can't let that guy you know, separate us and all this." And Tony says, "Well that's okay. Just tell me when's the lunch, man, going to come next week?" And Chris says, "You know, you're ridiculous. You're fired." He says, "I'm not fired, I quit." He said, "I quit." He said, "[words unclear], that's it, I'm out of here!"

A: He had played for Dorsey?

R: Yah, yah. Well what happened, Buddy Morrow, the band that recorded a tune called "Night Train," was very popular, came in to play at Lowell Tech.

A: Okay.

R: And he needed (--) Tony was going to leave his wife and Tony called him up. He's says, "I need to get out of town here." He said, "Okay, I'll put you on a band, but you got to stay for six months." So he stayed for six months and he ended up in Reno, Nevada. But he was that good he just walked on a name band like that. He was good.

A: Was Carl Braun a little bit out of date with the audience?

R: Well he was catering to the ballroom dancers. [Unclear] probably five. Well he was remembering the last forties, early fifties, and he tried to perpetuate that, but unfortunately. And the guy that created Rock n Roll was really Tommy Dorsey.

A: Yah?

R: They used to have a Saturday night show called "Saturday Night Dance Review," him and his brother. And Tommy says to the guys in the band, I'm going to bring in this shit kicker from Tennessee as a put down to rock-'n-roll music, Elvis Presley. Presley comes on, sings Heartbreak Hotel, he's inundated with letters and everything. He had to bring him on the next week. Six weeks later Ed Sullivan brings him on. But it started with Tommy Dorsey as a joke.

A: No kidding!

R: Yah, put down the rock-'n-roll music.

A: Interesting.

R: I remember that night he was on too.

A: Now did you play when it transitioned to Mr. C's?

R: No.

A: Okay.

R: That was when he started (--) Well he used to say, "They'll never be a rock-'n-roll band in this club." Then all of a sudden he transitioned and (--)

A: Carl said that?

R: Yah, yah.

A: Okay, interesting. So you're now getting out and you're playing in kind of popular venues.

R: Okay, so we're doing the ballrooms and then I left that after a while. And then one of the trumpet players, Nick Demogenes, who was originally from Lowell, came back in this area and he put a group together and called me to make rehearsal. And I ended up working with the group at Chuck's on Moody Street where the police station is now.

A: Okay.

R: And we were there for four weeks, seven nights a week. Seven nights a week!

A: What years was this?

R: Ah, (A: roughly) [19]59.

A: Okay.

R: [19]58, [19]59. And my English professor at Lowell Tech, because I was in college and I'm trying to do this seven nights a week thing, and he used to go down to Chuck's and he'd watch Jack Parr and Charlie Weaver, and he thought it was the funniest. He says, "You're in my class, aren't you?" I says, "Yah." He says, "Don't worry you got an A-." [Laughs] So there's one class I don't have to work too hard in, because we used to, you know, talk a lot during the breaks. It was eleven dollars a night I remember, \$77.00 for the week. Holy God! Then we went to Don's, which is where the Laconia is only up a little bit (A: Okay), for three weeks. So it was seven weeks, seven nights a week steady (A: Wow) doing nightclubs.

And then I also did the, there was a small group at the Flamingo, Jerry Vale came in, the trombone player needed a trumpet and saxophone player so he could play the Jerry Vale arrangements. And I did it with the trumpet player I was working with. And that was an experience. I did some shows with Chris' band and then I also joined the Dick Madison Band that John was very in tight with Dick Madison, and we did the same circuit only we added Hampton Beach and Old Orchard Beach.

A: Okay. Tell us about Moody Street?

R: Moody Street? There were a lot of clubs there. There was the Silver Star. There was Chuck's. I don't remember all the others, but it was, I know it was sort of a street of ill repute if you will.

A: How so?

R: Well supposedly that's where all of the hookers were hanging out.

A: Did you see them?

R: I was too young to notice, you know.

A: How about a place called Moody Gardens?

R: Yah, I don't remember where that is.

A: It was at the corner of Suffolk and Moody, right kind of next to the Silver Star. (R: Yah) It became well-known for a kind of lesbian and gay hangout.

R: No, the only gay hangout I remember is we were doing, we were playing Nick's Happy Hour.

A: Where was that?

R: In Tyngsboro. And then down the road was Roxy's. And then down the road was the Four Leaf Clover which became the Blue Moon, the strip joint. And then heading towards Hudson was Duke's, which became a lot of things and now it's back to Duke's.

A: Okay.

R: Duke's had a gay bar down in the basement. (A: Yah?) And upstairs was all straight people. And my friend Arthur [Zantoulas], who did a perfect, used to do a perfect interpretation of Bela Lugosi doing Dracula. He was up, the stage was up behind the bar, up in the ceiling. So we'd go up there and slowly the gay bar was getting bigger and the straight bar was getting smaller. So finally, "that's it", he moves the gay bar upstairs and it became a gay joint.

A: And when was this?

R: Oh God, I would say that was in the [19]60s.

A: Okay.

R: Early [19]60s.

A: Okay. A lot of Lowell people coming up to Tyngsboro?

R: Oh everybody used to go to (-- Nick's had a hell of a following from all over. We did a lot of weddings there. I played every Thursday, Friday and Saturday. In fact, Nick Demogenes, the trumpet player, left to go back to New York and play in the big bands there, and then he also got his Bachelor's Degree in music and started teaching.

So it became my band. "Richie D" was the name of the band. And I remember as a twenty year old, it was one summer, the summer of [19]59 there was this older couple that used to vacation out at the lake in the summer. And she was about I don't know, six, eight inches taller than he was, and she was pretty tall. She had to be at least six feet. And she used to wear these petticoats. And he was a little short guy. And they'd dance on the floor and he'd want a bolero. So I'd play "Lady of Spain," you know, [sings] "Lady, adadadidia," and they'd be up dancing and she'd kick her leg up over his head and all the petticoats would go flying. They'd get a standing ovation. So whenever they danced the crowd would just go sit down. And of course, smoke! You walk into the club and there was a little smoke across the ceiling, maybe two inches. By the time you would go home at night there was like two inches of air on the floor. You couldn't see anything. I don't know how the hell people could see, but anyway, they're all dancing. So he invites me to sit down with her in the bar. And when I said, "Boy, you guys are great," I said, "They really love you." I said, "Wow." He said, "Not bad for an old couple huh." I said, "No, guys you're really great." He said, "You'll never guess how old my wife is." Twenty years old. I should have said forty-two or something you know. I'm looking. He says, "Come on, guess, guess. You'll never guess how old she is." And I'm looking at her and she's got wrinkles on wrinkles. I said, "Eighty-two." He said, "Eighty-two," she'd be dead." He pays the tab, takes her and then left. So the owner said, "What the hell did you just do?" "Well he asked me to guess how old she was." "What did you say?" "I said, eighty-two." He says,

“She’s sixty-three years old!” [Both laugh] What did I know? At twenty-years old everybody looks old you know.

A: And they probably never came back again?

R: They never came back.

A: So Duke’s was the club that went from essentially from (--)

R: Straight to gay.

A: Okay. And did the band continue to play there?

R: Where the hell did Arthur go? I’m not sure.

A: So what was Duke’s like?

R: It was, Nick’s, Duke’s, Roxy’s, the Four Leaf Clover, they were just like, you just walk in, you had tables and chairs, and some booths, and you just ordered your drinks and that’s it. You could dance if you wanted. There was a dance floor and that was it.

A: Were the gay people dancing with each other?

R: Oh I don’t know, that was down, they were down in the basement.

A: So you never played when (--)

R: No, no.

A: They didn’t (-- Did they have a band down there?

R: I don’t think so.

A: No, okay.

R: That was all you know, in the closet.

A: Yah, yah, what did you think of that?

R: To tell you the truth I wasn’t even aware of it until after I found out they had moved upstairs.

A: Okay. So, but once they moved upstairs no more bands?

R: Probably, I’m not sure.

A: Okay.

R: You know I didn't follow it, because I was off now working with the Dick Madison Band around that time. We were back to doing ballrooms.

A: Okay. Okay. Now let me ask you, your work in the Portuguese Bands, did that translate into your work into doing popular music?

R: Well we got a few jobs, but it wasn't, it was almost a separate thing. I used to work. I was in a union, but I used to work non-union jobs with my friend George Ares who wasn't in a union. We would do like the Nurses Association at Lowell General Hospital. (A: Okay) We would do various little things. I remember my first New Year's job was at the Sunnyside Improvement Association Club, I was sixteen years old, in Billerica on Nutting Lake.

A: Okay.

R: And they had a club. And they had three bathrooms, His, Hers and Ours. [Laughs]

A: What did that mean?

R: I don't know, but there were more people going into the Ours than there were the His and Hers. And I remember my friend George and I, everybody around us was really drunk. And I got this bowl and we're emptying the plates into it and mixing up cigarette butts and everything. And one guy said, "Hey that looks like pretty good soup." I said, "You want some?" "Yah." [Laughs] Oh unbelievable! I remember there was a, I remember working a New Year's Eve at the Beaver Brook Country Club in Dracut. Do you know where that is off of Mammoth Road? It doesn't exist anymore. It was this narrow thing, you go down the hill, and the building was maybe thirty feet wide by you know, three hundred feet long. I mean it was, it was a long narrow room, Beaver Brook Country Club.

A: Interesting. How about your musicianship coming out of the Portuguese?

R: Oh that was my training ground. That's between Billy Note and Billy Notini and the Portuguese Band is where I learned how to site read. I didn't have to really practice much. Just put it in front of me. If I was physically able to do it I could do it on site.

A: How about certain (--) Did any of the kind of Portuguese, and I'm not a musician so I might be getting the words wrong, but the melodies or the style of music, did that (--)

R: Well I, my mother and father always had Portuguese music going on, and I actually wrote some arrangements for the (--) In fact on that tape we last did, one of the, one of the things there is my arrangement that I wrote, Portuguese melodies. So I did learn all that. And I'm going to at some point in the next few years clean it all up, expand it and make it into a big rhapsody and offer it to high-school bands in the area.

A: Okay. So did your, did your, did the Portuguese tradition work their way into popular presentations?

R: I played a lot of Portuguese weddings and stuff like that. Yah, I guess so. Not anything that I was conscious of.

A: Okay. All right. Good. Tell us about some other famous Portuguese musicians around town.

R: Well there was Tony Silva who was an accordion player, worked for Charlie Pelley. Of course you know John. Abel Alves, Joe Miquel.

A: Did Abel Alves go and play popular music?

R: Yes. Yes. Oh yes.

A: Okay, he had his own band, or?

R: Yah, quartet, yah.

A: Who were some of those, who were some of the bands like Frankie Ares had the Tri Tones?

R: Yah, well the Ares Brothers. George was my, was my best friend. (A: Yah) Yah, I worked for Frank and for Hank, the Ares guys, yah.

A: So who else had bands that were Portuguese but popular? I mean they were Portuguese people, but they went out and played popular music.

R: As far as fronting the band by name. Well there was Jimmy Oliveira, which was, he was a mandolin player. He was a gifted mandolin player. He died very young. And there was George Silva, his nemesis.

A: Yah? How so?

R: They both played mandolin. They both thought they were really pretty good. Mandolin players really, you know, they really thought they were the cat's meow, but I always thought Jimmy played a little tastier than George even though they both had a lot of technique. It was George Silva that came in when Jimmy and my father and his brother were rehearsing to say that Bernie Larkin died.

A: Okay. Do you remember the specific bands that they played with, the names?

R: No, you know, there were a lot of different names. Like my father with Jimmy and his brother, Jimmy's brother Joe, they called themselves "The Three Cavaleiros." Well hell that was a movie. That was a Disney Movie.

A: Okay. And that would be Jimmy Oliveira?

R: Jimmy Oliveira, Joe Oliveira and my father.

A: What did they play? Your father played guitar.

R: Yah, they did a lot of American things. They did the Portuguese things when they had to, but it was mostly you know, popular tunes of the day.

A: Jimmy played mandolin. (R: Yah) And what did, what did the third?

R: My father played guitar and the other guy played bass, no drums.

A: Okay, yah. How about George Silva?

R: George Silva was him on mandolin, a fellow named Happy Voleirio on guitar, or Frank Ares, or Richie Ares.

A: Okay.

R: And Jimmy's other brother Manual Oliveira played bass. He was one of the first people in the area to use an electric bass.

A: Manny Oliveira?

R: Yah. (A: Yah) He had a fender bass. Everybody else was playing the uprights.

A: And what years?

R: Ah.

A: Late [19]50s?

R: Early [19]50s.

A: Early [19]50s with the bass.

R: [19]50, [19]51, yah.

A: Yah, was that novel?

R: Back then it was.

A: What was people's reaction to it?

R: People who were dancing didn't care. I mean they could hear it.

A: How about musicians?

R: Yah, they thought it was novel, I think.

A: Nobody said, "Oh that's (--)"

R: Yah, but see, wind players didn't much care about that. In the big band, no way did they have the standup bass.

A: Why was that?

R: Because it just plays, one thing it plays an octave lower and it's, it just seems, it sounds better.

A: Okay, okay.

R: Even though there is a thing that I saw in Hawaii last year, last September called the "U Bass." It's ukulele size. It's half the length of an electric bass. Strings are an eighth of an inch thick. It plays in the same octave as the fender bass, the electric bass. And I'm listening and I'm watching this ukulele band, and I'm saying, "Where the hell is that sound coming from?" I went up and I talked to him. And I've looked it up. It costs about four or five hundred bucks. And he's got it plugged into this bass amplifier and everything. He said, "This is great." He said, "I don't have to take my electric bass anymore. I just pack this up in a little thing, gone."

A: Is it like an amplifier of sorts?

R: Oh you can plug it into an amplifier. (A: Okay) Yah.

A: Interesting.

R: The "U Bass."

A: The "U Bass." How about Tony Silva?

R: Tony Silva was an accordion player. He worked with Charlie Pelley at the Speare House.

A: Okay.

R: And they did a lot of weddings. Tony died very young too. He had leukemia.

A: Okay.

R: He was actually kind of a distant relative. He was uncle to my first cousin from the mother's side.

A: Okay. I didn't ask you about moving out of Lowell and into Chelmsford. What was your kind of reaction to that?

R: Well I moved into Chelmsford. Everybody used to call me Richie. My family called me Richie. My friends called me Richie. My childhood friend, musician friends still call me Richie. I got to Chelmsford and the principal introduces me to class as Dick and it stuck in Chelmsford. The moral of the story is I didn't become a Dick until I moved to Chelmsford.

A: [Laughs]

R: People say, "What do you call?" I say, "Call me whatever you want." But that whole first summer, we moved in in December and that first summer I didn't have all that many people. So that summer I practiced. Between the eighth grade and the freshman year all I did was practiced.

A: Because you didn't have many friends around?

R: Yah, yah. So I practiced and practiced. I think the neighbors were sick of hearing it. I'd start and it would be like five, six, seven hours a day. And so when I went into high school as a freshman I mean I was, I was a serious player. There was one guy that heard me at the all-state band that said he wanted me to come study with him. He would prepare me to play in symphonies. And I wasn't into that.

A: Did you think that was (--)

R: You know, I kind of regret not going into music. My father said, "Be an engineer. You can always be a musician." And I almost kind of regret it, because all of my musician friends who went to music school, they're all retired and I'm still working here. I'm not saying that they're better off than me, but I like working. I don't want to be home you know, looking at Fox News and yelling at the TV. I mean forget it. That's what my father used to do. He watched the news, he'd be retired, and he'd drive my mother nuts. He'd just yell at the TV all day long, you know. I don't want to do that. And I could very easily. [Chimes ringing in background] So I almost (--) And then I would have my (--) The problem is, see I was, I taught for a while, and I had no patience with students that wouldn't practice. If you practice (--) I had three or four students that were really getting to be good, but I had eight or nine of them that the last time they saw the lesson book was the time they put it into their case and they hadn't seen the instrument that long. And I had no patience for that you know. So. So I was for a while going to say, you know, if you're an advance student and you want to learn, I'll teach you, but I'm not teaching beginners.

A: Yah. Now there was quite a few Portuguese families in Chelmsford, right?

R: Yah, the Ferreiras, Sousas, all out in East Chelmsford.

A: East Chelmsford. What were they doing out there? Was this (--)

R: There were farms out there when they bought out there.

A: Okay, and did they run farms?

R: Ah, no, they own the land now. A lot of them developed it and sold it off.

A: But I mean back in the earlier days?

R: Ah, there was milk farm out there, Worthmore Farms. That was out milkman.

A: But I'm talking about Portuguese people.

R: Yah, he was Portuguese.

A: Oh, and his name was what?

R: Manuel [pause], God I don't remember his last name. But I remember my father used to say, "This one is the milkman. This one is the bread man. This one is the egg man," talking about the sons, you know, and just joking around that they were the real fathers. And I'd go look at the milkman. I'd go look in the mirror and I'd look, and I'd look at the milkman and I'd look in the mirror and say, "Gee I wonder, maybe he is my father." [Both laugh]

A: Did the (--) Was there other farmers out there in East Chelmsford?

R: I'm sure, yah.

A: Okay.

R: I don't think they were like big truck farms or anything.

A: Right, right, right, just for (--)

R: And I did work on a farm when I was twelve, thirteen, in Lexington for the Wronsky Brothers that lived in Lowell. They'd pick us up on a flatbed truck and we'd sit on the back of the truck, drive to Lexington. And one day they left me stranded out there and I didn't know how the hell I was going to get home. You know you didn't have cell phones or anything. And I finally got somebody to let me in the house to call my father to come pick me up.

A: What else can you say about the Portuguese community?

R: It's funny. As close as it was, sometimes it wasn't close. Sometimes (--) There's something I'd like to quote, my favorite biblical quotation, Luke 4:24, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown." And in the Portuguese community had this, especially with the Colonial Band, had this, I don't know what it was. I don't know if there was envy, jealousy, or what, but whenever we did a "battle of bands," the out of town band was like, they were the chosen ones and we were just the local guys; when musically we were every bit as good and most of the time better. So it's like oh, I know you, you can't be good. Like if you lived next to a brain surgeon and the only time you see him is when he's mowing his lawn and you find out he's a brain surgeon, oh, you can't be good. You know what I'm saying? And there was that kind of feeling, even though

as a whole they wouldn't, they'd have a lot of fun together. I think the Greeks in Lowell always stuck together, but I don't think the Portuguese had that cohesiveness that the Greeks had.

A: Okay.

R: You know. It wasn't anything that was, effected my life much, it's just that I observed it.

A: And what would be some manifestations of that?

R: Well again, they, no matter how good you may have performed, it was always the out-of-town group that was better. The out-of-town group would sometimes get paid more money and you know.

A: Yah. How about when the newer folks came over after the earthquake? Did that impact the community, or?

R: What earthquake?

A: The, from the Azores when the people started coming in the early [19]60s.

R: See I was already well entrenched in Chelmsford in the early [19]60s. I had finished school. I had started my engineering career at Raytheon, and that's a whole other story too. I worked at Raytheon as my first engineering job. And then I went to a small company called Ditrans, but it was a division of Litton Industries. And then I went to another small company called Philbrick Research, which became, it was Teledyne Philbrick, it became a division of Teledyne. And then I was recruited in [19]71 to go to California in a startup company, and I went out there. Biggest mistake I ever made was to move to California. Second biggest was to come back. You know you can never come back. You always go forward. And then I went to work for Hybrid Systems, then I formed my own company. Now that's a story in itself.

I had a company for eight years called Delta Lab Research. We made digital/audio products. We, we took my engineering background, my musical background and I created all of the special effects stuff that rock-'n-roll players were using. We were (--) I sold about 35,000 products in that eight year period mostly in the last four years. And I had a hundred employees, sixty during the day, forty at night. And we were up and coming. And then I decided to fight the Japanese and that's where I made my mistake. I started to play in their backyard instead of making them play in my backyard. I lowered prices and I created a new low-cost line and I couldn't compete with the Japanese. So I finally sold the company at one point. It's too bad because had I just stayed up at the upper end and not try to do a mass production thing we'd still be in business today.

It was a great company. It really was. People that worked there they met their wives there, their husbands. I mean it was, it was just a great comradery. We had, and it was not sexist. I had as many female managers as I had male managers. In fact I enjoyed the female managers better, because they'd tell me when I was full of it, and the male managers were always afraid of [losing] their job. So it was, and that was a whole period of time from 1977 to 1985. And then

[19]85 on I went to work for people that bought it as vice president of engineering, and then I left to go back into the military industrial complexes as a consultant. And I was always the best at what I did in that area. I was the kind of engineer I would say “Look, this right now is perceived to be the best that’s out there. Go sell it. I’ll make a better one tomorrow.” A lot of engineers they’ve gone for perfection. Perfection is only achieved through constant revision. And if you don’t release something for sale you’re going to go broke. (A: Yah) You know, so I always knew when it was time to sell and I never sold junk, but I could make a better one the next year, not because I was purposely doing it, it’s just because I could. And now I’m here working with my wife. She owns this company. My job basically is to make sure that the, I was the IT guy in the beginning, but now we have a guy that does it. I just make sure there’s more money coming in than going out.

A: Good!

R: You know.

A: Well any final thoughts?

R: It was a great experience growing up. My first thirteen years in Lowell, there’s a lot of things I remember. I remember my First Communion. I remember Confirmation. A lot revolved around the church and the Portuguese Band. Those first thirteen years that’s basically my life revolved around the church and the Portuguese Band.

A: Did the Portuguese Band change over time?

R: Yes.

A: How so?

R: Well John took it over in 1962. And for three or four years the band really got good because he had just graduated from Lowell State and Teachers’ College, and he brought in the musicians that were there with him. He’d bring them into the band and that just elevated, we went up a couple of notches.

A: And some of those guys weren’t Portuguese necessarily right?

R: Right, right. Right, but they were, oh God, Dick Layman, Eddie DeMicco, that’s Italian, all kinds of names, but some of them are, if not them now, they’re kids are, I think the leader of Chelmsford High School Band, I think his father used to work with us.

A: Okay.

R: So there’s a whole, whole generational thing. John was conductor, was band leader of Chelmsford High School for a while. (A: Umhm) And he was going through the music and he called me over, he said, “Look at this.” And he was just clarinet solo, and there’s a note written on it, “This arrangement was written to future Richard DeFreitas.” And it had all kinds of notes

on it. I said, "I'll be a son-of-a-gun." No, I got inducted into the Hall of Fame 2008 in Chelmsford High School.

A: Umhm, I beat you by one year.

R: Did you? (A: Yah) I, when I went to give a speech I was going to recreate on clarinet, I was going to play "Hora Staccato" and I'd have to woodshed the hell out of it. And I was going to have to get a piano player to do it. And I says, "You know what? I'm not doing this." This is a lose-lose situation. First of all nobody is going to appreciate it. Second of all if I screw it up, you know. So instead I brought the clarinet and I played "Memories of You," the Benny Goodman version, which was you know, a hell of a lot simpler and people liked it better anyway.

A: Yah, yah, what do you mean by the term woodshed?

R: Oh, we used to (--) Woodshed, that's when somebody would say if you're going to practice you go out into the woodshed, which was basically the outhouse, and you practiced. And a funny story, because I used to be in sitting in the bathroom practicing, we had a big bathroom on Evergreen Street and I'd be practicing there for two or three hours. I'd get up and there'd be this big ring around my behind from sitting on the toilet. [Both laugh] Woodshedding, yah, woodshedding is practice.

A: Okay, good. Well Richie, thanks very much for sharing all these stories today.

R: Okay. Let me just see if I left anything out here.

A: Oh sure! Yup.

R: Oh yah, I got to tell you about the name. I was born Richard Freitas.

A: Okay.

R: And when I went to get my birth certificate to get my driver's license, and I went down to Lowell, they couldn't find it, because I was DeFreitas. Now my father decided to put the "D E" in front of the name when we moved to Chelmsford, because my brother was DeFreitas, my youngest brother, and the other brother he, I think he was a Freitas. So he had basically the same problem, except it may have been fixed when mine got fixed. And Bill Busby was the Assistant City Clerk at the time. He went on to become City Clerk and became one of the longest city clerk's ever, but there was somebody before him, and her name escapes me. And my mother explained what happened, that you know the D E. And she says, "Well." She goes to the original entry and she starts to ink in the D E and Busby went berserk. "You can't do that." And she said, "You be quiet. I know what these people went through when they came over here, and I'm putting it in and that's all there is to it." And she fixed it. So when they looked up the (--) If I go for another birth certificate I have to tell them to look under the Fs.

A: Really?

R: Yah.

A: Okay.

R: No, she did it. And I have one copy which I carry, carry it around. In fact I have, I have to go get a passport. My passport is there, so we can (--)

Oh, I remember like elections, and my parents voted every single election. And back then they would give you little cards before you walked in to vote. The candidates would be there having a little like postcard size thing. They used to come home with stacks of these things for me to play with.

And we didn't have a TV until 1951. (A: Okay) I remember Milton Berle, "The Show of Shows," "Broadway Open House," which was the first late-night show with Jerry Lester and the blonde bombshell called Dagma. And I remember they used to sell extra editions of newspapers. We'd be like 10:00, 11:00 o'clock and the kids would be out in the street, "Extra, Extra, read all about it." I remember when the atomic bomb was dropped. I remember when Roosevelt died.

A: Oh wow!

R: [Pause] Alright, I think I told you the story when I came home crying one day. The policeman kicked me in the behind. My father asked, "Where?" I showed him over here. He kicked me on the other side. He said, "You must have done something wrong." He said, "I don't want any trouble with the cops." Well the next day the cop, I think he was a Portuguese guy, he saw my father. He said, "Jack," he said, "Your son was climbing that billboard up there. He's going to fall. So I gave him a kick in the ass for being up there." My father said, "Well you give him another one. Next time give him one for me." Braga, that was his name, Braga.

A: Okay.

R: John [Leite] elevated the Portuguese Band from a community Portuguese Band to not quite to where the Leite Concert Winds is, but pretty close, only because we had to carry some of the people that weren't really great musicians, but they did their part. They always did.

And I know my mother and father had lots of friends. We'd walk downtown and we used to just walk to go window shopping on a Sunday and they always bumped into somebody they knew, usually Portuguese. Gladys Picanso, I don't know if you know that name from the International (A: Institute?) Institute.

A: Okay.

R: I think she's passed away, or maybe she hasn't. I don't know. And people like that they all, they all knew each other. My mother knew which priests were having affairs with their housekeepers.

A: Really!

R: Yah.

A: You mean in the Portuguese Community?

R: And throughout. Back then the priests would have affairs with their housekeepers, not little boys. And it was common knowledge, but nobody would say anything.

A: Really. Who were some of the priests?

R: I think Father Grillo. I don't want to be throwing out names, but I think he had his housekeeper.

A: Interesting. Um, all right, well Rich, thanks again for your time.

R: Did you see that movie Snapshot?

A: No.

R: Is it Snapshot?

A: Oh, Spotlight you're talking about?

R: Spotlight.

A: No, I haven't seen it yet.

R: It's pretty good.

A: Yah good. Okay, thanks again!

R: Okay.

Interview ends