

The Madeiran-Portuguese in Lowell

(Joseph Freitas, a computer consultant residing in Tewksbury, grew up in Lowell's Portuguese neighborhood.)

By JOSEPH FREITAS

LOWELL — Madeira, Portugal's volcanic "Pearl of the Atlantic," with a mean temperature of 70-80 degrees year-round, is a vacation mecca for the British, French, Swedes and Italians, and to an increasing extent, Americans of Portuguese descent who are aware of its extraordinary natural beauty.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, this tiny archipelago exported many of its citizens to America, progenitors of future Americans like screen star Mary Astor (nee Lucille Vasconcells) and John Dos Passos, eminent author of "American Trilogy," a contemporary and friend of Fitzgerald and Hemingway.

Many of these immigrants found their way to Lowell, among them, my parents, Daniel Francisco Freitas and Constantina Souza Freitas, who made their home on back Central Street in St. Anthony's parish, which was founded in 1908 to accommodate the spiritual needs of a growing Portuguese presence in the city.

Today, this church is comprised mostly of Portuguese from the Azores, who have come here in the past 25 years.

The accompanying photo, taken in 1929, illustrates the closeness of this community. Directed by Firmo Correia (whose son Manny is a tax auditor for the state), the group performed plays, mostly musicals, for the entertainment of St. Anthony's parishioners and Portuguese people in other communities.

Front row

Among those in the front row are the late Joe Lawrence; Joseph DeFreitas of Birch Street (whose son, Joe Jr., is assistant clerk of courts in Ayer); Leo Fernandes, now 85 and still square dancing with his wife, Violette; Tony Santos of the Lusitania Bakery, eventually sold to Manny Barros, who renamed it Barry's (which is still doing well under Manny Jr.'s aegis); Joe Freitas of Waite Street; Antonio Batista, and August Fernandes. The four Fernandes sisters recently visited cousins in Madeira.



Stars of the Madeiran-Portuguese community, 1929

In the second row we find Hazel Pitta, whose husband owned a grocery store at the corner of Central and Union Streets; the two Souza sisters and Delphina Machado Quintal.

In the third row are Joe Oliveira, one of the six "Oliver" Brothers, who, along with their parents, were exceptionally fine musicians; Manny Freitas, now retired from the Mass. Bay Authority; Manny Quintal, husband of Delphina; and Joe Costa's brother, Arthur.

The fourth row includes Joe Ribeiro, a fine basketball player in his day, now retired from the B&M; Freddy Avila (attorney Herb Pitta's father-in-law); John-Maria Ferriera, who ran a chicken farm in Tewksbury; Firmo Correia; and Charles Borges, now confined in a local veteran's hospital. Correia had another son, Eddie, who invested in tuna clippers and real estate on the West Coast.

This group continued to change slightly throughout the 30s. There were constant rehearsals at a brick, six-apartment block on Tyler Street, which had a huge basement. Tyler Street (where Zayre's is now located) had

quite a few Madeiran families living on it, including the Caldeiras, Pachecos, Freitas', and Manuel and Julia Gonsalves, who maintained a boarding house which catered to unattached males newly arrived from the old country.

Contributed their talents

People like Joe Camara (father of Joe Jr., a music teacher in the Lowell School System), and Tony Gomes (whose widow, Mary, remarried John Thomas, another Madeiran) all contributed their talents. Mary's brothers (Silva) all became wealthy contractors. Lowell licensing commissioner Eddie Santos had a wonderful voice and participated for many years.

Pearl Rodriques, grandmother of Broadway aspirant Grady Mulligan (who obviously gets his talent from the Portuguese side of the family); along with my sister Julia, and brother-in-law Armand Santos, who plans to winter this year in Madeira, were contributors. I especially remember the beautiful and talented Madeline Bettencourt Stys, now de-

ceased, on a set that rivaled something out of Hollywood, singing on a swing.

George Mello, whose voice was good enough to merit a try-out with Arthur Godfrey; and Alice Joncas, mother of Steve Joncas (partner of Sen. Paul Tsongas in several developmental projects), made a marvelous duo. Abel Alves, retired to Rye, N.H.; Jack Freitas, who formed the Royal Madeiran Orchestra which played all over New England, and countless others, gave freely of their talents.

This Madeiran-influenced church group eventually purchased a piece of land on Village Street. It became the Holy Ghost Park and is the center of a new vitality that still exists within St. Anthony's. Its influence is now Azorean, but it's really not that different — it's still Portuguese.

During Labor Day Weekend the park is the scene of a "Festa do Loreto." Come on out, eat some "bacalhao," "carne de speto;" listen to some music, dance under the stars and make believe you're in Madeira. You'll enjoy it.