

# UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL

## Memórias – Preserving the Stories of Lowell's Portuguese Community

### Oral History Interview with Joseph A. Camara, March 5, 2016

#### **Biographical Note:**

Born in Lowell, Massachusetts, in 1927; parents Jose and Maria A. (Francisco) Camara immigrated to the U.S. from Madeira Island, settling in Lowell ca. 1920; they worked in various textile mills in the city and the father worked, as well, in the city's large tannery; they had two children, a son and daughter; the son, Joseph A. Camara, was educated in Lowell's public schools and studied music, and graduated from Boston University; while a young adult pursuing his education, Mr. Camara worked in a number of Lowell factories, including the Educator Biscuit Company, American Hide and Leather, the Lowell Silk Mill, and a furniture (bridge table) manufacturer; he taught music in Lowell's public schools at the junior high and high school levels; Mr. Camara also played soccer for local Portuguese teams and was a member and board director of the Portuguese-American Center.

#### **Scope and Contents:**

Interview conducted by local historian Mehmed Ali; included is information on Lowell's "Back Central" neighborhood, growing up there in the 1930s and 1940s, and working in a number of factory jobs in the 1940s; there is also information on the role of the Portuguese in local politics and the activities of the Portuguese Democratic Club, as well as the activities of various Portuguese social and fraternal clubs, and activities of the Holy Ghost Society, Saint Anthony Catholic Church and two of its prominent Portuguese priests (Father Grillo and Father deSilva); the interview also includes information on Lowell's Portuguese musical and marching bands.

**INFORMANT: JOSEPH CAMARA**

**INTERVIEWER: MEHMED ALI**

**J=JOE**

**A=ALI**

A: Okay. This is interview with Joe Camara on March, what is it, March 5.

J: 5<sup>th</sup> I believe.

A: 2016.

J: Umhm.

A: And Joe thanks again for sharing sometime this morning with us.

J: Glad to do it.

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

J: I was born in Lowell, Massachusetts September 22, 1927.

A: Okay. And where did you grow up?

J: I grew up in the section of the city that was called the Tremont. When Portuguese, when they moved here, they settled there most of them they are, were Madeirans.

A: Okay.

J: And the Back Central Street group most of those are Azoreans from Azores, the Azores Islands. So most of the, again, the Madeirans, which my parents were born there and I've been there. And you talked to (A: Herb) Herb [Herbert Pitta, Jr.], and he was there with a couple of people, there were other people.

A: Yah.

J: Yah. So and around the 19, early [19]20s my father left Madeira. He was fourteen, fifteen years old at that time. That was to get away from what they had the draft all the way in Portugal. And he came in a different name and he moved, moved to the section of back, right by the city hall, and that was the Tremont section, and there just about every Portuguese that, from Madeira. During the, during the 20s of course, at 29, a lot of them left because the mills slowed down and they moved to California. So but basically, Madeira, the area was all Madeirans.

A: Okay.

J: As you know, the church was built in Back Central Street, because majority of the Portuguese were there, and most of them, most of the people that we have in the city now are from the Azores.

A: Okay.

J: There are very few if any that come from Madeira, because they're doing, they're doing pretty well I believe. So if you ever picture the city hall and where the police station is, that building, that whole area there were mills, the Merrimack Mills that were from there, from the, to the river, almost to the halfway there before they hit the streets of Lowell, of Lowell. If you see that Moody Street, Moody Street was cut off and that used to go to the bridge completely.

The beginning of Moody Street, there was Dutton Street, and then Worthen Street, and then the next street was Prince, and I was born on Prince Street. My grandmother's and grandparents' house, we all lived there. I had four uncles, and two aunts, and there were nine, ten of us in one of the buildings there. Prince Street started off, we had a majority of Portuguese families, but we had a lot of French people and a few Irish. In fact the newspaper was printed on Prince Street,

*L'Etoile*, that's where it was originally. And we lived at the end of that, just before the railroad tracks where we lived. We lived there until about 1930 and then we moved to Tilden Street, which was a couple of streets down. In between that there are more homes and a little street called Colburn, Colburn Street. There were two Colburn Streets in the city, one Colburn and the other Coburn Street. And at the corner of that street, Tilden Street was Dan O'Dea's; [he] was selling the Plymouths and across the street was the library. And we lived in one of the, coming down there was a big garage where one bread company used to have their trucks. And then the little Dutch place that sold candy, they were from Holland. And then a French shoemaker, and then there was a three-story building. On the bottom of that building originally there was a bar, and we lived on the third floor. And in the back there were also apartments. And then there were a couple of other houses all the way, and a little market at the end of that street.

A: On the end (--)

J: By Freitas.

A: On the end of Colburn?

J: Oh no, the end of Tilden.

A: Tilden, okay.

J: Colburn Street was a funny street. It's like in a little arrow. To get there through from Moody Street it was only an alley way you get, but the other side was opened. And there is where I grew up. We lived on the third floor. And all, and as you went out there, you'd go back to Moody Street. If you went to the right there was the Perry's Market, and there was a bar there that was owned by the [Nabreau] family, and there was a gas station. And then the next street was Tremont Street where the mills started, and after that the little street, Hanover Street where a lot of other Portuguese lived. And there was, later on in the 50s, there was a market by Gomes, Gomes Market on Moody Street. And you had the canal. And from then on it was mostly French. But that little area they kept all the, most of the Portuguese from Madeira, although some of them strayed down, but this is it. We grew, I grew up there and that bar after became the club. The Saint Anthony's Soccer Team Club used to belong there.

A: Joe, what was the name of the bar before it became the club?

J: I forget what it was. It was owned by a Portuguese fellow named Avila. He owned a big house on Lawrence Street. Later became, it's still there right next to the church, a little church. It's now, it used to be the Armenian Church, but then now it's a Spanish Church.

A: Okay.

J: And it had a big hall and he owned that. And, but the family then moved, the boys moved to Methuen where they were in business, plumbing business, but most of those people were barbers, the Avilas.

A: Okay.

J: That's (--) What happened (--) The parameters all around the area, and most of these people, the Portuguese Madeirans are funny. My father, they didn't (--) My wife used to call me at the club and see if I was there, and said, "Joe Camara?" "Who's Joe Camara?" They knew my parents. My father is [from] Santa Cruz [on the island of Madeira], that's where he was born.

A: Okay.

J: And all these nicknames that the Portuguese had. Some people like "Marta Pardge" [sic?], and his name was Aguiar. And it said, "killer of priests."

A: Marta Pardge [sic?], okay.

J: Everyone had these "[Unclear]", Nobrega on Prince Street. His family was there. And most of the, we lived on Prince Street for a while. Then we, that's where we started everything, and there was nothing there. I had to go to school at the Cabot Street School.

A: Okay.

J: Because the other side of Merrimack Street, the Greeks, most of the Greeks on Market Street.

A: Okay. Where was the Cabot Street School?

J: It's still, they tore it down, right at the corner of Cabot and it's on Father Morrissette [Boulevard], right there before you cross the street on the left as you're going to the bridge. That was the Cabot Street School. So I went through three, three grades there, to the third grade. Then they, I started at the Worthen, went to the Worthen School instead of the Green School, which was closer, but then we moved. My sister was born in '34, and my grandparents had moved to there, because they had to move. And they moved up to Mill Street up off Back Central Street. So they were the babysitters, you know, between my, because at the time school used to run until 11:00-11:30. You'd go home for lunch and be back at 1:00. And you'd have to go to eat somewhere. So my, when my sister was born they took care of her. We moved up to Cady Street, and Cady Street in an Italian home, a fellow by the name of John Simone, he handled cutting the grass and all this. He used to do that. So.

A: Good. Well let's talk about the Tremont a little bit more. You talked about a couple of markets, Perry's Market?

J: Perry's Market, and then there was the Gomes Market, and a Freitas. They had a little, little markets.

A: Okay.

J: Portuguese that (--) When my father would go to the store he'd give them the order and they'd deliver it. And then on Saturdays after he got paid he'd go and pay them. This is the way it was.

So, and even after we moved up to Back Central Street there were a couple of markets, Pitta's Market, Super Sousa's Market and the Pioneer Market on Gorham Street. Same way, you'd go there, order everything, someone would deliver, bring it, you know, and then they'd (--). On Saturday he'd take care of all the bill notes.

A: Yah. And what was the, what was the condition of the housing down in the Tremont?

J: The housing, of course they were old mill houses, a lot old, but they were kept, well kept by the people there. You know the Portuguese people are picky and but they kept everything right up.

A: Now were there places for kids to do recreation? I know you were fairly young.

J: There was none. There was no recreation, no little parks. There was an empty, empty spot that, off Tilden Street, as you go in towards the mill. But those were your days where they, they had little streets there. In fact that's one of the boarding houses my father used to live in, and they worked the boarding houses and then they'd go to work in the mills. But there were no fields, nothing there. And if you wanted to do anything you'd go to the North Common and you take your life into your hands, [Laughs] because who owns (--).

A: Yah.

J: This was not like today where everybody complains. We'd have problems with this street, or these people or that, you know, like we didn't argue with them at all, stayed to ourselves.

A: Yah, yah. Was it (--). Did you go up to the North Common when you were a kid?

J: Ah, no. Well we'd stay away from it. Later one when they were playing baseball we'd, at CYO and we used to go there. You'd go there and you're lucky to get out of there. [Both laugh] This is the way it was, you know, rivalries. Greeks, Portuguese and Frenchmen, basically that was the area, the whole area, that area. Where Back Central Street was different if you, you know, that area.

A: So what did your parents do for work?

J: They worked in the mills.

A: Do you remember which ones?

J: My mother worked at the Suffolk Mills for a while until about the [19]40s, and then she went to the Silk Mill, what they called it on Market Street, they called it the Silk Mills. My father worked in the Boott Mill, and he worked at the, during the winter. And during the summer he'd go and work on construction on the roads. (A: Yah?) And then when that was done he'd go back to the Boott Mill. They'd hire him back because he was a good worker. Oh, and he also worked at the Silk Mills, and he finally, when he ended up working at the Tannery.

A: Oh, at the Tannery?

J: The Lowell Tannery. We were living up in the Back Central Street. So he, he worked in New York State. They'd go to work on Sunday, come back on Saturday, then go back. And we'd see him once, you know, one day a week.

A: Wow, and that was when (--)

J: For a while when they were working during the summer.

A: Building the roads?

J: They were building roads. They would work on Route 3, Lowell/Lawrence Boulevard, and all over the place.

A: Oh interesting.

J: And he worked for Brox for quite a while.

A: Okay. The Tannery, what do you know about that?

J: I worked at the Tannery too.

A: You did?

J: During war time and I was in high school, I worked there. I originally, when I was a junior, a freshman or a sophomore in high school I worked the old Bridge Tables, forty cents an hour.

A: What is it called?

J: It was a Bridge Tables. It's been near houses now. They tore a place down on Rogers Street. The Tannery was on Rogers, just off Rogers Street, on Perry Street further down. And when we worked that they changed over. I was in high school of course and I was involved in music, orchestra and everything else, and so forty cents an hour. And you would get a raise four cents. [Laughs] And finally, because I had chorus and everything after, oh and orchestra after school, he said, "Well you got to come more often." So I couldn't. I couldn't give that up. So I used to work with the, my neighbor who was Simone who we lived in his house. He had a four-tenement house, and landscaping. So that's where I used to work in summers. I also worked at the Silk Mill. I worked at the "Crax" Cookies.

A: Educator [Biscuit Company]?

J: Educator. I worked at the Tannery. I used to work after school during, in the [19]40s, in the late [19]40s, [19]43, [19]44. A lot of the people were there. I worked night, afternoons in summers at the Tannery with my father, where my father was.

A: So could you explain what does the term “bridge tables” actually mean?

J: The bridge tables, they made bridge tables, the little bridge tables that you see.

A: Oh, out of the leather?

J: No, just the wooden things.

A: But this was at the Tannery?

J: No. No.

A: Oh I’m sorry.

J: This was (--) They called it the Bridge Table. They just made bridge tables in a little building there on Rogers Street.

A: Okay.

[Interview stops and begins again]

A: Okay, so you were talking about this company that made bridge tables and that was on?

J: Yah, in fact my father-in-law used to work there. And he used to work downstairs. He worked there till they closed.

A: And this was on Rogers Street?

J: Rogers Street.

A: Now if I’m coming, if I’m coming over the bridge.

J: You go over the bridge, it was right there on the left.

A: On the left.

J: And now there are homes there.

A: Was it where Old Mother Hubbard Dog Food?

J: That’s where it was the Bridge Stable before it became Old Mother Hubbard.

A: Okay, gotcha.

J: That’s the building.

A: Good.

J: And the Tannery used to be on that street to the left.

A: So tell us about the Tannery.

J: I worked in what they called the wet, the area, the wet area, the hides would come in.

A: The wet area.

J: Yah, the hides would come in, you'd take them off the [unclear], until you take them and have them cut up and then thrown into the brines that to start the leather. I worked there, we worked there. That was one area. A lot of Portuguese and a lot of Greeks worked there. It was a union place. And they were paying 89 cents an hour, which was a good pay at that time in 1940s.

A: It was a good pay?

J: That's a good pay considering that's what it was. So a lot of the people, you'd stay there, it was a good job. But we were in the wet side, and I worked. My father would, after that it would go to the other house where they'd make the leather, into the leather. They'd have them in the brine and the acids to take everything off the skin. And it was a good job.

A: Yah, how was the working conditions?

J: Oh they were good. You'd do your job they didn't, they didn't bother you. The people who worked on the machines were working on a schedule. They had to do so much and that was it. So otherwise you were on the road, straight on the road like cleaning, or doing different jobs they'd be sent different areas. So that's what we used to, that's what it was.

A: Yah. Do you know when the Tannery closed up? Did you have anybody, friends or family working there when it closed up?

J: My father left. I forget what year he left. I don't remember exactly when it closed up.

A: Okay. [Pause] Sorry, I'm trying to figure this thing out here. So what else about the Tremont section? You talked about this Saint Anthony's Soccer Club.

J: Well it was a club and it had had a soccer team, because my father played soccer years ago when he came in, but this was old, an older group. A lot of them played good, good soccer, and they were in a soccer league. Portuguese had that soccer team, and then the up I the Back Central Street the Portuguese had that soccer team there. And the big game was on the South Common.

A: Okay.

J: One, the Madeirans against the Azores.



A: And how was that important?

J: This is the sport that they liked. Europe, playing soccer and baseball didn't bother them. The younger ones, we played, but we played baseball. And after we grew, after we moved we played CYO baseball. I played CYO ball. And churches, every church had a team and we played through that. In fact I'm finishing my 50<sup>th</sup> year as a baseball umpire. I did 60 years as a basketball through CYO.

A: Oh. So the soccer, where did, where did they practice?

J: A lot of them, the First Street oval. You know where the Hunt's Falls Bridge, it was a little, a park there and that's where a lot of the, the games were. (A: Okay) Because South Common was baseball, they had the baseball, the Twi League and everything. And we, as a kid you couldn't get to the field. We played in the grassy area when they tore down the Edson School.

A: Okay.

J: Where the Rogers School is now. We used to play football there in the, on the hill, baseball. As kids we did take our bats and balls and go out there.

A: Did you ever go with your father to watch him play soccer?

J: I'd go and watch him, yah. We used to go, because they used to play, the mills, the old mills had Englishmen up in Andover that used to play. They had a league, the Portuguese against the Andover Mills, the different mills there.

A: Yah, like was it like the Shawsheen Mills?

J: Shawsheen or any of those that they had teams.

A: Huh, and they were primarily English people?

J: Oh, on their team, yah, they'd play against Portuguese. It was a league that they were in.

A: I'm sorry. So did the Portuguese guys from Lowell play for the other teams in Andover?

J: No, no.

A: Or play against them?

J: Play against them. (A: Okay) Oh no, they kept, they were against them.

A: I see.

J: They had their own, you wouldn't play. They had their own men to play.

A: So there was the Saint Anthony's Club down in the Tremont. (J: Umhm) Was that connected to the Saint Anthony's Church?

J: No it wasn't, no. It was just the Saint Anthony's Club, because there were other clubs. Most of the other clubs up in the Charles Street area, the Charles Street area had the old, what we called the Pioneer Club, and the Band Club. (A: Yah) And then the Civic League Club, and the [spells] P – A – M - A, which was the younger group had a club. That closed during the war, but most of them were in the service. When it kicked up and came back, but it didn't last long.

A: Okay. What did that stand for P – A – M - A?

J: Portuguese-American Musicians Association. They went to all the (--) That's what, where they were started.

A: And where was? I'm sorry, go ahead.

J: They were on Charles Street.

A: They were on Charles Street, okay?

J: Yah, there were three clubs on Charles Street. One on one part, the Band Club on one side, the other side had [unclear], and up the hill was the, where the Civic League is now.

A: Yah. And so the Pioneer Club was on Charles Street?

J: It was on Charles Street. The Pioneer Club, it was named Pioneer Club. It was the Central Street Club originally, but they used it. They got a liquor license.

A: Okay.

J: And when they had the only liquor license of the clubs, legally. Because the way they used to do it, people would, they'd get the boxes of beer, etc., and they'd put names on it. So when this guy comes he can drink his, which was legal without the license.

A: I see. So kind of bring your own.

J: Yah, bring your, well they say you bring your own, but you're really buying it but saying, "Hey, I own that, I paid for that bottle."

A: Oh I see. So the club would write people's names on it.

J: Yah, one would say this is what it was. And when the Band Club had it, it was only beer and wine they could serve, where the Pioneer Club, they bought the license of the Pioneer Club, which used to be off Merrimack Street somewhere.

A: And the Pioneer Club was not owned by a Portuguese person?

J: They were Portuguese. Not the license.

A: Not the license.

J: They bought the license.

A: From?

J: Yah, from yah.

A: A French person, or Irish, or something?

J: Oh he was a Portuguese guy by the name of Borges that owned it. I don't know where his bar was, but I was too young then.

A: Yah, yah, and then (--)

J: Then they bought that and they had the full liquor license. In fact, I know when I was in college I used to work bartending bar. And when, when I'd come home (--)

A: At the Pioneer?

J: At the Pioneer Club, oh yah.

A: What was the mission of the Pioneer Club?

J: Just, just a club.

A: Okay.

J: That's all, where the Band Club had its, supposedly the Band Hall had a band, but the, and then the Civic League was originally to get citizenship. And so there was also was a Portuguese American Democratic Club. (A: Yah?) It used to be, have a meeting at this place in Lawrence Street, Avila's house. It was a big house. It became an undertaker after for a while, and now it's, I don't know what it is now. But they had these, all these clubs going. Now they're down to these two clubs I guess.

A: Yah. The Pioneer Club, or the Band Club, was there, were there Portuguese names for those, or did they call them by the English terms.

J: By the English terms.

A: Okay. Now you talked about the Democratic Club. Was there, were Portuguese very active in Politics?

J: Well there was a couple of men. One was way back before Plan E that used to elect them, like Mr. Correa, Firmo Correa, his son was Manny. He was, he's (--) He and I were involved in the Holy Ghost Society for a long time.

A: And so Mr. Correa would be active in politics?

J: Yes, he worked, he used to work at Bon Marche selling things, and he was, he was a Councilor for a few years (A: Really?) way back.

A: Okay.

J: On that time. He was the first Portuguese Councilor that we know, and the latest of course was Joe Mendonca now.

A: Sure, sure.

J: Joe was.

A: Now what was his first name, Mr. Correa?

J: Firmo, F – I – R – M - O.

A: Firmo, okay.

J: [Says name in Portuguese]

A: Excellent, and what else about the clubs? Were there kind of rivalries between the clubs in any way, or?

J: Um, only, not really, because the only team, the only one that had a soccer teams were Saint Anthony's and the Civic League.

A: Okay, so the Civic (--)

J: Nowadays it's different. Nowadays they have, they call themselves the Blues or the Red. The Blues are at the Portuguese American Center. The Reds are the Civic, The Portuguese American Civic League. They're up. They each have their soccer teams now.

A: Okay, okay.

J: But that was when there weren't that many people here then. After the war when they supposed, there were a lot of them came over.

A: Right.

J: Nowadays a few people that come, and most of them that come over from the Azores. There are very few Madeirans that come.

A: Right, right.

J: They don't (-- ) Madeira is doing very well as an area. A lot of the island is built up quite, quite a thing.

A: Huh, interesting.

J: Tourism, a lot of English. We were there twice. I went there in the summer and then we were there for the New Year's.

A: Really?

J: And New Year's they have their fireworks thing, and there are about six big liners that come in and park in Funchal for that, and they celebrate into the New Year. It's quite, it's quite a time.

A: Wow, sounds nice.

J: The streets, you'd walked the streets there were carols. When we were there all English carols (A: Oh really?) and they can sing it. And nowadays if you try that in this country, oh, you'd have to play something else though, because of different religions. What's going on now, it's just.

A: Or maybe you're disturbing the peace?

J: Yah. This music is all day, and all these parades that they had.

A: So just keeping with the soccer theme for a couple more minutes, were there any famous players that came out of Lowell?

J: No.

A: Okay.

J: No, in fact I played a couple of years.

A: You played soccer?

J: Yah, I played soccer as a kid. What else we started? We had a couple of people from the Textile. We had an Arabic fellow that played with the team, the Civic League Team, and a Brazilian.

A: [Music playing in background] Sorry.

[Recording is turned off and on again. Interview continues]

J: Just played.

A: I'm sorry, say that again?

J: [Nobody was making soccer], because we played and someone would go around with a hat to collect to pay for the officials etc., (A: Yah) but we had leagues.

A: So did you, were you part of the Saint Anthony's Club?

J: No, I didn't play with the Saint Anthony's Club. I played with the Civic League for a couple of years.

A: Okay.

J: The last I was in college, my first year in college. I played. I played a game in ah, just outside of Medford. We'd have a league and I got crucified. I got hit and I've had, my legs bothered me for then, so I quit. Soccer, it wasn't you know, they didn't play soccer the way it is. They go after you if you're a key player. So I quit.

A: So it was a little (--)

J: I didn't have the time anyway, so.

A: So was it a little rough and tumble then?

J: Oh it was rough and tumbled. Officials, one man officials then you know. Soccer was, you'd go in, you'd go into it try and kick a ball and someone would kick your legs. So you couldn't (-- ) You can see it if you watch the soccer games. And I don't know where you're from, but.

A: I'm from Lowell.

J: Oh.

A: So you talked about, there was an Arabic speaking person from the Textile Institute?

J: Yup, there were a couple of people from, played with us, and the Brazilians. And I also had a cousin that was a good soccer player and he was related to me. He moved to Washington, D.C., worked in the government for a while.

A: Okay.

J: We was a great (-- ) We had some good players, (A: Yah) goal tenders, (A: Okay) etc., but it was just, [but that it], because that sport still can't pick up even with all the big stars they've had.

A: Yah. So the two, you know, back in the older days the two clubs, the Saint Anthony's Club and the Civic League Soccer Club, they both represented the different Portuguese groups right, the Madeirans and the Azores?

J: Yah. Well mostly Madeirans and the Azoreans, but the fellow that was in charge of the Civic League used to hire some of these people from Cambridge. The club would pay them extra and try to get the professional and semi-professionals, yah.

A: And they were Portuguese guys from Cambridge?

J: Oh they were Portuguese from Cambridge. (A: Okay) Yup, Cambridge and, but down at Saint Anthony's just used their own members and most of them, that was it. They didn't go looking for them. It wasn't that, that much, because we started losing them, and then wartime a lot of them had left.

A: Yah, yah.

J: A lot of them moved to California.

A: Okay. You had talked about down at the Boott Mills when we had the presentation about the soccer clubs being places where kind of the rivalries were worked out?

J: Oh they worked out, oh yah. There was always this pride between the Azores and the Madeirans. In fact years ago at one of the meetings we had at the Holy Ghost, they said, "Oh, Madeiran, if you're a Madeiran you're not Portuguese." So, and I stood up and I said, "I am not, I'm an American, my parents were Portuguese." That's it. But that pulling my leg in [unclear], because there were only a few of us. But the few of us, when the building, the building burned down, the Holy Ghost building, on the committee there were three of us that were from the Madeira. (A: Okay) One that Correia, Manny Correia, my father-in-law Joe Freitas, myself, well my parents were Madeiran, and the others were, their parents had been there for quite a while. One was part, half Italian. It was Portuguese married relative of Manny Correia. So we were a committee that built the building that's there now.

A: Okay.

J: It took us seven years. The way we took it out, they elected us, and the first thing I said, "I will do this until it's built and paid for." So it took us seven years. And in 1973 we turned the building back to the officials because that was it. It was then done, paid for. We had no problems. But the Madeirans, we worked at it.

A: Yah. So were there other differences between the Madeirans and the people from the Azores?

J: No, not really. They were just, it's more a kidding we used to do things.

A: It's more what?

J: More a kidding. The Azores, even among the Azores there are nine islands there. The one, one that we predominate, the one area, but that's it. Some, the Saint Michael's people, that group, just a new group came over the lately I guess. There were a lot of them. (A: Yah) And so there's even between them there's talk, talk that way, island to island.

A: Back in the early (--)

J: It's, it's kidding more or less.

A: Okay, okay.

J: It's not something that we can get a lawyer and sue. [Both laugh] Those are things that are going now.

A: Yah. The, there was no problem back in the old days between somebody from Madeira marrying somebody from the Azores?

J: No. No.

A: Okay, good.

J: No, Herb's mother, a Madeiran, and Herb Pitta [Herbert Pitta, Sr.], his father, they were from the Azores. They had no problem. You know, they didn't have to marry him.

A: Yah, what about um, other work that you did? Herb told me that you had worked for the Lusitânia Bakery at one point?

J: I worked for Barry's, Barry's Bakery.

A: Oh Barry's, okay.

J: And not Lusitânia, Barry's. I was his brother-in-law for a while and I used to work. I used to teach and then I'd go to (-- I started teaching in the [19]50s, \$3,000 a year. That was big money.

A: Wow.

J: And so I worked part time at the bakery. I'd go there and close it up because we lived I the same house at the same time. He lived downstairs, and I lived upstairs in my first marriage. And so I used to work helping there. I worked at the bakery. I worked everywhere. I worked at the Silk Mills for the cloth room. And I worked one year. I started the Silk Mill third shift. And I was in college again. And that I dropped fast, because then I worked cutting the grass would be cheaper and even better, because the mill used to work at the third shift. You'd have lunch at two o'clock in the morning, but the machines kept going and you had to come back and run and do the thing.



A: Really.

J: Oh yah, but they kept on going making, making the yarn. So I worked there and I worked at the Tannery, the “Crax” [the nickname many Lowellians used for the Educator Biscuit Co., which established a factory in Lowell in 1937 and operated on Jackson Street until 1974], the, all these jobs I’ve done, the sweater place making sweaters.

A: Okay. How was working at the “Crax?”

J: “Crax,” I worked loading the trucks. And then I’d leave that job and go to the Tannery. I worked at the late shift loading up the trucks to go out. Then at 7:00 I’d be at the Tannery. This is when I was, before I started teaching, because I couldn’t, you know, that was it.

A: Yah. So you graduated Lowell High?

J: I graduated Lowell High in 1945.

A: 1945. So tell us about the war. How did the war impact you, or your family, or the Portuguese community?

J: Well it impacted a lot of the people who were drafted. (A: Yah) I had my uncles in the service. I was, I was eighteen and the war was over in 1945 in September. So I didn’t (--) I was going to go into the service if it were still there. I had passed the flight thing to go and become a pilot, but then they cut that out. So I said, well no use going into the service. I went, started at the Boston University.

A: Okay.

J: I went there, graduated Boston University, got my Masters. Didn’t teach until (--) I went to work at the Ford Motor Company and I was making good money time there.

A: So you went to BU, you got your degree, your Bachelor’s Degree?

J: Degree, Bachelor’s Degree. Then I got my, then I got a Master’s Degree.

A: Really. And what did you get your degrees in?

J: Music, Music Ed.

A: Okay.

J: I become a vio (--) I was a violinist.

A: Okay. Okay. And so you didn’t go into teaching right away?

J: No, couldn't afford it. I got married in 1950 and my son was born in [19]52. So I had to do something. And the reason I went into teaching is the Ford Motor Company was closed, the Somerville Plant. (A: Okay) So I figured, well it's time to start to do this. And I went to Tewksbury. I started in Tewksbury teaching.

A: Okay. And did you teach elementary or high school, or?

J: Everything. It was from (--) I had junior high and the high school chorus the first year. Then I took, and I taught violin in the primary schools.

A: Okay. How did you get interested in music originally?

J: My mother used to, she was young, she didn't finish school at all. She used to go to the International Institute. It used to be over Gagnon's [unclear] Store. And Julius Woessner had, was the violin teacher [Woessner, born in Baden, Germany, in 1874, immigrated to the U.S. and settled in Lowell in 1914; he was a popular music teacher and founded, as well as conducted the Lowell Philharmonic Orchestra. He also served on the board of the International Institute of Lowell]. He had a place over the Washington School, ah, Bank. It used to be a three-four story building. (A: Okay) And he started teaching a group of us at the International Institute.

A: Really?

J: So from there I continued, and we started taking private lessons and got involved in the orchestras. The Lowell Philharmonic [Orchestra], he had a junior orchestra up on the top floor over the bank where they had a hall, they used to have the Lowell Philharmonic, Julius Woessner. And I played, started playing with them. I was a junior, a sophomore with the big orchestra, I played with them in the [19]40s and I continued.

A: Um, where was the big orchestra located?

J: They were upstairs, upstairs. They used to have the concerts at Liberty Hall, (A: Okay) where the theater is now. (A: Yeah) We used to (--) We used to have to have concerts there.

A: But Woessner would practice above the Washington Bank?

J: Above the Washington Bank, then later he moved up to East Merrimack Street, (A: Okay) and across from the Immaculate School more or less, just on the edge, and he had a room there. We had private lessons there. And then the orchestra, the main orchestra I was then, you know, and I left that because I was in college. I was too busy. And I started back playing with the Merrimack Valley Orchestra and I was with them for forty years.

A: Okay. And were there many Portuguese people in those orchestras, the junior and the Philharmonic?

J: No. No, I was the only one that played the violin. They played instruments, but not interested in that type of music, (A: Yeah) because as a youth I was taught it that way.

A: Yeah, did you ever perform with the Portuguese Bands?

J: No. We had a Drum Corps (A: Okay) back in the, just wartime. I can show you a couple of pictures of Saint Anthony's Drum Corps.

A: Okay, for the church?

J: For the church.

A: Wow.

J: And this is me in there with the glockenspiel. I started out as a drummer.

A: Wow! And where is this at? [Looking at photos]

J: That's ah (--)

A: Is it the South Common?

J: It's one of the parades we had. We used to do a lot of parades. South Common, the [unclear]. Years ago when we had, we had a Drum Corps. Saint Rita's had a Drum Corps, a big Drum Corps. They had over 200. We had about 100 people [unclear]. So I would play the drums. And then the, I went to the glockenspiel because I could play violin. So the guy that was in charge would say "Hey, you can play this". Okay, I'll, so I read the music. And when he left to go, he was drafted in the war, I ended up being the Band Master for a couple of years, and I was in college, the beginning of college. So that ended when I couldn't, you know, keep it up. And then people broke away, and money was there. The thing that killed it was perhaps, you hate to say it, the priest died, really, Father Grillo, and he was behind that for 1,000%.

A: Okay.

J: But the money that came in, they would keep this, we had it done by the parents. And this new priest took over. And he said, "Well I have to have control of all the money." So that chased the parents away and then everything broke up. Same thing happened with CYO.

A: Really.

J: There's no money. The parents used to get to run all these parties for the money for baseball and basketball we had, but.

A: Yah, who was the priest that came in after Father Grillo?

J: Father [Rev. John F.] deSilva, John deSilva. (A: Okay) But nowadays it's even worse.

A: Yah, yah. So tell us about Father Grillo a little bit.

J: Well he was, he came from the old country. They moved to Hudson [Massachusetts]. Then he became a priest. He went to the seminaries in this country.

A: And when you say Hudson, Hudson, Mass. [Massachusetts]?

J: Hudson, Mass.

A: Was there a Portuguese colony in Hudson?

J: Yes, there is a big, big Portuguese Colony. They have a big club there too.

A: Was there Mills in Hudson, or?

J: Yah, the mills, there are a lot of mills in Hudson.

A: Okay. Okay.

J: And they were there. He became a priest. He was a friend of the Cardinal, or he went to school with the Cardinal, Bishop Cushing. Go way back. (A: Okay) And he came here and stayed there until he passed away in 1949 I believe.

A: Okay, okay.

J: In the meantime they got other, had other priests who would help. Nowadays they're not getting, there's no priests.

A: Any stories about Father Grillo?

J: No, not really. He loved the gardens, and he had a garden. If you didn't find him in the church he'd be in the garden working.

A: Okay.

J: And he, after all this, the back yard of the church was all the garden. Then we'd have all the parties were held there, a lot of the parties.

A: And what else about the religion? You said you were involved with the Holy Ghost?

J: The Holy Ghost Society, yah. We started, when my parents moved up on Mill Street, across the street was this man Mr. Silva, there are a lot of Silvas, Portuguese. And he was running the feast. And they used to run the feast and we'd be in the Drum Corps. We used to march to processions, and the Portuguese Band. So, and we got involved. We had a couples club and the place burned. We took over the club, because they were different. They had two committees. They had a committee that would run the park, and a committee to run the feast. The committee to run the feast was making money and they'd have to give the money to the others. And they

were the same people there for a while. So they changed it to where the [unclear] the way it is now, but the president runs the whole business, (A: Okay) the group committee.

So during, when the fire hit the place, the building had to be torn down. They built the building committee. And like I say, the five, the five, six of us were there for seven years.

A: Um, what caused the fire at the, at the Holy Ghost?

J: It was an old building and probably the electrical, electricity, and it's out there in the, you know, by the stadium out on Rogers Street. (A: Umhm) So we had to come up with the plans, the committee, and we had to go get the money. And we'd run the Bingo for a long time. And in the meantime we started at the church hall, and then when we opened up the building we finally, well we run the buildings there. But it was (--). When it was done after that I was President for three years. (A: Okay) And I, more or less now, I got away. It's altogether different.

A: How so?

J: We have a different group of people that are here now, and they don't believe in the rules the way they were. And they found themselves in trouble with the government, \$100,000 fine they had to pay. It's still over \$50,000 going now.

A: Oh boy, okay.

J: And the club, and one of the clubs had the same problem.

A: Was it because of taxes or something?

J: They were making money on taxes, yah. They weren't paying the taxes. So when I left them in the [19]80s, early [19]80s, they had money in the bank. Now they say they owe \$50,000. So it's, they're paying it now. They're working hard. The Saab woman is helping out. They've got a bank loan I guess.

A: Okay. So tell us about, you know, so you talked about the Tremont and kind of Back Central. Where else did Portuguese people live in the city?

J: Basically they're (--)

A: I mean the South End was kind of the biggest neighborhood.

J: South End is the biggest area right now, and that's where most of them are now. But now they're spread out. They've got a lot of them that live in Chelmsford. We had some people, Ferreira [unclear] that moved out to Chelmsford. They've had farms there years ago. They left the Tremont and [they move there.] And most of them, that's where they live now.

A: Okay.

J: But they're spreading out, depending, Hudson, Mass. and Hudson, New Hampshire, a lot of Portuguese, Cambridge, Peabody, Lawrence, although they have no parish. The only one that has a church is Saint Anthony's in Lowell, but I don't know how long that's going to hold on. Peabody is, Peabody (--)

A: John [Leite] was telling me there were quite a few people that moved up to Manchester when the mills in Lowell went down.

J: There were, there were a lot of them. My grandfather used to go to Nashua from Lowell all the time. He worked in the mills in Nashua, but others moved up to [George] and this is all I know about that, you know. I knew most of the people, but most of them worked in this area. The ones that moved up there, they moved everything, yah, but there aren't that many Portuguese up there in Manchester now.

A: There was, was there a church up in Manchester ever?

J: No. (A: No) No, no Portuguese church up there. Nashua had a priest. They had a little church for a while, but they don't have it now.

A: Yah, they had a parish, a Portuguese parish, or?

J: They did for a short time, but then no priests. So it changed.

A: Um, what about, Herb told me about a newspaper called "Aluta."

J: "Aluta" is from New Bedford.

A: Oh, it was from New Bedford, not from Lowell.

J: In New Bedford, nope. There's really no paper they printed in Lowell.

A: Okay. All right. So what happened to the Tremont neighborhood over time?

J: The Tremont neighborhood was changing. They knocked down part of the mill, the Merrimack Mills, most of it, all of it, and now it's changed to putting it the way it is. They took part, the front part of the city and put the city police there and the fire, main fire station. And that whole area that was there, it's changed. So that all happened with that flood area really in [19]45, in [19]30, in 1935 it was the floods.

A: Yah, the 1936 Flood.

J: Yah, and the [19]38. And they decided, the college started to change, the mills started to close. They started knocking down mills, the Tremont Mill. The only things left there now are the Suffolk Mills and the Hub Hosiery in the back, and that's all not really mills anymore. It's offices and (--)

A: I think it's residences mainly.

J: The college took the old Hub yah, along there. They used to make cloth for parachutes there, (A: right) and stockings.

A: Now did you know any families that had to leave the Tremont because of the urban renewal?

J: Most of them, all of the (--) There was no room. They took all those streets. They took Prince Street, Tilden, everything has been changed. And now you have this, they have the housing. They put that housing all the way up to close to Cabot Street. And so.

A: Did the Portuguese have their own kind of names for things around town, such as the Bootts, [for] the Boott Mills or Merrimack?

J: Just the mills, that's all.

A: Okay. But in the Portuguese language did they (--)

J: The fabrica. Yah, the fabrica is the mills. That's what they called it, but there were no special names. The Silk, the Silk Mill were really the New Market Mills, never Silk. They were into silk, but they called it (--) My mother worked there. And she worked down there and a lot of bunch of Portuguese did. In fact one of the men [unclear] bosses. Mr. Falante, if you see, if you saw the exhibit you saw his wedding. (A: Oh yah) He wrote a book, they wrote a book and I had it. My father-in-law got it. I don't know what happened to it.

A: Oh really?

J: He kept it. Yah, it must be, it's still at the, they wrote it at here and they kept it in the library over here in the, by the Boott Mill.

A: Okay, in the Mogan Center?

J: Mogan Center, right.

A: Yah, and what was the book about?

J: About the mills.

A: What was his name?

J: Falante, F - A - L - A - N - T - E.

A: Okay. So how would you describe the importance of music to the Portuguese Community?

J: Music, you'll find there's a lot of music. They have a lot of their [fado] singings. And they have their own, for each island has their own little type of music, and the way they sing and they act. They have a lot of feast. Every Sunday if you go to Madeira, every, during the week, every weekend is a feast on the island somewhere. They all do, there's a lot of guitars, mandolin. I learned to play the mandolin too.

A: You played the mandolin?

J: I played that. We used to have a lot of people who played mandolin. Jimmy Olivero was a great player.

A: Yah. So now did you go? I know you were playing violin and teaching violin, but did you go to you know, the clubs to watch performances, or did you perform?

J: No, I never performed at the clubs. I'd go and see some, but I go see performances of the singers. I did, you know, but I don't drive much now at night. So we don't do that [unclear] anymore.

A: Now did you go see Portuguese performers that would be in the popular clubs? Like the regular, regular bars?

J: Yah. Fall River we'd go. We used to have a friend that used to sing there quite a bit. She lived outside of Springfield. (A: Okay) And but she passed away. But we had, we could go to the clubs there, listen to friends, you know, go to the feast in New Bedford, the big Madeiran Feast in the first weekend of July. It's around then. They have, they come from all over, all over the country, Canada. I know my cousins from Canada would come down to the feast, so.

A: Now were there certain cities in Massachusetts, or even New England that represented different Portuguese groups?

J: New Bedford was primarily Madeiran, (A: Okay) but with no, none of them coming in, not now they don't, they don't [unclear]. It's a lot of the mixtures now. And the Azores, they're in the middle of what used to be the Madeiran area. They have clubs from different islands. Saint Michael's Island, and Fall River had a lot of Saint Michael's people, and mostly Azores. And they have a Madeiran club, but I've been there and I never saw a Madeiran. And the fellow said, "We haven't got any Madeirans, because it's just a Madeiran club." So that's what he called it.

A: And then what about like you mentioned Peabody?

J: Peabody has a club, but there is a lot of (--) Peabody is from the Continent. They had the Continent.

A: Really?

J: A lot of them there, but again, the majority will still be the Azores. There are more people here from the Azores than on the Islands in the Azores.



A: Okay. Was there many people from the continent in Lowell?

J: There were some, quite a few, but not (--) If you found fifty of them, and a lot of them didn't come. A lot are in Cambridge, in the Cambridge area.

A: A lot of people were from the continent?

J: That came from the continent, yah, but they evolved.

A: So was Cambridge considered the Continent people were the majority of people from Cambridge, in Cambridge?

J: No, they were a mixture and they never, the Continent, they didn't leave the continent as much, or they went to different islands too

A: Right.

J: Even Aruba. I mean not Aruba, um, down along the (--)

A: One of the islands in the Caribbean?

J: The islands up here. Names bother me at my age.

A: Yah, no. You talking Nantucket, or?

J: No. On Nantucket there were Portuguese, (A: Okay) a lot of Portuguese. The Cape had a lot, has a lot of Portuguese.

A: Okay. How about Hudson? Where were those folks from?

J: Hudson, I don't know where they're from. Basically the Azores I would say.

A: Okay, okay.

J: Most of them that come, people that come are all Azores. They're having their problems there, so. I did have one picture. This is the picture of the, of the monument [a granite monument, honoring Portuguese-American military veterans, located in the "Back Central" neighborhood] before the first, the year it opened.

A: Yah, of the Portuguese war monument?

J: Yah.

A: That's great.

J: You noticed it, and that's (--)

A: And is that you?

J: That's me.

A: Wow.

J: I don't know how I got this. My sister found, and my niece got everything my sister had. (A: Okay) Yah, that's the year that they opened the place.

A: Do you have any photographs from down on the Tremont area?

J: No. No.

A: Nothing, okay.

J: We didn't have any cameras.

A: Yah.

J: You know, and my father didn't get a, we never had a car. My father never had a car while I was single. And then when he put an order in the war was just ending and it took him a couple of years to get a car. And he bought the first car from Dan O'Dea, Plymouth. And he didn't have a license. I had a license, because at sixteen, because I used to drive. I had a license. The landscape gardener, I used to drive his, his around. So I got a license and I learned to drive. That's why I had the license.

A: Any, you've talked about a couple of people already, but is there any other kind of Portuguese community leaders that were important say, you know, in the 1940s or [19]50s that you remember?

J: Oh the Deolinda Mello. I don't know if you've ever heard of her.

A: I've heard of her name.

J: She eventually was running the International Institute when it was up on High Street. She was one of the leaders of the church. There are others, there are others now and they have changed. Everything has changed. It's different families that take over.

A: Yah, yah.

J: Didn't know who, what you can say. They take over the clubs now, and the managers.

A: What do you think the role of women was back in the older days?

J: For a while the Civic League originally started, the women were strong in there, but then they had the conventions. The Civic League would, had groups in Lowell, Cambridge, Peabody and they used to have different areas. Every year they'd have a thing at different cities in the state, but then it died out. Portuguese aren't interested in politics. The Civic League was originally to get the citizenship, and Deolinda Mello was one of the ones that was leading it, that group, so.

A: Was it maybe because they became successful, many people became citizens?

J: No, they weren't successful. The clubs didn't push it except the Civic League, but then they gave up. The Democratic Club tried to get going, but then they died down too. No interest. They're not, they're not people who want to go out and care about the voting. It's difficult for them to really back anyone. I wonder if a lot of them, I don't know how they vote, whether they all vote?

A: Tell us a little bit about your teaching career over the years.

J: Well I started in Tewksbury, and like I say, teaching double sessions. We had double sessions. I used to, I taught at the middle school, which is, and the high school basically, but I also covered the Ella Fleming out there, which was special needs.

A: Oh wow!

J: And the strings, and the first, the elementary group. Then came to Lowell to the Daley School to a brand new building, and I started teaching there. And I stayed there until 1995, (A: Okay) and I retired officially. And I used to fill in for the (--) Joe Hogan was the principal. When he was in the other building and, or the assistant would be out of the building. So I, even when Joe's wife passed away he was out for a month, because she died fast, I was in the office for the rest of the year. And I used to go in there even after I retired. He'd be out, he'd call me and I'd fill in for him, or I'd fill in for the assistant. And I subbed there for three years, and just the people that I knew had everything set when you'd go in. They had a lesson plan and you knew what you were doing. Any other one, don't bother me. They used to book me a month ahead, but yah.

A: Joe, any final thoughts about the Portuguese community, or your own time here in Lowell?

J: I don't know what's happening. It's, it's (--) The church of course, the priest is not Portuguese. He and I don't get along anyways, because I was on the committee and I would tell him, give him things and say things. So the next time he had a chance I was cut out, but I didn't care. I was, haven't been feeling that great. So I see the clubs fighting about things that are going on. When we were on the Holy Ghost and we had a thing between the clubs and the church, one week would be for one club, one week for the other club, and the Holy Ghost had their time, and the church had their time. Now they compete against each other. When we used to have the midnight mass, the midnight party, you know, for first of the year, just the, just the park, nowadays everyone runs them. There's one in each club.

A: Oh really?

J: They run their own parties. They're more or less trying to outdo each other I think. Because I was also a board of director on the Blues Club they call it. They took over and changed it, and put in rules. And now they changed that. And they're paying, I've heard, a thousand dollars a week for one of the managers, the managers of (--) And no wonder they go into the hole, you know, but they compete. They're competing against each other. I stay out. I'm a life member of all these clubs.

A: Are you?

J: Oh yah, and life because I've lasted long enough. [Laughs]

A: Good. Any last thoughts?

J: No. I hope to see it change. I'd love to see a Portuguese priest. Who knows what the Portuguese really want? I think [the priest] we have right now he's doing a good job. He speaks the language, works at it, but I don't think he's a happy camper. I hate to say anything. They're not, they don't even ask him to bring a Portuguese priest, to get a Portuguese priest here. New Bedford, Fall River, they have them all.

A: Really?

J: I have a cousin in, in Connecticut and in Hartford, they got a Portuguese priest out of, from Chicago.

A: Um, wow.

J: He came in. In Peabody they had a priest from Toronto for a while until he went back. And now they have an older priest. It's, you've got to know what it is. The Portuguese have feasts all the time no matter where you go. They even have a big feast down there on the Cape in June, early June, in P Town [Provincetown].

A: Okay.

J: They have soup. They have a big feast there. A lot of Portuguese there.

A: Sounds great. Well Mr. Camara I appreciate your time today again.

J: Any time I can be of any help I'm glad to.

A: Absolutely, there's some great history here, really great. Thank you again.

J: Thank you!

**Interview ends**

