

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL  
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY  
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK  
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL**

**ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF LOWELL, MA:  
MAKING, REMAKING, AND REMAKING AGAIN**

**INFORMANT: MARIA CUNHA [PORTUGAL]**

**INTERVIEWER: CHRISTOPH STROBEL**

**DATE: APRIL 23, 2008**

**C = CHRISTOPH**

**M = MARIA**

**Tape 08.35**

C: Maria, if you could just state your full name and where you come from and where you live in Lowell?

M: My last name is Cunha, I live in Lowell, in the Highlands, and I've lived in Lowell since nineteen sixty seven, arriving in Lowell from the Azores, Portugal. I arrived at the age of twelve with my parents and two younger siblings.

C: What was it like when you arrived in the United States? Did you have any preconceived ideas about the US?

M: My preconceived ideas of the US were based on the fact that my mother who had an aunt who is now deceased who had immigrated from the Azores and on a regular basis she would be sending goodies to us. And the goodies included clothes, toys, candy. At my age, I would say, back at that time, children were a lot more naïve than they are now and we were coming to this wonderful place where you had all these great things that you didn't have growing up. My parents were just regular folks, they did not have any education beyond fourth grade. At that time the Azores were still under a dictatorship. They were somewhat separate from the mainland of Portugal, and there was very little attention paid to the folks that lived on the Azores, which consists of nine islands. The island that I came from was probably one of the more advanced ones because we had the US airbase in Terras, so we had an influence from the United States. And I remember traveling to different towns where we had family and folks that were employed by the US base and so we saw all these people speaking a different language, now we were coming to this beautiful place which offered a lot of opportunities, and my parents came mainly

because of education. At that time education was only up to fourth grade so at the age of ten you were technically done unless you could afford to pay to have your children educated. My mother, who as I said, well, when I'm thinking of it right now, I don't even think she completed the fourth grade. She didn't like school, but she was very wise, very smart, and she surrounded herself with people that had an education. Therefore she knew that her children needed to get an education. My older brother who actually did not travel with us, in sixty seven, when he completed the fourth grade, he was put in a seminary, and I'm not sure if he knew or had any idea what was happening, but it was a way of getting an education. So he was able to complete his high school and college by the end of seminary a couple of years after we were here and he left and came to join us. I recall that my mother was paying a tutor for me to take an admissions exam at that time, and I think it still is in Europe, after you complete your high school now, you have to take an entrance exam, and it's determined whether or not you can go to college. At that time, in the sixties, you had to take an exam after fourth grade to get into high school. And my mother was paying a tutor, my father was a carpenter, and she was doing that, but also the aunt that sent us the goodies on a regular basis used to send my mother a five dollar bill or a ten dollar bill which went a long way, so she was able to do that. So that was the goal, that was the intent when we came here and I don't remember my mother ever saying I wasn't going to high school or I wasn't going to college. I recall all my friends at that time, Portuguese young women, were in grammar school with me and upon turning sixteen, they all left. They all left high school and went working in the mills, and at that time there were a lot of shoe factories and clothing manufacturers, shirts, pajamas, and all sorts of textiles. And these girls ended up leaving at the age of sixteen and a lot of them ended up married at a very young age which was very common at that time in that culture. I remember being the only one to finish high school and go on to college, so I credit my mom for having that insight and for not having a formal education she was a very bright and savvy woman.

C: What was your first reaction when you came to Lowell as a kid? Did you live in Back Central?

M: We lived in Back Central, and I remember that initially we weren't even supposed to stay in Massachusetts. My father's brother, who is still living in California, had actually married a young woman who was a US citizen, and again, at that time, very customary, he had a family member who was in the US and there was a neighbor who was of Portuguese descent, and they started looking at pictures and started communicating by pictures and before you know it, she went over there at the age of sixteen, married my godfather, my father's brother, and they came to Lowell, and initially came to Lowell and then they went to California. So when we came to the US, my mother had never met this aunt who was very generous and very kind, and she wanted to meet this aunt, so we stopped in Massachusetts on January tenth, nineteen sixty seven, in the middle of the winter, horrible, huge snow storms at that time and we stopped to see my aunt. We were going to stop for maybe a week or at least a couple days and then we were going to California. I'm not sure we even had a sense that California was another part of the country, but my mother was going to stay and we came, they were at the airport and picked us up on this horrible winter day I think it was a Friday, because if I remember correctly, by Monday there was a furnished apartment and there were places for my parents to go and work. And that was the end. There was an apartment in Back Central on Linden? Street. My mother went to work, I

believe she started out at the same place as my dad, the Wannalancit textile mills, but my dad didn't think that was appropriate for a lady, so with communicating with a friend she got a job at a factory that made pajamas and night gowns for women. So we never made it to California. It was this very close community, everybody who lived in the neighborhood made you feel welcome. Our neighbors across the street, my mother knew their family, but this individual had been here a long time. They took us grocery shopping, to the doctors, to the bank, and do all of those things, so before you knew it we were part of the community and ended up staying and never left.

C: I heard that a lot of the Portuguese in Lowell are from one island of the Azores, is that correct?

M: A lot of the people that came at that time were mainly from Graciosa and folks ended up where family members were, and with the change in the immigration laws in the sixties, you then had these families reunified at a greater pace and in larger numbers. Graciosa is very small. My parents came from this island. Most of the islands at that time, if you lived on one island and it was an hour to get there by boat, it was total isolation. Very few people traveled to any other islands because of the economic conditions, so most of the folks were from Graciosa, my parents were originally from Graciosa. There were some people who had arrived in Lowell from Faial, and that's where there was a volcano in the sixties and a number of people came, but they went to different cities and different towns. In the New Bedford area you have a lot of people from St. Michael, in Cambridge/Somerville you have people from Terceira, but in Lowell I would say the majority were from that small island Graciosa which was a very small island, very isolated. Most of the folks were either farmers or fishermen, and many who came were reunified with family members and ended up staying. It's interesting that a lot of those people that came, my parents age, are still living in Lowell, but their children are now living in the suburbs like Chelmsford, Dracut and Tewksbury.

C: Can you talk a little bit about the Back Central neighborhood in the late sixties and early seventies, because part of this project is to try to reconstruct the role that neighborhoods has played for immigrants and if it's still applicable?

M: I think to a lot of immigrant groups neighborhoods are very applicable. I would say the central part of the community was the church, St Anthonys on Central street. That entire neighborhood at that time as much as I remember, was entirely Portuguese, although as you were going towards the Rogers school right now, where St Peters was, the apartments where the elderly housing is now were the projects. Of course you had different individuals living there. But beyond the projects, down all of the side streets as you were going down to St Anthonys, I want to say that eighty percent of those folks were Portuguese. After a year of having been in the United States, my parents bought a house on Elm street which at one time was apartment buildings and some single homes. They paid for the house in one or two years, and I still remember when I bought a house and my siblings, and we told my mother we had these thirty year mortgages she couldn't believe it. She would tell us how she came to this country with nothing and bought this house and paid it off. I guess she could have bought a bunch of houses at that time because she managed her money very well. And a lot of Portuguese people did. They

bought two, three, four tenement buildings. It was a very close knit community. Everyone knew each other. The church was still the central location where people gathered and the focus of the community. The religious feasts at St Anthony's were the center of everything. There were the two clubs that were there, and the clubs are still there, and I think prior to my coming they were a social club where women were involved and did different things, where my recollection of it is that it was a social club for men, and if you went as a woman, you weren't considered a nice lady. Husbands wouldn't take their wives or girlfriends to the club because it was a place where men went to drink and smoke and play cards. But I believe in the early nineteen hundreds they were fraternal clubs that did a lot of stuff and got involved in the community. But again, in the community, everyone knew each other, everyone supported one another, so if somebody lost a job today at one of the factories, you'd walk two houses down and talk to somebody and find out that their factory was hiring. People would walk to work, they didn't speak English, they didn't have cars, so they would all walk to work together. At five in the morning they would meet at a central location and walk together to the downtown Market street and the shoe factories and be together. It was a very close community. I don't remember any issues with anyone not getting along or not helping each other and I think that is reflective of a lot of immigrant groups once they arrive. They stay together and seek out one another and help each other.

C: Were there stores?

M: There weren't Portuguese stores at that time, there were Frank and Ernie's which is still there, we had Harry's which is right on Central street at the end of my street and was a little convenience store, and you had Pioneer Market which was at the intersection of Central and Charles street, and it was owned by Portuguese, not immigrants, but descendants of Portuguese immigrants and that's where you would go and do your grocery shopping. People weren't going to DeMoulas at that time in the sixties and early seventies. I remember my mother would go shopping and they would deliver. So she would get out of work, walk up the street, cash her check probably at Washington Savings Bank or one of the banks downtown, and then stop at the market and do the grocery shopping and then they would deliver the groceries. There was Barry's Bakery where everyone went to buy their bread and desserts and stuff, but the ethnic stores that are there now, the fish market and the market across the street from the church, those were not there at that time. They probably came in the eighties, maybe late seventies, early eighties.

C: In terms of language, you said you came here when you were twelve?

M: I was twelve and I had no English whatsoever. I remember registering for school at the Rogers school which was the neighborhood school and there was no bilingual education. At that time, it was total immersion, and I remember going into fifth grade. Technically, I was twelve, I probably should have gone into the seventh grade. I tell the young people that I work with that I graduated from high school when I was twenty and they think I stayed back, but it was because I didn't speak English. At that time I was very tiny, so I kind of fit in with the fifth graders. There was a young man who lived in Billerica who had arrived six months before and he was actually the interpreter for all of the kids who arrived and were placed in the school. We would be sitting in class doing whatever and my recollection is that I went to school in January and by the end of

that school year, I remember getting up and doing spelling bees. To this day I don't know if I even knew what I was doing, but I think that total immersion process was helpful, just going in there and, what's the expression, learning by fire or whatever, you have no choice but to learn. I finished seventh grade there at Rogers and went over to the Butler school, at that time they did the eighth grade, and then we went down to Lowell High. By the time I was at Butler or maybe Lowell High, they had, and I don't think it was an official type of thing, but all my friends were doing this, they were going to this room at Lowell High where there was a teacher, and she may not even have been a teacher, but she helped the immigrant students. It was a place where the Greek students hung out, the Portuguese students, the Polish kids, and she was teaching English as a second language. And Mrs. Moore was the person we would go to when we were at the high school and we needed help and she was there to help us. So that was my experience.

C: Do you have children?

M: I have three children, three boys, a twenty seven year old and my youngest is twenty one.

C: Was it important to teach them Portuguese?

M: You know it wasn't and of course right now, as you get older and wiser, there is a certain time in your life when you don't want to listen to your parents because you think you know it all, and it really wasn't important for me to teach them the Portuguese language and now I regret it. My husband is Portuguese, he's also an immigrant from the Azores, and I love languages. When I went to college, my degree was in languages and secondary ed. and I started out my career teaching Spanish and French, but I think after I got married and had children, I was working in a social service agency and I was speaking Spanish and Portuguese all day long and so when I got home, I didn't want to speak it anymore. I was speaking English to my husband and therefore never really spoke Portuguese at home unless there was something we didn't want the children to understand. So that was one of the things I regret that I didn't do and one thing my mother could never understand, that I went to college and majored in language but didn't speak Portuguese to my kids.

C: Do your kids hold it against you?

M: No they don't. My two oldest can communicate, probably not as well as they should, but they can handle it. The little one forget it. It's funny because my mother-in-law is the one that took care of him and she used to speak to him in Portuguese and he would respond in English. All through high school they took languages, and I think Adam has taken language a couple years since he's been in college. They've never said to me, "Mom, you made a mistake," I know I made a mistake and if I had it to do over again, I definitely would do it differently.

C: Is being Portuguese-American an important part of your identity, or to your kids?

M: If anyone asks me what nationality I am I say Portuguese-American which is kind of strange when I say that because I've been here for many years, for forty years, and I have never returned to the island where I was born which is another interesting thing. I've traveled to Portugal, but

I've never gone back to the islands. At that time, my mother had her mother there and two sisters, but was living on a different island. When she got married, she moved to a different island and was isolated. There was never this thing where we went back every year. A lot of my friends to this day will travel back to the islands every year and spend their vacations. I never did that, so I've always identified myself as Portuguese-American, and it's interesting because my children will have the Portuguese flag and the American flags on their walls in their rooms. The music at one time, my youngest one was very interested in the music, and of course the food, with my husband being Portuguese and my mother being always around us, eating the Portuguese food was very important, the music, and the language even though they aren't as fluent, and it is important to me.

C: You mentioned the aunt that supported you while you were still on the islands, did you ever have to support anyone when you got to the US?

M: My father had a special skill as a carpenter, in the churches and the public buildings where we lived he actually did a lot of the woodwork. He used to make furniture. So while we weren't poor, we weren't part of that middle class either. As I said to you before, my mother was very savvy, she connected to the right people, so let's say she would, this family had a vineyard, and in the month of July or August they would be picking the grapes to make the wine. My mother would go over there and help them out. When my mother got the clothing from the US when we were still in the islands, she would take the coat, or dress to the dressmaker, take it all apart, and we would have a brand new dress. At that time women's hosiery was very expensive, so this aunt, who wasn't rich, would send my mother brand new hosiery, and my mother would sell them because it was an expensive thing and she would make some money. I was telling my boss the other day that growing up in Portugal and in the US, I never considered myself poor, but when I really think about it, we were poor, but it wasn't something where, you know, my parents did everything possible to make sure we had everything, that our basic needs were met and were part of the system and part of the culture that no one really knew, but in reality we were poor. Many of the immigrants that came to this country at that time were very hard working, they had their piece of land and in the old country were able to farm that land and grow their vegetables and everything else. They didn't have those things when they came to this country, but after working they could buy their cars, they could buy their homes. Although we did have our own home in the Azores and I remember my parents rented a place and they wanted to build so they built, all through my dad's hard work and my mother was the boss in the house and she managed the money, and she's the one who knew how to do all the bartering here and there and making sure things were done. When we left we had a nice house with a dining room, a kitchen and three bedrooms, and it was theirs.

C: What role does religion and social networks play in your life?

M: Growing up and when I was younger those networks were very important. I had the opportunity to go off to college, I came back and I married right after I got out of college, and then I started a career, so those things became not so important. I had an opportunity to work for a social service agency in Lowell for twelve years, the International Institute, and at that time that was the agency in Lowell, there weren't many more other than maybe Community

Teamwork, but this was the agency that helped immigrants. I was very involved with the agency, in addition to being employed, I was very connected to the various communities and built a tremendous relationship with the Columbian community at that time, the Puerto Rican community and the Portuguese community. I then had the opportunity after working at the International Institute for twelve years and being totally burnt out and I had had enough of that, I then went to work for Congressman Meehan and was there for seven years. You go through phases of your life where some things are more important than others, your children are growing up, life kind of goes on....The Portuguese church was always the center of my life. I think it was two, three years ago with the reconfiguration. I was really involved when the Portuguese church remained open and remained a Portuguese church. With everything that has happened with the Catholic church you kind of push back a little, and I don't go to the Portuguese church as much. And I'm sometimes surprised at myself because maybe ten years ago I had this idea that maybe I need to go back, and I have to be part of it and I have to be involved, but over the last two years I only go when there's a funeral, or a wedding, or a special feast, but I'll go to other churches for services on a regular basis. I don't miss a Sunday mass, that's still ingrained in me, because that was very important growing up. I remember on Sunday mornings that was the thing to do, my mother would dress us all up in our beautiful clothes and we'd go to church, then we'd come home and have dinner or lunch together and then we'd go visit friends, so the church was still critical and it still is. I'm still doing it on a regular basis, I get up Sunday morning, I could very well go out for breakfast or brunch, but I cook, start lunch, and go to church, and we all sit down as a family and have lunch.

C: So when you went back to Portugal, did you go there for vacation?

M: I lost my mom seven years ago and my dad five years ago, and prior to their death, we were going to take a trip that summer and take the children back. Only one of my boys has traveled to the islands, he went with my mother one year and that was something she really wanted to do, to show them where she was born and see all that, but both of them passed away and so that desire to go back...it's just not going to be the same with them not around, so I haven't gone back. I would like to go some day, but it's not one of those things like it was seven, ten years ago, where we really wanted to go and we wanted to go as a family. My youngest is always saying he'd like to go so I mentioned it to my oldest and suggested that he take his younger brother and the two of them go there, and I think I could do that. I don't think I want to go back right now, it's still too early, and I don't want to go back and deal with all the memories that I'm not ready to deal with.

C: Have you ever been involved with any ethnic, neighborhood, or community organizations or festivals?

M: Yeah, my mother and brother were very involved with the church and very involved with the Holy Ghost park. So for many years, I remember as a young girl fourteen, fifteen years old, being the director of the Holy Ghost Society, and I have no idea how that happened, but I think at that time the older folks that had not been born in this country were trying to bring in new people and I remember being involved in it. I was very involved with the feasts as my mother would do a lot of the cooking. My brother coordinated many of the feasts for years and was in

charge of the Holy Ghost as president. As a teenager I was more involved than I have ever been, I mean I would go to the feasts. Right now at the club, one of the clubs, we go there for dinner every Friday night, it's kind of a ritual that every Friday night we go there for dinner, meet up with some friends and just sit there until ten, eleven o'clock at night. I was involved when I was at the International Institute, I think it was prior to the Folk Festival, I don't remember exactly where I was, but when I worked for the International Institute, the festivals, which were at the Regatta at the time, I was very involved with that and participated and helped. So in that sense I worked very loosely with the Columbian community, and then I had an opportunity when I was at the Congressman's office to really do outreach to a lot of the communities, so I've been involved in that sense, but not in the sense that I'm the president of the organization or something.

C: I'd like to shift to power and politics. Are you registered to vote?

M: I'm registered to vote and I will tell you that I became a citizen probably while I was in college, and I think at that time, in order to teach, you had to be a citizen, so I remember while I was in college filing for citizenship and becoming a citizen. I remember registering to vote and I remember voting, but I really had no sense of what politics was all about. While at the International Institute and working with immigrants, at that time a significant number of the immigrants were undocumented, especially the Colombian community in Lowell and I remember at that time working very closely with them and then when we had an opportunity in nineteen eighty six for legalization which was signed by I think President Reagan, and being able to legalize all those immigrants. I also recall having to deal with Immigration at that time, and the International Institute had an incredible relationship with Immigration, but I also learned the whole twelve years I was there, it was a learning process for me, I learned about the whole process of becoming legal and filing for citizenship and all of those things. Back then when you couldn't get things done, you contacted your Congressman, but after having done that for twelve years and realizing that in order to be effective you had to do different things. One of the reasons when Marty originally got elected, and I wasn't involved with his campaign, but I remember when he was elected to Congress and I was at the International institute and totally burnt out from having to drive to Boston with a carload of Jamaican folks that were here on a temporary visa to get an extension, or helping someone in the Cambodian community to get their green card, I realized I could probably be a lot more effective if I worked in his office and I knew he would probably be hiring someone who had experience with those agencies. So I was hired. I went for three interviews and the last interview was with him and I was hired to be the case manager and became a case worker, I think they called us case workers, and then became the Director of Constituent Services where I could be more effective for the little guy. My goal in life has always been to help the little guy, it's never been about money and my husband would tell me to this day that we could definitely be better off if I had done what I should have done, but I'm happy and it doesn't bother me. And I know that I could have gone differently than working in social services. It was Proposition two and a half and I lost my job in Chelmsford and I went to the Institute making eight thousand dollars a year at that time. At that time when I went to Regis College, my parents were paying and with the help of grants and all that other stuff, I was paying seven thousand dollars a year, so it didn't make any sense, but my husband was very understanding I must say and so I stayed there for twelve years and went over to the



Congressman's office and really realized how important it is to be engaged, involved, to vote. To this day as I work with the younger generation, the children of my peers, ninety nine percent of them are college graduates, and I'm trying to say to them, you need to get engaged, you need to get involved. If there's a town meeting, you need to go. If there's a fund raiser that's fifty dollars, you need to show your face, you need to be there, and the more of you that show up, the more chance there will be of someone listening to you and paying attention. I learned that in the Congressman's office although...I loved doing what I did and he was incredible I that sense, it didn't matter if you were undocumented, it didn't matter if you were a homeless person, it didn't matter if you were a homeless veteran. I remember everyone was welcome into the office and I could spend three hours with a person listening to their hardships and troubles trying to help them and there was never a sense that I shouldn't be helping that person, that I should be helping some other person because they were a contributor, or a business owner, there was never that. And I always said, I think his office was unique in that, but maybe I'm wrong, but we treated everyone the same and we had an opportunity to really impact people's lives.

C: Part of the interview is to figure out ways to get more recent immigrant communities involved with the National Historical Park. Have you been to any of the exhibits?

M: Yes.

C: Do you feel the Park is engaged with the Portuguese community?

M: I'm going to say yes and no. It's a cyclical process. At one time it was the Portuguese immigrants and the Greek immigrants and then the Portuguese, and then the Hispanic, and then it's the Southeast Asians and now maybe it's the Africans which is fine. One of the things I'm involved in now is that group they have for the creative economy, and I think the established institutions have to do a little bit more to reach out. And when I say the established institutions, I'm talking about the institutions that are "Anglo" like the National Park. The National park and the city of Lowell, need to do a little more outreach and need to be more inclusive with the ethnic communities. The ethnic communities do amazing things in their own little corners. Unfortunately it stays there and the people that take part in it are the ethnic community and it's not something that's publicized but it's attended by the community as a whole. I have always said there needs to be more collaboration, more involvement, and I know right now they're talking about putting out this calendar so that there's a listing of say, the festival at Holy Ghost park, or a festival in the Acre that the Greeks are putting together and everybody is more coordinated and on the same page, becoming more integrated, even having some of the festivals from the different neighborhoods downtown. Why not integrate them into the larger piece? So I think I've answered you question, yes and no.

C: These are really great suggestions which I think will be useful. Thank-you so much for your time and thanks for talking to us.