

A TALE OF TWO GRANDCHILDREN: THE QUEST FOR MY HIDDEN AZOREAN HERITAGE

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Growing up, I was taught that my father and his older siblings were born in Benicia, California. When he was ten, his parents and the unmarried children moved to Oakland. A few times a year we drove to Benicia to see relatives who remained behind, and they reciprocated our visits, although I never knew them well. Whenever I asked relatives about our national origin they said it was Flemish, adding that both of my grandparents were born in Northern California. Then they would insist I drop the topic.

After my father died, I found among his papers death certificates for some of these older relatives, listing their parents' birthplaces as the Azores. I only knew that the Azores were Portuguese islands in the Atlantic, so consulted my parents' world globe in order to locate them. This made me wonder if many other Americans could trace their roots to such a tiny remote area, and whether my family still retained any remnants of its Portuguese heritage. Next I scrutinized a formal family portrait dated 1900. Only my grandparents' brother-in-law and his infant daughter fit the dark-eyed, olive-skinned Iberian stereotype I held. The rest, including my eldest uncle and grandparents, had lighter eyes and fairer complexions. I telephoned my much-older first cousin, only to be amazed when he admitted always knowing about our Portugueseness. To keep family peace, he never told me because his passing mention of the topic during his 20s to an uncle unexpectedly provoked a stern rebuke not to raise the subject again, despite its never having been taboo before. Neither of us could recall anti-Portuguese prejudice in school, but I wondered: Had we passed for enviably-suntanned Anglo-Saxons instead?

My cousin was six when his mother left him and his father, so they moved in with our still-vigorous grandparents, octagenarian great-grandmother (who mostly stayed in her room fingering her rosary), and unmarried young uncle and aunt who

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worked in San Francisco. My cousin confirmed that our family spoke flawless English, spelled well and had neat penmanship. Years later, my earliest family memories were of our divorced uncle living with Grandpa, while Grandma was bedridden at our aunt's house; my cousin's parents remarried to others, but living nearby; my cousin working for a while after high school graduation, then entering the military; and, our eldest uncle and his wife serving as live-in caretakers at a private rod-and-gun club outside Benicia. My cousin and I both missed Grandma's funeral: he was stationed abroad in the service, while his mother (who would have been unwelcome at the funeral) babysat me all day.

Most astonishing was my cousin's revelation that everyone in our fathers' generation could speak Portuguese - which they did mainly at home when they did not want him to know about adult matters like family finances, gossip about people they knew, or his birthday or Christmas gift. One evening, after my cousin turned 21, his father and uncle took him to a neighborhood tavern, where the two brothers sat quietly discussing in Portuguese the merits of certain female patrons. My cousin figured it never occurred to them that one of the women might also be Portuguese-American, and thus perhaps able to understand their comments if she overheard. He said our relatives rarely discussed their Portuguese origins, except for Grandpa divulging that he was from Flores. Then my cousin recounted a story Grandpa once began telling me long ago, until my mother hustled me away, about how awed he had been as a child by America's vastness when he and his parents rode the train for many days cross-country to California: they had to sit on hard wooden benches, it was cold and the railroad car contained only a pot-belly stove for warmth. On Sundays Grandpa took my cousin to church, though our fathers and Grandma did not go. Beforehand, my cousin would be given a Hershey chocolate bar, whose edges he used for sketching on the back of the next pew, to Grandpa's dismay. Another tradition I never heard of was the annual Holy Ghost Festival, which some of our family attended in Benicia. My cousin described the parade, and sopas simmering in vats over wood fires tended by the men on Saturday night, then served to everyone on crusty bread for Sunday lunch.

I procured my grandmother's death certificate, which listed her and her parents' birthplaces as the Azores. When I disclosed my findings to my aunt, she initially denied my claim, clinging to the "Flemish" fiction and insisting that Grandma was born in San Francisco. Flourishing the certificates, I asked why Grandpa would list their birthplaces as the Azores if it were untrue; she termed him "misinformed." My cousin's admission that he always knew we were Portuguese forced our aunt to recant, but she castigated me for forcing her to betray a family pact made when I was little to kept the truth from me. Despite her tarnished credibility,

our aunt's account jibed with our uncle's long-ago threat to my cousin. She added that they considered claiming to be Swedish before settling on Flemish, for reasons allegedly unknown. Had my father opposed his siblings' deceit, but as the youngest been unable to prevent it? Or did he go along, to his later regret? In retrospect, those incriminating death certificates were so easy to find in my father's house that I wonder if they were his posthumous veto of the cover-up.

I began reading library books and websites about Azorean-Americans, learning that Portuguese who came to America through the 1920s, like other European immigrants of that era, generally assimilated within a couple generations.

E.g.:

- Within one generation, most took Anglo given names.
- Some Portuguese surnames got changed, whether accidentally through misspelling, intentionally through anglicization, or by intermarriage.
- Subsequent generations were usually better-educated and upwardly-mobile;



Figure 1.
 March 1930 Fundraising
 Letter from Topo, São Jorge,
 to Emigrants.

- Like nearly one-third of all American-born adult Catholics, some eventually left their ancestral faith for other religions or became non-religious.²
- An unknowable number concealed their Portugueseness, even from younger relatives.

Among other details, I learned that my mother's recipes for pork chops (marinated like *torresmos*) and watercress soup (*sopa de agrião*) were typical of Flores. Also, I wondered when my father accused me of “reasoning like a Jesuit” for getting too-clever-by-half in our discussions, if he'd picked up the expression from his elders, and that perhaps it dated back to Pombal's 1759 expulsion of the religious order. Due to my burgeoning interest in materials unavailable in English, as well as a dream of tracing my father's family tree in the Azores, four years later I enrolled in Portuguese classes.

A year later, my professor helped translate an old letter found among family papers (Figure 1), written by a committee of leading Topo citizens including two Noronhas, soliciting donations from emigrants to rebuild a road. Googling on village names in the letter yielded the island of São Jorge, so I deduced that my great-grandfather was Jorgense, and wondered if any Noronhas still lived there. I found the website of one in Calheta, so emailed introducing myself. He replied warmly, reporting that his relatives never heard of my great-grandfather, but assumed he was related. After another year of Portuguese I made my first trip to the Azores. My email friend gave me a tour around São Jorge and introduced me to other Noronhas (including the last of his great-uncles); he and his mother hosted two cousins and me for dinner. Another day his father and stepmother drove her cousin and me to Topo, where we saw the home of a Noronha signatory to the 1930 letter. I could not imagine how my young great-grandfather felt about leaving this tiny remote village to go to sea for years, then live in a huge foreign country. On Flores two weeks later I stopped by the Tourism Post, where I mentioned my concealed Azoreanness to the director. Since my maiden name, Fredericks, is not Portuguese and he knew of nobody on Flores with a similar surname, he could not guess at Grandpa's native parish. Then I described the watercress soup my mother made for my father.³ The Tourism director suspected that since watercress grows wild near Fajãzinha, my grandfather might have hailed from around there, so on my island tour I had my driver emphasize Flores' west coast.

Back home, I located long-lost survivors of Grandpa's nephew in California. By phone, his widow said her father-in-law (Grandpa's brother) told her he was baptized João Frederico Henriques, but anglicized it to John Henry Fredericks after

working his way to America on a fishing boat. He did not say which island he was from, so I told her of my Flores visit. She recalled my eldest uncle and his wife, and another uncle and our aunt, but not my cousin's father nor mine. We have since met, and her daughter and I have become friends, even attending a festa together where she ate her first sopas.

On my next Azores trip I scoured Fajãzinha's vital records in the archives at the Horta Public Library. The parish listed João Frederico Henriques' baptism but none for José Henriques, only a José Frederico near Grandpa's age, with apparently the same father but a different mother. In the Angra do Heroísmo archives I located my great-grandfather Noronha's baptismal record: he was born in Topo, São Jorge, to an unwed 16-year-old girl and a pai incógnito. My aunt later claimed that my great-grandfather had been well educated but, rather than be forced to attend university, ran off to sea at 20; I suspect far less appealing options were presented to him, since bastards had few prospects in those days. The only other record of my great-grandfather's mother I could find in the Archives was of her baptism; I still wonder what became of her. One of the Calheta Noronhas I met in 2002 confirmed that his great-grandfather had the same great-grandparents Noronha as did my great-grandfather, making us fifth cousins.

In her last years my aunt finally revealed a little family history. Neither my cousin nor I knew that our great-grandmother had an immigrant bachelor brother who labored on Northern California ranches and would come visit them in Benicia, although our aunt said the siblings inevitably wound up arguing. My cousin located his grave in Benicia's municipal cemetery. Nearby we spotted the Noronha family gravestone, on one side of which were carved the names of two younger daughters we had never known of, ages 1 and 6. In Benicia's Library we scrolled through microfilmed newspapers, finding:

- Articles confirming that our grandparents' house burned in 1919, and two weeks later their second son, age 18, died from a long illness; my cousin was later given his dead uncle's given name as his middle name.
- Our great-grandfather's obituary, which termed him a "pioneer resident" who had come from St. George, Azores, and lived in Benicia for 50 years after a seafaring career that took him around the world (including twice transiting Cape Horn). He worked for 35 years on the *Solano*. I later learned this was the world's largest railroad steamer, able to ferry one freight or two passenger trains at a time across Carquinez Strait between Benicia and Port Costa, up to 52 trains/day. He was long the only Portuguese on the *Solano* crew, working mainly as a deck hand, though in later years as night watchman.

- Great-grandma's obituary, which noted that she was born in the Azores, had lived in recent years with a daughter in Oakland, and that her grandsons served as pallbearers.
United States Census enumerations, ship manifests, voter registrations and other genealogical resources posted on Ancestry.com revealed that:
- In 1872, a mariner named Jose Fredrico (age 22) sailed to the United States from the Azores in steerage. Could this have been the arrival in America of Grandpa's father?
- In 1877, the Noronhas arrived with their three-year-old daughter (Grandma). Another daughter was born in California in 1879, and by 1880 they were settled in Benicia.
- In 1880, in nearby Denverton, Portugal natives Joseph (age 14) and Antone Fredrico (age 12) attended school while living with a farm family from the "Western Islands" (Azores). Joseph was likely my grandfather and Antone a heretofore unknown brother.
- In 1887, California farmer Jose Frederico (age 22) sailed to Boston from the Azores - presumably my grandfather returning from a family visit on the west coast of Flores.
- Five years later, Portuguese laborer Joao Frederico (age 18) arrived in Boston from Flores - probably Grandpa's younger brother immigrating to the United States.



Figure 2. Memento from Fajã Grande, Flores, to Grandpa from his Mother, 1893.

- Among my aunt's effects were an 1893 religious memento (Figure 2) from

Fajã Grande, Flores, to Grandpa from his mother, and an old Benicia IDES [Irmandade do Divino Espírito Santo] dues book listing my great-grandfather as a paid-up member.

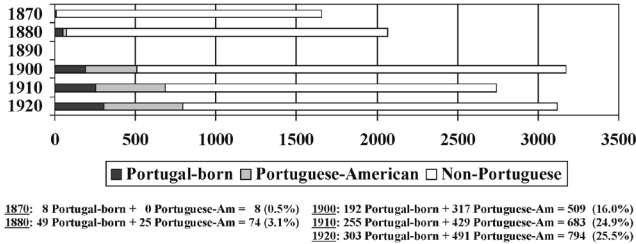


Figure 3. Portuguese Among the Population of Benicia, California, 1870-1920.

Census enumerations from 1870-1920 (Figure 3) scanned and posted on Ancestry.com reveal Benicia’s growth during that period, especially its Portuguese population. In 1870, Benicia had only eight Portuguese; a decade later 74, including the four Noronhas. By 1910 Benicia was nearly 25% of Portuguese origin. Records showed that:

- My grandparents lived next door to my great-grandparents Noronha. This is consistent with my father and aunt recalling that as children they would sit on their grandfather’s porch listening to stories from his seafaring youth how he taught them to count in Chinese, and that they had to move in with the Noronhas after a housefire.
- In 1920, Grandpa (a blacksmith) and his eldest son (a machinist) worked at the Navy Yard in nearby Vallejo, while my cousin’s father was an office clerk. My father had told me that my cousin’s father also drove a cab some evenings, and lost his religion in part due to their priest who, as my uncle’s passenger to Vallejo on Saturday nights, would remove his clerical collar, then spend time at a brothel, replace his collar en route home, and act pious on Sunday. Strangely, my cousin said his father never told him about this.
- All of our immigrant ancestors could read and write, and became American citizens.
- They registered to vote, although Grandma and her mother had to wait for women’s suffrage (1920). My cousin’s and my parents impressed on us the importance of voting.

In 1923 our eldest uncle married; he and his wife remained in Benicia the rest of their lives. My cousin's father found better jobs for himself and Grandpa in Oakland, so my grandparents moved there with their remaining children and bought a house in a non-Portuguese neighborhood near the Berkeley city limits. Oakland public schools were vastly superior to Benicia's. Whereas the eldest sons had attended school only through eighth grade, our youngest uncle graduated from Oakland Technical High School, while our aunt and my father graduated from the prestigious University High (grades 7-12), run in conjunction with the University of California Berkeley School of Education.

In her last years our aunt finally revealed a bit more about our Portugueseness:

- She gave me Grandma's monogrammed SPRSI [Sociedade Portuguesa Rainha Santa Isabel] pin, adding that she and my great-grandmother had belonged, too.
- She said Grandpa's parents had immigrated to Folsom, California (near Sacramento), when he was little, but were unsuccessful so returned to the Azores after a couple years, leaving him behind with another family.
- She described our family's watercress soup recipe (Figure 4), adding that after my widowed great-grandmother came to live with my grandparents in Oakland, she would help Grandma wash watercress while Grandpa thin-sliced potatoes for a big batch. She confirmed that Grandma marinated spare ribs the same way my mother did pork chops. I never used the P-word when asking about recipes though, lest my aunt drop the topic.
- She gave me a packet of letters in Portuguese: one, dated 1928 from the grandfather of the Jorgense Noronhas whom I met, mentioned a recent visit to my great-grandfather in Benicia by the relative whose house I had seen in Topo in 2002. However, most of the letters, dated 1913-38, were written to my great-grandmother from nieces Ana Floripes de Silveira and Maria Mateus Silveira in Ponta da Fajã Grande, Flores.

My mother taught me an adage she said was Grandma's favorite: "You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar." I bought an azulejo I found in the Azores with a similar saying, *Com vinagre não se apanham moscas*, as a reminder of my heritage.

Figure 4. My Family's Flores-style Watercress Soup (Sopa de Agrião)

<u>SOPA DE AGRIÃO FLORENTINA DA FAMÍLIA</u>	<u>FAMILY'S FLORES-STYLE WATERCRESS SOUP</u>
<p><i>1-2 c. de sopa de azeite ou manteiga</i> <i>½ chávena de cebola, descascada e picada</i> <i>1 dente de alho, descascado e picado</i> <i>4 chávenas (quase 1 litro) de água</i> <i>1 molho de agrião, muito bem lavado</i> <i>225 g. de batatas, lavadas e descascadas</i> <i>Sal e pimenta q.b.</i> <i>Pão duro, partido em pedaços</i></p>	<p>1-2 Tablespoons vegetable oil or butter ½ cup onion, peeled and chopped 1 clove garlic, peeled and chopped 4 cups water 1 bunch watercress, washed thoroughly ½ pound potatoes, washed and peeled Salt and pepper to taste Crusty bread, torn in chunks</p>
<p><i>1. Numa panela não-corrosiva de 4 litros, aqueça o azeite (ou a manteiga) em lume brando. Coloque a cebola e o alho nela e cozinhe até ficarem translúcidos.</i></p>	<p>1. In a medium-large non-corrosive saucepan (I use a 4-quart All-Clad pan), sauté the chopped onion and garlic in oil or butter over low heat till translucent.</p>
<p><i>2. Misture na cebola e no alho a água; em seguida ferva.</i></p>	<p>2. Add the water to the onions and garlic, then heat to boiling.</p>
<p><i>3. Enquanto o liquido estiver a aquecer, pique finamente os caules de agrião e corte as batatas em rodelas de 3 mm de espessura; depois de ferver o liquido, mexa-os até cozinhar, cerca de 15-20 minutos. Com um garfo, vá verificando a cozedura da batata – não deverá desintegrar-se.</i></p>	<p>3. While the liquid is heating, finely chop the stems of the watercress and thin-slice the potatoes 1/8" thick; then add them to the boiling liquid and cook till done, about 15-20 minutes. Test by gingerly forking a slice of potato – when pierced, it should not fall apart).</p>
<p><i>4. Tempere com sal e pimenta q.b.</i></p>	<p>4. Season to taste with salt and pepper.</p>
<p><i>5. Sirva a sopa em tigela individual, sobre pedaços de pão.</i></p>	<p>5. Serve the soup in individual bowls, poured over chunks of crusty bread.</p>