

THE PORTUGUESE DAIRYMEN OF LAWRENCE ROAD
SANTA CLARA, CALIFORNIA

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by

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This essay is based on the recollections of Antone D. and Mary Nascimento Simas. Their memories of the Lawrence Station Road Portuguese Dairymen provided the material for the information included here in.

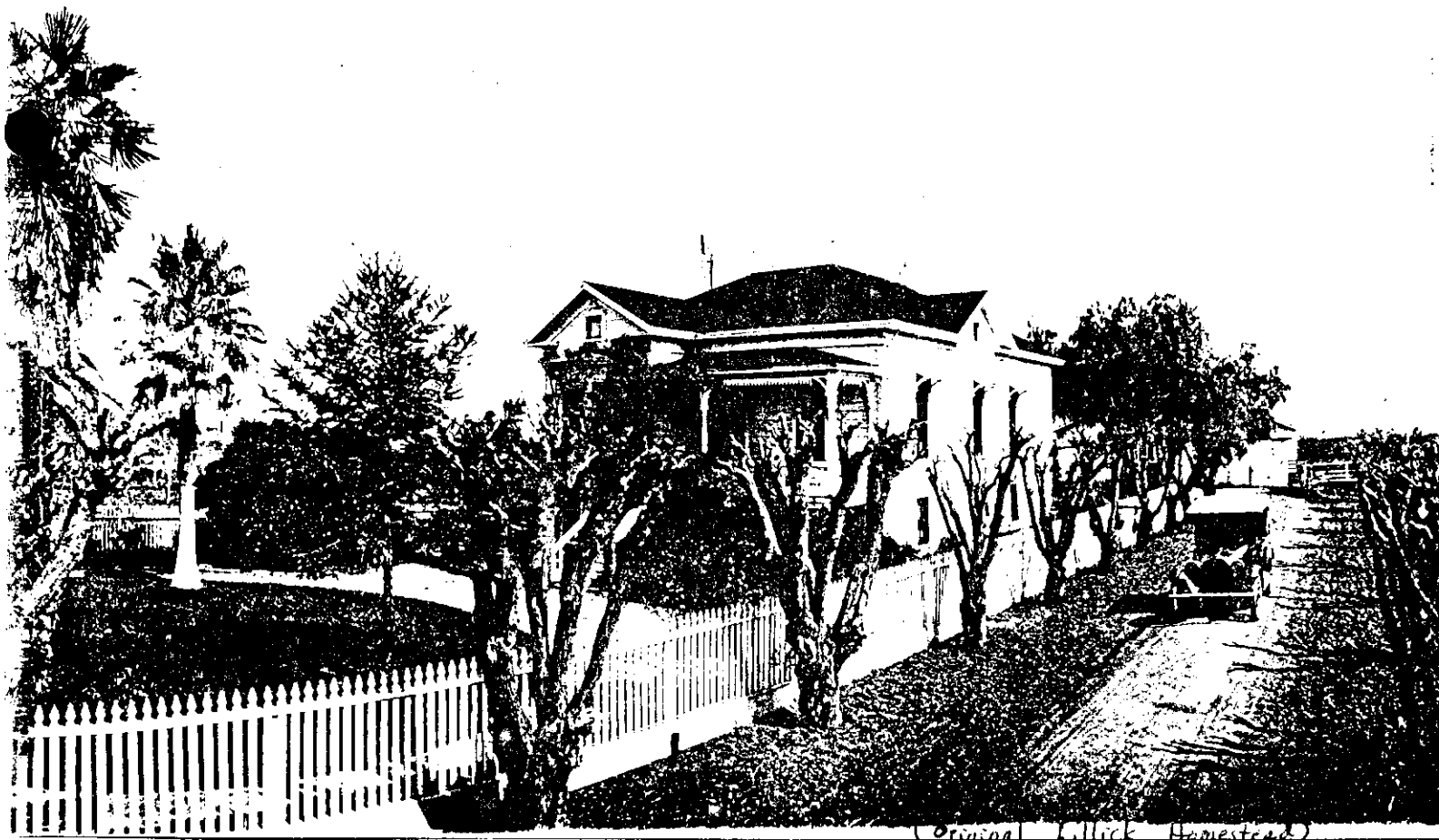
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During the late 1800's Santa Clara County was in the midst of changing from a community inhabited primarily by Mexican and Northern European settlers to a melting pot of a greater variety of nationalities. One particular group that chose to immigrate to this Northern California region was the Portuguese Azoreans. The rugged, isolated Azores Islands, located in the mid-Atlantic Ocean, developed industrious and hard-working people. The poverty and limited opportunities on the islands encouraged many Azoreans to leave their homeland in order to pursue the dream of building a better and more prosperous life in America.

One particular area that attracted many Portuguese immigrants was the section of Lawrence Station Road located between Alviso Bay and the El Camino Real Highway. Upon arriving in the area these hardy islanders initially worked as hired hands on the established ranches, orchards and dairies. They worked long hours at their low paying jobs in order to save money to purchase their own lands. Due to their knowledge of farming and milk production these frugal Portuguese immigrants often ventured into the dairy business. Perhaps they selected the Lawrence Station Road area to establish their first dairies because the lands were relatively inexpensive and the Southern Pacific Railroad and the El Camino Real Highway were very accessible. In addition the climate and terrain found there reminded the Portuguese of their homeland. At the turn of the century Santa Clara was surrounded by vast fields filled with oats, barley and other grasses native to the area. A variety of wild animal life freely roamed the countryside. Here and there the colorful Ring-necked Pheasant and the California Quail dashed about. The long-eared Jack Rabbit could be seen running frantically in search of a safe hide-out. From this scenic alkaline land north of Santa Clara the diligent Portuguese families carved out a livelihood.



(Original Lillick Homestead)

Approximately twenty Portuguese families founded dairies on the seven mile section of Lawrence Station Road situated between the Mt. View-Alviso Road and the El Camino Real Highway. One of the typical Portuguese dairies was established by Antonio A. Nascimento and Jose P. Pombinho. These two Azoreans purchased the forty acre Lillick homestead and transformed it into a Holstein dairy. The acreage was located along the then dirt and gravel Lawrence Road(it was rather common in those days to see a man driving a horse driven wagon loaded with a large wooden barrel filled with water. A sprinkler attachment would send rapid showers of liquid to control the road dust and pack the earthen roadway.) Approaching the two story farm house, built in the late 1800's, the beholder's eyes were overwhelmed by all the "gingerbread" needlessly decorating the exterior. The large hay barn was constructed in a much more practical manner. Its plain wooden exterior did not immediately reveal its usefulness to the farmer. The interior was divided into three main sections: the hay storage area, the animal stalls and the hay loft. In addition to the house and hay barn, the original homestead also included

a large windmill and several other outbuildings. The windmill harnessed the winds and breezes to provide water for household and general farm usage. There always seemed to be enough of a breeze to turn the slanting vanes and send a soft purring sound throughout the farm yard. A fan-shaped tail kept the vanes facing the wind. There was a float mechanism that stopped the pump whenever the large redwood storage tank was filled with water. The whirling and twirling windmill was a functional and charming feature of the farms of yesteryear. To this basic farm Antonio and Jose added milking barns, corrals and outdoor animal feeding stalls. Finally they purchased their first herd of Holstein dairy cows. The Holstein was selected primarily for its consistently high level of milk production. These large-boned black and white cows appeared to have random patchwork quilt patterns stitched to their hides. In spite of their odd appearance the Holsteins were capable of producing 15,000 pounds of milk annually.

Antonio Nascimento and Jose P. Pombinho's life on the dairy was filled with a repetitive daily routine that under closer examination reveals a satisfying work laden life. At the break of each dawn the big red rooster would stretch out his neck, stand on the very tips of his wrinkled toes and utter out a loud, explosive alarm that a new day was about to begin. Hours earlier the dairymen had already tossed aside their bedding (revealing their long John underwear which they wore practically year round) and started preparing for the initial work of the day. Sleepily they doned their denim jeans and faded blue chambray shirts. Pulling up their thick home-made woolen socks and stuffing them into a pair of wooden-soled shoes or rubber boots they groped for their kerosene lanterns. Lantern in hand they would stagger into the cold, dark farm yard. The old shepherd dog would help the dairymen round up the cows. The waiting Holsteins would often toss their black and white heads from side to side and swish

their long tails in anticipation of the morning milking. A few eager cows would open their wide cavernous mouths, exposing rough pink tongues, and call out a welcoming "mooing" sound to the milkers. Quickly guiding the cows into the wondrous barn, with its hand-hewn beams festooned with wisps of hay, the milkers could hear the soft tapping sound of the cow hoofs on the thick wooden plank floor. Overhead spider webs woven in delicate lace patterns obscured the quiet doves hiding on the upper rafters. Each cow automatically went to its accustomed stall and was locked into place. In the winter season the Holsteins were often coated with splashes of mud and manure. The men would carefully hose down the cows to clean them thoroughly. Then with a hand held clippers the dairymen would shave the cow's hind quarters. This was done to keep the cow's bag clean and sanitary.

Immediately the milker grabbed his one-legged milking stool. This basic stool was usually hand-carved out of fig tree wood. The light-weight, yet strong wood yielded a stool that was easily attached to a belt that could be cinched around the milker's waist securing the stool firmly on his buttocks. Milking stool in place the milker would sit at the rear of the cow (near the udder) and the milking ritual would begin. Strong hands would clench the protruding tits and in a regular pumping motion squeeze out the rivulets of milk. The milk would fall rhythmically into a five gallon tin pail held between the milker's knees. Foam, billowing in cotton-like puffs, would ease to the top of the pail. The milker would then take the milk-heavy bucket to a nearby ten gallon can and carefully dump the liquid into the container. The milk cans were usually covered with a cheese cloth strainer in order to filter out any unwanted impurities. The filled milk cans were capped and placed in water-cooled troughs to keep the milk as fresh as possible. Shortly a horse driven cart would take the cans of milk to the train depot to be shipped to San Francisco creameries for distribution. Once a month the dairymen would ride on the train and go to the creamery office to collect a few gold coins as payment for their milk.

After the morning milking (cows had to be milked twice a day, seven days a week!) the dairymen would return to the farm house kitchen for a hearty, home-cooked breakfast. The bulky wood stove was the center of activity. Fragrant eucalyptus wood provided fuel for cooking and also warmed the kitchen. Antonio Nascimento's wife, Rosa, stood over the stove frying a pan of freshly gathered eggs and home-cured bacon. A pot of spicy beans slowly simmered on the back portion of the stove top. Other breakfast items frequently served were buttermilk pancakes, oatmeal mush, fried potatoes, home-made bread topped with freshly churned butter and quince jelly. The entire family would often join the milkers at the kitchen table as they all enjoyed the first meal of the day together. After breakfast the men would return to the barn to clean the milking utensils and to complete other routine chores.

During the summer haying season Antonio Nascimento and Jose P. Pombinho would put on their battered straw hats and hitch up a team of horses to a mowing machine. The horses, men and mower would move across the open fields carefully cutting row upon row of tall grasses. Later a wire-tined buck rake would be used to pull the drying hay into more concise rows. When the hay was almost completely dried Antonio and Jose would use their pitch forks to pile the hay into igloo-shaped mounds. Now the two dairymen would anxiously scan the summer skies in hopes that a brilliant sun would cure the shocks of sweetly scented hay. After the hay was properly dried it was ready to be stored in the barn. A large flat-bedded wagon, pulled by the team of horses, would be taken into the fields to gather up the crop of hay. The men would pick up a forkful of hay and toss it onto the wagon (repeating this process until the wagon was piled high with its precious cargo.) The Nascimento children enjoyed climbing to the top of the hay wagon and pretending to be kings and queens as the wagon was pulled back to the hay storage area. Their merry laughter could be heard as the men began to unload the golden hay using

a gigantic grappling fork suspended by a rope from the main barn beam. The giant steel teeth of the fork bit into the hay and pulled it skyward into the barn where the load was dropped quickly and efficiently.



When hay was not plentiful Antonio Nascimento and his partner would rent a pasture in the La Honda area (approximately twenty-five miles from the Lawrence Road dairy.) The men and boys really had to play cowboys when the cows were moved to the distant grasslands. The "cowboys" walked the herd along the back roads in order to move the animals toward their destination. Leaving at day break; the entourage would head north on Lawrence Road zigging and zagging onto Evelyn Street in the Sunmyvale area, twisting through the streets of Mt. View until they were able to cross the El Camino Real Highway. Arriving at the lush green fields of the rented pasture lands the men and boys would feel exhausted but satisfied that their trek would provide food for their prized animals.

The Portuguese dairy families were quite religious. They almost all adhered to the Catholic faith of their forefathers. Sunday mass was faithfully attended each week. A uniquely Portuguese religious celebration was the annual Holy Ghost Fiesta. Portuguese societies such as the Sociedad de Espirto Santo(S.E.S.) were formed to preserve and retain the centuries old custom of honoring a thirteenth century queen(St. Isabel). Traditionally a young Portuguese girl would be selected to be queen of the local festival. The dairy families would donate beef cattle for

Nascimento-Pombinho
Dairy



Antonio Nascimento
and Children
John Nascimento
Tony Nascimento
Mary Simas Nascimento
Manuel Nascimento



Portuguese Fiesta
1922



a free lunch of sopas e carne(meat and beef broth was served over slices of thick bread garnished with sprigs of fresh mint.) Often the donation of a cow was the result of a promise between the farmer and God. The promises were usually based on the fulfillment of a desire for a healthy and prosperous year. The proud and pious Portuguese families living on Lawrence Road enjoyed participating in the solemn religious procession and mass. Immediately following the religious ceremonies everyone enjoyed feasting, dancing and other typically Portuguese forms of entertainment.

This glimpse into the lives of the Portuguese dairymen serves as a means of highlighting an almost unrecognized segment of loyal citizens. Their relatively uneventful lives provided a sense of stability to their families and community. In recognizing the early pioneers in the dairy industry we acknowledge their contributions to the growth and development of Santa Clara County.

Early Portuguese Dairymen of Lawrence Road:

Antonio Nascimento
Jose P. Pombinho
Joaquin Silvera
Joseph Faria
Frank Faria
Joseph Silva
John Brazil

Antone Silvera
Frank Machado
Manuel Machado
Alfred Machado
Manuel Freitas
Joaquin Freitas
Manuel de Simas

John Texiera
John Nascimento
Joe Moniz
John Baptista
Frank Dutra
Joe Dutra
and others