



Nancy Mullen

I moved to the Fall River area in 1982 when I was 25 and single. I was from Arkansas, but had been working in Brazil with missionaries just before that. Someone while I was there made me aware of the great Portuguese influence in the Northeast of the US, but especially in the South Coast area. I was very intrigued and decided I would move up here after my work visa expired in Brazil so I could continue to speak and remember the Portuguese I'd learned in college and from working in South America. Living next to the ocean was an education. I was driving between New Bedford and Fairhaven and the first couple of weeks I arrived, I was going over the Route 6 bridge between New Bedford and Fairhaven and I noticed flashing red lights. I thought, "Must be the police or the firemen," so I pulled over and parked on the bridge and waited and waited and no vehicle came by. Finally, a man appeared from somewhere on the bridge shouting, "You idiot! Get off the bridge. It's about to open."

Well I went job-hunting. It was hard even though I spoke three languages and had a college degree. The area was rather economically depressed. A couple of people I interviewed with expressed amazement. They said, "You moved to Fall River on purpose?" It was kind of sad. It showed the lack of pride people had in the community. I had never seen anything in the South like the Fall River Granite Mills surrounded by [inaudible 00:01:43] family tenement houses. I learned that that was because the mills and homes were built before the age of automobiles and people had to live close to their workplace. The tall tenements packed in more workers in a smaller space. I used to go to a grocery store next to Maplewood Park which nowadays has been taken over by Seabra. At the checkout line on the wall, there were instructions about various means of payment and I think they were written in at least five or more languages: Portuguese, Spanish, several Eastern European languages, and maybe Cambodian. That really brought home to me the melting pot of ethnicities in the area.

I also discovered at Heritage Park on the Waterfront this great multimedia slideshow and oral histories which explained a lot about how the South Coast became a magnet for immigrants in the mid-1800s and early 1900s. I had met a Portuguese American girl my age at church and she proposed we shared an apartment. We had a second-floor two-bedroom apartment with a balcony on East Main Street. We paid \$18 a week for rent. That was \$9 each. Carmelia had been born in Sao Miguel Azores. I asked her if she spoke Portuguese. She said no. When she realized I could speak fluent Portuguese, she took me home to a family dinner with her parents and 12 siblings. All the Reposos were speaking a combination of English and Portuguese except for all the older ones who preferred Portuguese. "Why did you tell me you didn't speak Portuguese," I asked. Carmelia explained that she always distanced herself from her Portuguese background because kids in school would tease her and call her a greenhorn.

I was impressed by the legacy of the Portuguese immigrants, their hard work. They buy up wrecked properties and rehab them and their beautiful yards. They just made every neighborhood clean and beautiful. Afterwards, Carmelia and I moved to Pitman Street on the east side of Fall River. On our street, just about every house had a Portuguese flag flying and their yards were neat and well-landscaped. This apartment cost \$38 a week, but had been newly rehabbed. The yard was a mess because all the other apartments were being worked on and the landlord lived in New Bedford. So we asked Mr. Margherita if it'd be okay to fix up the yard and do some gardening. He said sure so he let us prop up the falling grape arbors and put flowers in front, pull the weeds, and it was funny. All of a sudden, all of our neighbors decided we were okay. They had been unfriendly before, but I guess because we were doing the kind of thing they would do with their property, they became friendlier and they approved the tidier look of our building.

One thing that was cool about Pitman Street is that one of the Portuguese festivals, they would decorate the street with flower petals with all kinds of designs and then have a big parade over it, blocking off the street. It was amazing. Another thing that happened while we lived on Pitman Street, that huge old Notre Dame church burned



common
ground
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new bedford
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down. We heard that a spark from a soldering gun during some work being done had started it. I came home from work to find the police blocking all the streets in that area off of Eastern Avenue and I begged them to let me through because I lived there. So they did. They permitted me to pass, but flaming debris was floating through the air, coming about half a mile from the church building. I was really afraid the roof of our two-floor apartment building would catch fire. I called my landlord and asked, "Should I hose down the roof if it's possible?" I think we tried. Fortunately, nothing caught fire. It was sad to see such a large, beautiful landmark disappear. You used to be able to see it on the horizon coming from New Bedford.

In the next couple of years, the Kerr Mill on Watuppa Pond caught fire and the flames were just enormous. They were about three stories above the roof. It was so hot that it melted some of the vinyl siding on houses on McGowan Street where we had friends which was about half a mile from that building on the other side of I-195. I ended up marrying a Somerset guy in 1983. Our sons went to Carroll Annex School which received the Cambodian immigrant children at the time that didn't speak English yet and they needed to improve their English before going to a school that might be closer to their house. They had some Cambodian teachers who would teach in English, and even my kids who were English-speaking got to learn to count to 10 in Mon-Khmer, their language, and we celebrated Asian New Year. It was a lot of fun for them.

Bristol Community College graduation ceremony, we had seen one of the male Cambodian elementary teachers get his degree and give a speech. He told all about living through the war growing up, fleeing in the jungle, walking for months 'til he reached a safe country, and later getting sent to the US. It was fascinating, but sad. One comment I never forgot, he said, "You don't understand how excited I am to graduate. Old people don't go to school in my country." The man was only about 26 years old. To be considered old at 26 said volumes about what the war was like in Cambodia. I don't remember when I heard a person complaining about all the immigrants coming in and doing well, better than people born here. I didn't feel bad about it at all. I admired people that were willing to come and work hard and then be rewarded by achieving the American dream. There were folks in the community that were content to sit back and live off government assistance and they might have improved their situation if they had put in as much effort as some of the immigrants.

I've lived in New England for about 40 years now. My husband and I, one thing we did is got very involved with foreign students at the University of Massachusetts, kind of adopting them so to speak while they're in the US. That's been an education for us to have young people from Africa and Asia, Christian, atheist, Muslim, Communist or free countries around our table. Our sons have learned, I hope, that there are nice people from all works of life. They're pretty much like us. They have sense of humor. They need loving on even though they're young adults. We've really, really enjoyed that.

I guess the last thing, another thing I continue to enjoy after 40 years is the rich history in this area. It's amazing after living in the South to be able to visit places that have to do with the roots of American history. So that's never gotten old for me. I've really enjoyed living in New England and I don't expect to ever go back down South.