

A Story of Portuguese Immigrants in Toronto and a Yellow School Bus
'Apanhar Minhoca'

Stories gathered by Ralph Blank, U of T (PRT252 – Portuguese Island Culture)

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*"I heard the streets were paved with gold. When I got here, I found out three things:
First, the streets weren't paved with gold,
Second, some streets weren't paved at all,
Third, I was expected to pave them."*

Anonymous Immigrant

From Pico Island to Canada

This story is set in Southern Ontario, focused on one Portuguese immigrant family that came from the Azores Islands in 1960. Once they landed in Ontario from Pico Island, the family was placed in North Bay where they found out what hunger felt like for the first time. Previously on Pico Island the family ate fish, dairy, potatoes, and the fruits of the subtropical island. Everyone in the family had to work long hours of subsistence farming, or the dangerous work of harvesting the sea. Since ocean fish and seasonal fruit were plentiful, hunger was something that was unfamiliar, and hungry stomachs immediately after landing in Canada caused the father to long for the Azores Islands.

Worm picking business

Later in 1960 the family was moved to Newmarket Ontario where they settled as farm helpers. The following year, they moved to Toronto and worked for a worm picking manager named Picardo, and over a number of years travelled around Ontario and Quebec from May to October, temporarily settling in various communities to pick worms while residing for the

winters in Toronto. Over those first years in Canada, the months from November to April would find the father as a construction labourer while the mother cleaned houses. With the parents on the Canadian treadmill of working long hours and sleeping when the time allowed, the children found adult guidance within Toronto's Kensington Market Portuguese community and St. Christopher House.

By the mid-1960s the father was managing his own worm picking business in Toronto with the pickers coming from both the Azores Islands and the Portuguese mainland. As Portuguese immigrants came to Toronto, they looked for work right away so they could pay their rent. Many would follow the directions to the new worm picking manager's house on Wales Avenue in the Kensington Market district of Toronto.

Barulho entrepreneurship

'Go to the house where you see an old 'Christie' bread van sitting on the street. Knock on the door, and ask for *Barulho*.' That was the father's Azorean nickname. 'You can make money in Canada starting tonight.' *Barulho* would readily take in new workers right off the plane; he did not want others to go hungry like his family's experience when they first landed in Canada.

During the months of April to October, *Barulho* would start out in the early evening to pick up his crew of up to twenty people. He would pick them up at their homes, which caused people to want to crew for such a manager, versus other managers who wanted to pick up their workers at a specific location such as a street corner. In the early years the first vehicle being used was an old 'Christie' bread van to transport the workers, then a white Ford Galaxy station

wagon, then a yellow school bus which had a capacity of up to fifty people. Seat belt requirements did not exist in the 1960s to ensure the safe transport of the workers. This would have tragic consequences in the future.

A crew of twenty would typically be fifteen women and five men. It was not unusual for the Portuguese women to take care of their pre-school children and the house during the day while the husband worked, typically in construction or in a factory. After the husband came home in the evening, she could go out to pick worms at night, while the husband would be at home with the children. If the children were older and in school during the day, a Portuguese woman would clean a few houses during the daylight hours. Sleep was found when the opportunity was there, either in naps during the day, or during the long drive to the golf course during the evening, or on the return trip back to Toronto during the early morning. The groups of pickers were usually two or three friends or family members, mostly people who were in their thirties and forties.

When picking worms at the golf course, the pickers would only stay on the fairways to gather the worms, so the finely manicured golf greens would not be damaged. The pickers quickly found no incentive to go on the golf greens because the worms would not go there since these areas were highly fertilized, and sprayed with weed killer. As of today, the worm pickers have not shown any adverse health effects from their work since they stayed away from the greens. The worm picker's attire consisted of warm clothing, rubber boots, and a hat with a small flashlight on the top to see the ground and the worms. A one quart 'Allan's' juice can opened at the top was strapped to each rubber boot. One can could hold around 500 worms. A smaller

container of sawdust was also strapped on to the picker so they could dip their fingers into the sawdust to grab onto the slippery worm. The picker would walk slowly hunched over and reach down to retrieve the worms and place them in the cans. But, picking a worm from the ground was not as simple as just reaching down and dropping it into a can. Dexterity and finesse was required or the worm would be ripped in half. One end of the worm would be grabbed, raised slightly off the ground and pulled taut on an angle so the rest of the worm would slide smoothly out of the worm hole. On an excellent night, a picker could gather up to 15,000 worms, but on average over the year, about 3,500 worms would be gathered per person in one night. During the dry summer months, about 2,500 worms per person would be a normal night's work for one individual. But this amount could be higher if the fairways were being watered on a regular basis.

Other people from the Kensington Market neighbourhood who did not go to the golf course knew that if they left boxes full of worms in the vestibule by *Barulho's* front door on Wales Avenue, they would get paid for their efforts. Rather than going out for the entire night, these people would gather worms for a few hours from other locations such as local parks. If people wanted to pick locally they would first get the wooden one square foot boxes from *Barulho*, before setting out on their hunt. Some were not concerned where they trod, and at times were chased off the lawns of private residences when the startled homeowners saw small flashlights moving back and forth on their grass lawns. Obviously these efforts would not be as substantial as working a golf course, but it did provide some pocket money. For many immigrants, every penny did make a difference for the benefit of the household.

Barulho ran the operation as an independent businessman. Starting in the mid-1960s, he would sell the worms to the wholesaler Jonathan <Barker> Worm Live Bait at Dufferin Street and Steeles Avenue, but in later years <Bob> Conroy Live Bait at Gladstone Avenue and Queen Street paid 25 cents more per box of worms to *Barulho*, so then he moved his business to Conroy. It was also helpful that Conroy was closer to Kensington Market. On a daily basis, the extra drive to Steeles Avenue was time lost when trying to catch up on sleep.

A worm picker manager would have to buy the access rights for his crews to pick on a golf course from sundown to sunrise, and he was responsible for the golf course not being damaged. To save money, some other worm picking managers would try to share a golf course between their crews, but this led to arguments among the pickers from the different crews. The best arrangement was the manager having the sole access to a golf course for his own pickers, and this is what *Barulho* accomplished. During the April to October worm picking seasons he had agreements with up to eight separate golf courses, some as far away as Belleville. Forty years ago the rental agreement with the Bowmanville golf course on Taunton Road was \$900 for the season. If the people and the worms were available, he could have up to three crews of twenty people each on a golf course in an evening. However, the Bowmanville golf course was difficult to find crews willing to work there since on one occasion people thought they had seen UFOs at that golf course. Many Portuguese did not want to go back, and ironically it was the biggest and toughest Portuguese men who were the most terrified. The UFO sighting had been on a foggy night, and perhaps the lights and noise from nearby farms could play tricks on the sleep deprived people in the middle of the night. One person still to this day continues to be plagued by the experience.

During a typical evening the pickers would fill their one quart cans and return them to the manager who would place the worms into one square foot wooden boxes that were 1 ½ " deep. When properly filled, a box would hold the required 500 worms, which a picker would get paid \$1.25. The sprinkling of sawdust like salt on top of the worms would prevent them from crawling out of the box. Later in the day the boxes would be delivered to Conroy or Jonathan Live Bait. Here the wholesaler could tell by looking at the box if enough worms were there or if the worms had to be counted out individually since the picker did not gather the required 500 worms per box. Once the box was accepted, dirt would be put into the box so the healthy worms would go down into the dirt, but the dying ones would stay on top. Then the box would go into a fridge, awaiting shipment typically to the USA, such as Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, or Pennsylvania. In 2010 prices the wholesaler would receive \$16 per thousand worms, and the retailer would sell a dozen worms for \$4.50 to recreational fishermen. The worm prices would fluctuate because in the summer months, the dry weather would create a scarcity of worms that could be picked.

As the night's work continued, the groups of people in twos and threes would chat and gossip among themselves. The women would first concentrate and diligently count 500 worms into a can. Then seeing the height of the worms in the can, they would use that as the line of measurement for 500 worms in a can for the rest of the night. This would be problematic since in the early hours of the evening, smaller worms would come out, but later in the evening, the bigger and fatter worms would appear and be placed into the cans. This caused accounting problems since payment was based on the quantity of worms, not the size of the worms.

Although tiny worms would not be accepted, big fat worms twice the normal size would still be

counted only as one worm. Since the boxes were numbered, and each picker had those numbers assigned to them, money would be deducted from the pay of those pickers whose boxes were noted by the wholesaler as being short of the required 500 worms. To pass the time while picking worms, the conversations would focus on the many social events of the local Portuguese community. Some of those future events were arranged by *Barulho* who would on occasion gather the workers and their families together on the yellow school bus, and drive them as a group to the Espirito Santo (Holy Spirit) festival in Oakville, or for Sunday BBQs to Woodbine Beach, where he would contribute the meat for the meal.

Throughout the years of worm picking, stories were gathered that are funny today, but were not so humorous at the time. One of those stories that was remembered dealt with the wife arguing with her husband while he was driving the car in the golf course towards where the worm pickers were working. She was directing him as to how far to park the station wagon from the edge of a creek. Once they parked, he got out of the driver's side door, with his wife sliding on the bench seat towards the open door. However, he had not set the car's brake properly, and the car with the wife still in it, began slowly rolling towards the creek. Frantically, the conversation of where to park changed to him telling his wife to push the brake pedal.

Unfortunately she had never learned how to drive and did not understand how the car's braking system operated. With the dialogue between the two now in an elevated tone, the car with her still in the front seat slowly rolled into the one foot deep water of the creek. Another story found a young Azorean man on a golf course the night after he landed in Canada. On one of the golf course fairways his friends found him in great distress in the middle of the night. He had wandered off from the group for only just a few minutes, and he told his friends that he

saw a large black cat with a white strip on its back, and since he never seen such an animal in the Azores, he decided to follow it. Now standing downwind of their unfortunate friend, they quickly understood what he had encountered. The morning trip on the yellow school bus back to Toronto was not pleasant for all involved. Since *doninhas* are not known in the Azores, one of his first learned English language words was *skunk*.

Children of worm pickers and schooling

The transient nature of the worm picking business in the early years did have an effect on the future educational opportunities of *Barulho's* children. In the early 1960s when the family followed their work locations with Picardo, the children were enrolled during the winter months in a Toronto elementary school. The beginning of the warm weather in May would find the children pulled out of school and transferred to a new school in a different city for the remainder of the school year. In 1961, the first summer found the family in Ottawa, and in subsequent years they lived in Montreal twice, and Kingston twice. Over those years the months of May and June would find the children in a new school in Ottawa, Montreal or Kingston. The children at the age of eight to twelve years old would go to school during the day and afterwards go to the golf course with the parents in the evening to pick worms until midnight. Then they would go back to the vehicle to sleep as best they could until they would be driven back to the apartment to wash up for school the next morning. Today as adults the siblings recounted their earliest memories on golf courses as children when they were five and seven years old. They remembered how they would work together to build a little shelter out of the empty worm boxes to keep the night dew off themselves. They would use the little

shelter to rest inside when they were not required to bring more worm boxes to their parents for filling. At midnight when the children went back to the car to sleep, the adults would continue picking worms until sunrise. There was no attention by the parents towards homework or the need for a comfortable sleep in order to be refreshed in the morning and be able to focus on the lessons from the school teacher. Added to the children's burden was the physical and emotional bullying at their temporary schools, and being ostracized as 'low class Portuguese worm pickers'. The summer months of July and August gave no relief as there was now an expectation of full time work. When September came, the school attendance pattern returned to the temporary school with worm picking until midnight, which ended when the golf courses closed in October, and they returned in November to their school in Toronto.

In 1965 the father started his own worm picking business from his house in Kensington Market of Toronto, and the children were expected to participate. At least the transient nature of the work ended, but the stigma the children felt of being ostracized by other school children as 'low class Portuguese worm pickers' remained. In 1969 a third child was born, the first new born child in Canada. During the hours when the eldest daughter was not in school, she was given the responsibility of caring for her little sister while her mother continued to work. Family commitments trumped any school activities or homework assignments for the 14 year old girl.

Prejudice in the 1960s

1969 was also a year of near tragedy as the old 'Christie' bread van was wrecked in a head on collision with a drunk driver. The young son was now 12 years old, and was sitting in the passenger seat beside the father one night when a drunk driver drove into their lane. From the

impact of the collision, the son was flung out of the window and the hot radiator fluid spilt out and severely burned his arm. In the hospital the drunk driver and his passenger had also been transported to the emergency room, laughing and giggling at the victims of their actions. The doctor told the father that his son's arm was so badly burned that it would have to be amputated, and to immediately sign the consent form that was thrust at him. Fortunately he refused, and in the morning another doctor called in a children's burn specialist from Boston who was able to save the arm after numerous operations and painful rehabilitation. The drunk driver received no criminal punishment for his actions. Canada as a country to live in continued to sour in the minds of the parents of this Portuguese family. The open Atlantic Ocean surrounding Pico Island continued to beckon the family to return.

As time went by, the two older children entered into the Toronto high school system. A consequence of the lack of sleep due to worm picking were poor school grades and subsequent placement into a vocational high school. This was viewed favourably by the parents since education was not considered as a good thing; it interfered with the children contributing value to the household. Also, at that time the vocational schools were segregated by gender. The Azorean values of the parents embraced the idea that the eldest daughter would be going to an all girls' school since this would reduce the possibility of the *shameful* Canadian behaviour of dating. Boys could do what they wanted, but the parents did not want to be the recipients of gossip about their respectable daughter. Unfortunately, being registered at a vocational high school was now another social stigma piled on top of the worm picker taunts. Teenagers more academically inclined viewed such students as less intelligent if one was destined to a vocational school. The embarrassments would continue as the yellow worm picking school bus

was used to drop the daughter and her girlfriend off at the Toronto vocational school. The young girls would plead to be dropped off a block away, so the other school kids would not tease them about being worm pickers. By the early 1970s, the two older children graduated from high school, and successfully entered the Toronto workforce.

Return to the home country

The focus for the parents of this family was to return to Pico Island, which the parents finally did in 1975. They returned with their youngest daughter, after seeing their son married in Toronto to a recently arrived Pico Island woman, and coercing their eldest daughter to marry a Portuguese immigrant living in Toronto. The yellow school bus was sold to another Portuguese family; however, the new owners did not ask how to maintain the bus. The following winter froze the engine and wrecked it. That was the end to the worm picking travels of the yellow school bus.

Conclusion

Azorean immigrant parents did not have positive role models from their homeland regarding education. The Portuguese dictator Salazar made the comment of the Portuguese peasant not needing education to be happy, and they should return to their fields with hoes and spades. Azorean education in 1970 consisted of four years of school, and the University of the Azores was not founded until 1976, after the fall of the dictatorship. Azoreans knew how to work very hard, and sacrifice their personal ambitions for the benefit of the family. Men were responsible to be providers for the family, and mothers and daughters were subservient in the patriarchal

society. Some Portuguese immigrant parents that came from a subsistence, peasant like environment, could not believe their Canadianized children could aspire for other goals. Other immigrant parents may have seen the possibilities but were exhausted on the treadmill of immigrant life that focused on nothing else other than paying the rent and buying food. There was a small number of other Portuguese immigrants, who had been educated prior to coming to Canada, and envisioned a different future for their family in Canada.

The two young Azorean children from Pico Island who immigrated in 1960 endured their childhood years in Canada in less than favourable conditions. However, their early hardships together had developed a resilience in their individual characters that allowed them to persevere through the inevitable turmoil of life, and created a durable, lasting bond as siblings.