

Unknown influences on the West Coast brought by Joe Silvey

Growing up in a small town on Vancouver Island I would frequently pass a store that sells fish called “Portuguese Joe’s”. I never thought anything of it as I knew it was a Portuguese family that owned it. It wasn’t until I would learn in the PRT252 course “Portuguese Island Culture” at U f T about Joe Silvey, who was the first Portuguese man to come to the west coast of Canada that a light bulb off in my head. Not only was he Portuguese, he was Azorean. Joe with his experience in whaling brought fishing to the west coast and taught the indigenous people how to fish using modern techniques at the time including the use of the seine net. Fishing is still one of the main industries on the west coast, some of the credit for the industry has to be given to Joe Silvey. After learning about him, when I went home and asked people from my family because I come from a family of fishermen if anyone had ever heard of Portuguese Joe, Joe Silvey, they all said no. I would like to explore in the essay the influences that Joe Silvey had on the west coast that go unnoticed still to this day.

Joe Silvey left the island of Pico in the Azores at an early age onboard a whaling ship. The tough economic times in the Azores saw many Azoreans leaving the islands in search of a better life elsewhere. Although being able to escape the hardships of life in the Azores, whaling was not an easy job, Joe’s father and brother died on board their ship (Barman, 2004, 12). Many sailors jumped ship because of the tough working conditions and low pay. Joe did this along with five other Portuguese men when their ship had reached Vancouver (Barman, 2004, 13). The exact date of this is unknown but records state sometime around 1860. Joe would be

welcomed by the indigenous tribe he encountered on the banks of the Fraser River and marry the Chiefs daughter (Barman, 2004, 17). Joe began to settle down with his wife, he fished to make an income and on March 23rd 1867 he became the first Portuguese man to receive British citizenship (Barman, 2004, 19).

Joe lived with his wife and children in Gastown on Burrard inlet. During the fishing offseason he opened a saloon in Gastown called Hole-in-the-Wall (Barman, 2004, 27). Another Portuguese man from Madeira named Gregorio Fernandez owned and operated a general foods store in Gastown across the street from Joe's Hole-in-the-Wall saloon (Barman, 2004, 27). Gastown was the first part of what is now Downtown Vancouver to be built and settled in the 19th century and two of the first business owners in the city were Portuguese immigrants.

Joe Silvey became the first fisherman in British Columbia to own a seine net licence (Barman, 2004, 33). He is seen as the pioneer of the seine net fishing industry in British Columbia, this is a method of fishing that is still used today. He was able to make a good wage catching dogfish and selling the oil to coal mines. He was able to prove that fishing was viable occupation and today fishing is very much an important industry to British Columbia, especially Vancouver Island. A report by Simon Fraser University states that the fishing industry is the fourth largest primary industry within British Columbia.

Joe and his family began to be discriminated against by the British migrants who began to populate the area when they were living in what is now Stanley Park in Vancouver, so he

moved his family to a small island called Reid Island in the Strait of Georgia close to Vancouver Island. I believe that Joe's Azorinity, a term created by Azorean writer Vitorino Nemésio, helped him become the successful man he became (Moss, 2002, 477). Azorinity is a concept that refers to the mindset of people from the Azores because of the isolation of the islands and the physical characteristics such as the frequent earthquakes and storms. Joe did not let the difficulties he encountered in life hold him back, he was able to overcome any situation, adapt to change and provide for his family.

In recent years there has been more awareness made about Portuguese Joe, thanks to the book "The Remarkable Adventures of Portuguese Joe Silvey" written by Jean Barman in 2004 and the documentary "Portuguese Joe: The Forgotten Pioneer" made in 2010 by Bill Moniz and last year a statue was erected in Stanley Park to honour Joe Silvey (InsideVancouver). However, I do not think enough is being done to honour him, I feel ashamed being from Vancouver Island and not knowing about Joe Silvey until I took this course. I think his contributions alone to the fishing industry in British Columbia have helped it become what it is today and he should be seen more as a pioneer for British Columbia. Learning about Joe Silvey makes me wonder how many other immigrants there were like him that jumped ship and helped contribute to society on the west coast but have gone unknown.

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