

## Old House Tells a Story

by John A. DeMello

It's funny how things start off in one direction and then come around from another angle. I had been looking into my DeMello – Morra family histories. In particular I was curious how my immigrant parents had handled adversity, picked themselves up, raised a large family, and succeeded in business after having lost their home and a rental property they were having built. I was successful in finding this

information, continued researching the DeMello (or de mello) ancestors in the Azores back to 1540, but it wasn't until reading Frederick V. Lawrence's own family history in the Summer 2008 *Spritsail* that I learned he and I shared some information about his grandfather, Solomon H. Lawrence's, home in Tearicker.



Former home of Solomon H. Lawrence, remodeled by Alphonse DeMello.

Frederick V. Lawrence wrote that his father, Sidney W. Lawrence, was the son of Solomon H. Lawrence who had a large dairy farm in Teaticket and lived in the large Victorian house where Dr. Lee's Walk-in Clinic is today. After Solomon died in 1901, Sidney W. Lawrence ran the dairy business with his mother, Mary Abbie Childs Lawrence, and lived in this same house. Mrs. Lawrence must have continued to live there until her death in 1912. In 1916 Sidney Lawrence, as executor, sold the property to Charles R. Crane. Mr. Crane used the barn as an adjunct to his Coonamessett Ranch Co., according to *The Book of Falmouth*, and before 1928 Milton Gray ran a poultry farm there. I'm not sure what took place on the property between 1928 and 1937 when my parents purchased it.

My father, Alphonse, arrived in this country from Sao Miguel in the Azores with his mother, one sister, and two brothers in 1894. His father and older brothers had come over earlier. He was nine when they arrived. By age sixteen he was working in New Bedford at an entry-level job in a cotton mill. He was a "doffer," one who changes the bobbins as they fill with thread and replaces them with empty spools. I'm told this job is only slightly above that of a janitor in a mill. However, it allowed him to live on his own in a boarding house on Hiawatha Street.

By 1910 he moved to Falmouth and became a farm laborer and later a carpenter. Farming was always a love and, like most Portuguese, he always had a garden or farm in addition to his main job. He

obtained a mortgage to purchase some land and built a home in 1912. This property he sold in 1919, at the same time T. Lawrence Swift's Falmouth Land Co. was developing the Teaticket end of Maravista Ave. Barnstable County Registry of Deeds shows Alphonse purchased and sold several lots in that area. In the early 1920s, he worked with a man, Antone Barboza, who had a grocery store/bar, and the grocery business seems to have interested my father. Also of inter-

est was a young lady by the name of Mary Motta, and they married in 1923.

When 1926-27 brought prosperity, Alphonse built his growing family a two-story home at 16 Maravista Ave. When my parents were having a two-story rental property built next door, the builder went to my mother and said Alphonse had told him she was to give him the money owed for the work that had been completed; she paid in cash. He later claimed he never received it and took them to court. Because they had to pay him a second time, they had no money to pay the mortgage and foreclosure followed. In the late summer of 1932, my parents and five small children were homeless. A kindly neighbor let them live in a picker shed behind their barn. By

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fall the family was able to rent a house with a storefront, and thus began their first grocery store. As that became successful, a baker bought that property and my folks moved to another rental property near Trotting Park Rd. When history repeated itself and that property was sold, my father looked for land they could purchase in the area to build a store and home for his family of six children.

The land across the street was the former Solomon H. Lawrence property and was available, but Charles R. Crane who now owned it would only sell all forty acres containing a large Victorian house and barn(s). Tired of renting and having the properties sold out from under them, my father agreed to purchase it. My mother thought misfortune might follow and was not a happy person. None-the-less, he must have convinced her because on December 10, 1937, they purchased the whole property. A year later their grocery store and house had been built at 273 Main Street, Teaticket. The acreage gave Alphonse plenty of space to farm while Mary tended the store and their family. As time progressed, he built two rental houses on part of the property, and sold off a lot to a relative to build a service station. He had cows, horses, pigs, chickens, and, of course, strawberry fields. The property was located across the street from Trotting Park Rd, went northerly to William Lawrence's property (across from the Teaticket Elementary School, now the School Administration Building), then easterly to Perch Pond, southerly by what is now the playground side of the Teaticket Elementary School and westerly back along the property that is now McDonald's. Sleepy's mattress store is now located in the store my father built. Some of the timbers in the basement came from Solomon Lawrence's barn. They have the holes from the original mortise and tendon construction.



Alphonse and Mary DeMello on their wedding day, with their attendants Mr. & Mrs. Manuel Medeiros.

I didn't know much about the history of the large, three-floored, Victorian house located on my parent's property until I read about it in *Falmouth-by-the-Sea* as reprinted by the Falmouth Chamber of Commerce in 1973. In the original book, published in 1896, the author says it was Solomon H. Lawrence's new home and he raised fruits and vegetables and sold them on the road. I remember when I was six years old, my mother was going to take me to the Teaticket Elementary School to register me for school, and I waited for her in the Victorian house where my father was remodeling it into a two story, two-apartment building. He had already removed many of the deep-gabled roofs and some of the rear porches.

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The replaced roof became a plain hip roof, and the building became square sided. The large wraparound porch in the front was left in the position where it was originally. Frederick V. Lawrence has recollections of his grandmother's large tin bathtub with mahogany trim; I recall seeing the same bathtub after my father removed it while remodeling. Dr. Lee added the addition on the left side of the building when he turned it into his walk-in clinic.

In *Falmouth-by-the Sea*, page 86, one can see a copper roof ornament on a peaked roof tower room to the side of the house. My father kept that ornament in the basement of his home, and after my mother sold the property, I kept it, and it now sits in the garden of our present home.

As described in the Summer 2008 *Spritsail* article, Sidney Lawrence's move to Woods Hole was the story of many who owned the beautiful Victorian, Colonial, and Greek Revival ship's captain's houses in Teaticket and moved away. They were looking for waterfront homes or better neighborhoods, whereas the immigrants who took their places were looking for farmable land and houses sufficient enough for their large families. Being near the water was not a consideration for the immigrants; this land had been

farmland, and that's what attracted them. History was repeating itself, just with different players.

The flourishing strawberry industry during the 1940s and 50s enabled many of these new owners to thrive and prosper. In the 60s and 70s, many of them in turn sold their homes and properties to enterprising builders and developers who saw Main Street, Teaticket, as a the new growth area. The sellers moved into newly developed housing areas with less trafficked roads. The incoming buyers had probably sold their homes elsewhere in search of a better place to live. Times had changed, people had changed, but the pattern of change was almost as predictable as the tides.

The article in the *Spritsail* helped me learn a little more about the Victorian house, its people, and a time gone by when hard work was rewarded. Gratification was not instant, but earned, and perhaps enjoyed and appreciated more. I'm not one who wishes for a return of the old times, they are past, but the memories of them are enough to make one content and thankful for our forebears whose hard work and persistence made us what and who we are today.

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John A. DeMello was born and raised in Falmouth and graduated from Falmouth schools. He earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration from Roger Williams University in Bristol, R.I. and a Masters Degree in Education from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He retired after 35 years in banking. John served on many town committees and was Chairman of the Falmouth School Committee. He lives in West Falmouth with his wife Sally.

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