

Strawberry Farming

by Jennifer Stone Gaines

In Falmouth, the history of strawberry farming and the history of the Portuguese are inextricably linked. Local lore says that in the course of a gardening job in the 1890s, John Emerald saw some strawberry runners sprouting from a rubbish heap, took them home and planted them in the sandy East Falmouth soil. The plants flourished and bore beautiful fragrant red fruit. Thus began strawberry farming in Falmouth. It was to grow into an important and profitable business for the whole town.

The Portuguese first arrived in this area aboard whaling ships that had landed in the Azores seeking additional crew and fresh water. The Azorean men, faced with poor farming and poverty in their native islands, joined the Yankee ships. When the voyages finally ended years later in New Bedford, the men searched for a way to make a living in this new land of opportunity. Many started in New Bedford factories, saved some money, and sent for their families who arrived by packet ship. The fact that there were regularly scheduled packet ships running between the Azores and New Bedford is a sure indication of a large number of travellers between the two ports. The present day *Ernestina* was one of the last packet ships. The immigrant families then moved to the country and returned to their farming roots. They were attracted to East Falmouth where, in 1892, John Emerald became the first Portuguese to buy land and start his own farm. Antone

Augusta, who came to this country aboard a whaling ship as a young man, was the second Portuguese to settle in Falmouth. He also became a prominent strawberry grower. Emerald's brother, Frank, followed in 1898, and another brother, Manuel, two years later. Manuel met and married Estrella Farias here in Falmouth. She came from the same Azorean island, St. Michael's. Three years later they were able to buy 4.67 acres on Davisville Road. Later they bought eight more acres across the road.



Strawberry Farming Plaque by Sarah Peters. Photograph by Jacki Forbes.

In the beginning, most Portuguese farmers had day jobs as well. Manuel Emerald rose early to work in his own fields on Davisville Road, then mounted his bicycle for the ride to Penzance Point in Woods Hole and his day job

as a landscaper on one of the estates. At the end of the day, he rode home and with the help of the whole family, cleared the land and worked his own farm while daylight held.

All family members helped with the chores. Joe T. Medeiros remembers his childhood: "We were taught to work... We all had animals to take care of. We would feed them, water them, and put them up for the night. Then we would fill the wood box and chop kindling to start the fire the next morning. School children walked the family cow to a pasture across the road from the school" [then on the East Falmouth Highway]. "Come three o'clock,

when they let us out of school, I'd call my cow. The other guy would get his cow and we would walk home down Davisville Road."

Following John Emerald's lead, many of these Portuguese farmers were growing strawberries as a cash crop by the 1920s. Most strawberry farms were relatively small, from one to ten acres, though some were 15 and a very few as much as 40 acres. They planted strawberries on some of their fields, growing food for the family on the rest. Over time, more of each farm's acreage was devoted to the lucrative berries. Since the crop matured in a narrow three-to-four week period in early summer everyone – families, friends and neighbors – was dedicated to picking berries. Children were allowed to leave school to pick. Bea Emerald remembers picking 275 boxes of strawberries in one day when she was seven years old.

As more berries were planted, more pickers were needed. Since there were not enough at home, Mrs. Emerald rode the train to Wareham where she would go door to door seeking pickers. If she couldn't find enough, she would go on to New Bedford, sometimes going as far as Providence, Rhode Island.

Each farmer with enough acreage in berries built a shed on his property to house these pickers. In the cellar was a wood stove and kitchen for their use. In the late '20s and '30s the Emerald fam-



Aerial photographs of a section of Davisville Road: between 1950 (top) and 1988 (bottom) the acreage devoted to berries diminished and Falmouth's fame in strawberry-growing waned. Most of the fields were sold off as house lots. Courtesy Falmouth Town Hall.





Eight year old strawberry picker Alice Valerio in 1930. Courtesy Alice Valerio Ciambello.

ily housed about 25 pickers; most farmers brought in about 10 pickers. The conditions caused by the Depression provided a pool of available workers; whole families came to pick. It was a happy time; amidst all the hard work picking for long hours on their knees, there was joyful camaraderie and fun. Cape Verdeans comprised a large percentage of the pickers. There had been a severe drought on their islands in 1904 leading to a major exodus. They followed the same route as the Azoreans before them. Many were attracted to this area and stayed to become farmers themselves.

The Portuguese were a close, inter-dependent community, always helping each other. They were also

devoted to the Catholic Church. Since many of them were fluent only in Portuguese, the services, including confession, at St. Joseph Church in Woods Hole, were difficult for them. In 1922 they received permission from the diocese to raise money to build St. Anthony's church named for the patron saint of the Azores, where services were given in their native language. St. Anthony's became known here as "the church that strawberries built." For years, farmers held a "Strawberry Sunday" in which all the money raised from the berries picked on the peak Sunday's harvest were given to the church.

In the 1930s, when there were about 600 acres of strawberries in Falmouth, more than 3,000 pickers were brought in to help with the harvest. This was at a time when the total population of Falmouth was only about 5,000.

Thanks to John Emerald's forward thinking, the berries were shipped by train in refrigerated cars to the Boston market and from there they were shipped



Manuel and Estrella Emerald raised eight children in the Emerald House on their small farm on Davisville Road. Here, "Pa" Emerald crates strawberries with his daughter Emily, 1942. Courtesy Bea Emerald.



Strawberry picking at the Sousa strawberry farm. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

and sold to New York, Maine, New Hampshire and even Montreal and Quebec. The market was thus greatly expanded, making the growing of berries an even more lucrative business. There was even a special afternoon Berry Train at the height of the season.

Not one, but two cooperatives were formed by the local farmers to help market the berries. Their trucks left Falmouth in the night to arrive at opening time in the Boston market in the best condition and to get the best price. At the height of the industry in 1937, Falmouth produced 13 million quarts, sending 32 trucks each night to market. Falmouth accounted for 50 percent of the entire Massachusetts strawberry crop.

World War II marked the beginning of the end of the boom in strawberry growing in Falmouth. With so many men and women involved in the war effort, there were too few laborers to bring in the crops. Always innovative, strawberry farmers held a picking competition in 1940 between the sailors stationed in Woods Hole and the soldiers stationed at Camp Edwards. In 1944, prisoners of war from Camp Edwards were brought in to help pick. Many of the

Davisville children of those war years remember handing berries to the American soldiers marching down the road to the coast to practice amphibious landings. At their mothers' encouragement, they poured handfuls of fragrant berries into the soldiers' helmets to ease their hot and dusty trek. These families were now not only Portuguese, they were devoted Americans.

After the war, many soldiers did not return to their family farms, but rather, took up other trades. There was no longer a population of itinerant pickers. In response to this labor shortage, some farmers felt that they had to reduce their acreage in berries, but Tony Andrews, who had been farming on Old



Many farm workers were brought in to help during the short, intense harvest. They came mainly from New Bedford, Fall River and even Providence, predominantly immigrants from the Azores and Cape Verde. Here, workers at the Emerald farm are gathering hay for mulch. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.



Strawberry Queen Georgie Lillie waves as she rides past the Eastman building on Main Street in the 1954 Strawberry Festival parade. Ms. Lillie was the daughter of George Lillie, who was the manager for many years of the Strawberry Growers Association. Courtesy *The Falmouth Enterprise*.

Meeting House Road in East Falmouth since 1926, began offering “pick your own” strawberries. This marketing technique proved to be so successful that it continues to this day.

In an attempt to boost the industry in the early 1950s, a Strawberry Festival was started, complete with crowning a Strawberry Queen (Cynthia Botelho is a former Strawberry Queen who still lives in Falmouth), a parade with floats down Main Street, concerts, fireworks and a ball. St. Barnabas’ strawberry festival offering lobster rolls and strawberry shortcake remains as a vestige of those huge multi-day events. Today many Falmouth families look forward to the

Strawberry Festival and to their “pick your own” visit to the Andrews farm as their official start for the Cape Cod summer.

Many of the sons and daughters of Falmouth’s first Portuguese families became active in local government and civic organizations. With their hard work, integrity, devotion to family, and concern for their community, these people with ties to the Azores and Cape Verde are in large part responsible for making Falmouth what it is today.

Biographies

Jennifer Stone Gaines is the Executive Director and Curator of the Woods Hole Historical Collection and Museum. Besides being interested in all things historical, she is also an avid naturalist and teacher as well as librarian, and sailor and racer of Cape Cod Knockabouts.

Jacki Forbes has designed websites and worked with a number of artistic and cultural groups including the Falmouth Artists’ Guild, Falmouth Cultural Council, Falmouth Cultural Alliance, and Committee to Encourage Public Art.



Tony Andrews and Marina Andrews at a Heritage Dinner where he was honored by Falmouth Historical Society. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

For more information:

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The records of the Swift bogs are in the archives of the Falmouth Historical Society. The records of the Falmouth Historical Commission record much of the bog ownership and history in town.

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Falmouth Historical Society's Oral History Project

The Portuguese of Falmouth, Unpublished monograph by Margaret Hough Russell

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