

The Reactor

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They were brave immigrants

One by one, my father's maternal grandparents said goodbye to six of their daughters and one of their sons. Seven of nine children left their home on the small Island of St. George with a population about the same as Pacifica, emigrated 5,000 miles or so, and never saw their parents again. Because they could not read or write, the only letters they sent or received had to be written for them or read to them. Since this was before the days of satellites, long distance telephones, or radio, the children never again talked to their parents after the trip to the new land of California.

When my dad's mother came to California, at 19, it was with the idea of helping her 24-year-old sister, who was ailing in Austin, Nevada and trying to care for two small children. When my grandmother arrived in this country she learned that her sister was dead of typhoid fever, a scourge thankfully much rarer today than then. Plans changed. She met a fellow Azorean from the same island, a hardworking

dairyman 11 years her senior, and soon there was a double wedding. Her oldest sister and she were married in a San Francisco Church the same day. In my grandmother's case the marriage lasted well over 50 years.

I cannot begin to imagine the bravery of a young woman who would travel so far, alone, without the anchors I depend on so heavily. I have the telephone, easy access to worldwide communications, a post office to speedily transport my written messages and the literacy that allows me to take advantage of them. She had none of these things. She did have a high degree of native intelligence and a fantastic memory. She traveled to a strange country whose language she did not understand, and whose customs were foreign to her. Only her religion was familiar. The Latin of the church at that time was the same around the world. Whatever she learned had to come verbally or through pictures. In her later years she could listen to the radio, but for the first quarter century of her

life in this country there were no radio programs, either in Portuguese or in English. The sisters came to California in the late nineties and early 1900s. They married fellow Portuguese and scattered from Humboldt County to the San Joaquin Valley.

On a recent weekend I drove over to Hilmar, a small town near Turlock, for a picnic billed as the Lopes family reunion. It was more than that because there were cousins there descended from more of the six sisters and the brother who emigrated to California. With a few exceptions I had never met them. The day was spent in looking over cherished family portraits, and figuring out how the various persons were related to me. Genealogy is an intricate science, as well as a lot of fun. It isn't often that I meet a whole side of my family I hardly knew existed. It's very satisfying to learn, not only more about your roots, but how the branches are doing. They seem to be doing fine.

