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Motives for Azorean Portuguese Immigration to California and How They Established Themselves There

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Even though the Portuguese explorer João Rodrigues Cabrillo was the first to “discover” California for the Europeans in 1542, a significant number of Portuguese immigrants did not follow until 1815. Immigration was slow at first although by the time of the Gold Rush in California, quite a few Portuguese immigrants had already arrived in what is now the Golden State. In the 1800s and 1900s, when the influx of Portuguese immigrants began, the precipitating factor was mainly a desire for better economic opportunities. This accelerated in 1958, when the United States passed the Azorean Refugee Act, which allowed almost 5,000 Azoreans to immigrate to California and escape the earthquakes or volcanoes they experienced in their homelands.

Although there are now about 350,000 Azorean immigrants in California, limited research has been done on their motives for coming there or how they established themselves. To help understand their dreams and goals, some background information on the Azores is helpful. The Azores is an archipelago made up of nine islands off the coast of Portugal in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean with a current population of roughly 250,000 inhabitants. For most of its history, its inhabitants were exceptionally poor, with many islanders essentially living a peasant lifestyle. Natural disasters were common, including earthquakes and volcanoes, which destroyed many family homes.

Due to these challenging conditions, many Azoreans risked a voyage to America in search of a better life. America, the new country, “has long been seen as ‘the land of milk and honey,’ offering unlimited space and endless opportunity” for those who suffer in their old countries and want a change from their impoverished lifestyle (Lick 41). Today, about one million Portuguese Americans inhabit California. Their population consists of people who left the Azores for a better life and their numerous descendants.



The amount of research already done on this topic is sparse, and it ranges in quality. Only some has been done by established academics, of various backgrounds within the humanities and social sciences. The expert with the most regular work in Portugal-related history is Onesimo T. Almeida, Professor of Portuguese and Brazilian Studies at Brown University and the former Chair of the Department of Portuguese and Brazilian Studies. Almeida has advanced degrees in Philosophy and has regularly taught a course at Brown on “Portuguese Cultural and Intellectual History.” He focuses his research mostly on matters in Portugal, not on the Portuguese-American experience, although in 1979 he reviewed a bibliography of *The Portuguese in the United States: a Bibliography*, by Leo Pap, in the *Luso-Brazilian Review*. He has published extensively in other academic journals on Portugal-related topics, and he is the author of numerous scholarly books and work related to Portuguese cultural and historical topics. Since Almeida is from the Azores himself (born at São Miguel Island), his essay “A Profile of The Azorean” is enlightening for its characterization of the Azoreans in the Azores Islands and how this contributes to their behavior as citizens in America. He provided invaluable recommendations on authors discussing the Portuguese-American experience when contacted by this researcher.

Two other academics are significantly represented in the relevant literature, the first being Denis Borges, California State University at Fresno’s Lecturer of Portuguese Language and Director of the Fresno State Portuguese Beyond Borders Institute. Borges is particularly notable in his work at the Institute, an organization recently founded to “function as a hub of cultural, literary, pedagogical and research resources for the Portuguese-American experience ... focusing on the archipelago of the Azores, with a strong emphasis on the Azorean Diaspora in California” (Kirk). Although Borges has not published any works cited in the current research, he provided invaluable information and feedback to this researcher through phone conversations and helped direct the course of research, particularly in establishing a methodology for further inquiry, an area in which he has extensive experience as overseer of the oral history project at Fresno State, which aims to compile the life stories of Portuguese immigrants to California.



The second prominent researcher is Eduardo Mayone Dias, Full Professor of Portuguese Language at UCLA. Dias not only possesses a rigorous academic background but has published work specifically on Portuguese immigrants to California. His work *The Portuguese Presence in California* traces the arrival of Portuguese immigrants from the 1800s through the 1970s. Its chronology of immigration events proved especially helpful in organizing this researcher's thoughts and understanding of the Portuguese immigrants' journeys to the United States. The work of Frederick G. Bohme, who was on the history faculty of the University of New Mexico, is also important, although his article "The Portuguese in California," written some time ago in 1959, represents his only foray into Portuguese-American history. His focus was primarily Californian history in general.

Beyond the works of these established academics, another source for research was found in Allison Pereira, who wrote an undergraduate thesis at California Polytechnic State University that treats the subject of Portuguese immigration to California. Then there are non-academic authors such as Nelson Ponta-garca, who is an author and business entrepreneur. In his book *Portuguese in California*, he surveys the immigrant group's history and showcases the Portuguese American community in California. In terms of what these sources have to say about Azorean motives for emigration from the Azores to the United States, all offer broad agreement: economic factors were often to blame, and so were the dangers of the natural environment. Pereira writes that the Azores were never a place of wealth, and ongoing volcanic eruptions or earthquakes would occur, which explains why over time most of the population has chosen to leave – the population has declined to under 250,000 and continues a downward trend. Graves mentions how volcanic eruptions in 1958 caused a great exodus as many needed to flee their homes, prompting their arrival in America for a better life. Graves also concurs about the economic impetus: "Material advancement in the Azores Islands was impeded by a static economy--an economy which for centuries had made peasants of the majority of the population," revealing how severe their economic situation was back home and their main motive for immigrating to America (Graves). In this context, the wave of Azorean immigration in the 1840s prompted by the Gold Rush in California in 1848 that he discusses is not surprising.



When they arrived in California, the immigrants gravitated toward vocations similar to those prominent in their home country. Ponta-garca states that the “Portuguese have traditionally preferred to follow agricultural pursuits, where they have been especially active in the state’s dairy industry,” which mirrors the prevalence of dairy farming back in the Azores (Ponta-Garca). Graves also notes that “most of these Azoreans turned to dairying as their major livelihood activity. In less than three decades, they had attained ownership of the majority of the San Joaquin Valley dairy farms” (Graves). Bohme concurs with the success of the immigrant population in their chosen fields, explaining that Portuguese people represent a majority community in the important California industries of fishing and dairying.

However, this Boehm article was published back in 1956, and so this information led to questions about what other motivations more recent immigrants would have had for coming to California and how they established themselves in this state in more recent years. Indeed, in general, although there has been some work about Azorean immigration as recently as the 1950s, there has not been much written about it since then, and what has been written is not extensive. As Alison Pereira from Cal Poly, author of “The Portuguese in America,” explains, “there is not much information or research done on the Portuguese immigrants in America compared to other ethnic groups” (Pereira).

This researcher wanted to fill this gap and learn what has motivated Azoreans who came to coastal and Central California in more recent times, and what livelihoods they are currently pursuing. However, as Pereira noted, there is limited research on the Portuguese community and on Azorean immigrants in general compared to other minorities, and most research seems to be outdated, from the mid-twentieth century, or does not address Azorean immigrants in more recent times.



This researcher hypothesizes that the main motive for Azorean immigration to California has been economic hardship: Azoreans did not have much in their homeland to live on and wanted a better life in America. A secondary motive has been to join family members who had already come to California. Furthermore, this researcher hypothesizes that their principal pursuit when they established themselves was agriculture, although those who were able to get an American education might have gotten more middle-class skilled jobs. However, nothing too advanced has been expected as a community norm since among Azoreans it is generally perceived as quite a challenge to move up in the American economic society.

A considerable amount of library research has been conducted from public libraries and private collections which has provided the historical aspect of this study. The majority of this research project is concerned with the motives of more current Azorean immigrants to California in which the researcher used a qualitative research technique through interviews with various Azorean immigrants. This included interviews with various Azorean immigrants who have migrated to California in a more recent era of time. In order to answer the research question effectively, interviews were conducted with Azorean immigrants in the Central California area as a way of gathering qualitative data.

These interviews were unstructured, which means they “are open-ended. This lack of structure can help you gather detailed information on your topic, while still allowing you to observe patterns in the analysis stage” (George). As this study focuses on personal experiences, an unstructured interview was the best way to gather a clear understanding of each interviewee’s personal story. This methodology was based on UC Berkeley’s regional oral history office where they gather transcripts from Portuguese immigrants in the San Francisco area of California. However, UC Berkeley’s research project is different in that it focuses on more well-known Portuguese immigrants rather than the average Azorean immigrant.



The academic guidance of researchers in the field was particularly helpful in designing the research methodology. To help create and solidify a research question and to guide the researcher through the research process, the researcher had contacted Professor Almeida from Brown University over Zoom calls and through emails. Professor Almeida guided the researcher to contact Professor Borges at Fresno State University, since Borges' studies are specifically focused on the Portuguese in Central California. Professor Borges was inspiring in how he gathers oral histories from various Portuguese immigrants and helped the researcher to eventually decide that the best way to gather data would be through interviews since oral histories require a bit more time in order to be qualified as an oral history.

The research question, "What are the main motives for recent Azorean immigration to California and how did immigrants establish themselves there?" can be answered by the three developed themes: economic reasons, dairy farming, and unskilled labor. This research found that there are an overwhelming amount of commonalities between Azorean immigrants in terms of their motives for immigration to Central California and the occupations chosen in order to establish themselves once here in America.

While the researcher's hypothesis, formed in reference to Alvin R. Graves' study and Denis Borges' project and insight, was shown to be partly correct; it was not nuanced enough to capture the entirety of the results from this study. The interviewees did state that they came to California for a better life and more opportunities. However, more detailed responses were given explaining the desire to help one's family or to experience the "American Dream." The main motive for Azorean immigrants who came to California was to have a better life. Their economic situation was not ideal in the islands, and they thought they would have more opportunities if they came to America. They then decided to come to California because they believed it would be the best locale since it is known to have the best climate for dairy farming, and it is where most of the interviewees already had extended family or friends which would help them assimilate into American culture much more smoothly.



Additionally, they mainly obtained labor-intensive jobs as a way of establishing themselves in California such as dairy farming, working in canneries, or as custodians for various facilities because they did not have an American education and had to choose something they already had experience with, such as dairying or cleaning or something that did not require much training such as working in canneries. This caused the recurring theme of unskilled labor to be prevalent since they did not qualify for other occupations, especially for those with limited English language skills. Another recurring theme was dairy farming, a popular unskilled laborious enterprise that Azoreans had substantial experience with from their homeland. It was noticed that most individuals chose an occupation in America that they had experience with from the Azores, in order to ultimately pursue family businesses where they could leverage their past know-how to advance their economic prospects. However, all individuals pursued occupations that are classified as unskilled because of their otherwise limited job prospects.

The information gathered through this research is important because it helps to fill in some of what was missing in this area of research. Since Azorean immigrants are a minority group in America who are usually poor and do not speak English when they first arrive, they have a hard time becoming successful citizens of a new country. When immigrating to America interviewees described having little to no money and struggling to make a living with the limited unskilled jobs that were available to them. They struggled to become part of American society as it is much different compared to the Azores Islands.

This study shows the motives for Azorean immigration and how they established themselves in California in more recent times. It helps reveal what life was like in the Azores and that it was not ideal, causing inhabitants to leave and establish a better life for themselves in America in more recent times. It also situates this group within the larger struggles of immigration and assimilation into American life and leaves ample opportunity for further research in the historical study of California's Azorean community.



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