

John Oliveira's memories of the Octagon Barn and the Home Dairy,

(excerpted from a 2012 interview
conducted by Bev Gingg and Lynne Landwehr
for the Land Conservancy of SLO County)



I'm John Oliveira, I was born in 1927 in Los Gatos, California, and until I was age 9, we lived in a little town near Fresno called Lemoore, and that's where we moved from when we came to the Octagon Barn.

My parents both immigrated from the Azore Islands--my mother was from Pico, and Dad was from Terceira....I think he had been born in São Jorge, and the family moved to Terceira before they came here. Almost all the other Portuguese that came over here--they were also from the [Azore] islands. There was nothing at home for those people....they'd come, as long as somebody sponsored them....these young women would be 17, 18, 20, they'd come over alone, with almost no money and couldn't speak the language, and they'd line up at Ellis Island, and the sponsor was in Tulare, or Fresno, and they'd put a tag on their

coat, their name, and the conductor would tell them where to get off the train. They had almost no money, and they'd come over here and start a new life like that. The courage that those people had!

[In those days, the Portuguese military drafted men as young as 14 and 15; one reason that young Azorean men left home was to escape that draft.]

My dad had two brothers, almost that age, I've got the ship's manifest--the passenger list--from Ellis Island. On the ship was Grandpa, Grandma, my dad and my dad's brothers. But his oldest brother, Antonio, is not listed on the manifest [probably because the Portuguese authorities would not have permitted a boy of draft age to leave]. But the captain knew he was there, and Antonio worked on the ship. I don't know how they got him ashore in New York. He didn't go through Ellis Island, because he would have been sent back to the Azores, you see. So he got put ashore in New York, and he wound up with the others, in the San Joaquin Valley, but I don't know how. And there were others like that, who came as stowaways, like the Furtado guys, and his uncle, they came over on the ship as stowaways. They were stowaways on a sailing ship, and before the ship landed in San Francisco, this sailor put them in a small boat and rowed them ashore through the breakers, and dropped them off on the beach, and said, "There you are, you're in America!"



John and Dolores Oliveira display the passenger list (also called the *manifest*) from the September 1901 sailing of the S.S. *Peninsular* from Terceira (Azores) to New York. The name of John's oldest uncle, Antonio Oliveira, who was about 15 at the time, is not on this official list, but Antonio was indeed on the ship with his family.

Most Portuguese men would start out milking cows and they would save their pennies until they could buy a few cows and maybe 40 acres, and then they were in business...and they got going, and they, they just did it! And their families worked on the farms too--everybody worked. My parents were pretty resourceful. They killed their own meat, and had chickens and gardened, and [made] stuff that we got by on through the Depression years, too.

My father always spoke good English. He was ten years old when he came over with his family, I don't know where he learned [English], but he could read and write and speak very good English, but my mother never took to learning...she spoke a broken...she was embarrassed by her English. But when she was alone in a department store, she could tell the clerk what she wanted. And she studied to take her citizenship papers, and she could recite the first paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence to you, which is something I never could do.

My mom wasn't well--she had asthma. That was one reason we moved from Lemoore, because over in the San Joaquin valley, the air was bad. We came to the Octagon Barn ranch in 1936 and stayed there until 1941. The dairy was called the Home Dairy. It was the largest dairy that my dad had ever attempted. We kids were all pretty young, my two oldest brothers were 15 and 16, and they pretty much took care of milking the cows, with one hired man. We used milking machines--twice a day, all Guernsey cows. That was what the Pereira family had, that was their cows.



John Pereira age 11 or 12,, riding Headlight,
one of the Home Dairy's Guernsey cows.

My dad was in, like, a partnership. The Pereiras owned everything, and our family did the work, for shares, like a sharecropper. The owners were Manuel Garcia, and Joaquin Pereira—two brothers-in-law, and their two wives, who were the Lima sisters. I don't know how my dad contacted them, or how [the job] came up. That was 1936, we milked and fed the cows in the Octagon Barn for two years, and then we built the milking barn in 1938, and after that, we milked in it.

In this country, we don't put the cows in at night, but we stored hay in the Octagon Barn, and the cows were fed in the barn, but could mill about. When they were milked in the Octagon Barn, they were put into stanchions, facing inwards around a smaller circle, where there was feed for them.

After the milking barn was built, the cows were given mill feed while they were in there, and they were in stanchions there too. I think they probably got milked in smaller sets, maybe 10 or 15 cows each. We started at 4 in the morning, and milked for a couple of hours, between two and three hours.

The milk, as it came from the cows, it went over a refrigerated cooler which was about 4' x 4'. The milk ran slowly over that and then down into ten-gallon milk cans. The evening milk was stored in a cold room at the barn, and the morning milk was taken that same morning to the plant, they were all taken in together.

The Pereiras, the same family that owned the Octagon Barn, owned the plant, and it was called the Home Dairy—on Higuera Street. They pasteurized and bottled there, and then delivered the milk to people's homes. There was a Portuguese gentleman there named Gilles Costa--he managed that plant for years and years. *[Gilles' wife, Virginia Garcia Costa, worked there as well. She was the sister of Manuel Garcia, one of the owners of the dairy. Manuel's wife was one of the Lima sisters.]*

There were inspectors; I remember that Earl Hansen was one of them. The inspection was for cleanliness, and the equipment had to be sterilized in a big steam sterilizer. They would check the utensils and what-not. They had a way of taking a bacteria count from your dairy, and they went by that on how they graded your milk. The Home Dairy was a Grade A dairy.

We made the hay. We didn't bale it. It was cut, shocked, and then hauled in a hay wagon with a team, and we took it to the Octagon Barn and it was spread in the manger there, in the Barn.

I went to Bellevue School, which was about three miles past the ranch. Our teacher came by the ranch in the morning, she had a '37 Chevy, brand new, and picked us up there, took us to school, eight grades in one room, from first to eighth grade in the same room, one teacher. The Bellevue has been moved down to Shell Beach, it's by a church down there.

The other nearby school was the Santa Fe. It's now the winery down near the Johnson Ranch--if you go to the Johnson Ranch trail, there's a board there that explains about the school and has pictures. Lots of us Oliveira kids are in the photo of the school.



John Oliveira's family in 1939, on the Home Dairy/Octagon Barn property:
(l. to r.) Mary Alice, Manuel, Virginia, Mariano (John's father),
Lena, Virginia (John's mother), John, Marion, and Georgina