



# Gil Perry

Interviewer:

Good afternoon, Gil, or morning. Thank you for agreeing to share a story with us for Common Ground. I just want to make sure that you're okay with us using this story, the video, the audio, the transcription of the text in the upcoming exhibition and publication.

Gil Perry:

I am.

Interviewer:

Okay, and great. So now I will sit back and enjoy your story.

Gil Perry:

Very good. Well, my story is a bit of an odyssey, which I guess probably a lot of people can say that about their lives, but mine certainly is. I grew up in this area, raised in Dartmouth, went to church and school in New Bedford, and for pretty much the first 20 years of my life was surrounded by and large by Portuguese people, because all four of my grandparents immigrated from the Azores. My family was not particularly, we didn't get involved in a lot of the really heavy duty Portuguese stuff, [foreign language 00:01:18] those in that. But we were clearly Portuguese. We weren't overly religious, but we did go to Mass on Sunday, to St. John's Church in New Bedford, which was the oldest Portuguese church in America. The sermons were done in Portuguese, et cetera. I became an altar boy at one point and so on. And as far as I was concerned, this was what life was like. People were Portuguese.

Yeah, I had friends who were Irish, and I had friends who were Polish, French Canadian, but most people were Portuguese. So I grew up in an area where Portuguese-ness was the norm. Even women who had names like Vermet, their birth name was actually Sylvia. So Portuguese was everywhere, and that was my world.

And then I went to college. I went off to college in 1964, I went to Holy Cross, and I discovered when I got there, or shortly after being there for maybe three hours that there were 2,000 or so students, all men, there was only one Portuguese guy, and that was me. And my name didn't even sound Portuguese, it was just Perry.

There was one guy in my class who was from Puerto Rico, and his name was Hector Perera. So he was the closest thing to Portuguese that I could find. I spent four years really not knowing who I was. I didn't, it was a Catholic college, most everyone was either Irish or Italian. And there was me. And that was the first time that I realized, started to think about who I really was. After college, I went off to New York City. And now at the time, New Bedford was not, was just beginning its decline. And so there really, in my view, wasn't a lot to hold me here. So I started drifting, and I first drifted to New York City where I spent 10 years, which got me into what I perceived to be the fast lane, but it got me further away from my roots.

After 10 years of New York, I decided to drift further, and I went out to Minnesota. I spent 24 years in Minneapolis, drifting further away. So it wasn't as if I was ashamed of my roots, I just really didn't care. There wasn't anything to hold me. I had not learned the language when I was a kid. And my grandparents were all working class people who were not educated. My parents weren't even educated. Neither of my parents went to high school. They were born here, they spoke, fluently, both languages, but they did, they were not educated. So I was uncomfortable at home, but I was comfortable in these other places.

But as I time passed in those year, during those years in Minnesota, I ended up marrying a woman who was



Norwegian. Her grandparents had all immigrated from Norway. I ended up having a couple of kids, two boys who are now half Norwegian and half Portuguese. And what I started to realize, as time went by, during those years in Minnesota, was that I didn't belong here. Something wasn't right, I just didn't feel comfortable. And that's a feeling that persisted for decades. But what I did notice, was that with my Norwegian side of the family, it did actually remind me a little bit of my family. And the reason was, well, I'll come back to the reason later.

So after all these years of drifting and drifting, I finally, in 2002, I decided to come back home. And when I came back home, well, the reason I came back home, was I had a high school sweetheart, no, she wasn't a sweetheart in high school. I had a high crush on somebody in high school. And in 2001, after being divorced for a couple years, I came home and we reconnected and we've been happily together ever since.

So that's what brought me back home. But when I came back home, it was actually even worse. Because I didn't know anybody anymore. I had pretty much disconnected from my roots, my friends, I had made all of my adult friends in Minnesota, particularly through children and so on. So once again, I was a man without a country. I didn't belong there. I didn't belong here, and I was sort of drifting again. I started trying to blend back in. I did connect with some people from my past, and it never clicked, it just didn't work. They had changed. I had changed, and we didn't have any common ground anymore. So I got frustrated.

Then I started really trying to think about, "Okay, who I am, who am I really?" And one of the things that was plaguing me, as I tried to figure out who I was, was that I didn't know anything about the Azores. I didn't know, as I said at the beginning, I did not, we weren't your classic Portuguese family, in the sense that we embraced Portuguese, my grandparents, one of them didn't speak English at all. But we didn't, just didn't do the [foreign language 00:08:58], and we didn't do that stuff. And we didn't live in the church. And we went to Mass, and my father, if he could find an excuse not to go, we wouldn't go. So things weren't quite right there.

But as I tried to struggle to figure out who I was, once again, I didn't belong and I hadn't felt like I belonged even when I was a kid. And I didn't know why. Well, now I sort of know why. My paternal grandparents were from São Miguel, my maternal grandparents were Faial. They may as well have been from Germany and Italy. And oddly enough, my father's family was typically on the short side, typically dark, typically talked fast, and typically argued a lot. That wasn't me. My mother's side of the family were typically tall, typically fair skinned, they didn't talk at all. That was more like me.

So I started trying to figure out, okay, I guess, as much as I love my father, I wasn't like him at all. I mean, he was charismatic, he was opinionated, he had a hot temper. He was burley, and that wasn't me. On the other hand, my mother, I felt more like my mother, but the problem I had was, so I started believing I was my mother's son, but I didn't want to be my mother's son. I wanted to be my father's son, and there was a reason. My father had, had a falling out with his father when I was an infant. So I never met him. I never met my grandfather, my paternal grandfather.

And so I didn't know anything about, and my paternal grandmother had died when she was 40. I never knew my paternal grandparents, so I had nothing to compare it to. My mother's side of the family, my maternal grandparents had a chicken farm about where UMass Dartmouth is now. So we spent a lot of time there. Well, my grandmother didn't speak English, and my grandfather never talked. But he did have a son, my uncle, who was also my godfather, and I reminded myself of him. He was passive, but not completely passive like my grandfather, which described me somewhat. He had a sort dry sense of humor, which I do. I remember he used to eat peanuts and cashews constantly, which I do. So okay, that's who I am.

The problem was my father had a falling out with him too. So by the time I reached adulthood, they weren't talking. And so I knew my uncle as a child, but never as an adult. So I never really had an opportunity to get in sync with him. So here I am, once again, I feel like I'm my mother's son, and I remind me of my uncle, but I don't really know him, only as a child. I really would like to be more like my father, but I don't really know who he is either, because I never met my grandfather.

So back in limbo again. And then my father died in 2004 after I had been back home for a couple of years. And I, at that time, from that point on, started to get closer with my aunt who was his half sister, and she's only 10 years



older than I am. And as I got to know her, I learned more and more about my paternal grandfather, who I had never met. Now by never meeting, we lived in the same town, I knew what his car looked like. Occasionally I see him driving around in his car. I knew he owned a liquor store on Rockdale Avenue, Perry's Liquor. I knew the store. We drove by the store frequently. He had a house on Anthony Beach that I can see the house from here right now. But I never met him. And as I chatted more and more with my aunt, and we've become very close since, who I was not able to get very close to when my father was alive, she started describing her father.

And the more she described her father, the more I said, "Well, wait a minute. Maybe we skipped a generation here, but this sounds a little bit like me." And there were a couple, now he was uneducated, but what resonated, was when one day she said, "Your grandfather used to sit out," we were down at the beach house, "Your grandfather used to sit out here on the porch," right on Anthony Beach, "And he'd sit there, staring at the ocean for hours." And I said, "I do that." And my father, he couldn't sit still for two minutes.

Then she said, "And one of the things he used to love doing, is he'd sit on the porch in the summers, and he'd page through National Geographic." I've been a subscriber to National Geographic since 1970. And I thought, "Oh, what? Well, look, there's something here." So now my curiosity was peaked. So maybe I can figure out who I am now. I mean, maybe I'm a little bit of both. But again, one of the confusing parts for me was not understanding the difference between a [inaudible 00:16:01] and a [inaudible 00:16:04], and that's who I am. I'm a hybrid.

So that just festered for a while. And so I felt a little bit more comfortable that I was getting to know who I am, a little bit. But I still kicked this stuff around back and forth. Periodically, I'd learned more about my grandfather from my aunt. And it's odd, because I don't know what his voice sounded like. That's a weird feeling. I know what my other grandfather, I know what he sounded like, even though he didn't say much. I knew what he sounded like. I have no idea whether my grandfather had a high pitch voice, or low pitch voice, or whether he had a soothing voice. But it intrigued me.

Then about, I guess, it was in 2013, I had put this stuff to rest. And decided that, "Okay, I am who I am. I'm a little bit of this and I'm a little bit of that." But I resent the fact that I hadn't ever gotten to meet my grandfather, who may have told me a little bit, something about who I am. And I resent the fact that I didn't know my uncle as an adult, because maybe I would've learned something about myself from that. But they're both dead, and there's nothing I can do about it. And then 2013 rolled around. And Donna, who had recently retired from teaching, decided to take a continuing education class on the history of the Azores, because she, who is Jewish, has no clue about anything having to do with Portuguese at the time, other than a few swear words in [inaudible 00:18:19].

So she decided, since she had heard me so often, talk about, "Who I am, what am I? My mother's son? What?" She took this class, and I was still working. And I think it was once a week, and she'd have notes and things, and I'd look at the notes and, fine. But I really still didn't really care that much. I cared about knowing who I was, but I didn't really care about Portugal or the Azores, or any of that stuff. It was what I had come to learn, I guess, over the years from my experiences in college, and then New York, and then Minnesota, was that Portugal is kind of invisible.

Not so much at college, but in Minnesota, "Oh, your name is Perry?" This was typical, "Well, are you related to Oliver Hazard Perry?" "Well, no, I'm Portuguese." "What's that?" "Well, my grandparents came from the Azores." "Where's that?" So over time, I came to realize that this [inaudible 00:19:48] you were nobody in a way, you were invisible. So I didn't really care. I cared about who I was, but I didn't really care about why I was who I was.

And then she, so she took this class, I read the notes, "Fine, okay, Prince Henry, great. And okay, they discovered these islands and big deal, Holy Ghost? Yeah, okay." Didn't really make a big deal to me. But the guy who taught the course, his name was Tony Cabral, not our Tony Cabral. I think he had something to do with Stonehill College. He offered a trip to the Azores for those who took the class to just field trip. And so Donna said, "Why don't we go?" And I said, "Well ..." I mean I figured I'd eventually get to the Azores anyway so, "Okay, let's go." So that was in the spring, actually May of 2014. So I've said, Well, I should, in the winter, I'll maybe do some homework, and see if I can find out something. Maybe I got some relatives over there, who knows? And we'll have a more





meaningful trip.

But I didn't do it. So April rolled around, we were going in May, and I hadn't done anything. Partly because I really didn't care that much. Yeah, it is like a vacation. We're going on a vacation, big deal. That's fine. The year before, the summer before we had gone to Italy, and had this wonderful trip around Italy. And to me, so this was the same thing. Instead of going to Italy, we're going to Portugal or these islands. And I couldn't even name the islands. I knew two, maybe three, and even know there were nine. And so about two weeks before we were going to go, I said, "Okay, I should do something." So I started racking my brain, and I remembered that way back in the '50s, when I was in junior high, this guy from, I think, the Azores, came and lived with us.

I don't know who he was, but there was a guy that came. And I think his name was Tony, and I don't know who he was. I assume he was a relative, but I don't know that for a fact. So I started looking through a bunch of old pictures and I found a picture of him. And on the back was written his name Tony Sarmento. So I said, "That's right, there was Tony Sarmento." So I said, "I'm going to try looking them up." Maybe I can get some clues as to where to go in the Azores to find relatives and such. So where do I start? So I just took the phone book, and there were a dozen Sarmentos in the phone book, and at least three of them were Antonio, and I called them all, "No, I don't know who you're talking about, don't know what you're talking about."

So I made no connection from that. It occurred to me that this guy, whoever he was, that his brother came to visit once, and I thought his name was Joe. Which I've learned from now that he got three choices anyway, Tony, Joe or Manny. So I said, "Well, okay." So I started calling, there were a half a dozen Joe Sarmentos in the phone book. And I called them and I got to this one, and it's Joe Sarmento? I said, "Now I'm trying to," I told him why I was calling. And he was very abrupt. He was like, "I don't know who you are, why are you calling me?" I just said, "Well, there was, I thought I, there's a guy named, I think Tony Sarmento and I thought he had a brother Joe, and I'm wondering if that's who you are?"

And he said, "Well, yeah, I have a brother, I have a Tony, but I don't know who you are." And he said, "Look, he was from Faial, and he came to America in 1959 and he came and he stayed with [inaudible 00:24:57] Albino." That's my grandfather. How many Albinos are there? So, "You mean Albino Souza?" "Yeah, Albino Souza. Yeah, the Chicken Farm on Fisher Road. That's him." So I explained to him who I was, now he opened up. And he turns out he lives about a mile from here. This Joe Sarmento lives about a mile from here, a couple of miles from here at the most. And he said, "Well, why don't you come on over? We'll talk." So I did. Turns out Tony, the guy that had lived with us, had stayed for 20 years and went back.

So he picks up the phone, Joe picks up the phone and he calls Tony and he explains to him what's going on. And so we set it all up so that when we went to Faial, we would meet Tony. So it turns out we're second cousins that to their mother and my mother were first cousins. I didn't know anything about [inaudible 00:26:05], I didn't know anything about that, never heard of it. That's why Joe and Tony had come to America, because they had gotten, when Kennedy and Pastore passed that immigration act, they were able to come. But that's the reason why they came. So anyway, so now we had a connection, and we got on the plane two weeks later, went to Faial. Well, we went to Ponta Delgada first. So it was a three island trip. We landed in Ponta Delgada, switched planes and went to Faial, and then Faial for a few days and then to Terceira. And then from Terceira back to São Miguel. So it was a 10 day trip.

So the first stop, actually, other than the airport in Ponta Delgada, was Faial. So we get to off the plane, and I had this picture, I didn't know, as it turns out, when he had lived with us, I was 12 and he was 22. And now it's, I'm 60-something, and he's 78. Yeah, I'm 68 and he's 78. So I don't know what this guy's going to look like. So I brought the picture, and he's not going to know what I look like. So I brought the picture, we got off the plane in Castelo Branco near Horta. And I'm holding this picture, didn't need it. We're walking up. And he had said, well, he didn't speak English, but his wife did. His wife had lived here and learned English here. So I had talked with her on the phone, and she said, "We'll be at the airport to greet you." And we got off the plane. And I'm expecting we're going to get off the plane.

And well first of all, that we'll be fortunate if the plane actually lands safely. And when we get off the plane, we're



going to have all these people walking around with no shoes. Nobody's going to be wearing shoes. And the people that are wearing shoes, they're old shoes, and everybody's going to look like a farmer. We get off, as come out the airport, there's Tony and his wife [inaudible 00:28:41] is dressed to the nines, and Tony is standing there. I knew it was him right away, standing there nicely dressed. And he's wearing a Lacoste sweater. Most of my clothes is Lacoste. And I'm like, "Wait a minute, where am I?" And we then spent two or three days in Faial and it was like, I felt like this is home. This just feels right.

And the more I got to know Tony, he spoke a little bit of English, the more I saw me. This is, I'm not my uncle, I'm this guy. We were so similar, except we did have a little bit of a language barrier. But we spent a few days together. Well we were on a tour, so we had to do some of that stuff too. But we did spend a firm amount of time together, and we have since stayed in communication. And we've gone back every year since 2014. And every year when we've gone back, Tony's English is better. He's been practicing. And that's been really heartwarming, that he really appreciated our making the connection. He's been making an effort to be able to communicate.

So anyway, that was a step in the right direction. I now felt like this is getting to be, I'm not invisible. As we spent a couple of days in Faial and we've since gone back many times, I've come to realize that just what Faial was back a 100 years ago or more, and what it still is today. And I couldn't get over how cosmopolitan Horta is. Have you been in Horta?

Well, it of course was a hub for whaling. It was also the center for the cable and wireless business when the first transatlantic cables went in. And now it's, I think, it's the second largest yachting port in the Atlantic, on the Atlantic Ocean. So there's this cross current of people from ... When you go, there's a famous bar on the waterfront called Peter's Cafe Sport. When you go in that bar, there's like 10 languages being spoken. And it's just a cool place. It's not what I thought it was. It made me feel like, this is who I am. I'm a little bit part of this. So anyway, after there we went to Terceira, and we spent a few days in Terceira, which was nice, but I don't have any relatives there. And then from there we went to Saint Michael.

Well, I didn't know exactly what to expect in Saint Michael, and I had no connections, although I knew that my grandfather came from Água de Pau, which is about 15 or 20 miles east of Ponta Delgada. But I have a cousin, well my aunt, one of her cousins had written a little story, a little family history. So I had read that, didn't help, it helped a little bit. But I have a cousin who's my age, who had been to the Azores many times, and he's a cousin on my father's side. And he said, "Look, when you get to Água de Pau, look up Roberto Madeiras. He owns a store in Água de Pau called [foreign language 00:32:57]. He knows everything. He'll know, he can tell you who to go talk to if you want to make connections and so on and so forth." And he said, "If he's not there, his wife Maria, she can help you, and she knows everything too."

"Oh, okay." So we took a day off from our tour, and rented a car, and drove to Água de Pau. And once again, I'm like, "This just seems like familiar. I mean, I've never been here, but I feel like I've been here." So I was on a high, and we go to the church, which is the center of town like every place else, and I saw down the street a sign that said [foreign language 00:33:55], "Ah, that's Roberto Madeiras's store." Now I had come on, for this [inaudible 00:34:04], I had come armed with a photograph of my great grandparents that my aunt had given me, as well as I had dug up my grandfather's birth certificate, or baptismal certificate from that Portuguese church website. So I'm just on a high, and I can't wait to get in there to try to get some information. And his name is Madeiras. And also, I see a sign that says, "Madeiras and Sons."

So I walk right by what is in fact [foreign language 00:34:46], and I walk into the Madeiras and Sons store, and I said who I was. And he didn't speak English, but this guy named Madeiras, but his son was there and he spoke a little bit of English. He said, "Well, my mother is not here right now, Maria, but she'll be back." "Oh, that's perfect, that's Maria. That's the one I'm supposed to look for if Roberto's not here." So I thought the Madeiras that I was talking to, who was actually Duarte Madeiras, I thought that was Roberto, but it was Duarte, his brother, who doesn't speak English. And I was assuming that the Maria that I was going to be talking to was Roberto's Maria, but it wasn't. When she finally showed up. So he'd said, "Come back in a couple hours," so I did. So it was 1:00 in the afternoon, we're waiting for Maria, who I thought was that Maria, but it turns out it was that Maria.





And suddenly this woman walks in, who's just strident as could be, and she reminded me of one of my father's aunts. And she says, "Yes, I know you're [inaudible 00:36:02]." And she spoke a little bit of English, and I explained to her why we were there. And she said, she looked at the picture, she started looking at the document and she was a very, something very charismatic about her, and very strident about her, and she was very positive and genuine. And she suddenly, she started crying, said, "We're cousins." I said, "What do you mean?" She said, "It's right here." And she pointed out that there was a name in my grandfather's birth certificate, and the name was Favela. She said, "All Favelas are related. I'm a Favela, you're a Favela. We're cousins." And we have since become great cousins. And we see them every year until lately. And we've connected, we've made all these connections. As it turns out, my name's not Perry, my grandfather was named Manuel Tavares.

And I ever wondered, because my father's middle name was Tavares. I never knew where did Tavares come from. Well, it turns out my grandfather's was Manuel Tavares. His father was José Tavares, and his wife, my great-grandmother was Maria [inaudible 00:38:02] de Costa Favela. So within a few, within 10 days, I went from being nobody to being somebody. And here I'm [inaudible 00:38:23] in a way. I'm [inaudible 00:38:25] in another way, and it's all good. And since then I have just dived head-long into finding out more, and finding out, not so much specifics as to who my specific cousin or aunt or uncle might be, but who we are, who we Azorians are.

And I've become just fascinated by our ancestors, and what they did. It wasn't all good. So that trip in 2014 was a jumping-off point for me to really now figure out who I really am. And that's what I've been doing ever since. About a year later, I was coming out of a restaurant here in Dartmouth. I forget what that, it's recently closed down in the pandemic. But in any event, and I bumped into Jean Montero who I had gone to school with, high school with. And we were friends in school, and we played sports together, and we crossed paths now. And we had gone out for lunch or dinner a couple times, but nothing big.

What he didn't know is I wanted it to be big, but we never, we just didn't connect. There was something missing from all those years of being gone and so on. So we decided, "Well, let's get together for dinner." So we decided, we made it a date to get together for dinner a couple of weeks later, or a week later. We went to the Pasta House in Fair Haven, and we started talking. Now I had been trying, and Jean doesn't really know this. I guess, he may, I don't know if we've ever talked about it, but I had been really trying to connect with him in a more meaningful way than talking about the Celtics and the Red Sox, because that's what we always talk about. And I started talking to him about our trip. I didn't know he was connected to the Whaling Museum.

We started talking about our trip, and suddenly it was like he was really interested. And little did I know that he had been exploring, was on the same exploration in Cabo Verde, and suddenly we had a real connection that really resonated. The very next day he called me, and he said, "How great it was to talk about these things and blah, blah, blah." And we've been, our friendship has just grown and grown ever since from that spark. And I've learned a lot from him. He's learned a lot from me. And we, another step in my learning more about who I am.

Around the same time as that, that was 2015, Donna is Jewish, and we have friends who, Bob Waxler, Linda Waxler. Bob Waxler is a retired professor of English at UMass Dartmouth, but he was also heavily involved in the Jewish, they have a Jewish cultural program of some sort at UMass Dartmouth. And they were involved in raising money to restore the synagogue in Ponta Delgada. When we went there in 2014 for the first time, we actually were able to go and look at the restoration project. And in 2015 we were invited, the Waxlers were, and they invited us to go along with them, for the actual unveiling, or whatever want to call it, of the what?

Interviewer:

Dedication.

Gil Perry:

Dedication, the dedication of the synagogue, which we went. And it was another one of those, this is who we are. I mean, there was a vibrant Jewish population on this island, and I may have Jewish blood with the name now



that I know what my name really is, maybe there's a connection there, which was a very, another one of those eye-opening, "Wow, this is more of who I am and we are." And this process has just continued.

I've read a lot. I've read dozens of books, both about the Azores specifically, and about Portuguese history as well. And then suddenly in 2019, after getting involved a bit with the Whaling Museum, I met Onésimo. And through, or with him, I have just explored everything. And have learned more and more about who the Portuguese really were and are, who Azorians were, and why we should be, I'm going to say it, why we should be both proud and ashamed of who we are.

Unfortunately, in my growing up, the only stuff I learned was the good stuff. Prince Henry, I mean, around here, it was Prince Henry and the Pope. And I've learned a lot in the last few years from my own reading, from Onésimo, from my involvement with the Whaling Museum, from my extraordinary friendship with Jean, that we did a lot of bad stuff too. And if you want to embrace the good stuff, you've got to take responsibility for the bad stuff. So in the end, I've gone from being nobody in my eyes, to being who I always wanted to be really, and who I now am. I've become more outspoken, more empathetic, sympathetic, I don't know what you want to call it, more driven and more genuine. And that's all come from this process of, it took 74 years, but it's still, and I don't think, and I'm not done yet. But I guess I've rambled a lot, but that's more or less my story. And I'm grateful to have had the time to tell it.

Interviewer:

Thank you for sharing that story. I'm going to ...