



A cherished part of our American heritage is the effect of the "melting pot" upon our nation's people. To these shores while the country was growing and expanding across our western frontiers came the hundreds of thousands who now, together with their descendants, make up the population of the United States.

Just as the nation as a whole was enriched by becoming the melting pot into which poured the multitudes of people from all parts of the world, the lives of Cape Codders were enriched with the addition of quite a large group who live among us and share with us their culture and customs, somewhat different from those of the typical Yankee family.

These people identify themselves, not without a good deal of pride, as Cape Verdeans.

Finding information about the history and geography of the Cape Verde Islands is not easy. One might suppose, considering the number of Cape Verdeans living amongst us, that this information would be readily available.

Background material about the homeland of these people, now transplanted and well rooted in our sandy soil, is far scarcer than that relating to Japan, China, Russia, Australia, India, or New Zealand, however.

It's surprising, since the percentage of our population with these other backgrounds is unquestionably a lot smaller than that with Cape Verdean lineage.

Most people on the Cape, whether Cape Verdean or not, know little of the origin of these, our neighbors and friends. Most are classified simply as Portuguese, even though the islands are far removed from mainland Portugal.

The crescent-shaped cluster of islands lies in the Atlantic Ocean, approximately 300 miles west of Senegal, Africa. The archipelago became a Portuguese possession in 1460, thirty-two years before Columbus discovered America, and it remained so until July 4, 1975, when Cape Verdeans celebrated their independence.

In Praia, the capitol city, located on the island of Sao Tiago, the islanders sang and danced in the streets, shouting joy at finally being a free people. Other islands of the Cape Verdes are Santo Antao, Sao Vicente, Sao Nicolau, Sal, Boa Vista, Fogo, Brava, Maio.

The majority of American Cape Verdeans make their homes in New England, for thousands of them came to New Bedford when it was the whaling capital of the world. Ships from Massachusetts ports often docked at the islands for supplies and water, and many of the islanders signed on as crew and wound up in America.

Other Cape Verdean communities are located in Boston, New York, Providence, R.I., Bridgeport, Conn., Youngstown and Canton, Ohio, and in Alameda, Sacramento, and the Imperial Valley of California.

The Cape Verdean is of mixed races and neither black nor white, by his own definition (although not all of them agree). There are between 200,000 and 300,000 people of Cape Verdean descent living in the United States.

For the Cape Verdean living on his native island, race was never a problem. During the more than 500 years of colonial rule, the African natives of the islands intermarried with the Portuguese who governed them. The result was generations of mulatto -- or mastico -- Cape Verdeans.

When they immigrated to this country, of course, they encountered for the first time a society which classified people according to the color of their skins. No distinction was made by most Cape Codders between Cape Verdeans and Portuguese, although few would refer to Canadians as British.

Since many families of Cape Verdean have lived in the United States a century or more, there's been a natural mixture with people of other backgrounds -- the melting pot continues to boil -- and in some instance the Cape Verdean has lost or forgotten his origins.

We who grew up on the Cape during the earlier years of this century are quite unconcerned about the backgrounds of our schoolmates. Among us were children from families of Finnish, Swedish, Scottish, English, French, German, Greek, Italian, Polish, Irish, Russian, and occasionally Oriental, as well as Portuguese and Cape Verdean descent.

There existed, and I hope still exists, a normal give-and-take between the school children. More than that, I want people of whatever background to consider me worthy of being their friend.

It's of no importance if I accept them; the thing mattering most is that they accept me as one -- one of the many -- who recognizes the importance of keeping open the avenues of communication and understanding, no matter what our ethnic backgrounds, skin color or religion.

In many American cities ethnic populations segregated themselves in pockets of people speaking the same language and coming from the same homeland. Here on the Cape, homes were scattered and schools relatively few; integration was automatic. As children, we learned we all share the same feelings, have the same needs for survival, for growth, for developing our best potential.

We were fortunate to absorb this knowledge in our earliest years before the storms of racism broke upon society.

The waves created by these storms are now breaking on Cape Cod shores. Perhaps I'm naive to believe our early experiences will serve as a breakwater for these waves of bad feelings threatening to flood us and undermine the foundations of our positive relationships.

I can only liken it to a hurricane, a hurricane of feeling. In nearby cities storms rage, high winds blow, tidal waves of pain sweep over all the people. The central issues of racism and prejudice are the eyes of these storms. Waves, piling up on one another, come pounding in against the shores.

We have, and we are fortunate to have, protection against these stormy feelings, a bulwark, a breakwater -- built not of stones and boulders but of our knowledge of one another from childhood.

Only by letting the waves break harmlessly upon this knowledge, by holding firm to lessons of past experience, can we retain these good feelings, in spite of the storms.

There are, always, things we can think about to make us unhappy if

we let them; if we concentrate on those and forget the nice things about each other, we're bound to scrap our feelings of neighborliness. A lot of people -- of all different backgrounds -- have encouraged us to do that, to concentrate on the negatives.

Don't forget that someone slighted you; ignore the possibility he may be near-sighted; just be angry that he didn't speak. Do something unpleasant in return.

Let nothing make you remember the kindnesses you've also been shown. They don't count. Pass over the many opportunities you've been given; you had them coming to you, anyhow; in fact you deserved more.

This can only hurt us all and destroy the fabric of society. The path to harmony, integration, and successfully continuing the beneficial effects of the melting pot, is posted with appreciation of positives, not with constant exhortations to punctuate every action and reaction with negatives.

If you're a member of a minority group -- and believe me, brothers and sisters, every single one of us is -- join hands and hearts and minds to create a society where being part of a minority is acknowledged as the lot of all peoples.

Being different is no crime! Be proud of it and feel good about it; it's our uniquenesses that makes each of us special, interesting, and nice to know.

We share many things. We're none of us perfect, for instance. We all have feelings -- love, anger, sensitivities, dreams. We all feel pain -- the same things that hurt me hurt you. We all feel pleasure -- things that make me happy give you joy as well.

If we are honest, we can overcome the tragedies of racial strife and accept each other as just people. If, on the other hand, we permit ourselves to be led to set up barriers, dividing barriers that encourage hatred and anger, if we look for trouble when we meet someone different from us, we will rend and tear each other to shreds.

What's it going to be? Peace? Or war? What's best for you? Will you benefit from recognizing another human as a person? Or will you come out ahead by letting prejudice prevent you from seeing and responding to sincere efforts to close the gap -- a gap that exists only in the mind -- between you and someone "different"?

What's going to be depends on me -- and you. Together. Neither of us can do it alone. If a smile doesn't beget a smile, we're both lost.

Cape Verdeans and Cape Codders showed, years ago, that it can be done. May the practice spread across our land!