

AZOREAN HISTORY

Sometime ago, a lady named Beth Bell, from somewhere in Oregon, posed a question on the Internet about her Azorean genealogy. It seems that one, or two, of her grandparents had been born at Capelas, or Mosteiros, on São Miguel Island. For personal reasons she wanted to know how the names of the two places had come about, where on the island they were located, and if any prominent people had ever come from there. I couldn't quite answer her. The great drawback of Azorean History is that the islands were made of story tellers, and a large part of what has come down is hearsay, rather than written.

Nevertheless, in spite of that fact, two prominent Azorean historians stand out, both of whom went deeply into records, but equally into folklore. One was Gaspar Frutuoso, the other Carreiro da Costa.

A great authority on both in this country is a fellow who lives in Fall River, Massachusetts, Manuel F. Sardinha, whom I consulted in order to answer Mrs. Bell. Here's what Sr. Sardinha said:

Both Frutuoso and Costa wrote about Capelas and Mosteiros, neither with concrete evidence of how the names came about, for when the "Freguesias" were formalized their names already existed. Mosteiros supposedly got its name because of the rock formations at sea outside the island that resembled a group of praying monks. You have probably seen those formations, or a picture of them. Another source attributes the name to a group of caves where monks would pray in seclusion. Take your pick.

Capelas, like Mosteiros, also owes its name supposedly to one of two beliefs. The first deals with a type of cows that someone brought to the area whose markings resembled some chapel designs. Another is that, because the area was accessible to other villages, it became a sort of gathering place for its produce farmers on certain market days. Temporary chapels were raised occasionally in the area for religious services thereby giving a name to the location. Again, take your pick.

I hope that Mrs. Bell doesn't feel too badly about the skimpy explanation.

Although the Azores is a very small place, its "evolution" in the human world scene has a lot of unexplained loose ends. We Azoreans are great traditionalists, but, in a way, like most people, we seem more stuck in the present than in our past. I was born in the "Freguesia" (Village) de São Roque do Rosto do Cão (St. Roch of the Dog Face), for example. Until São Roque took prominence over his dog, only the Dog Face was featured in old historical records. Yet now-a-days even the village's road signs make no mention whatsoever of the animal. Ironically, in spite of losing his prominence to the saint, the dog always sticks around - as anyone who has ever seen the icon can attest. Not once has the humble and loyal animal ever run for cover - even on rainy procession days.

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