

Cultural Importance of Portuguese Religious Festivals in California

By Victor Toste

During the summers in California, families with Portuguese origins find themselves at their local Portuguese lodge throughout the state. In the past 150 years, the Festas do Espirito Santo (Holy Spirit Festivals) have travelled from the Azores into Portuguese-American society and has become an integral physical and social link between these their new and previous home countries. Over the past 50 years though, immigration from Portugal and specifically the Azores has peaked and declined rapidly. I argue that due to this decrease in immigration from Portugal to the United States, the Holy Ghost festivals have slowly changed the transition of Azorean immigrants into American society. Originally, these festivals served as community building and preservation of their Portuguese/Azorean culture and religion, but the festivals have dwindled and the lack of steady immigration has allowed the festivals' cultural meaning and importance to diminish. Once a celebration of an Azorean lifestyle, the festivals have become a recognition of a unified Portuguese culture while the second and third generation lose part of their Azorean identity. My work goes on to look at the process in which these festivals began, the power they have over the Portuguese community, and how their disappearance could cripple the remaining Portuguese-American community.