

Long Island Traditions

NEWSLETTER

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Passings: George Combs Jr.

By Nancy Solomon

When I first began documenting maritime culture on Long Island, back in 1987, one of the first people I met was George Combs Jr., then the owner and operator of Combs Bait & Tackle in Amityville. The store was filled with decoys, historic eel traps, photographs and maps. It was there that I had the first of many conversations with “young George” about decoy carving and duck hunting, his father’s efforts to save old decoys, and baymen’s history on Long Island. In later months we spent hours down at his bay house with his friends and family, and in his home which was a virtual museum.

George was full of stories about the bay house, those of his own days and those of the generations before him. I remember this story as just one of many:

They were staying down at the Greenhouse with a party for a couple of days. Every bay house in the back somewheres, they had a backhouse [an outhouse]. And he [Obadiah Verity] was there one morning, it was a little foggy, and he’s in the backhouse and doing his thing, and lo and behold, just about forty feet over the meadows come a whole bunch of geese right over him. He said “I’ll never go in the backhouse again without my shotgun.”

—George Combs Jr., January 18, 1989

George had a treasure of stories and a memory as long as the generations of his family. When he moved to the Eastern Shore of Maryland, he left devoted friends and family members. He returned frequently for duck hunting excursions, the Long Island Decoy Collectors annual show, and to visit his brother Jack. George died in December at home in his sleep. Our wishes go to his family and bay house friends.



George Combs Jr. with a spider crab.

Long Island Traditions hopes to commemorate George’s life at an exhibit as part of our Maritime Folklife Festival in October. If you are interested in helping, please call us. We are especially interested in recording memories and photographs that chronicle his life. ■

Ranchos Folclóricos Sonhos e Juventude - Portuguese Dance Traditions of Long Island

By Sydney Hutchinson

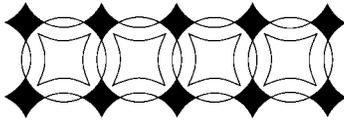
Mineola is home to an old and very large Portuguese community. The Portuguese Club of Mineola was founded in the late 1920s. The current building on Jericho Turnpike dates to 1935, when it was constructed and paid for by the original 12 members. Although immigration has slowed down in recent years, Portuguese traditions are kept alive by second, third, and even fourth generation Portuguese Americans. Today the club, which contains a bar/restaurant and ballroom, is not only a place for the community to gather but is also where the younger generation learns about Portuguese culture. There are soccer teams for young and old, a school of Portuguese language and literature with about 200 students, and two traditional dance groups or *Ranchos Folclóricos*.

The Mineola Portuguese Center’s first dance group was the children’s group *Sonhos*, founded in 1985 by Dominic Cunha and Manuel Carlos. The teen and adult group *Juventude de Portugal* began one year later. Although Dominic has since left, Manny, his brothers and assistant Tony Da Silva keep the group “going strong.” Now nearly fifty children ages four to thirteen participate in *Sonhos* and twenty-four older dancers perform with *Juventude*.

Manny Carlos, head teacher or *ensaidor*, began his dance career at Mineola High School 24 years ago after immigrating to this country from a small town near Braga, Portugal. He and the other Portuguese students were encouraged by their ESL teacher to form a dance group, even though Manny didn’t think much of his dancing ability at the time. He describes his first rehearsal:

A friend of mine in school at that time is an accordion player, so he starts playing. I danced a little bit but I thought it was nothing. “Alright, you guys start - I’d like to watch.” They start and I said, Oh my God! I thought they were going to be really good. “Alright, I’m going to pick up this girl over

see **Ranchos** on page 3



Long Island Traditions Inc.

Dedicated to the documentation and preservation of Long Island's living cultural heritage.

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Sydney Hutchinson, Staff Ethnomusicologist - Activity Report

Sydney has been keeping herself busy with developing some exciting new programs. Recently she met with officers of the Islamic Center of Long Island including Zubeida Lunat, treasurer, and Shaida Khan, chairperson of the Domestic Violence Committee. Together they hope to develop educational presentations on Islamic traditions such as Koranic recitation and calligraphy. Sydney hopes to collaborate similarly with the Indian Cultural Society in Port Washington, which offers classes to South Asian children in culture, language, cooking, music and dance. She is also beginning a long-term cooperative project with the Queens Council on the Arts, the Brooklyn Arts Council, and the Asociación de Músicos Típicos de NY focusing on perico ripiao, or traditional Dominican accordion-based merengue music. The final outcome will be a series of lecture-demonstrations, concerts and/or workshops in 2003.

2001/02 Arts-in-Education Programs

During the fall/winter semester at Dodd Junior High School in Freeport a variety of projects have taken place featuring traditional artists and student research projects. In November English teacher Janet Sganga and Social Studies teacher Steve Whelan developed a unit on Latino immigration in order to understand the historical and cultural changes that have taken place since the 1900s when the first major wave of immigration took place. Participating in the programs were Theo Torres, a Peruvian musician and immigrant and Cesar and Alex Fernandez, Dominican musicians and immigrants. During the program students developed interview questions for the artists about their immigration experiences and the role that music played during their first years on Long Island. Students wrote essays about the presenters as part of their project.

During October English teacher Judi Summers developed a unit on Native American culture on Long Island and surrounding regions. The programs featured a performance and classroom workshops with the Thunderbird Native American dancers and a mini-residency with quilter Ina McNeil of Hempstead. Students developed interview questions and wrote short essays about their findings. In addition a team of teachers from different disciplines had a residency program with Ms. McNeil on traditional cultural practices of her native Lakota tribe of South Dakota. Culminating projects included student-designed geometric paper quilts, a unit on traditional medicinal remedies and stories and legends of the Lakota people.

During November - December Judi Summers and design educator Julie Maurer completed a 5-week project with 7th grade English students on traditional decorations of Freeport. Students, armed with cameras and interview questions, documented a variety of decorations that are part of everyday life. Examples of places documented included police stations and fire houses, waterfront neighborhoods, downtown shops and stores, and students' own homes. The students produced a "photo album" that included selected sites from their research, essays about their sites, and a photo log of the places documented.

Upcoming programs include our maritime folk arts-in-education programs in Freeport, Port Jefferson Station and Mineola districts, the Steel Sensation ensemble in Freeport and E. Setauket, and the Ink Spots at Huntington High School.

These programs are funded by the Freeport School District, the NY State Council on the Arts and the Roslyn Savings Foundation.

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NYSCA Grants

Long Island Traditions has received major project grants from the NY State Council on the Arts for new and current projects. Among the grants are a walking tour publication of the historic sites of Great Neck Plaza and an apprenticeship grant for master vallenato player Eugenio Ortega and his son Juan Ortega. The walking tour will include approximately 12 historic sites in Great Neck Plaza from the mid-19th century to 1965 such as workers houses and the Bauhaus designed Chase Manhattan Bank. The apprenticeship, which has already begun, will allow Juan Ortega to master his father's complex accordion traditions that originated in northern Colombia. Their apprenticeship will culminate in a public program tentatively scheduled for the fall.

here, let's dance." When she saw me, she said, "Wow! Manny, you go in the front! Try to teach them." "Teach? No, I don't want to teach. They're here longer than me; I don't know. I don't want problems with these guys here." But then we got a little group over there in Mineola High School.

Soon thereafter he reconsidered his initial reaction to teaching and started the town's first Rancho at Corpus Christi church. Dance practices were held at the church school right after Sunday services. After seven years and the marriages of several dancers, the group dissolved but Manny's brother decided to start a children's dance group at the Portuguese Club. He asked Manny to take charge. More than 16 years later, his enthusiasm has not dimmed in the least:

If you've got any problems, you come to the dance, you forget everything! That's the best thing. And you have fun with friends - you get friends from all over.

Antonio Da Silva, secretary and assistant dance teacher, was born and raised in Mineola. A second generation Portuguese American, he joined *Rancho Juventude* in 1989. Tony had always enjoyed music and dancing, which form an essential part of any Portuguese celebration from weddings to sweet sixteen parties to Saints' feast days. But he never considered performing until another Portuguese student at Mineola High School asked him to participate in a show for the school's international culture day. Afterwards it became known that Tony was a good dancer and Manny asked him to come to the Rancho practices.

I actually started coming here without my parents knowing. My mother was very old fashioned, strict. I was thirteen at the time. So I used to come here by bicycle at night to come and dance. My father loved dancing. My mother loves dancing too, but it was too early for me to go, to her. She wanted me to be good in school. Then Manny, actually they came to my house one night that I was here late, because there was a performance being done the following Saturday and they wanted me to dance. I told them I would - without my mom knowing. So they came to my house, all three brothers: at 11 o'clock at night they walked in and they convinced my parents. My mom loves seeing me dance - now she admits it!

The group has a sizable repertoire of traditional dances, all of which come from Manny's native region, the northern area called Minho. The beautifully embroidered costumes are also native to that area and are imported from Portugal at great expense (about \$400 for each woman's outfit). The three main dance types are *Vira*, *Malhao*, and *Shula*, each of which is done to a particular rhythm. Other dances include *Ceifeiras* (scythe) in which dancers imitate the motions of cutting a crop; *Serrinha* (saw), where four lines of dancers weave in and out in a sawtooth pattern; and *Rosinha* (rose), a circle dance done to a romantic song. Although the

same general steps are done at social dances where Portuguese music is played, *Rancho* performers adapt and change the traditional moves to add interest and create more complicated choreography. They perform for all kinds of events, from Portuguese holidays to dance competitions to the festivals of other cultural organizations, like those of Mineola's Irish or Jewish Centers.

Ranchos Juventude e Sonhos boast their own in-house traditional music group. Led by a father/son *concertina* (button accordion) duo, the ensemble also includes two *cavaquinhos*, small stringed instruments; *viola*, similar to a mandolin; *bombo*, a two-headed drum; *ferrinhas*, or triangle; and *rabeca*, a wooden scraper. The dancers often add to the sound by playing *castanholas* (castanets) or *panderetas* (tambourines) while performing. Singers are essential and the group has a male and a female lead singer who improvise lyrics as well as five or six women who form a chorus, but the instruments are what give the dancers their cues. As Tony says, "*The concertina tells you when to move, the drum tells you how to move.*"

The dance group's importance to the Portuguese community stems from the fact that it brings members closer to their cultural heritage and to one another. Tony explains, "*It's like one big family, that's what it comes down to.*" A number of marriages have resulted from group membership, making the family ties among some dancers very real. Led by two talented and dedicated men who truly enjoy sharing their traditions with others, the *Ranchos* of Mineola are sure to be an important part of Long Island's cultural tapestry for many years to come. ■

(c. 2001, Emily Timmel)



Head teacher Manny Carlos and his partner show off their costumes from Portugal's Minho region.



(c. 2001, Mineola Portuguese Center)

Rancho Infantil Sonhos de Portugal, the children's dance group of the Mineola Portuguese Center

Quilt Exhibition at LI Museum of Art, History and Carriages

During February 23- June 2 Long Island Traditions will showcase two traditional quilters as part of the Long Island Museum of Art, History and Carriages exhibition "Quilts: A Window to the Past." The exhibition focuses on historical quilts but includes two quilts from African American quilter Ora Kirkland and Native American quilter Ina McNeil. Both women live in Hempstead and have learned to quilt within their families and communities. On Sunday, April 7th there will be a lecture-demonstration program with the women along with Ella Hallock at 2pm. For more information call the LI Museum at 631-751-0066 or Long Island Traditions at 516-767-8803. ■

Latino Fiesta in Freeport

On Saturday, April 20 Long Island Traditions will be sponsoring a dinner and dance party with Luis Cordero y Los Amigos del Amargue. This social event will include a variety of traditional Latino foods including pupusas, tamales, chicken and rice and homemade cakes and pies. Tickets will be \$20 per person and \$35/couple. This social event is at 6:30 - 10pm at the Unitarian Church of Freeport, 228 S. Ocean Avenue, Freeport. For more information call Long Island Traditions at (516) 767-8803. ■

Shinnecock Reservation Project

During the past 5 months Native American artists Denise Silva Dennis, David Martine and Ina McNeil have been working with young people on the Shinnecock Reservation in Southampton to create a mural and quilt on traditions associated with the Shinnecock annual Pow-Wow. The students meet weekly with the artists to sketch, paint and quilt various images based on their research with their family and neighbors. The project will be completed in early February. The program is funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Hagedorn Family Foundation. ■

EVENTS OF INTEREST

PLEASE NOTE: If you have a Long Island concert or program that focuses on some aspect of traditional culture, drop us a line and we'll put it in our "Events of Interest" column. The deadline is the 7th of October, January and April.

- Feb. 9** Long Island Traditions and Landmark on Main Street host a Black History Month concert featuring the Gospel Elders and Little Buster. 8pm. \$10. Call (516) 767-6444 for more information and reservations.
- Feb. 10** Jewish Calcutta Through Music and Memory with Rahel Musleah, Temple Beth El, 45 Oak Street, Patchogue. 11 am. Call (631) 475-1882.
- Feb. 17** Blacksmith Demonstration at LI Museum of Art, History and Carriages, Route 25A, Stony Brook. Noon to 5:00pm. Call (631) 751-0066.
- Feb. 23** Decoy Carving Demonstration, Bayman's Art Decoy Gallery. 1-4pm. LI Museum of Art, History and Carriages, Route 25A, Stony Brook. Call (631) 751-0066.
- Feb. 24** Gallery Tour of Quilts: A Window to the Past at the History Museum. Join Guest Curator Victoria Hoffman for a tour of this new exhibition of more than 29 traditional quilts, from the early 19th century to the present. 2pm. LI Museum of Art, History and Carriages, Route 25A, Stony Brook. Call (631) 751-0066.
- March 17th** Kapelye and the Long Island Cantors Ensemble will be performing a program "Klezmer Meets the Cantors" at Midway Jewish Center, 330 South Oyster Bay Road, Syosset, NY, 7:00 PM. Tickets are \$20 each. For Ticketing call: (516) 938-8390.
- April 7** Quilting program with Ora Kirkland, Ina McNeil and Emma Hallock at LI Museum of Art, History and Carriages. 2pm. Call (631) 751-0066 for more information.
- April 16** Jewish India through Women's Lives by Rahel Musleah. The Community Synagogue, 150 Middle Neck Rd., Port Washington, NY. 6:45 pm. Call (516) 883-3144 for more information.
- April 20** Latino fiesta at Unitarian Church of Freeport. Features performance and dance party with Luis Cordero y Los Amigos del Amargue. Food and refreshments. \$20/person or \$35/couple. Sponsored by Long Island Traditions. Call (516) 767-8803 for more information and reservations.

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