



Fall Newsletter

Volume 20

September 2006

NEWS FROM THE PUBLICATION COMMITTEE

by Pauline M. Golec, Chair

The Society's second postcard book, **LOWELL: THE RIVER CITY** has been successfully launched and enthusiastically received. A book signing was held in May at the Annual Meeting.

We invite you to attend a book signing sponsored by the Lowell Parks and Conservation Trust on September 27 at 7:00 PM at the Spalding House on Pawtucket Street. **LOWELL: THE RIVER CITY**, appropriately enough, includes some rare postcard images of both the exterior and interior of the Spalding House as well as scenes of "green spaces" in Lowell during a 50-year period from the 1890s to the 1940s. Other views in the book highlight churches, schools, waterways, residences, monuments, and Lowell's neighboring towns.

LOWELL: THE RIVER CITY complements and supplements our first postcard book, **LOWELL: THE MILL CITY**, which emphasizes Lowell's growth as a historical industrial city. Postcard scenes of mills, businesses, municipal and social organizations, and streetscapes bring the reader back to that 1890-1940 period in the Spindle City. Both postcard books, enhanced by a chapter of postcards in color, were published by Arcadia and written by the Society's Publication Committee comprised of Pauline Golec, Lew Karabatsos, Tom Langan, and Martha Mayo.

These books promise to be collectors' items and make wonderful gifts. All the Society's publications are offered to members at a 10% discount. Take advantage

of that discount to buy some of our other publications including **BRICKS AND BATS**, a history of some of Lowell's early pro baseball players written by Chaz Scoggins, sports columnist and Red Sox scorekeeper; and the second edition of **MOURNING GLORY**, an illustrated history of Lowell Cemetery penned by Catherine Goodwin, who is known for her informed tours of the cemetery.

Visit the Lowell Historical Society website for a complete listing of publications and sales items.

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Lowell Historical Society Book Sale At The Lowell Bottle and Postcard Show

The Lowell Historical Society will have a table selling copies of the Society's large range of books connected with Lowell at the **Lowell Antique Bottle and Postcard Show** on September 24, 2006. The books will include the Society's postcard series **Lowell: The Mill City** and the just recently published **Lowell: The River City**. The Lowell Antique Bottle and Postcard Show is hosted by the Merrimack Valley Antique Bottle Club. The show will be held between 9:00 am and 2pm at the Lowell Elks Club at 10 Old Ferry Road. Old Ferry Road is just off of Pawtucket Boulevard (Rt 113) in western Lowell. The entrance fee for the Bottle and Postcard Show is \$3.00 but is not required if you are only interested in the Society's Book Sale. For more information, discount tickets, and directions see the clubs website: www.erols.com/choyt/mvbc.

Call Cliff Hoyt at 458-6575 for additional information.

GROWING UP IN LOWELL

An Interview with Luis Alvarado

Written by Gray Fitzsimons
Lowell, Massachusetts

Introduction: In 1972, when eleven-year-old Luis Alvarado, his mother, and five siblings moved from Puerto Rico to Lowell, the city had a small but steadily growing Puerto Rican community. The earliest residents from the island had settled in Lowell in the 1950s, with one of the city's first Puerto Ricans working at Fort Devens. Others soon followed, finding jobs in Lowell's textile mills, shoe factories, and sewing shops. In the 1970s, however, both newcomers and long-time Lowell residents faced a city in economic turmoil. Manufacturing was in serious decline, the downtown and surrounding neighborhoods were becoming increasingly blighted, and the public education system was plagued with crumbling school buildings and an alarmingly high dropout rate.

Some in Lowell linked the city's troubles to the influx of economically struggling newcomers who, like members of the Alvarado family, spoke little or no English. Troubling stereotypes of newcomers, especially those in the Puerto Rican community, became widespread in Lowell and found expression in the city's media. With tensions peaking in the early 1980s, the Lowell Sun ran an important series on the city's Puerto Ricans. While not downplaying the problems of crime and poverty within this community, the Sun's series pointed to the advances that Puerto Ricans were making to the business, cultural, and religious life of the city. Not all readers appreciated these stories, some believed they merely reinforced negative stereotypes, yet many applauded this series for at long last showing the Puerto Rican community's positive contributions to Lowell.

With the aim of extending our understanding of Lowell's various ethnic communities, Gray Fitzsimons, Mehmed Ali, and Father John Cox sat down with Luis Alvarado, known to his friends as 'Quique', and listened to his stories of growing up in Lowell and, upon reaching adulthood, finding work, marrying, and raising a family. The following narrative is from this interview conducted in 2001.

Luis Alvarado:

"I was born in Ponce, Puerto Rico, in 1961. My father was a shoe salesman, my mother was a housewife.

She was going through hardship, you know, raising six kids on her own. She decided to come to the United States. A friend of hers told her that over here she [could] get better help from the government. And we came, I think it was April [of] '72. When we first came we lived on Concord Street. And from Concord Street we moved to Andover Street, and from Andover Street we moved to Newark [New Jersey] because my mother had a brother there. He said over there was better than Lowell. So, not knowing what was up there, we said, "Well let's go." But we only lasted eight months there, and we came back to Lowell. We [then] lived in the Acre. In the early 70's, when we first moved there, the Acre was like a battle zone. There was a lot of fires, a lot of drugs, smuggling, you name it. Fights every night, you know. And there were so many fires. It was so bad we used to take turns to sleep. Because there was so many fires, you never knew if your house was going to be next.

"We were on welfare until we came out of school. I didn't graduate. I went right to work at Lowell Shoe on Bridge Street. They used to make a lot of shoes for hospitals, for nurses and nurses' aids. They made only the white shoes. It was a good experience, because that was really my first job in the mill. And I used to just make the boxes, because I wasn't qualified to work the other machines because of my age. I think I was close to seventeen. So they give me a job making the shoe box, because that was very easy. And I stayed there, I think, it was two years. Then they closed. I started looking for [another] job. I went down to Lawrence Manufacturing [Ames Textiles], but they was only going to pay me \$2.00, \$2.10 an hour. I say, "No." So I went to Commodore Food. They started me off I think it was \$3.00 [an hour], something like that.

"That job was pretty good. I used to do a lot of different things. I used to operate the machine. I used to cut the fish, because I used to get a big block of frozen fish and you cut it into square, or to sticks, whatever the run was going to be that day. And, they had me do a lot of different jobs, [like] packing. Most of the people that worked there were Portuguese, they lived in the same area around Commodore Food and in Back Central. Commodore Food provided transportation. They used to have two school buses and they used to go around Lowell picking up the people, especially the second shift. The third shift used to be the prisoners from, I think it was from Billerica, or something. They used to go wash the place every night.

"Commodore moved to Nashua, and at that time I didn't have a car. A friend told me JoAnn Fabrics was

hiring. So I went [there] and I got hired. My first job was floorman. I used to bring the fabric to the [shearing] machine operators. After they inspected it they sheared it, meaning they cut the pile of the fabric. From one roll you get two rolls of fabric. The Shear Department I worked in was all men. But when I brought the rolls to the inspection, all the inspectors were women.

“When I started I think I was [paid] \$4.35 [an hour]. At that time it wasn’t too bad. That was in 1981. I was single and still living at home anyway, so it was just to help my mother get by. I went to parties on the weekend and I helped my mother with the groceries and the rent.

“When I worked in the early 80’s there weren’t too many safety rules. You do your work you don’t see nobody. But then that started changing because of the accidents and people suing the company. Well a lot of time it was, people cut their hands, their fingers, or whatever, because the machine, because the switch failed. Or somebody fell off a step, because the step wasn’t properly attached to, to the machine. Or the floor was missing a board, and they twisted their ankle. Um, you know, accidents that could have been prevented you know, with a little bit of maintenance. So then they started making safety rules.

“As floorman I used to have a lot of free time and I used to watch the machine operators to learn how to run the machine, because I want to keep moving up. After two or three months, the guy that got me the job got fired, because he took a lot of time out. So they asked me if I wanted the job, and I did. I took the job as a shear operator. And I was a shear operator for over a year. And then there was another job opening in shipping and receiving. So I traveled from shearing to shipping. And I was in shipping for I think about a year, then I went back to the shear department as a lead person, because they needed a lead person. Every time I heard there was job opening with a better pay than mine I used to tell my supervisor I wanted to try it. And at that time there was a lot of jobs, they were very flexible. You know, if you wanted to try it they gave you the chance to try it.

“I wanted more money and the supervisor that I had, he changed my title to assistant supervisor, because there wasn’t any assistant supervisor at that time. It was just a supervisor and the lead person. So he changed the title to assistant supervisor in order to get me more money. So, then I did the assistant supervisor for about maybe twelve, thirteen years. Now I’m doing mechanical work. Because when I was the lead person and assistant supervisor, I had to make sure the machine kept going. I learned how to fix them. I used to tell the mechanic,

here, go fix the machine for me. But the mechanic made more money than me. From my point of view, if you’re giving the order you should be the one making the most money, not the opposite. So I never felt good about that, until one time I knew there was going to be an opening for a mechanic and said that I wanted the job. And I’ve been a mechanic for about probably six, seven years now.

“I met my wife Marta at work. She was one of the inspectors. Marta came to the United States in 1981. She came here legally from Columbia, South America. She started work at JoAnn Fabrics. You presented social security and you got a job. If you knew somebody there you get a job. So she started working there as a cloth inspector, and that’s where I met her. And she worked for the company seventeen years. She just left the company to do foster care. We’ve got two foster children.

“When I started at JoAnn a lot of Portuguese worked there. Also, Columbians. They [company officials] knew that Columbia was big in textiles, so right away they hire you. They wanted the experienced people. In the 1980s there were few Americans; more Portuguese and Hispanic, between Columbians, Puerto Ricans, and a few Mexicans, but the majority has always been Puerto Ricans and Columbians. I learned English in Lowell, in school, in the work place, and you practice a lot on the street, and with friends

“Most of the Portuguese understand what we say, but we cannot understand the Portuguese. So when you go into a mill, if you don’t know English, whether you are Spanish or Portuguese, there’s always somebody that will translate for you. So it’s easy to get by. Still if you’re Portuguese and you don’t know English and you apply for the job, you get the job. But if you say you’re from Puerto Rico and don’t speak English, most of the time they don’t give you the job. And I say that because I think the Portuguese people are not really harder working than we are, but they will do the work for whatever they offer. You see I will say, Okay, how much [are] you going to pay me? If you’re going to pay me so much, and I think the job is worth it for the pay, I take it. But the Portuguese people, if you tell them it’s nine dollars, they say, I take it. I will refuse it for nine, but they will take it.

“One time I heard some rumor there was a guy who started working at JoAnn who wanted to start a union. And he got fired right away. And I heard also, it’s only rumor, I heard that the manager said one time, if somebody ever starts a union I [will] move the company someplace else. It’s just things you hear on the floor.

“When Larry Ansin used to own the company and something was going to happen, we used to hear about it

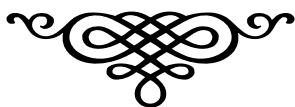
sooner than you hear now. Now everything is a secret. Let's say, next week we're not going to work for whatever reason, we will know Friday. They won't tell us a week or two before. When Larry was here we knew the shut-down was the first two weeks of July; and a couple of times at Christmas. But we used to know ahead of time that there was going to be a shut-down and could use that time as vacation.

"They give you vacation pay, but they don't really like to give you the time. It's very hard to get vacation time. Most of the supervisors there, they're making their own rules. I don't know if it's JoAnn Fabric that doesn't like you to take vacation or if it's just the supervisor that won't give it.

"One time in, I think it was in '84, they switched to twelve-hour shifts. Nobody liked the twelve hours. I got a group together to complain about the twelve hours. I got a lot of signatures to get rid of the twelve hours. But when Human Resources gave me the meeting, no workers showed up. I think they were afraid of getting fired. So I say I will never do something like that again. You know, I will fight for me; I keep fighting until I can't.

"If you're looking for a clean environment, and good benefits, vacation times, you're not going to get it in textiles. Because textile work is dirty and dusty, it's not the best job you can have. I don't think it's a bad experience, but I wouldn't recommend it to make a life out of it like I have. I started there when I was twenty years old. And sometimes I look back and I say, 'Why did I spend my life here?' So, I won't recommend it to my son. I've been on his neck so he can go to college. You know, I think I'm convincing him. Now he says he wants to go to college and become something more. He goes to a Votech school and he's taking drafting; he wants to do commercial art, or something like that. So I tell him, go to college. Don't end up on the textile like I am.

Note: For the complete transcript of this interview visit the Center for Lowell History and consult the Center's oral history collection.



ARCHIVIST COLUMN

By Denise C. Cailler

The Historical Society has received an interesting and very important collection over the summer months. With the help of Mehmed Ali, Director of the Mogan Center we have secured the "Lowell Sun" collection which consist of a mixture of negatives and prints taken by the Lowell Sun photographers before the age of digital cameras. We have spent many hours culling through the file cabinets and boxes in a storage room at the Sun and have begun to physically move them to our office. We should have the move completed shortly. As difficult as this collection was to move and house because of its size, it was well worth its weight. During the primary review of the collection we have determined that it dates between the 1960's and the 1990's.

We are presently trying to secure a grant so that we may first sort and index the collection. The second phase will be to scan the images and make them available for research and other projects.

Many thanks go to Mehmed Ali, Cliff Hoyt, Marie Sweeney, Stephanie Donahue, Shawn Cailler, Michael Pierson, Ben Morrison and Victoria Howard. Without their help we would have never been able to add this collection to our archives.



Marie Sweeney and Stephanie Donahue evaluating and selecting photos from the Sun Collection to be moved to the Lowell Historical Society site.



eBay Auctions of Lowell Interest

J.C. Ayer, Lowell, Mass. advertising cover (envelope) with draft for \$6.25 to pay for newspaper advertising, circa 1877. Sold for \$110.00 plus shipping.



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A sepia advertising photo showing a winter scene with a milk man beside his horse drawn "Sheldon's Milk" wagon. The photo was stated to be in excellent condition and measured 10" tall by 12" wide. Sold for \$124 plus shipping.



Early (1871c) Lowell baseball CDV taken at the O.H. Warren gallery on 89 Merrimack St. Lowell, Mass. The uniforms clearly display the name Lowell. The photograph sold for \$1,147 plus shipping.



Lowell Trivia

By Martha Mayo

1. What Lowell Company built the Statue of Liberty stairs?
2. What was produced by the Lowell Manufacturing Company?
3. In what section of Lowell is Druid Hill?
4. Who were the two brothers that founded the Lowell Sun in 1878?

Answers are on the last page of the newsletter.

And now for something different

We have a trivia question provided by Richard J. Dacey:

What Lowell High School headmaster went on to become a governor of New Hampshire?

Mr. Dacey will donate \$100 to the Historical Society if anyone can provide the correct answer. Send your answer to the Historical Society or email choyt@erols.com. Responding members with the correct answer will be listed in the next newsletter.

Lowell Historical Society
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The preservation of Lowell history depends heavily on YOUR membership. If you have not yet sent in your membership renewal for 2006, please do so as soon as possible.

Lowell Historical Society

The Lowell Historical Society's mission is to collect, preserve and publish materials related to Lowell and to promote the study of the history of the City.

We are located at the Boot Cotton Mills Museum, 115 John Street, Fourth Floor, Downtown Lowell Massachusetts 01852

The office is open on Wednesdays and Thursdays, from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. The telephone number is 978 970-5180 or

On the Web at: <http://ecommunity.uml.edu/lhs>

Answers to Trivia Questions:

1) American Mason Safety Tread Company, 2) Carpets, 3) Pawtucketville, 4) Daniel J. and John H. Harrington

Calendar of Events

LHS Book Sale

September 24 – Book Sale will be held at the Lowell Antique Bottle & Postcard Show, 10 Old Ferry Rd, Lowell (see information Page 1)

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Postcard Book Signing

September 27 – Book signing for Lowell Historical Society's Postcard Series at 7:00 PM at the Spalding House on Pawtucket Street. (see information Page 1)

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All of our programs are free and open to the public. For information or directions call 978-970-5180