



ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

An interview with
Hilda Cantos, 1896-1994

November 7, 1985

This interview was conducted by: Ruth Held
Transcribed by: Virginia White
Edited by: Ruth Held and Thomas E. Walt
Final typed by: Virginia Whiter

PREFACE

Mrs. Cantos didn't think we could be interested in her story. But there is so little information about the Greek community in San Diego that it seemed important to interview her.

We finally met in her neat, nicely furnished home on a quiet street of neat, well-kept small homes near the Normal Heights area. She was just back from the beauty parlor and her black hair was beautifully done. She looked much younger than her years--she was born in 1896--but arthritis has really slowed her down.

Although she's lived alone since her husband died three years ago, the family is in close touch and she has many friends and things to do.

Her two sons and their families live in San Diego.

Ruth Held, Interviewer
November 7, 1985

INTERVIEWER'S NOTE

This is the story of Mrs. Hilda Cantos in her home at 4445 Swift Avenue in San Diego on Thursday, November 7, 1985. She is being interviewed by Ruth Held of the San Diego Historical Society. Mrs. Cantos has an unusual background. She's of Portuguese descent, married to a Greek, so she is a member of both communities. Also the family is very active in the musical circles of San Diego.

RUTH RH: Mrs. Cantos, you were born in Massachusetts?

HILDA HC: Yes, in Gloucester, Massachusetts.

RH: Gloucester? That's a good fishing town, right?

HC: Yes

RH: Did your folks come there from Portugal?

HC: Yes, my mother and dad did, yes, from Portugal.

RH: When did they come from Portugal?

HC: Well, I would say over a hundred years ago.

RH: Oh, really? When they were young . . .

HC: Oh, yes.

RH: After they were married . . .

HC: Right. My dad and mom came from New Bedford, and then after they married, then we moved to Gloucester, and that's where we were born, the family, myself and my three sisters, were born in Massachusetts, and went to school there, and worked there until I got married.

RH: Oh, you married there?

HC: Oh, yes, I married in Gloucester, Mass.

RH: About what time?

HC: 1918.

RH: You were about how old?

HC: Oh, goodness . . . I think I was eighteen . . .

RH: Oh, you were born in 1900?

HC: I was born in 1896. I'm eighty-eight years old.

RH: My word! (laughter)

HC: Oh, yes, I'm really getting up there.

RH: Well, you don't look it.

HC: Well, I feel it, though. You know, I drove a car for fifty years and joined everything that I wanted to join, and three years ago after my husband passed away, well, before, it was coming on, my hands--see? And my legs, and oh, I have this arthritis so bad. There's days I can't even walk.

RH: Well, you look fine today.

HC: Well, I don't always look that way, but I'm telling you, I sit here and think what I used to do, where I went, and now I read more because I'm alone. I have to do the little things more than I used to do, so that's life for you, you know. But when you get older you have to accept what the Lord gives you, so, that's it.

RH: Then you went to elementary school in Gloucester?

HC: That's right, and high school.

RH: Did you go to college at all?

HC: No. I didn't go to college.

RH: Well, you're one of those of my mother's generation, who wanted their kids to go to college.

HC: Well, no, neither one of us, of all our sisters, no one went to college. Those days were different. We did everything. But my dad was a fisherman, and he'd go to the Grand Banks, you know, and be gone months.

RH: Really?

HC: Oh, yes, the Grand Banks--they'd go away for months.

RH: I just thought it was pretty close.

HC: No, sometimes three months or more, and of course the money didn't come in like it does here now. They get paid every week or every month. We had to wait till the check come in, and Mother did the best she could. And we were raised real nice. I'll say that, but we didn't go to college, and I admire my sons, both of them sent their children to college, all of them are college graduates, you know. Bill has four children, and it's different living. But we did a lot of good things in those days, too. Didn't cost like it does today either.

RH: We had a lot of fun and it just didn't cost that much . . . So you met your husband there. Had you known him long?

HC: No. I hadn't known him. I was working on a church bazaar.

RH: That's the way to meet them.

HC: And I just had dolls and teddy bears and all that, and he took a chance on the wheel and he won a big teddy bear, beautiful. And my sister that's younger than myself . . . well, I thought oh, if I could only get that teddy bear, and he said, "What am I gonna do with this?" He said, "I don't have anyone to give it to." I said, "Would you mind giving it to me?" And he laughed. He says, "Sure, you can have it if you want it." So I took it and brought it home to my sister, and then the next day he came in again, and he says, "How would you like to go for dinner with me tomorrow?" And, of course, not knowing him, I have to ask my folks if it was all right. It's a small little town. We know everyone there, so I did and after that we started going together and going together, and we got married, and that was it.

RH: Well, did your folks mind that he was Greek?

HC: Well, my family didn't like it, didn't care for it [he wasn't a Catholic], and my godfather said, "You don't know this man. You don't know who he is. You don't know this and you don't know that." He said, "I disapprove of it." So anyway, we got married, and there was ups and downs like all couples have. Every couple hasn't been smooth, I bet. So that's the way it was, and then we came out here. And my husband, he was a chef when I married him, and he worked at that for many years, and then he went out on tuna boats as a chef.

RH: Now, that's here?

HC: That's here.

RH: When did you come here? Shortly after you were married?

HC: I think 1920.

RH: I'd been here eight years by then, but I was a little kid. So you came in 1920. And he was a chef, so he worked, he found work right away, I'm sure.

HC: No. He . . . well, when we came out here we went to Imperial Valley for a year, but we didn't like it there at all, so we moved here to San Diego, and he worked at that for years, and he had two restaurants of his own. And the tuna was very . . . oh, then you could make money on tuna, so he says, "No, I don't know anything about fishing. I don't want no part of it." He says, "The Greeks like candy stores or restaurants." So he went into that but I talked him into it because all my friends in Point Loma are all Portuguese, and they were making big money, and I thought ours wasn't coming in that fast. So he tried it, and he liked it. He stayed eighteen years in fishing,

HC: and then the war came on, and both our sons were at war, and then he retired. He was sixty years old when he retired. He retired and done anything he wanted to do. I can't tell you what he didn't do, but he went here and there and enjoyed himself.

RH: Well, now did he find a good many Greeks here? Did he immediately get into a Greek group or a Greek church or anything?

HC: Oh, yes.

RH: What did they have?

HC: Well, one Greek family had that meat market right at Tenth and Broadway. Do you remember that?

RH: No.

HC: You weren't here that long, probably.

RH: Well, of course, I was going to high school those days, and wasn't as concerned about meat.

HC: Well, he worked there for a while, and that was before he went fishing, you know, and he worked there, and I met a lot of lovely, lovely Greek people. I know a lot of 'em, real nice people, but he wasn't very . . . he didn't like to do social things. He was a person who wanted to sit at home or read or do what he wanted to do, but we met a lot, became very friendly with a lot of them.

RH: Well they have big Greek events now.

HC: Oh, I'd say they do.

RH: Did they start in those days?

HC: Oh, I don't know . . . course I never went much cause I didn't know the language. I'd go with my husband, but I didn't know. I'm dumb, I guess. I could have learned the language real good if I made up my mind, because they are lovely, lovely people, the Greek people.

RH: I had a girl in my club at Point Loma High named Athena Zarkos. Did you know her?

HC: Zarkos? The name sounds familiar, but remember all the ones I knew . . .

RH: Were earlier.

HC: Yes. The young ones I don't know.

RH: Well, did your husband do the cooking at home?

HC: Oh, quite a bit, quite a bit.

RH: Well, that was a break.

HC: When he retired, and then he became kinda . . . had all these problems of the heart, and I think he was diabetic, and he had so many many things wrong with him. He was sick about three and a half years.

RH: Do you think the fishing is too hard on the men?

HC: Well, you know when you're away on those boats, you don't have a decent bed, and it's rough living, you know what I mean?

RH: Yes.

HC: But he was pretty well up until three and a half years ago, and he died of a heart attack.

RH: Well, let's see. You lived in Point Loma when you first came?

HC: No, I never lived in Point Loma. I lived down on Columbia Street. That was real nice then. I could walk down to Broadway, pull my baby carriage up Broadway. If they saw me now, they'd think you were crazy doing that. I'd a liked to live over there, but my husband didn't like it. He said, "No, if we buy a home, it won't be in Point Loma. I don't like it over there." I wish we had, though. I like it over there. It's beautiful.

RH: Well, the Portuguese now are moving up on top of the hill. They were all close together there for a long time.

HC: I know. Yes, I know all those people. But then, I wish we had stayed over there. My boys, though, Earl was in Hoover High, and Robert was at Wilson, and I saw this home for sale, this one here, we've been here forty-six years, and there was one in Point Loma, and a friend of mine called me, and she says, "Hilda, there's a beautiful home over there and why don't you find out about it." And I went in it and it was just simply gorgeous, and it had a recreation room downstairs, and a beautiful upstairs, and I just fell for it. Only \$7,500.

RH: Oh, my gosh.

HC: So I said to my friend, I said, "Mary, you know what, my husband's fishing, but he told me if I'd see anything I liked to put a down payment till he gets back." Well, oh, I was all enthused, so I come home, and I said to the boys at dinnertime, "I've seen a home in Point Loma, and I think I'm going over tomorrow." Earl says, "Mother, I don't want to move. I want to live right here where we're at." And Robert says, "I don't--my friends--I don't want to go." Well, I

HC: made up my mind I was going. They were still under my roof, you know (laughter), so anyway that night the phone rang. It was my friend Mary. She says, "I got bad news for you, Hilda. The home that you looked at--it belongs to a police officer in Coronado, and he decided that he doesn't want to sell. He's going to keep it."

RH: Oh, so there you were.

HC: So then the other friend that lived down the street here called me, and she says, "Hilda, there's a home up on Swift about two blocks from here, and I come up here, and the minute I saw this home--we made a family room out of the third bedroom back there. But to raise my boys--they had their own bedroom, their own bathroom back there, and everything was perfect, so that night I told them, "We couldn't get the house." They says, "Good." So anyway, that's how I'm here forty-six years. I've always enjoyed it.

RH: Therefore, the boys went to Hoover High.

HC: Oh, yes, over to Hoover and then to--he didn't go to State. He went to Western College.

RH: Cal Western?

HC: Yes.

RH: This is Earl?

HC: Yes.

RH: And Robert?

HC: Robert went to Hoover, and he didn't go to college either. He didn't want to go to college. Then the war came along, and they were both drafted and went to war. They were gone about two and a half years, you know. So that's all I can tell you about living and everything.

RH: Were they in the Navy?

HC: Earl was in the Army and Bob was in the Navy. And thank God they both come home, got married. I've got seven grandchildren.

RH: Now, let's see. I made a little chart with what I know about it. Let's see, what was your maiden name?

HC: Sears. No relation to Sears Roebuck, though.

RH: But you spell it the same.

HC: Yes.

RH: It doesn't sound Portuguese.

HC: Well, it's different. It's really S-O-A-R-E-S, but my dad was very Americanized, and he's the one that changed it to Sears. Then all our family changed their name, and we were all Sears. They all knew us back there by Sears.

RH: Hilda doesn't even seem Portuguese to me.

HC: Well, that's another story. My mother, you know, lived in New Bedford, and this young girl worked for the people where my mother stayed, and she was a young girl and all, and after my mother got married, and when Mother had me, why, she said, "You know, she has a name picked out, but I don't even know how to say it. It's not a Portuguese name." So my dad says, "Well, why call her that?" He says, "We won't know what to call her." And so my friend, my mother's friend said, "Oh, that's a nice name, so I and about three other Hildas in that whole town where we lived, only three Hildas, and it was not a Portuguese name, but that's what I am--Hilda.

RH: (laughter) Well, I think I was named after a girl that brought milk to the family, and my mother thought she was pretty cute. What was your husband's first name?

HC: Theodore.

RH: Then your two sons are Robert and Earl.

HC: That's right . . .

RH: Why does the judge call himself Earl, Jr.?

HC: Earl has an Earl . . . My grandson is Earl, Jr.

RH: Now, is Robert married?

HC: Oh, yes, with three grown children. They have grandchildren.

RH: Oh, my word.

HC: I'm an old lady, you know.

RH: And Earl married Irene.

HC: Yes. If you want to know her Greek name before she was married, T-R-I-F-I-A-T-I-S.

RH: And she was Greek? Did she live here, grow up here?

HC: Oh, yes--no, she's from Connecticut, and then she came out here, and was up in . . . she's a singer, as you know, and she was at a party for Edwin G. Robinson, and she was singing at that party, and Earl was up in Hollywood. He used to be a radio operator. This goes back so many years that I hope I can remember everything, and they went to that party, and he saw

HC: Irene. And my husband and I decided we'd go on a trip to Phoenix, and he had a lot of his relatives down there, and we went down there, and we get a phone call. It was Earl. He says, "Mother, when are you and Dad coming back?" And I said, "I don't know, maybe a week or more." He says, "I've met a Greek girl," and he says, "we're thinking about getting married." And the worst thing happened to me--my gosh, he just met her about two or three weeks ago--I wonder if she's pregnant. (laughter) It was so quick! But Ted says, "All right, let's go home. We have a lot of things to do if they're going to get married." So that's what we done. We came on home, and they arranged their wedding, had a lovely, lovely wedding. I have their wedding picture in that drawer there.

RH: Was it Catholic?

HC: No, no, the Greek. All their children are baptized Greek.

RH: Oh, they are?

HC: Oh, yes, and they're all college graduates, too. You know you know Earl. You know my son?

RH: Yes, I've met him a time or two. Not enough to really know him.

HC: I'm sure he has a good reputation. Of course they're both interested in Starlight Opera.

RH: We used to go to everything.

HC: So did I. The Altrusa Club gave a party last week down in National City, but I was coming down with a cold, and it was that night, and they felt bad that I couldn't go with them, you know. Anytime she sings, I want to be there, you know, but I couldn't go, and then they called me on Monday and told me what I had missed and who sang, you know . . . but I love that Starlight Opera, oh, it's so nice . . .

RH: But they're not active in that any more . . .

HC: Irene's too busy. She has a real estate office right up on the avenue, and . . . busy busy people. I don't know. You never can keep up with them. Every night there's somewhere to go and they live their life, and I'm alone. I enjoy my life.

RH: Are all their children musical? Rita's the one that I know about.

HC: Rita--oh yes, and Roxanne teaches dancing, and Bill is back in Massachusetts. He's getting his masters at the Conservatory of Music in Boston. Bill's the youngest one.

RH: Now is he interested in an instrument or does he sing?

HC: They all sing. Every one of them's got good voices. They sing together, the four, sometimes. It's just beautiful. Sometimes if you ever went there, I'm sure they'd like to do an act for you.

RH: Is that the Greek background, or is that your family?

HC: Oh, it's that Greek background. Her dad had a music studio when they were growing up. We're going back many many years, now, remember?

RH: Well, and are they all beautiful?

HC: Well, I still say, and I'm getting old, and I don't mind the girl that done my hair today, and she said, "You know, Hilda, I admire you because you take so much interest in things." I said, "You know, I'm hating myself many times. I'm giving up everything. I played bridge for years and years. Just get ready in the morning, do my work, zip around here and go and come back at five o'clock, get my dinner. And now I find myself just walking around the house doing little things, you know, so there's nothing to look forward to when you get old." I tell everybody that. (laughter)

RH: Well, I think you find a lot more than some other people your age.

HC: I know, and I like to do things, and I'm still interested in knitting many things that I'll never give up, and I have a lot of phone calls, so I'm all right. I don't feel sorry that I'm eighty-eight.

RH: Did any of the big world events affect your life--like World War I? Your husband didn't go to . . .

HC: No, he didn't. He was called but I was pregnant with Earl.

RH: So he got to stay.

HC: Yes.

RH: How about the depression? Did that really hit your family hard?

HC: Well, not too bad. You know, like I say, my husband was like--well, he could do anything he wanted to do. So we worked down at the Beehive, that was at Tenth and Broadway. Then when he got there, he done something else, and then he went fishing. And then the fishing got really bad. You know that's gone from San Diego. That's too bad, 'cause those people that have those beautiful homes and cars and all those furnishings and all, they're hit hard. But we got in and out of it at the right time.

RH: Oh, that was lucky.

HC: My husband had three boats, and he sold two of them, and one was running, but they never made anything after he stopped going, and so he sold the third one. So the depression really wasn't too bad on us. We always made a good living.

RH: What about Prohibition? Did that affect your family at all, or weren't you even concerned? Of course, he didn't have a restaurant then, and it didn't matter that they couldn't have drinks at the restaurant.

HC: I don't think they served drinks. A small place down on Market . . . he didn't have a great big place. No, that didn't affect us too much, but I think all in all we led kind of a different life, quiet, not too sociable but enough to be in and out of things.

RH: Well, were you really affected when Lindbergh flew over the ocean or . . .

HC: Oh, yes, yes.

RH: Wasn't that exciting, really exciting for San Diego . . . Well, let's see, how about the cooking? Do you cook Portuguese?

HC: Yes.

RH: And you make some of that good bread every year?

HC: I don't make bread at all.

RH: Oh, you don't?

HC: No. For one person? It isn't worth it. But I know how. If I had to . . . I could do it. When I want some lovely rolls or anything I want, I go out to dinner quite a bit, and they have buttermilk rolls out here at a market. I go for them. Always have them on hand. I don't cook too much, but I know how to do it. If I had to . . .

RH: Do you ever go over to the SDS hall?

HC: Yes, every year, every year.

RH: That's good; that's really big stuff.

HC: And I belong to a Portuguese lodge, and they have a meeting once a month, and I have very dear friends on Point Loma. Do you know Mrs. Oliver? Mrs. Lawrence Oliver?

RH: Actually, I don't know her, but I taught at Point Loma High a long time, so I knew the kids . . .

HC: That was the first friend I met in San Diego. I moved next door to her. When they weren't millionaires, let's put it

HC: that way, and she lived next door to me, and she was carrying her baby, and I was carrying Earl, so they were born one month apart. So we bought those great big buggies that they used to put babies in, and we would walk down the street and then go up Broadway, just as proud as we could be, and I've been her friend ever since. She calls me, and I call her about once a week. With all the money they have and that beautiful home and everything, she's the same person she was always. A very lovely, lovely person. Of course Mr. Oliver is dead. He's been gone ten years. On his ninetieth birthday they gave a huge huge dinner down at the Westgate Hotel. I got that little glass up there that they gave everyone, a little glass that says "ninety years old." A very lovely man, lovely people. Then I have a lot of friends over there. Have you ever seen the SDS parade?

RH: Sure.

HC: Isn't that beautiful?

RH: Oh, yes, I should say so. I was never sure how they picked their queens.

HC: Well, first they get the father, and then he takes the daughter--is the queen. If not, it has to be a sister or somebody else. They have to be Roman Catholic. They have to be a certain age--the young queens--everything--and they give that in honor of the Holy Spirit that dwells within us, you know. So--and the money they put in those dresses, and those capes with fur on, dragging down Rosecrans Street. My friend beaded a cape for one of the queens, and do you know, it took her one year from one year to the other to bead that cape. It was gorgeous--all those beads and that fur. And I says, "Angie, my goodness sakes!" She says, "Listen, they're funny people (she's Portuguese), they're funny people. They like to outdo one or the other. If one has a beautiful cape, next year the other one's going to have better." Isn't that something?

RH: Oh, yes. Well, it looks like it.

HC: I know it. Oh, and they give that free dinner, bread and meat to the poor, or to anyone that wants to go, you know. It's a free dinner, because years and years ago the queen of Portugal--she gave away so many things to the poor, and when she died, she asked if they would please continue this fiesta always through the years. And they have. So we do that in honor of the queen of Portugal.

RH: What was her name?

HC: Queen Isabelle. Yes, it goes way back. Now I feel as if I'm in my twenties talking about it . . .

RH: Did you ever march in the parade?

HC: Oh, yes. I waited on table when I was thin and could get going and everything. White uniforms . . . My boys were in it every year.

RH: Oh they were? It must have cost something for their clothes.

HC: No--boys--it isn't so bad. One took the Portuguese flag, and the other one carried the American flag, but it was all white pants, white shirt, and a red tie, and a red sash. So that isn't bad. It never cost me that much to get them ready. But three years ago Mrs. Oliver was the one that was running the fiesta. So she called me, and she says, "Hilda, I want to ask you--my son's daughter is going to be the queen, and do you think you'd like to have one of your granddaughters in it? I'd love to have Kelly in it." So I asked my granddaughter. I said, "Sharon, do you think you'd let Kelly (they're not Catholics, you know)--would you like Kelly to be in the procession?" "Oh, Grandma, I would love it!" She says, "Oh, yes." So I went over there, and a lady made the dress. It was red, all lace, and there was a hoop in it, and a little hat with a rose and everything in it. And that dress alone--besides the hoops and everything--cost me \$150 to have her in.

RH: Oh, my word. I know the material cost like \$100 a year.

HC: That woman makes--I understand--the one that made her dress--and I take her over for the fittings, she makes, Mary Oliver was telling me, she makes about \$2,000 on labor every year for the fiesta. You go there a dozen times, though. Her home--she has a room as big as this, and it's all like a dress shop.

RH: What was her name?

HC: I'll have to think what her name is . . . Mrs. Costa.

RH: Well, we have a lot of interesting things here. What else can you think about that would be fun for us to know?

HC: I think we've covered quite a bit.

RH: So Judge Cantos and his wife were married in the Greek church -- Irene -- and that was here in San Diego?

HC: Right.

RH: And did any of your folks feel uneasy about that?

HC: Oh, no. We just loved her from the beginning. She's a lovable girl.

RH: And the children were brought up Greek?

HC: Oh, yes, but as I go back again, none of them married Greek boys. There goes a generation--you know what I mean? It

HC: changes. But they're all very happy, very lovely kids, everything is great.

RH: Well, they must know a lot of people in the Greek community.

HC: Oh, they're into their Greek community. They had that bazaar up at Del Mar about three weeks ago, and Earl was the one doing the calling for the Greek dance. Of course, they've been married thirty-eight years, remember?

RH: So he does the Greek dance, and he can call it . . .

HC: Oh, yes, they all know the Greek dance.

RH: Oh, good. And they had a ball recently. What did they call it? Panhellenic?

HC: I think their balls come in January. I'm sure it is. But they were here last year, before they went. They come to show me how nice they looked. Earl and his boys had tuxes on, and the girls had those beautiful dresses. They looked beautiful. And my son says, "Mom, why don't you come?" I says, "Earl, I would love to go but I can't even walk around right. I used to dress nice--I could stand straight. Now everything bothers me. I don't want to go; I'd rather be home."

RH: Well, they probably came by and talked to you about it afterwards.

HC: Well, I was glad you dropped by. Too bad I had to keep changing the date. And you know yesterday I told my sister, "I don't dare to tell the lady now tomorrow I'm busy. Saturday I'm busy." The Greeks are having a fashion show at the Hilton, and my son got me a ticket--\$25 a ticket--and I gave it to Irene's sister 'cause I can't go to those things. I've got a formal or two in the closet, but I can't go to those things. Isn't that something?

RH: Oh, you ought to go occasionally.

HC: I did it for so many years. I had my husband to go with. Now, it's sit there. Everybody's having fun. Everybody's dancing. Everybody's having fun. Just sitting there . . . I'd rather sit home and look at TV.

RH: Well, I can see that. Are your folks busy with the opera or the symphony or any of those?

HC: Oh, yes. They go to the symphony all the time.

RH: Were they there Saturday night at the opening?

HC: No. They were over in Hong Kong.

RH: Oh, of course

HC: And I got a card today from Irene, and she said they're having a wonderful time, and they were leaving Tokyo and going to Korea. Then they're going from Korea, and to the island of Macao, and somewhere else--I have the itinerary there--but I can't remember everything, you know.

RH: No, of course not. Well, that's fine. Well, it's been a pleasure talking to you, and I'd say you had a lot to say.

HC: Well, maybe I talked too much, but it's all things that I enjoy through life.

RH: And so I think I'll just say that this is the end of the interview.

END
