

Pedro da Silva, Canada's first official letter carrier**By Jose Mario Coelho, with translation by Maggie Medeiros**

It all started with a short article in a Vancouver newspaper. Industrialist and long-time FPCBP member Virgilio Pires had been visiting Expo 1986 and came across a small item about a Portuguese man named Pedro (Pierre) da Silva, or "Le Portugais." Little was known about da Silva, except that he was considered first official Canadian courier between Montreal and Quebec in 1705.

Pires was intrigued and returned to Toronto, where he told others at the FPCBP about da Silva, setting in motion a series of events that would eventually culminate with a commemorative stamp.

According to a popular saying, "if we don't look after our own, nobody will do it for us." It was with that in mind that Armindo Silva, Frank Alvarez, and Fernando D. Costa, all past presidents of the federation, devised a plan to convince Canada Post to launch a commemorative stamp to symbolize the 50th anniversary of Portuguese immigration in Canada.

Silva took on the challenge to gather more details about the legendary carrier and was determined to garner greater attention within mainstream society of the Portuguese contribution to Canadian history. A commemorative stamp, he thought, would serve to instill greater pride in Portuguese youth. His enthusiasm was contagious and soon many were participating in the research project aimed at paying homage to da Silva.

In 2002, an organizing committee was formed and chaired by Clara Santos to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Portuguese immigration to Canada. The committee formed various sub-committees, one of which included Silva, Costa, Alvarez and Charles Sousa, also a former president. Its purpose was simple: lobby Canada Post, and launch the Pedro da Silva commemorative stamp.

A letter-writing campaign involving various political contacts was started and included MP Joe Volpe – a longtime supporter of the Portuguese community. Silva and Volpe took their fight to Ottawa and were received by then-minister of immigration Dennis Cordele and Canada Post President Andre Ouellette. The meeting was fruitful and generated hope and satisfaction that the project would be unveiled during the 50th anniversary celebrations.

The stamp was unveiled at a gala dinner on June 6, 2003 at the Liberty Grand in Toronto. Organized by ACAPO (Aliança dos Clubes e Associações Portuguesas do Ontário) the event's theme was "Celebrating the Pioneers." The stamp was unveiled by the then-minister of transportation David Collenette.

At the event, Silva read from da Silva's biography. Community genealogist, Ivo Azevedo, da Silva was baptized at "Sao Juliao" church in Lisbon. According to Canada Post, da Silva was an experienced sailor from the school founded in Sagres by Infante D. Henrique, the Navigator.

Da Silva is believed to have embarked on a journey of discovery at some point before 1673 to what is now Canada. In 1677, da Silva, who was also known as Pierre da Sylva, married and later had 14 children. According to 1681 census, da Silva had settled with his family in Beauport, Quebec where he worked as a common carrier. He later moved to Sault-au-Matelot in Quebec City's lower town, and became involved with the

shipping of goods. His proximity to the St. Lawrence River gave da Silva easy access to the ships off-loading goods for delivery within Quebec City and the colony. It is believed that da Silva built a good reputation for transportation goods, packages and letters by offering delivery in all seasons, even the harsh winters. Documentation dating back to 1693 shows da Silva was paid 20 sols (roughly the equivalent of British pound) to take a package of letters from Montreal to Quebec City.

In 1705 da Silva received a letter of commission signed by Jacques Roudot, Intendant of New France, bestowing on him the duty of 'first courier' in Canada. He also received permission to carry letters "from private persons to their address and to bring back the replies." It was da Silva's punctuality, attentiveness and loyalty that earned him the privilege of being a 'regular messenger' of goods as well as royal dispatches and those of the Governor General of New France between Quebec City and Trois-Rivieres or Montreal.

Designed by Clermont Molenfant, the da Silva stamp features an image of Quebec City based on an engraving done by P. Canot (c.1759-1761). A drawing by Richard Short inspired the engraving. A magnificent red seal used by the Sovereign Council of New France displays the King of France's coat-of-arms, symbolizing the secrecy and privacy of the hand-written letter. Embellished with excerpts from official letter of commission signed by Roudot, along with da Silva's signature, the stamp comprises several elements that bespeak da Silva's role as New France's courier.

During the celebrations of the FPCBP's 25th anniversary, it is appropriate to remember da Silva as well as pioneers. There is the Azorean (São Miguel) Norberto Rebelo that opened the first grocery store in Kensington Market, Antonio Sousa who provided the community with the first restaurant on Nassau St., and Father Antero de Melo who was the first priest to arrive and celebrate Portuguese mass.

Although da Silva is no longer here, his legacy and the legacy of the many other Portuguese pioneers remains.