

## Interviews Outer Cape women over 90

*Holt photographs oral historians*

By Mary Abell

Photographer Norma Holt, a summer resident of Provincetown for 25 years, has begun a new series, photographing women at least 90 years old who live on the Outer Cape.

Holt is interviewing her subjects as well, and hopes to compile photographs and taped transcripts into a "regional, oral history book, illustrated with photographs."

Holt is interested in the historical context of these women's lives, as well as their personal statements. "I want to know for everybody's benefit now, what it was like here," she said.

A work in progress, the artist has interviewed and photographed nine women. This current work will be on display at Hell's Kitchen Gallery in Provincetown during the Fall Arts Festival, September 23-25.

Emily Hiebert, wife of the late Dr. Daniel Hiebert who delivered hundreds of Provincetown babies over the many years he lived and practiced in town, has told of the experience of being a doctor's wife.

A resident of Provincetown since the early 20s, she came to town as a young bride. She is now a widow in her 90s.

Other women, like Flora Peters of North Truro, who is 99 years old, lives in the house she was born in.

"She has things to talk about that no one else will have after she dies," said Holt.

"After she dies, that's it. A few still have their memories intact. This is very precious material. It gives a real picture of an area that is rapidly disappearing with each condominium. Each is obliterating a part of history."

While searching for common threads in the lives of the women she has interviewed and photographed, Holt said, "all came from an era long before women's lib. But there were always outspoken gutsy ladies who put up with a lot of difficulty. But they are still articulate, with all they went through from snowstorms, gales or drunken husbands. They are still strong, still with it."

Cultural backgrounds range from Pilgrim stock, "the original Yankee: tough and resourceful," the Portuguese (families of seamen who settled in Provincetown beginning in the mid to late 1800s), Scotch and Irish. The majority came prior to World War One.

Most of the women, said Holt, are from large families, though the majority now live alone. They were used to putting up with difficult poverty, raising a family, often with the husband away from four to six months a year, if he were a fisherman.

"These women had all of it on their shoulders," said Holt. "And they managed very well through low funds, having babies alone, scarlet fever."

Holt said that one of the common character traits she has observed about these women was their "copeability, not resignation" which came from their pioneering spirit.

This kind of spirit, she said, created a "resilient, resourceful society."

"This is what Provincetown is based on," said Holt. "No matter what the nationality."

Holt mentioned the incredible spirit of many of these women. She arrived at one interview exhausted. "I was beat," she said, and the woman she had come to see, though considerably older said, "Take it easy, dearie, I'll make you a cup of tea."

During one session Holt asked her subject if she ever thought of dying. "No, not particularly," replied the elderly lady. "I just go to bed hoping I'll wake up in the morning and when I do, I'm glad."

Most livelihoods on the Outer Cape during the early years of this century were based on the fishing industry and relied on farming as an additional source of income.

Lucinda Ross of Provincetown spoke to Norma Holt of her early childhood: "My father used to go whaling in March and be back home in August. And my two brothers and me, four sisters and mother picked berries, and we planted a garden and sold all we could spare to the A&P in exchange for other food. So when my father got back he found no bills to pay, and my father was the happiest man in town, and we all would go to pray at high mass."

Holt said she has gotten a tremendous amount of help and encouragement from Grace Collinson, a Provincetown resident and senior citizen who has long been compiling documents and information regarding the Portuguese community in Provincetown.

"What I've accomplished has been due to her efforts,"

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Flora Peters, North Truro, 99 years old

Photo by Norma Holt

# Norma Holt

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said Holt. "She has spent years interviewing old people and could write volumes."

Tom Kane, who has a column in the Advocate called "My Pamet" has also been an invaluable help, according to the photographer.

Holt said she eventually hopes to begin a series of photographs of men who live in the community. That is if she can find enough funding support for her project.

"I want to do men," she said. "The history of the fishing community is in those faces. But I began with women because they are a primary interest and as I am funding myself, I indulged myself."

"I'm a pretty liberated lady, always have been. I have a great respect for women, women with a lot of backbone. It is a different history than you can get through women rather than men."

Holt admits that her concentration on women stems from her own concern about aging. "I'm getting older and facing aging with some difficulty," she said. "It helps turn my head into a healthier place."

# Still gazing out to sea

Holt's supersized photos honor the town's Portuguese heritage

By Patricia Farrell

BANNER CORRESPONDENT

Norma Holt, Provincetown's grand dame of photography, says that at one point in her long and varied career she signed herself up for a course in oral history. Then she says, "I quit after the second class." Apparently the instructor preached complete objectivity, telling the class never to get too personal with their subjects. Feeling that this ideal of complete objectivity was probably a false god, Holt went her own way. But this is only in keeping with a woman who has always been fearless in her pursuit of the path that rings most true to her own ear — and eye.

Set to coincide with the Portuguese Festival, Holt's latest creation, five much-larger-than-life photographs on display on the buildings at the end of Fisherman's Wharf, will be celebrated with an opening party from 5 to 7 p.m. on Friday, June 20. Titled "They Also Faced the Sea," the installation honors the Portuguese women who kept house and home together while the men were at sea.

The 84 year-old Holt has every intention of being on hand for the party.

The installation is comprised of five 12-by-14-foot faces of Portuguese matriarchs. Printed on a specialized vinyl mesh material and framed with customized aluminum and stainless steel structures, the magnificent images have been mounted on two separate warehouses where they are slated to be on display indefinitely.

In materials describing the project, it is noted that the Portuguese wives, mothers, sisters and daughters did their part as "cooks, laundresses, nurses, teachers, and telephone operators. They have kept the culture alive, sung the songs, danced the dances, buried the dead, given birth, cooked the kale soup and codfish and kept the church at the center of their lives."

Now, with the completion of Holt's project, their lives are remembered along with the role they played in creating the rich Portuguese heritage we still celebrate.

Holt has always considered photography a tool for communicating and is always in pursuit of ways of keeping her work fresh and new. The idea of distance and objectivity never sat well with her.

"Over time these women and I shared wonderful intimacies," Holt says. "We laughed and cried together."

The end result is a career of producing portraits that art critic Raymond A. Liddell of artsMEDIA magazine describes as "unusually sensitive" and "characterized less by social commentary and analysis than by extraordinary tenderness and affection."

The desire to keep her work relevant is what brought Holt to

this enterprise of photographing the female elders of Provincetown. Having for several years made a career of photographing children, Holt says she began to lose interest. "Believe me," she says, "it was a good living for awhile there, but I found that I had begun to repeat myself."

This wouldn't do.

For a time, Holt allowed herself to drift. Not the most comfortable feeling in the world, but for an artist with any kind of

This was over 25 years ago and several of the photographs that came out of her new focus were collected and displayed at the Pilgrim Monument & Provincetown Museum in the "Keeping Culture Alive" show.

Holt no longer shoots, saying that it's too much of a physical strain. In her day a manual Nikon was her camera of choice. She never took to the automatic cameras. Still, she's not stuck in the past. On the contrary, shortly after the publication of her book

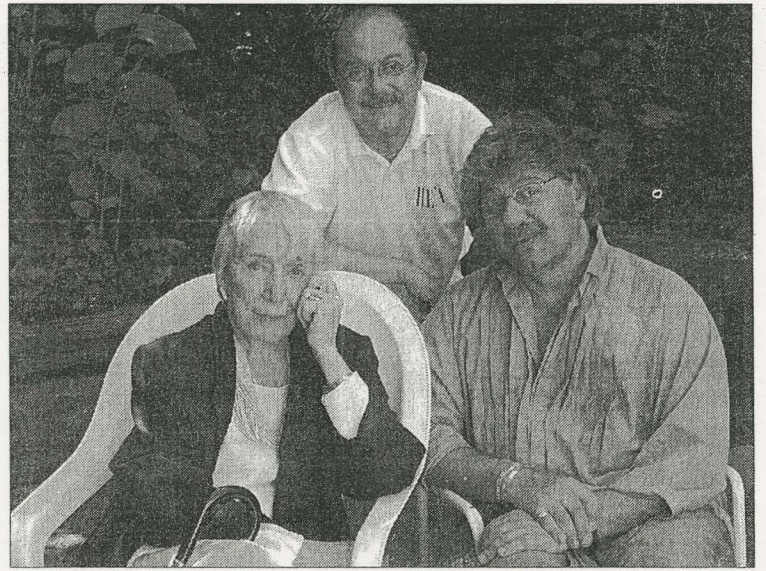


PHOTO VINCENT GUADAZINO

Photographer Norma Holt with friends Donald Winter and Richard DiFrummolo, who assisted in putting together the outdoor photo project on Fisherman's Wharf.



PHOTOS KEVIN MULLANEY

Almost two story tall photo of Eva Silva by Norma Holt graces the side of the warehouse building on Fisherman's Wharf.

integrity it beat repetition. Finally, one day while walking down Commercial Street the inspiration she'd been waiting for appeared. By Holt's description, "It was just one of those things: There she was, this beautifully white-haired lady, wearing a red dress, sweeping her sidewalk. And there's this 'For Sale' sign just behind her." To Holt the juxtaposition of the sign and the woman distilled a moment in time and the life of the town.

Holt recalls, "I asked her to please not leave and I ran home and got my camera." And a new period in her career was begun.

documenting the artists on the Outer Cape, "On Equal Ground," she was on the prowl for her next project. Ewa Nogiec of Shank Painter Printing, who had worked with her on the book, approached her about collaborating again, saying, "Let's do something big." Nogiec's hunch about the direction resonated with Holt, and she found herself noticing truly oversized images — Paul Bowen's collages on fabric in front of the Whaler's Wharf, for example. Another time she noticed some photographs nearly as big as billboards in front of the Pine Street Inn in Boston.

She began to make inquiries about what it would take get some of her images blown up to these kinds of gargantuan proportions. Her quest took her all over but culminated in the breathtaking experience of being on hand at a special lab in Edison, N.J. as the Provincetown women came rolling off a huge press.

At the same time that the technical and logistical aspects of the project were becoming clear, the need for financial assistance was also becoming painfully obvious. This is where part-time Provincetown residents Donald Winter and Richard

DiFrummolo came in. Taking over the fundraising reins, Winter and DiFrummolo have helped Holt raise nearly \$40,000 and come within striking distance of their goal of \$50,000. According to DiFrummolo, the steel frames alone cost \$24,000.

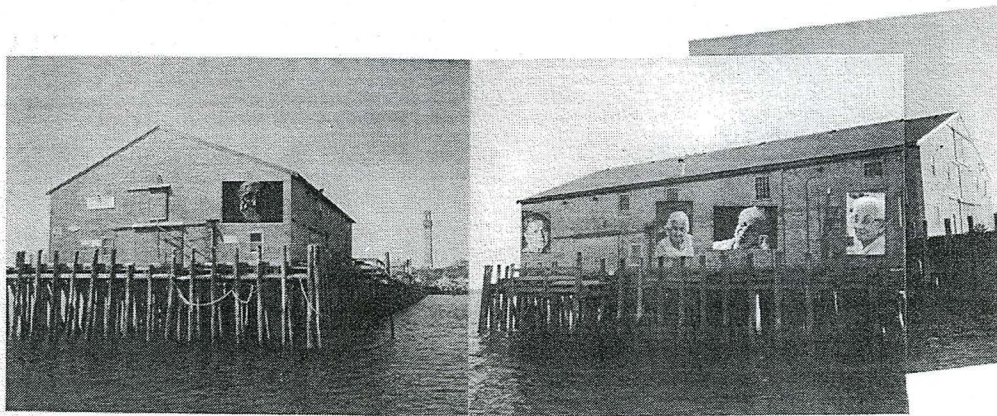
DiFrummolo is retired but he has been coming to Provincetown for 41 years and sees the end result of getting these incredible images mounted in such a prominent manner and place as well worth the fundraising effort. Furthermore, he says, "The show is about women from every culture whose roles and hard work behind the scenes all too often go unacknowledged."

DiFrummolo still hopes to find a way to light the images after dark. In any case, donations to help cover the current shortfall can be made by sending a tax deductible check payable to the Fine Arts Work Center, 24 Pearl St., Provincetown, MA 02657. Note on the check that the donation is for the Norma Holt project.

As for Holt, life simply goes on. While reminiscing recently about her life as an artist in general and that day she spied the beautiful Portuguese woman with the 'For Sale' nearby in particular, she seemed to be of several minds. When speaking of her long stretch as an artist she says almost wistfully that it has been both a blessing and a curse. Then she looks up and with the slightest hint of a smile adds, "In the end, I suppose it's been more of a blessing." Similarly, when she adds that the changes she's seen over her 45-year relationship with the town have sometimes been tough to take, she's quick to add, "History can't sit still."

However, it can be given its due and even honored. The late Provincetown activist Grace Gouveia once said, "The ideal fishermen's memorial would be a tribute to the women who stood waiting on shore, watching for the fishing boats to round Long Point to see if their husbands were dead or alive."

If that is in fact the case, Holt's "They Also Faced the Sea" may well achieve something akin to perfection. □



*This is one possible layout for the display of large photographs by Norma Holt that will be displayed this summer on the building at Fisherman's Wharf.*

# Holt's giant homage to Portuguese community grows

By Sue Harrison

BANNER STAFF

Norma Holt, a photographer who splits her time between New York and Provincetown when she's not otherwise traveling around the globe, has often turned her acute eye on Provincetown. She completed a set of artist portraits ("Face of the Artist") that Robert Motherwell described by saying, "At her best, she has succeeded as Marcel Proust did in his last volume, in holding still a place in time for our meditation." She now is in the process of creating a series of large (12 to 14 feet square) photographs of Portuguese women entitled "They Also Faced the Sea" as an homage to the Portuguese immigrants who made Provincetown their home and changed the flavor and texture of the community.

The photographs, similar to those in Boston done for the Big Dig, are being printed on special fabric that will be mounted on large frames before being hung on the building at the wharf. Although no date has been set, the pictures will be in place prior to the beginning of the annual Portuguese Festival in late June.

To finish the work, Holt and project manager Donald Winter are seeking tax-deductible donations to offset the remaining cost (\$18,000) of producing, framing

and mounting the large photographs.

"We are still looking for the final dollars to make it happen," Winter says.

"We have gotten money from the Banner, the bank [Seamen's], the Portuguese Festival and from private and business donations," the indomitable 80-something-year-old Holt says. "But no one is a millionaire. No amount is too small. Some of my friends say, 'Norma, would you take \$50?' I tell them, 'Damn right, I will.'"

Holt's previous chronicling of the arts community in portrait, with accompanying brief biography by Pam Mandell, culminated in the book "On Equal Ground." She also created a photographic series, "Keeping Culture Alive," based on the Portuguese immigrant population for the Pilgrim Monument and Provincetown Museum in conjunction with the Puffin Foundation. She traveled in Europe and Africa photographing for the United Nations. Those trips also resulted in the "Africa Unadorned" collection of photos of aging West African women purchased by the Richard Florsheim Fund.

For this current project, Holt turned to a familiar subject — women — to express her impression of and admiration for the Portuguese community.

"This is a tribute to all the

women who kept the town going," Holt said when she started the project. "They worked so hard and did wonders.

"Their husbands, fishermen, were often gone for long stretches and even the shorter trips put them in danger from the unpredictable sea. The women of town kept the houses in order, took care of the children, the gardens and always kept an eye toward the sea, waiting for the boats carrying their husbands, fathers or sons to round Long Point and make for safe harbor."

In a letter describing this project, Holt writes that census figures in 1939 reveal that 75 percent of the year-round population was of Portuguese descent. She writes, "These women kept the traditions, sang the songs, buried the dead, cooked kale soup and cod and went regularly to church. Their lives and labors touched everyone, became embedded in the building of this unique, thriving community. Above all, these women were resilient — their strength and their courage easily matching their male, seafaring counterparts."

Donations can be made by sending a tax-deductible check payable to the Fine Arts Work Center, 24 Pearl St., Provincetown, MA 02657. Note on the check that the donation is for the Norma Holt project. □

# Provincetown photographer shares images and memories

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By Reva Blau

BANNER CORRESPONDENT

Last Thursday, watching the parade to mark the Pilgrim Monument's 100 years, photographer Norma Holt stood with her cane on Commercial Street and made small talk with the big group sharing the narrow sidewalk. Counting them, she says that there were at least three generations of the Nelson family, whose deep roots in town are evidenced in Nelson Avenue that juts off from Race Point Road.

Holt told them that she was the photographer who made, "And They Faced the Sea," the five larger-than-life black-and-white images of Provincetown women of Portuguese descent, mounted at the end of MacMillan Wharf. They jumped up and down in the street and threw their arms around her. They shared memories they had of Almeda Segura, Eva Silva, Mary Jason, Bea Cabral and Frances Raymond.

A collaborative project with Ewa Nogiec, the mounted photographs celebrate all the Provincetown women who were backbones of the Provincetown



PHOTO REVA BLAU

*Norma Holt exhibits her photographs at Seashore Point in Provincetown through Sept. 15.*

fishing community for centuries, as their husbands, fathers, and sons built an unrivaled fishing industry.

Throughout her 50-plus year career as a photographer, Holt has created images that celebrate the deep reserves of interiority of their subjects, whether they are facing the camera or caught up in the work of their own lives.

Holt, who is represented in Provincetown by the Schoolhouse Gallery, will be showing her work at Seashore Point in Provincetown in a joint project

between the retirement community and the art gallery.

"The Schoolhouse decided it would be interesting to expand the walls of the gallery," says Holt. "Seashore Point is interested in reaching out to the community."

The exhibition will present close to 20 photographs that date from various points along the photographer's career. Now a Provincetown resident, Holt shot on assignment for the United Nations for several years from her beloved home of New York City. Over the years she would travel

to document UN-sponsored projects designed to aid women living in poverty in underdeveloped nations in the process of trying to achieve financial independence. Her career took her to Egypt, North and Central Africa, Cuba, Nepal, and India — all of which were cut off to most American travelers at the time, particularly women.

"In Egypt," Holt says, "I was often under threat. They were not accustomed to seeing a woman traveling alone. Someone was always trying to break my camera." Rather than quit, she hired a bodyguard.

In Nepal, she had to climb into the thin air of the Himalayas with no previous training in mountain climbing. "I was terrified of the heights," Holt says. She had been sent to document women orange growers. "One side of these mountains was ice," Holt describes, "and on the other side the hot sun."

From the oranges, the women extracted a powder out of which they would make a drink that they could sell. On these assignments, Holt would extend her stay in order to shoot her own images.

She has published two collec-

tions of photographs: "Face of the Artist" and "Africa: Unadorned." She also photographed images for the book, "On Equal Ground — Photographs from an Artists' Community at the Tip of Cape Cod" published in 2001 by the Provincetown Art Association and Museum.

The work for this exhibition will be borrowed from collectors. If a visitor would like to buy a piece, then an archival print can be ordered. Holt refuses to cross into the digital age, preferring the velvety blacks of the film. In fact, the photographs in "And They Faced the Sea" were the first she ever had printed digitally. They are printed on perforated vinyl. She notes that they have small tears in the fabric that can be repaired. Asked how the inks have held up in the salty air, Holt says she has no idea and muses that perhaps it is thanks to the strength of their subjects.

*"Norma Holt Photography — A Mini Retrospective" is up at Seashore Point, 100 Alden St. in Provincetown, through Sept. 15 and available for viewing from noon to 3 p.m. daily. Holt will be discussing her work at a reception Sunday from 3 to 5 p.m.*