

THE GLORIOUS HISTORY OF MARIA DABLEMONT: PART I

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doi :10.14434/hindsight.v50i2.27039

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ABSTRACT

Maria Dablemont (1919-1992), co-founder of the Optometric Historical Society (OHS) and head librarian for the American Optometric Association (AOA) from 1964 to 1988, had a profound impact on the profession of optometry in the United States. At a crucial moment for the AOA, Dablemont helped to pioneer a new, forward-looking professional identity for the American optometrist, and articulate an origin story that mapped the future the association was plotting for the profession to its past. In part one of this biography, we have drawn a sketch of Dablemont's life before joining the AOA (1919-1964) and explore how her life experience made her the perfect agent to help the AOA to craft a new ideal of what it could mean to be an optometrist. In part two, we will trace Dablemont's personal and professional development through the lens of the history of the International Library, Archives & Museum and the OHS from 1964 until her retirement in 1988.

KEYWORDS

Maria Dablemont; Optometric Historical Society; American Optometric Association; Getulio Vargas; professional identity; International Library, Archives and Museum of Optometry

INTRODUCTION

Maria Dablemont (1919-1992), co-founder of the Optometric Historical Society (OHS) and head librarian for the American Optometric Association (AOA) from 1964 to 1988, had a profound impact on the profession of optometry in the United States. During Dablemont's tenure, the AOA and its affiliates had a hand in shaping almost every optometric institution and regulatory body that exists today, and built an advocacy program that succeeded in expanding the scope of practice and jurisdiction of optometry far beyond what was thought possible, practical or even desirable during the first 50 years of the association's existence. In order to mobilize membership behind these goals, the AOA first had to create and impart to its members an image of themselves as agents of change with an important part to play in the developing story of optometry. To do this, it was necessary to construct a professional identity and origin story for optometry that wove the AOA's vision for the future of the profession together with its past. It was in Dablemont, drawing deeply—if unconsciously—from her own experience, that the AOA found the person with the vision to see that institutions like the International Library, Archives & Museum of Optometry (ILAMO) and the OHS could manifest this ideal, and ground modern optometry in the solid foundation of history, capturing the imagination of, cultivating loyalty in, and inspiring action from the association's membership. In part one of this biography, we create a sketch of Dablemont's life

before joining the AOA (1919-1964) and explore how her experiences made her the perfect agent to help the AOA to craft a new ideal of what it could mean to be an optometrist in the twentieth century and beyond.

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY AND ORIGIN STORIES

Current research in sociology and organizational theory points to the importance of a cogent, distinct professional identity in promoting an individual practitioner's personal well-being, ethical and successful practice, and participation in the activities of professional organizations. The more an individual identifies as a member of a particular profession and has a deep sense of what being a "professional" within a particular specialty means, the more likely they are to act in accordance with the directives of their professional associations and regulatory organizations, organize and take action in pursuit of collective goals, and value membership in the group.¹

But the genesis of a professional identity cannot take place in a void; most professions define not only what they are, but how they "became." They must model a professional identity on relatable characters and set them in motion in compelling stories. Dr. David Goss has referred to one of these stories as optometry's "origin myth"—a narrative that traces optometry's beginning to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century when the battles that Charles Prentice

waged with organized medicine lead to the founding of the organization that would become the AOA and inaugurate a quarter-century quest to make optometry a legislated profession.² Goss points out that there is, of course, a different and, in his view, more accurate narrative that pushes the point of optometry's origin back many centuries, expanding it into Europe, the Middle East, and Asia.

Still, any story of optometry's origin is still just one story, carefully curated for a particular purpose. The Prentice-AOA narrative and the more expansive history of optometry Goss prefers are both more or less true, even if neither one is *the* truth. The first one demarcates the origin of the profession in America, and the other encompasses its scientific foundation, but each is still only one reconstructed strand in what most historians recognize as a more dynamic, complicated web of reality. The AOA-Prentice origin story revisited at mid-century grafted the AOA's efforts to expand the scope of practice to American optometry's roots, justifying the course of action as an homage to optometry's founding fathers. For this reason, it became the tradition favored by organized optometry. Likewise, it isn't surprising that Goss (and Hofstetter before him) takes the long view, favoring the tradition which celebrates optometry as a branch of science and part of academia. As Centeno says of nationalist Latin American histories, these stories are used to inform "traditions" and on some level all traditions are "invented"³ just as histories are constructed. Therefore, rather than consider if these origin myths are true or false, it may be more constructive to look at the function of the histories and examine how they are used to inspire purpose, identity and action.⁴

A GOOD CITIZEN OF THE *ESTADO NOVO*

While the construction of professional identity may be a new area of analysis for social theorists, it was intuitive for Maria Dablemont, whose life in Brazil under the nationalist dictatorship of Gétúlio Vargas gave her a singular and ingrained understanding of how to craft both identity and narrative history in the service of building allegiance and establishing institutions. For its part, the AOA leadership recognized the value of their institutional history but at the time of Maria's hiring were more directly concerned with documenting the contributions of aging charter members, worried that their legacy would be lost to the ages. There were a few, however, that recognized the power of history to strengthen loyalty and persuade membership to participate in implementing the AOA's vision and it was in these leaders that Maria would find her allies.

It may seem like a stretch to compare the AOA's attempt to construct a professional identity for its constituents and

perpetuate an origin story for optometry to the machinations of a nationalist political regime, but like most propaganda campaigns the purpose of the project and the tools the AOA used are remarkably similar to the Vargas', even if in miniature. When Maria was 10-years-old, the charismatic Vargas was appointed as provisional leader of Brazil courtesy of a left-leaning military *coup d'état* called the "Revolution of 1930."⁵ In order to dismantle the power of Brazil's landed aristocracy who had inherited their control over the country's politics, economics and culture from the colonial power structure, Vargas established the *Estado Novo* or "New State," which employed a strategy of rapid modernization and expansion of infrastructure coupled with a well-organized, state-implemented re-education campaign to fashion a new cultural ideal for Brazilians and revisionist history of Brazil.⁶

During his first decade in power, Vargas created political, economic and social institutions in his own image, nationalizing and expanding the federal railroad system, and taking control of municipal life through strict regulation of the public schools and the local media, and mandating patriotic civic celebrations that perpetuated a new, uniquely Brazilian identity and promoted his vision of a culturally modern, technologically advanced, society populated by an educated citizenry.⁷ To consolidate his hold on the government, Vargas established an impressive suite of administrative agencies that he proceeded to staff with a new class of intellectuals cum technocrats that owed their status and positions solely to him and the success of the new order.⁸

The Vargas years are unquestionably the most resonant in Brazil's modern history because his influence was not only political or even economic, but also cultural. One of the most powerful ways that he legitimized his government was to ground it in Brazil's history, tying his modernist regime directly onto an idealized history of Brazil. In his 1994 article in the *Luso-Brazilian Review*, Daryle Williams describes Vargas' engagement with institutions of patrimony like Brazil's National Historical Museum:

the fledgling Vargas regime insinuated itself among the greatest figures and movements of the Brazilian past ... the Revolution of 1930, quickly became a part of ... the difficult, yet glorious, process of forging a strong, independent, and unified Brazilian nation-state ... The Vargas regime cultivated an intimate relationship with the memory and materiality of the Brazilian past through an expanding network of federal institutions which cared for Brazil's national historical patrimony ... [and were] implicitly

charged with incorporating Vargas and the Vargas project into the collective historical memory of the founding fathers and ideals of Brazilian nationhood.⁸

While none who knew her would deny Maria agency, her biography reveals that she was a model citizen of the *Estado Novo* and a fully actualized archetype of Vargas' vision. Maria's education, career, her worldview and even her family's movements to and from Brazil during the course of her life illustrate that she considered herself a member of the urban intelligentsia—a daughter of a new erudite class of men with roots firmly planted in her native country's colonial past. Her instinct and talent for creating stories and commemorating past glories to motivate action were present in the identity she projected for herself, and that which she envisioned for optometry. She was the perfect person assist the AOA in creating an origin story that would connect the association's vision of a modern professional to the great men of the past.

A DAUGHTER OF THE MEN OF LETTERS

Born Maria José Florence Dias on October 27, 1919 to Otaviano Celso de Oliveira Dias and Almerinda Florence Dias, Maria described her family as "traditional" and "conservative," with "a deep value on education and culture."^{9,10} She identified her father as a *luso-brasileiro*, tracing her paternal line back to the original Portuguese families that settled in Brazil during the sixteenth century. The de Oliveira surname is ubiquitous in Brazil and the de Oliveira Dias family has deep roots in the political and academic history of northeastern region of Bahia. Satyro de Oliveira Dias (1844-1913), one of the Alagoinhas region's most famous sons, made his name as a physician, medical researcher, politician and war hero. De Oliveira Dias served in Bahia's General Assembly and, as the Director of Public Instruction (1890-1913) he appointed his younger brother, Otaviano de Oliveira Dias, as secretary of Salvador's Instituto Normal. The younger de Oliveira Dias held this position through the first two decades of the twentieth century.¹¹ The early baptismal records for Alagoinhas have not been indexed, so while a direct connection could not be made between Maria's father and his namesake, Maria's own description of her family history, her early education and academic career, and her multiple appointments as a government functionary—as well as her striking physical resemblance to the elder de Oliveira Dias—provide strong circumstantial evidence of a relation.

Maria also implies that her mother, Almerinda Florence Dias, has a distinguished past, tying her to one of Brazil's most renowned nineteenth-century French immigrants. Her assertion that her maternal great-grandfather was French

coupled with her mother's rather uncommon Brazilian family name "Florence" suggests that Almerinda, born in 1883,¹² was the grandchild of the French artist, inventor and explorer Antoine Hercule Romuald Florence. A native of Nice, Florence arrived in Brazil in 1824. During his lifetime in Sao Paulo, he fathered 20 children with two wives, both daughters of his erudite circle of patrons which included journalists, scientists, physicians, high-level bureaucrats and naturalists.¹³ Among his many activities, Florence made early connections with other French expatriates in Rio de Janeiro's newspaper trade, providing illustrations for several publications such as Pierre Plancher's *Jornal do Comércio*. Like many literate, middle-class women, Almerinda—who may have gained access to the post through her family connections—would also write as a local correspondent for the society pages of Rio's *Gazeta de Noticias*, where a facility with French and artistic ability would have proved valuable to the newspaper's translated French serials and frequent caricatures.¹⁴

Maria's family history—her roots in both Brazil's colonial past and the intellectual tradition of republican Brazil—was critical to her identity and constituted an important part of her personal and professional origin story. It also bears a remarkable resemblance to the one she would help craft for optometry; an educated professional born of "learned men" of science, applying her skill to make their vision manifest. Like optometry's origin myth(s), Maria's genealogy is true, but her selection and presentation of these aspects of her history are a reflection of her education and upbringing in Vargas' Brazil.

CHILDHOOD AT THE TERMINUS

Maria's hometown, Alagoinhas, is a mid-size city in the Brazilian state of Bahia. Known as the "backwoods gate," Alagoinhas (in Portuguese "at the little lagoons") is situated at the edge of the *sertão*, 76 miles northeast of the Bahia's capitol city, Salvador.⁷ The village gained status as an independent municipality in 1853 thanks to the promise of its arable land, its large fresh water aquifer, and its strategic location along the road from Salvador's ports to the São Francisco river valley and the superb grazing area in Brazil's backcountry. The Salvador-São Francisco railway was completed in 1863, connecting Alagoinhas to Salvador, and forming the stem line of the Federal Railway of Bahia.¹⁹ By Maria's first birthday in 1920, Alagoinhas was a busy commercial center with a diverse population of 37,000 inhabitants settled around the railroad station, and an economy, political apparatus and culture heavily influenced by the urban hub at the end of the line.¹⁵ Alagoinhas would become a model city of the *Estado Novo*, a rural village that blossomed into a cradle for the new, modern Brazilian.

THE TEACHER

As a child of the Vargas regime, Maria's education was, next to family, the single most important factor in shaping who she would become both personally and professionally. The first laws mandating the establishment of secular schools in rural Brazil were passed in the 1830s, but these had developed in fits and starts until the turn of the century when the building of new schools accelerated under the influence Bahian politician and intellectual Ruy Barbosa de Oliveira. Barbosa's *Escola Nova* or "New School" movement was adapted from the ideas of American educator John Dewey who promoted the school as an incubator for citizenship, which appealed to positivist ideals of Brazil's "Old Republic" (1889-1930).¹⁶

Maria entered primary school in the mid-1920s. At this time there were 17 schools in Alagoinhas serving more than 1000 students, but with only 18 teachers and mostly catering to the children of the local elite, of which Maria was presumably a member. The curriculum of Maria's primary school reflected the Eurocentric worldview of the elite in pre-Vargas Brazil who looked to France as a model for its institutions.¹⁷ The public school curriculum and teacher training in Maria's early years featured instruction in French and Portuguese, European history, math, and "Christian principles."¹⁸ It is likely to this early training that Maria owes her multilingual skills, international outlook and strong Catholic faith.

In 1925, Brazil passed Public Law No. 1.846 mandating the consolidation and regulation of public schools, putting the power of legislation behind the *Escola Nova* movement. With new curricular and teacher training standards based on "principles of modernization and development,"¹⁹ the law created a network of *Escolas Reunidas* (Gathered Schools) in rural areas formed by consolidating the disparate, understaffed schools into unified state-sanctioned primary and secondary institutions, and expanding the curriculum to include courses on physical and biological sciences and the arts.

Dramatic improvements in infrastructure transformed rural Bahia between 1920 and 1930, exemplified by the modernization of Alagoinhas. In 1929 10-year-old Maria saw her small town electrified by a new power plant and a new *Ginásio* (high school) and *Escola Normal* for the education of teachers.¹⁵ By 1937, the *Estado Novo* in Alagoinhas was in full swing and the town had become a model city for the new regime. The Vargas administration accelerated its use of schools to promulgate the *Estado Novo* and to consolidate its power. By infusing the curriculum with patriotic themes and organizing civic life around the education of children as good

citizens, Maria was primed to mature into a proud member of the educated intellectual class. The daughters of the "men of letters"⁷ like Maria were valued as keepers of the culture in Vargas' Brazil, and *luso-brasileiras* were encouraged to pursue degrees in teaching and then were appointed to positions in

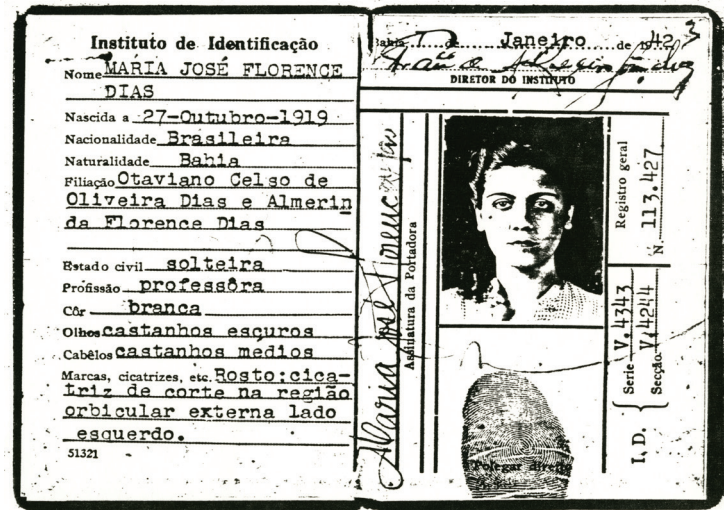


Figure 1: Maria José Florence Dias. Identification card for the Instituto Normal do Bahia, January 7, 1942.

state schools or as low-level administrators where they acted as important agents of the state ethos.

In 1938, five more schools opened in Alagoinhas, including the new *Escola Normal* where 19-year-old Maria began pursuit of a teaching degree. During the inauguration of these new schools, the city received a visitor who would play an important role in Maria's life: renowned Brazilian educator Dr. Isaias Alves de Almeida.^{10,16} Alves was trained as a psychologist and lawyer, but worked primarily in educational administration and testing. Between 1905 and 1911 he was the Director of the *Ginásio Ypiranga*, a military-style private academy for working class boys in Salvador. After earning a degree from Columbia Teacher's College in New York, he returned to Bahia where he held numerous positions in education including Secretary of Education and Health and Director of the Faculty of Philosophy, Sciences and Languages at the University of Bahia.²⁰

After Maria graduated *summa cum laude* with her teaching degree in Alagoinhas, she joined Alves in Salvador where he was overseeing the construction of the *Instituto Normal do Bahia*.^{10,20} Here she completed a "superior" course in teaching under Alves' instruction, while supporting herself teaching history and math to the boys at the *Ginásio Ypiranga* and completing a research paper on "The Baroque Influences in Brazilian Literature."¹⁰ In 1942, Bernadette Sinay Neves, a professor of civil engineering at the University, founded the

School of Library and Information Sciences, where Maria took advantage of the first courses on Library Sciences offered in Bahia.²¹ (Figure 1)

THE LIBRARIAN

In 1935, the Vargas government nationalized the railroad and, in 1938, Brazil purchased its first diesel-electric locomotive from the English Electric Company.²² These engines pulled aluminum cars manufactured in Bahia and, in 1943, the second train was being fabricated in a plant outside Alagoinhas to use in transporting workers to new rubber plantations on the Bahian coast.¹⁵ Following her library training, Maria was appointed by the Vargas government in May of 1943 as a librarian for the Brazilian Federal Railway, the *Viação Férrea Federal Leste Brasileiro* (VFFLB).^{10, 23}

In her position as an “officer” at an agency as important to the Vargas regime as the national railroad, Maria assumed her full role as a productive member of Brazil’s new white collar elite at one of the most important unifying institutions of the *Estado Novo*.¹⁵ Her childhood in the relatively metropolitan Alagoinhas, with its constant influx of foreigners brought in by the railroad, made her comfortable in her new post in the busy Bahian capitol where she interacted frequently with international businessmen and other members of her class, living with her sister Avany, in the Barra Praca neighborhood near the University of Bahia.²⁴

Despite the eventual rightward slant of the Vargas dictatorship, Brazil was an American ally during World War II and there was considerable investment in Brazil by companies such as Ford Motor Company which looked to Brazil’s natural rubber industry to maintaining tires and hoses in Allied vehicles. The rubber boom of 1942-1945 went hand-in-hand with the expansion of Federal Railway and, consequently, the spread of African mosquitoes carrying the malaria virus. In response, the Vargas government launched a massive and largely successful malaria eradication program. In 1944, he welcomed St. Louis-based Monsanto Chemical Company and its new chemical DDT (dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane) into Bahia to battle the spread of the vector.²⁵

In February of 1945, Earl Rollan Dablemont, arrived in Salvador as a mechanical engineer in the service of Monsanto.²⁶ Earl was born in Moberly, MO in 1905 to Vitor Jean Dablemont, a French immigrant, and Izora Mallory, a first generation American with a French-Canadian father.²⁷ Nearly 15 years Maria’s senior, Earl was a recently divorced father of two who had been working in Monsanto’s downtown St. Louis plant since at least 1940.²⁸ Maria and Earl’s courtship

REPÚBLICA DOS ESTADOS UNIDOS DO BRASIL
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MODELO S.C. 129

Esta ficha, expedida em duas vias, será entregue à Polícia Marítima e à Imigração no porto de destino

Nome por extenso..... **EARL ROLLAN DABLEMONT**
Admitido em território nacional em caráter **Permanente**
Nos termos do art. 2º letra - do dec. n. 7967, de 1945
Lugar e data de nascimento **Moberly, MO. 13 de Fev. 1905.**
Nacionalidade **USA** Estado civil **casado**
Filiação (nome do Pai e da Mãe) **Victor J. e Izora A. Dablemont**
Profissão **Engenheiro**
Residência no país de origem **4338 Swan Ave. St. Louis, MO.**
NOME IDADE SEXO
Edward George Dablemont 2 Anos Masc.

FILHOS MENORES DE 18 ANOS **Viaja em companhia da esposa, D. Maria José Dablemont, cidadã brasileira, portadora de passaporte Nº 059866, expedido por este Consulado em 1/8/50.**

Passaporte n. 322501 expedido pelas autoridades de Depto. de Estado, EE.UU. na data **7 de julho, 1950.**
visado sob n. **496**

ASSINATURA DO PORTADOR: **Earl R. Dablemont**
O CONSUL: **Heraldo F. Oliveira**
em **Chicago** do Brasil
2 de agosto de 19 50.

NOTA—Esta ficha deve ser preenchida e enviada pela autoridade consular, sendo as duas vias em original.

Figure 2: Immigration Card. Dablemont, Earl Rollan. 2 Aug 1950. in Brazil weathered the political turmoil of another *coup d'état* that would briefly depose Vargas in 1946. In the years following the coup, Brazil suffered from instability, shrinking salaries for the professional class, and rising inflation. These factors, combined with Maria’s pregnancy, may have inspired the Dablemonts to wait out the next few years back in the United States.²⁹

Maria and Earl, with her sister Avany in tow, arrived in New York in December of 1947 on the *S.S. Mormacsea*.³⁰ The Dablemonts remained in the United States for the next two years, living in the Compton Heights neighborhood of St. Louis City. On July 9, 1948, Maria gave birth to her son, Edward George Dablemont.³¹ A U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Manifest documents Maria’s passage through the Port of Detroit from Canada the following year on June 2, 1949.²⁴ It is possible that she was returning from a visit to Brazil in order to maintain her appointment with the VFFLB which she held through 1948,³² or to return her sister to her family and show off baby Edward, but more likely she was renewing her residency status.

In October of 1950, Vargas returned to power, this time by democratic means.²⁹ Perhaps hoping that Vargas’ imminent return to power would prove friendly to new foreign investment, Monsanto sent Earl back in August.³⁴ (Figure 2) This time the Dablemonts settled in Sao Paulo, where Earl worked for the Monsanto office headquartered on Rua Martim Burchard. They rented an apartment in the fashionable neighborhood around the plaza Praca da Bandeiras and Maria worked part-time as a translator, technical writer and proofreader for various trade publications while she took care of Edward.^{10, 32}

In 1954, under threat of yet another military coup, Vargas took the rather dramatic step of committing suicide, leaving Brazil in a state of national mourning and political turmoil.³³

Perhaps because of hostility to those friendly with the Vargas administration or because Monsanto Brazil decided to pull out its foreign agents until the situation stabilized, the Dablemonts once again returned to St. Louis. Earl repatriated first, arriving by ship in October. Maria and Edward followed by air in July of 1955.³⁵ The close association that Maria and Earl's movement between Brazil and the United States has with the Vargas regime demonstrates just how tightly Maria's personal and professional life—indeed, anyone involved in the public administration in Brazil—was intertwined with the fate of the Vargas government and Vargas himself.

Even during her time in the United States, the gregarious Maria remained a Brazilian at heart, working in positions where she could use her language skills and interact with international contacts. Between 1957 and 1963, the Dablemonts lived in St. Louis City in the vicinity of Forest Park.¹⁰ Maria's sister was a frequent visitor and had brought their mother to St. Louis in 1962, where it appears she may have stayed until her death in 1969,¹² providing help with childcare and allowing Maria to work for various import-export firms including J.A. Roldan, a St.-Louis based company whose founder Jose Roldan brought the first fluorescent bulbs to South America in the late 1930s.^{10, 36} Fluent in Portuguese, English, Spanish and French, Maria found work as a translator and eventually used her considerable organizational skills to become office manager at Roldan. During this period she also took measures to validate her teaching degree, taking classes at Washington University and began to build a community of European and Latin American expatriates through her contacts at the export companies and within the University community.¹⁰ Between 1963 and 1964, Maria got her feet wet in non-profit administration, working as Secretary for the St. Louis Dairy Council.¹⁰ In October of 1964, Maria would accept a position as a librarian at the American Optometric Association. Here she embarked on a 25-year project building a library, archives, and museum and co-founding and administering the Optometric Historical Society. In her job at the AOA, Maria seemed to find her most rewarding professional work, demonstrating a singular passion for the history of the profession and a mission that was perfectly suited to her professional training and personal belief system. **Continued in Volume 50, Number 3.**

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