

MAINE SOUND AND STORY IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE FIRST COAST

AN INTERVIEW WITH HELEN BEAL FOR THE FIRST COAST JONESPORT/BEALS
COLLECTION

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY GALEN KOCH

JONESPORT ISLAND, MAINE OCTOBER 28TH, 2018

TRANSCRIPT BY JOHNNY ROBINSON

Interviewee Name: Helen Beal

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Interviewer(s) Name(s) and Affiliation: Galen Koch (The First Coast)

Interview Location: Jonesport, ME

Date of Interview: 10-28-2018

Interview Description: Galen Koch interviews Helen Beal, a retiree, at her Jonesport home. The interview touches on aspects of Beal's life growing up and working in Milo, as well as her current home in Jonesport which she moved to with her husband Buzz in the 1980s. Beal's jobs—including working at a shirt factory, at a shoe factory, as a blueberry harvester, and a wreath-maker—are discussed, as well as her and her late husband's hobby of making an impressive model railroad, which has gained media attention as a unique local attraction.

Keywords: Community, factory, blueberry, wreaths, trains

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Transcribed By: Johnny Robinson

GK: Galen Koch

HB: Helen Beal

[0:30:59.3]

START OF BEAL_HELEN_JONESPORT_AUDIO_01

[00:00:00.0]

[Sounds of rain pattering on air conditioner throughout.]

GK: The... this is the microphone, you don't need to worry about it, I'll just hold it. Like this—by you. And first I'll just say where we are. This is Helen Beal's house. Uh, we're at—what's the address here, Helen?

HB: 668.

GK: 668...

HB: Mason's Bay Road.

GK: Mason's Bay Road. And, uh, this is October 28th, 2018. I think, isn't it? (laughs)

HB: [inaudible]

GK: Is it the 28th or the 29th? It's—I think it's the 28th.

HB: You're right.

GK: I can hear the uh, rain on the roof.

HB: It's got a nice, uh—oh, it's drippin' on the... air conditioner.

GK: Oh yeah. [pause] It's kind of a nice sound. So where—Helen, what's your history in Jonesport and Beals? You're not from here originally, right?

HB: N—no.

GK: Where did you—where are you from?

HB: Well, I was born and brought up in Milo. Which is... about another—about an hour... uh... away from Bangor, goin' north.

GK: So it's kinda central?

HB: Yeah.

GK: I'm not quite sure where it is—I don't know where it is, I don't think I've been there.

HB: And... then... I moved to Dover-Foxcroft, and I worked in the Hathaway Shirt Factory.

GK: Whoa!

HB: For nine and a half years. And then I worked at the Dexter Shoe... for five years, and then I met Buzz, [and?] my husband. [pause] And we moved down here, because he was born and brought up here.

GK: Okay. Did you move right here to this house? Or did you have another house in town?

[00:02:00.8]

HB: No—well... we stayed with his mother. And, 'till we... we cleared all this out, it was all... nothing but trees. Cleared it all out, and... at first we had a trailer. And after seven years, we got this double-wide. And here I am!

GK: (laughs) And so the shirt factory and Dexter Shoes, those are pretty big... those are some pretty big, like... Maine... businesses that were around.

HB: Right.

GK: What was that like working in those? What was it like working in the shirt factory? What was your job there?

HB: My job was inspecting, and uh... making the button holes in the shirts.

GK: And what did—would you actually sew it? Or what did—what did [they have you do]

HB: With a big machine.

GK: Okay. (chuckles) Cutting the button holes?

HB: Yeah.

GK: Wow. Do you remember—I mean, what—do you know what year that... mill closed? I assume it closed.

HB: Oh... oh dear. [pause] Well I've—I have been down here 34 years, so... mm. I'm gonna say it must be 40 years, it's been closed up there.

GK: It closed before you left. Is [that true]

HB: Y—yes.

GK: Okay. What was that like, when it closed? When the factory closed? Do you remember what it was like—were you in the town still? Was that in Dover-Foxcroft?

HB: Yes.

GK: Okay. Do you remember what people were saying about it?

HB: Everybody felt so bad. Another business gone.

[00:04:00.0]

And then... the Dexter Shoe... shop closed, shortly after... I came down here.

GK: Mm. So you worked at Dexter Shoe after, because the—did you—did you switch because the, um... the shirt factory had closed?

HB: Yes.

GK: Oh, okay.

HB: Yes.

GK: Oh, okay. Yeah, that's tough, so you were basically... laid off—

HB: Yeah.

GK: —and had to find other work. Which I'm sure a lot of people, that was the case.

HB: Sure was, and very s—it was very sad. I loved workin' there. It was clean, the place was clean. People were friendly.

GK: What was it—was it different at the shoe—at the shoe factory?

HB: The shoe factory was a lot different.

GK: Yeah. Don't they kinda smell? Is that not true? Like, doesn't the leather smell?

HB: At certain parts of the shop it did.

GK: Yeah.

HB: But where I worked it didn't—well you—you could smell leather a little bit, but... [pause] And my job was skiving—which [inaudible] the machine, you put the—the parts of the shoe, in through and it more or less molds them out and... it cuts them at the right—the right size. That was my job.

GK: Did they—what was the training like for that? Did they have a long training, or did you [just kinda]

HB: No, it was pretty simple.

GK: Okay.

HB: Yeah. They'd stand and they'd watch your lot, though. Stand behind ya and watch ya, and... kinda made me nervous. But I put up with it. (chuckles)

GK: (laughs) I guess you had to.

HB: [Yep.]

GK: Yeah. And so you—then you met Buzz, where—how did you meet Buzz, were you—

[00:06:00.02]

HB: He was in the shoe shop.

GK: Oh really?

HB: And then when we moved down here—uh, we was in our 50s... and... um, we raked blueberries.

GK: Wow. Where did you ra—who—who did you work for, raking blueberries?

HB: [pause] Can't remember. It was out here in the bay. [long pause] I can't remember, dear.

GK: Oh, that's okay. You were fifty years old? When you moved up here?

HB: We were both in our fifties.

GK: Wow. Had you been married before you met Buzz?

HB: Long time ago.

GK: Okay. So you had—so you had a whole other... [life]

HB: (quietly) He was a drunk, and a wife-beater.

GK: Oof.

HB: So I don't put that in there.

GK: No, I'm sorry, that's awful.

HB: Mm.

GK: But then you had a second—a second love.

HB: Yup.

GK: That was better. (chuckles) Yeah. [pause] I... the raking blueberries... I mean—did you—did you enjoy doing that? [It's]

HB: Not really—

GK: [laughs]

HB: —it's pretty back—back-breaking.

GK: Yeah, what was it like? You had those big... rakes—

HB: Rakes. [pause] And we'd have to... move our buckets that we was dumpin' the berries in, and... it was hard work.

GK: And just—

HB: At our age.

GK: Yeah. (laughs) And just a couple times a year, it wasn't alway—I mean, that was seasonal, right?

HB: Yeah, that was Mar... uh... August and part of September.

GK: Mhm. [pause] And then, were you doing other seasonal work, too? At that time?

HB: In—in November, w—we made uh... Christmas wreaths.

[00:08:00.0]

GK: Oh you did! Do you still do that? Ever?

HB: Last year I made, uh... one. But... uh, Buzz was working at T.A. King's, there's a lumberyard down there. In the mornings, he would get up, and... he'd cut brush for me. And I'd, after... it warmed up a tiny bit... I'd go out, and... and stick it, on sticks. And... at that time, we only had half of our—the train room done. But j—just as you go through the door, on the bench there I would make wreaths. And... I made seven hundred. Not that—no, not in one day, but... 'till it was over.

GK: That's—

HB: I had made seven hundred—

GK: A lot!

HB: Twelve. Inch. Wreaths.

GK: Wow. And—would you just sell them, from... from here?

HB: Um... [Grey's?] ... over in uh... Addison. They—they bought 'em.

GK: Mm.

HB: They had a business. They bought 'em.

GK: So he was doing—so, Buzz was doing your tipping. He was getting the—the tips, isn't that [called tipping]

HB: Yeah. [But he—]

GK: He would do that for you.

HB: Yeah but he didn't have time to lug the s—the—the b—the bag—bag, uh... the brush, and bring it out, 'cause he had to be at work at 7 o'clock in the mornin', and... to get daylight very early.

GK: Wow.

HB: So...

GK: [How did he]

HB: That was fun.

GK: Yeah, that is fun.

HB: I loved to do that.

GK: Is that one of your favorite things that you did?

HB: Yeah.

GK: For money?

HB: Yeah.

GK: That's great. Would you do decorations on them, or were they pretty simple?

HB: Nope.

[00:10:00.05]

GK: Just a simple wreath?

HB: Yep.

GK: Yeah. I bet it smelled...

HB: Ohhh.

GK: So— (laughs)

HB: I love the smell of fir.

GK: Yeah, it's lovely. So you'll still make them, just a few now. You made a couple last year.
[Just a couple wreaths.]

HB: I only made one.

GK: Just one.

HB: One. This year I'm gonna make two, one for, uh... Gina's... father.

GK: Oh, nice.

HB: Like I did last year, and... Maralyn Maza. Gina's mom. Um... I'm gonna make one for her
cousin... that's—that's buried fairly [near]

GK: Mm.

HB: —where her dad is. I'll be making two. But that's all... all I can do now, at my age. I'm eighty-*four*.

GK: Wow.

HB: And... it's hard on your shoulders if you're ever pullin', uh... tighten the brush out, and... flippin' 'em over.

GK: Is it hard on your hands? At all?

HB: No, it didn't seem to bother my hands.

GK: No. [pause] So Buzz was working at the lumberyard? That—was that his job most of the time, or did he do a lot of different things?

HB: On weekends, he'd make a few.

GK: (giggles) He'd make a few wreaths with you?

HB: Yeah.

GK: Aw, that's nice.

HB: Yeah.

GK: And then he was... you had a lot of... can you tell me about why you started doing the train? How did that come about?

HB: Well... that's—that's the second one. The first one was in... before we built the long piece on? That goes across? Um... first time he'd ever done it, and... he asked me if I'd like to... be okay if he did it, and I said "sure, I'll help you." Well, I did! And then...

[00:12:00.0]

his nephew... Harry Fish, Jr., helped with the wirin', and he laid some of the track. But Buzz and I did all the scenery. And Buzz painted the walls. And then, decided, uh... we gotta make it bigger. So, his nephew, Harry, helped... financially with it, to build, uh, the long buildin' on. And... we—we got this one done right. First one it didn't really run good... so...

GK: What—I just—it's amazing to me that you had... the time... to make that, while you were also doing all these other things. (laughs) When did you make—when did you work on it? Like, what—after work, or would you do it on the weekends?

HB: Uh... we did this... [long pause] Well, see we only raked berries—we'd have a quota. Two or three hours a day, we'd have a quota. And plus, it was so hot. Bein' old, we couldn't take the heat, so. But we made good money, doin' that.

GK: You did, what would—what would you be able to make—like, how did they sell them, did they sell them by, like a bushel, or like a pallet?

HB: Uh...

GK: They probably—it's probably the same now, I don't know that much [about the blueberries]

HB: Yeah, these little—little boxes, they're about that long, and... about that high.

GK: Oh, they're the boxes that are all the different colors [that they stack]

HB: Yeah.

GK: Right. And so it would sell—that would be like one unit.

HB: Yeah.

GK: And you'd sell by those.

[00:14:00.0]

So how much would you get for one of those units, when you were doing it? Do you remember?

HB: [pause] No... mm... I [can't remember dear]

GK: I imagine it's very different than it is now. (chuckles) Probably. [pause]

HB: Seem—

GK: But it wasn't—yeah.

HB: Seems to me somethin' like 25 cents.

GK: Okay.

HB: For a box.

GK: Yeah.

HB: That we got.

GK: But it was pretty good money.

HB: [Yeah.]

GK: I mean—for like, [inaudible]

HB: If you're a fast raker—

GK: Yeah.

HB: —it was good, dear.

GK: (laughs) You get as much as you—

HB: (coughs)

GK: You get as much money as you can handle, I guess—

HB: (laughs) Right.

GK: —if you can—if you can get more berries. So you didn't have that much that you were doing so you could come home and you could work on the train.

HB: Yup.

GK: Yep, [okay]

HB: But we didn't—we didn't work on the train much in the summer, 'cause people... wanted to s—see, how we were doin', they'd come, and... and plus, in the winter, in my computer room, we—we'd, uh... make all the little buildin's and stuff in the house. 'Cause we couldn't afford to run that furnace out there at high speed, uh... so [inaudible].

GK: It seems like a nice way to—to spend time with... someone. (chuckles) You know? With your—with your husband.

HB: It was.

GK: Yeah.

HB: I remember the first little buildin'... that I built, it was... (clears throat) Oh... it probably was two-by-two. And, uh... it looked like a little outhouse.

GK: (chuckles)

HB: And then—didn't he laugh, when he come home and see it. First thing I ever built out of wood.

GK: (chuckles)

HB: And so, he showed me—taught me a lot, so. So I made a lot of those buildings out there, the little houses, and... stuff were—it was fun.

GK: Yeah that's so fun.

[00:16:00.9]

D—how would you do it, would you cut them... I mean... did they come—because some of those are not kits, some of those you designed... yourself, right?

HB: All—

GK A [lot of them]

HB: All of 'em.

GK: All of 'em.

HB: All the wooden ones.

GK: Okay.

HB: And, uh... made outta basal wood.

GK: [pause] And glued together? Mostly?

HB: Yep.

GK: Okay.

HB: Mhm. We'd cut 'em out... cut out the windows, and the doors, and... he, eventually... h—he started puttin' lights, and somebody said to put Christmas lights. So we'd leave a... place in the bottom to bring the light up through, in the houses. And...

GK: Do you have lights in all those?

HB: No, they did—it didn't work out.

GK: Oh, yeah, that seems like it's pretty—it would be pretty [complicated]

HB: But if he hadn't a passed away... he was goin' to... do it different...

GK: (pause) Put all the little lights in all the windows.

HB: Yeah.

GK: Do you have anything—do you decorate it for Christmas? (chuckles)

HB: No.

GK: Maybe if you had more tourists you'd have to do that. (clears throat) More winter—winter tourists are not really a big thing.

HB: I know, don't have many of them come.

GK: (laughs) How did people, uh, know that it was there, at first? You know, when people started [visiting]

HB: Oh, talk around town.

GK: They'd just hear that it was—that it was over here and wanna come see it?

HB: Yeah. (pause) Then, uh... few years later, channel five, and channel two... news people, were here. 'Course when it gets on the news like that, it spreads.

GK: Mhm.

HB: And they promised us a CD of it, but, we... they didn't give us one.

GK: That's too bad.

[00:18:00.6]

I wonder if it's on the internet somewhere. It might be. (pause) You know you can look—they have, like—I don't know if they go back that far, but they have like, the archives of the news?

You can look through some of that old stuff? I don't know how far back they go, probably not very far.

HB: I know they both had it on TV.

GK: Two and five?

HB: Yeah.

GK: I can look for it, see if [there's anything there]

HB: Showed it.

GK: Did you ev—did you ever see it?

HB: Just on the television, yes.

GK: Yeah.

HB: But it was just a quick blip. (chuckles)

GK: (chuckles) Did they—

HB: It was put—it was chosen as one of the best pictures of the year.

GK: Oh really?

HB: Yup.

GK: Oh, that's great, and then it was in Yankee Magazine, wasn't it?

HB: Yes.

GK: Did they have you in there, too?

HB: Yup.

GK: That's pretty cool. So people probably started coming after the Yankee Magazine. Did you have more visitors after that?

HB: Oh yeah. We had quite a few before that.

GK: Yeah. You have a map... I mean, people have come from all over the world. It looks like.

HB: Yup.

GK: What's like, the—the most memorable—do you have any (chuckles) really memorable guests?

HB: I had somebody just a few days ago from... um... Switzerland. Switzer—

GK: Wow!

HB: Switzerland! (chuckles)

GK: (laughs) Tha—that's amazing, they were just here the other day?

HB: Yeah.

GK: Wow. Hm!

HB: (clears throat)

GK: Interesting.

HB: Did you sign my book?

GK: I signed your book.

HB: Well it had to've been the guy just a—above where you signed it.

GK: Oh wow. Do—people will come up even if you don't have the "open" sign out? Sometimes?

HB: Yeah he did.

GK: (laughs)

HB: But I have to take it in this time of year. Never know when we're gonna get buried in snow.

GK: I know.

HB: And the wind, and... I don't want it destroyed, 'cause I c—I couldn't make another one and I couldn't afford to have somebody build one.

[00:20:05.2]

So... But I hardly ever get anybody this time a year.

GK: It quiets down a lot. Yeah. It must be kinda hard living out here in the winter by yourself.

HB: It is. (long pause) I have to... and Harry Fish's nephew usually comes and shovels me.

GK: (pause) Do you have a car parked in there... too?

HB: Just my c—my [car]

GK: You've got a car? Okay.

HB: Yeah.

GK: I didn't see one outside, I wondered if you had one.

HB: Yeah.

GK: That's good.

HB: I learned my lesson that day when we got that frozen rain, and... that little bit of snow. Didn't think I was ever gonna get it scraped off.

GK: Oh, god.

HB: I said... if I had known we were gonna get that, I'd a... put it in the garage.

GK: Do you have a fireplace in here?

HB: No, dear.

GK: No? Just so if the power goes out...

HB: Well I've got that—the propane heaters.

GK: Oh, good.

HB: So I don't freeze.

GK: Okay, that's good. Yeah. [inaudible]

HB: And I make—make my coffee in the morning if the power's out... I got... two of those lanterns... and...

GK: (pause) The lanterns? What do you mean? Will you show me? (light shuffling noises) Ohhh, the kerosene.

(Both GK and HB get quieter, away from the microphone)

HB: No, they're, uh... (squeaking noise) (groan) Not kerosene...

GK: Oh, are they, uh... like, battery... powered? Or... propane?

HB: Yeah. Batteries.

GK: (pause) Yeah, that's nice. That's really good. And then you don't have to worry about... flames, and all that kinda stuff.

HB: Nope. (pause) I have to have my coffee in the morning.

GK: I know, me too! (laughs)

HB: Get any this mornin'?

[00:22:03.8]

GK: I had some, do you wanna have some more? (chuckles)

HB: You want some, dear?

GK: Maybe. (chuckles) Could we make some?

HB: I'll make you some.

GK: I'd love some coffee. (pause) I would... love... some coffee. And then you have all your... your—when did you start pickling? (pause) When did you start pickling? [When you were a kid?]

HB: Oh, oh yeah. Oh... when I was young. Probably in my early twenties. (long pause) How much will you drink?

GK: Oh, just a cup.

(Sound of water filling)

HB: One cup.

GK: That would be great.

HB: I got good spring water.

GK: (pause) From a spring here?

HB: (pause) What, dear?

GK: From a spring here? (pause) Yeah?

HB: The ground's loaded with it.

(Sound of lid closing)

GK: Oh, that's great.

HB: Yeah. Hundred gallons a minute.

GK: (laughs)

HB: When they drilled it, it was pourin' right down the driveway.

GK: (gasps) Oh, my god. (pause) That seems like a lucky... a lucky thing. (pause) That you have this—history.

HB: [inaudible]

GK: I like this.

HB: [inaudible] Gave it to me. Have you read it?

GK: Yeah, I've looked through it.

HB: 'Course, if my husband was here (door shutting) he'd—he know all those people.

GK: I know, he would be—he would have the... So he worked at the lumberyard, did he do any fishing or anything?

HB: Uh, yeah.

[00:24:00.0]

When we first came down here, we... went fishing... with his uncle.

GK: Oh, you were saying that, you were lobstering for a little bit.

HB: Yeah, and... I painted... I uh... filled all the little pockets with... the stinky... you got that on—?

GK: Yeah. (laughs) You don't wanna say stinky bait?

HB: Oh, I don't care.

GK: (laughs)

HB: I know I—that's why I don't have arthritis in my hands, all that fish oil.

GK: (pause) Oh, yeah!

HB: I think! (chuckles)

GK: Yeah! (pause) Oh, these are sweet photos. Of Buzz with the—with the train...

HB: Yeah. That's uh... Maralyn's mother and father. Not Maralyn, uh... that's Maralyn, that's Paul.

GK: Oh, [Gina's parents?]

HB: Gina's— Gina's parents. (pause) Yep.

GK: (pause) Were you close with them? (pause) Or are you still close... with... because Maralyn's still alive—

HB: Yeah.

GK: Right?

HB: Yeah. She's 90... or 91.

GK: Wow. Wow.

HB: You'd never know it, she don't have a wrinkle in her face!

GK: Ah! (chuckles) (long pause, reading) "Businesses and services..."

HB: What do you want in your coffee, dear? Half and half?

GK: Yeah! That's great.

HB: Sugar?

GK: Sugar—I don't need any sugar.

HB: Don't use sugar.

GK: No. (pause) But it's not often that people have half and half. It's exciting.

(light clamor of dishes)

HB: I have to have half and half [at night?]

GK: Yeah, I like half and half.

HB: I don't want a big cup 'cause I had two this morning.

[00:26:01.08]

[inaudible] I have to use Splenda. I have to watch my sugar.

(long pause, clamor)

GK: Splenda's not so bad.

HB: No. (pause) [inaudible]

GK: You want it on or off?

HB: Off.

GK: Okay.

HB: 'Cause I don't know too much about—

GK: No, I know. (HB and GK move closer to microphone) Well, I was just wondering if—if it's... if, um... it's changed much around here since you... and Buzzy moved back. Just in that time. Like, the fishing industries, or the houses, or...

HB: A lotta new houses. A lot of out-of-staters got beautiful homes. And... 'course we're, uh... shortly after we moved down here, two of the... big—big stores... burned... on Main Street, there.

GK: Which ones were those? Like, big grocery stores?

HB: Uh... the hardware...

GK: Mhm.

HB: And the clothin'—they had shoes. Years and years ago had shoes, and then... and then... um... where the other big stores, uh used to be... a restaurant, and... the huge buildin', and I don't know what else, dear.

GK: But that burnt, [yeah, that burned—]

HB: It burned.

GK: —burned down.

HB: Just a few years after we come down to Jonesport.

GK: Wow.

HB: And... now, there's a... veterinary shop there.

GK: (pause) Oh yeah, I've seen that. (pause) But there's not really that—I mean, [00:28:00.0] there's like, Byron's... where you can have—that you can have some breakfast or lunch there. [That's by Moosabec, right?]

HB: Yes. Yeah.

GK: But there's not really many other restaurants or anything. Were there more when you and Buzzy first came?

HB: Yeah, Tall Barney had a... big restaurant. (pause) We used to have a drugstore, too.

GK: Oh, wow. A pharmacy.

HB: Yeah.

GK: Yeah, where I'm from in Stonington, we had all that... until like, the late nineties, and then it was just gone.

HB: This one wasn't here too long, either, after we come down here.

GK: (pause) You ca—and you moved back here what—in the—maybe the 80s? It was—you said you [were 50 so yeah]

HB: 80—'83.

GK: Okay.

HB: —When we came down here.

GK: '83. (pause) Yeah, let's check our coffee. (HB and GK get quieter again) I like all... (pause) all the... I was glad Gina ha—showed me your um... your canning. Your pickling. (pause) When will you... when do you typically do the picklin'? (pause) All summer? Or are you done around now?

HB: How much do you want in that, [dear?]

GK: Oh, that's good, that's good.

HB: [inaudible]

GK: That's a lotta coffee. Thank you.

HB: (pause) Want more in it?

GK: Um... sure, why not? (chuckles) I'm gonna be buzzin' around, now. (chuckles)

HB: Is that all the want?

GK: Yeah. That's good. (clamor) Oh, does it—it stopped? It stopped, for ya.

[00:30:01.7]

HB: [inaudible] ...finish runnin'.

(long pause, clamor)

HB: You okay?

GK: Yeah, it's great. Thank you. (pause) How did you decide what... like, parts of w—of towns that you wanted to have in the railroad? (pause) 'Cause you have some towns, but you—it's like... it's obviously not every town in—in Maine, or anything like that. But how did you decide?

HB: Oh, we just set in—

[00:30:59.3]

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