

Interviewee Name: Helen Beal

Project/Collection Title: The First Coast Jonesport and Beals

Interviewer Name and Affiliation: Galen Koch, The First Coast

Interview Location: Jonesport, Maine

Date of Interview: October 28, 2018

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

Collection Description: Audio interviews from The First Coast's residency in Jonesport and Beals Island, October 2018.

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Transcribed By: Johnny Robinson

GK: Galen Koch

HB: Helen Beal

Track One: 0:30:59

Track Two: 0:08:33

[Track One]

Galen Koch: [0:00:00] This is the microphone. You don't need to worry about it. I'll just hold it. First, I'll just say where we are. This is Helen Beal's house. What's the address here, Helen?

HB: 668.

GK: 668 –

HB: Mason's Bay Road.

GK: Mason's Bay Road. This is October 28, 2018, I think. Isn't it? [laughter]

HB: [inaudible]

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

HB: You're right.

GK: I can hear the rain on the roof.

HB: Oh, it's dripping on the air conditioner.

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

HB: [0:01:02] No.

GK: Where are you from?

HB: Well, I was born and brought up in Milo, which is about an hour away from Bangor, going north.

GK: So it's kind of central?

HB: Yeah.

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

HB: Then I moved to Dover-Foxcroft and worked in the Hathaway Shirt Factory –

GK: Whoa.

HB: – for nine and a half years. Then I worked at the Dexter Shoe for five years, and then I met “Buz,” my husband, 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?

HB: No, we stayed with his mother. We cleared all this out. It was all nothing but trees. Cleared it all out, and at first, we had a trailer. After seven years, we got this double-wide, and here I am.

GK: [0:02:28] [laughter] The shirt factory and Dexter Shoes are pretty big – those are some pretty big Maine businesses that were around.

HB: Right.

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

HB: My job was inspecting and making the buttonholes in the shirts.

GK: Would you actually sew it? What did they have you doing?

HB: With a big machine.

GK: Okay. [laughter] Cutting the button holes?

HB: Yeah.

GK: Wow. Do you remember –? Do you know what year that mill closed? I assume it closed.

HB: Oh, dear. I have been down here thirty-four years, so I'm going to say it must be forty years it's been closed up there.

GK: [0:03:35] It closed before you left. Is that true?

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

GK: So you worked at Dexter Shoe after. Did you switch because the shirt factory had closed?

HB: Yes.

GK: Oh, okay. That's tough. You were basically laid off –

HB: Yeah.

GK: – and had to find other work, which I'm sure [for] a lot of people, that was the case.

HB: [0:04:36] Sure was. It was very sad. I loved working there. It was clean. The place was clean. People were friendly.

GK: Was it different at the shoe factory?

HB: The shoe factory was a lot different.

GK: Yeah. Don't they kind of smell? Is that not true? Doesn't the leather smell?

HB: At certain parts of the shop, it did.

GK: Yeah.

HB: But where I worked, it didn't. You could smell leather a little bit. My job was skiving, which is the machine – you put the parts of the shoe in through. It more or less moves them out and cuts them at the right size. That was my job.

GK: What was the training like for that? Did they have a long training?

HB: [0:05:40] No, it was pretty simple.

GK: Okay.

HB: Yeah. They'd stand, and they'd watch you a lot, though. Stand behind you and watch you. Kind of made me nervous, but I put up with it.

GK: I guess you had to.

HB: Yep.

GK: Yeah. Then you met Buz. How did you meet Buz?

HB: He was in the shoe shop.

GK: Oh, really?

HB: And then when we moved down here, we was in our fifties, and we raked blueberries.

GK: Wow. Who did you work for, raking blueberries?

HB: Can't remember. It was out here in the bay. 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 Buz?

HB: [0:06:43] Long time ago.

GK: Okay. So you had a whole other life ... but then you had a second love.

HB: Yeah.

GK: That was better. Yeah. Raking blueberries? Did you enjoy doing that?

HB: Not really. It's pretty back-breaking.

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

HB: Rakes. And we'd have to move our buckets that we was dumping the berries in. It was hard work at our age.

GK: Yeah. [laughter] And just a couple times a year, it wasn't – I mean, that was seasonal, right?

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

GK: [0:07:48] Were you doing other seasonal work, too, at that time?

HB: In November, we made Christmas wreaths.

GK: Oh, you did? Do you still do that ever?

HB: Last year, I made one. Buz was working at T.A. King's; there's a lumberyard down there. In the mornings, he would get up and cut brush for me. After it warmed up a tiny bit, I'd go out and stick it on sticks. At that time, we only had half of the train room done. Just as you go through the door, on the bench there, I would make wreaths. I made seven hundred, not in one day, but until it was over.

GK: [0:08:59]

HB: I had made seven hundred twelve-inch wreaths.

GK: Wow. Would you just sell them from here?

HB: (Gray's) over in Addison. They bought them. They had a business. They bought them.

GK: So, Buz was doing your tipping. He was getting the tips. Isn't that called tipping?

HB: Yeah.

GK: He would do that for you.

HB: Yeah, but he didn't have time to bag the brush and bring it out because he had to be at work at seven o'clock in the morning, and it doesn't get daylight very early. But it 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: [0:10:00] No.

GK: Just a simple wreath?

HB: Yep.

GK: Yeah. I bet it smelled –

HB: Oh, 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, a couple of wreaths.

HB: I only made one.

GK: Just one.

HB: One. This year I'm going to make two, one for (Gina's?) father –

GK: Oh, nice.

HB: – like I did last year, and (Marilyn Mazza?), (Gina's?) mom. I'm going to make one for her cousin that's buried fairly near where her dad is. I'll be making two. All I can do now at my age – I'm eighty-four.

GK: Wow.

HB: It's hard on your shoulders. You're forever pulling to tighten the brush up and flipping them over.

GK: [0:11:00] Is it hard on your hands at all?

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

GK: No? So, Buz was working at the lumberyard? 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: 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 the second one. The first one was in – before we built the long piece on that goes across – first time he'd ever done it, and he asked me if I'd like to – [if it'd] be okay if he did it, and I said: "Sure, I'll help you." Well, I did. Then, his nephew, Harry Fish, Jr., helped with the wiring, and he laid some of the track. But Buz and I did all the scenery. Buz painted the walls. And then, decided we got to make it bigger. So, his nephew, Harry, helped financially with it to build the long building on. We got this one done right. The first one didn't really run good.

GK: [0:12:42] It's amazing to me that you had the time to make that while you were also doing all these other things. [laughter] When did you make –? When did you work on it? After work, or would you do it on the weekends?

HB: Well, see, we only raked berries – we'd have a quota – two or three hours a day. We'd have a quota. Plus, it was so hot. Being old, we couldn't take the heat, so. But we made good money doing that.

GK: You did? What would you be able to make? How did they sell them? Did they sell them by a bushel or a pallet? It's probably the same now; I don't know that much about the blueberry industry.

HB: [0:13:42] These 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. So, that would be one unit.

HB: Yeah.

GK: And you'd sell by those. How much would you get for one of those units when you were doing it? Do you remember?

HB: No, I can't remember, dear.

GK: I imagine it's very different than it is now, probably.

HB: Seems to me something like twenty-five cents for a box that we got.

GK: But it was pretty good money.

HB: Yeah.

GK: I mean, it felt like pretty good money.

HB: If you're a fast raker, it was good, dear.

GK: [laughter] You get as much as you – you get as much money as you can handle, I guess.

HB: [laughter] Right.

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

HB: [0:14:44] Yep. But we didn't work on the train much in the summer because people wanted to see how we were doing. They'd come. Plus, in the winter, in my computer room, we'd make all the little buildings and stuff in the house because we couldn't afford to run that furnace out there at high speed [and] sit out there and work.

GK: It seems like a nice way to spend time with someone, with your husband.

HB: It was. I remember the first little building that I built. It probably was two-by-two. It looked like a little outhouse. Didn't he laugh when he come home and see it? First thing I ever built out of wood. So, he showed me. He taught me a lot. I made a lot of those buildings out there, the little houses and stuff. It was fun.

GK: [0:15:59] Yeah, that's so fun. How would you do it? Would you cut them? Because some of those are not kits. Some of those you designed yourself, right? A lot of them.

HB: All of them.

GK: All of them.

HB: All the wooden ones. Made out of balsa wood.

GK: And glued together mostly?

HB: Yeah. We'd cut them out – cut out the windows and the doors. Eventually, he started putting lights in. Somebody said to put Christmas lights, so we'd leave a place in the bottom to bring the light up through in the houses.

GK: Do you have lights in all those?

HB: No, it didn't work out.

GK: Oh, yeah. That seems like it would be complicated.

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

GK: [0:17:04] Put all the little lights in all the windows.

HB: Yeah.

GK: Do you have anything – do you decorate it for Christmas? [laughter]

HB: No.

GK: Maybe if you had more tourists, you'd have to do that. Winter tourists are not really a big thing.

HB: No, don't have many of them come.

GK: [laughter] How did people know that it was there at first when people started?

HB: Oh, talk around town.

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

HB: Yeah. Then, a few years later, Channel Five and Channel Two news people were here. Of course, when it gets on the news like that, it spreads. They promised us a CD of it, but they didn't give us one.

GK: That's too bad. I wonder if it's on the internet somewhere. It might be. I don't know if they go back that far, but they have 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: [0:18:19] I know they both had it on TV.

GK: Two and Five?

HB: Yeah.

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

HB: Showed it.

GK: Did you ever see it?

HB: Just on the television, yes.

GK: Yeah.

HB: But it was just a quick blip. [laughter] It was chosen as one of the best pictures of the year.

GK: Oh, really?

HB: Yeah.

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: Yeah.

GK: That's pretty cool. So, people probably started coming after *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. People have come from all over the world, it looks like.

HB: Yeah.

GK: What's the most memorable –? Do you have any really memorable guests?

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

GK: [0:19:25] Wow. That's amazing. They were just here the other day?

HB: Yeah.

GK: Wow. Interesting.

HB: Did you sign my book?

GK: I signed your book.

HB: Well, it had to have been the guy just above where you signed it.

GK: Oh, wow. So, people will come up even if you don't have the "open" sign out sometimes?

HB: Yeah, he did. But I have to take it in this time of year. Never know when we're going to get buried in snow –

GK: I know.

HB: – and the wind. I don't want it destroyed because I couldn't make another one, and I couldn't afford to have somebody build one. But I hardly ever get anybody this time of year.

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

HB: It is. Harry Fish's nephew usually comes and shovels me.

GK: [0:20:34] Do you have a car parked in there, too?

HB: Just 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 the other day there when we got that frozen rain and that little bit of snow. Didn't think I was ever going to get it scraped off.

GK: Oh, gosh.

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

GK: Do you have a fireplace in here?

HB: No, dear.

GK: No? So, if the power goes out –

HB: Well, I've got the propane heaters.

GK: Oh, good.

HB: So I don't freeze.

GK: Okay, that's good. Yeah.

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

GK: The lanterns? What do you mean? Will you show me? Oh, the kerosene.

HB: No, they're not kerosene.

GK: [0:21:39] Oh, are they battery-powered or propane?

HB: Yeah. Batteries.

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

HB: No. Because I have to have my coffee in the morning.

GK: I know, me too. [laughter]

HB: You had any this morning?

GK: I had some. Do you want to have some more? [laughter]

HB: You want some, dear?

GK: Maybe. [laughter] Could we make some?

HB: I'll make you some.

GK: I'd love some coffee. I would love some coffee. And then you have all you – when did you start pickling? When did you start pickling? When you were a kid?

HB: Oh, when I was young. Probably in my early twenties. How much will you drink?

GK: [0:22:45] Oh, just a cup.

HB: One cup.

GK: That would be great.

HB: I got good spring water.

GK: From a spring here?

HB: What, dear?

GK: From a spring here? Yeah.

HB: The ground's loaded with it.

GK: Oh, that's great.

HB: Yeah. Hundred gallons a minute.

GK: [laughter]

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

GK: Oh, my god. That seems like a lucky thing. You have this history.

HB: Yeah, (Gina?) –

GK: I like this.

HB: (Gina?) gave it to me. Have you read it?

GK: Yeah, I've looked through it.

HB: Of course, if my husband was here, he'd know all those people.

GK: [0:23:49] He would have the – he worked at the lumberyard. Did he do any fishing or anything?

HB: Yeah. 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 filled all the little pockets with the stinky – you got that on –?

GK: Yeah. [laughter] You don't want to say stinky bait?

HB: No, I don't care. Anyway, that's why I don't have arthritis in my hands, all that fish oil.

GK: Oh, yeah.

HB: I think. [laughter]

GK: Yeah. Oh, these are sweet photos of Buz with the train.

HB: Yeah. That's (Marilyn's?) mother and father. Not Marilyn. That's (Marilyn?). That's Paul.

GK: [0:24:56] Oh, (Gina's?) parents.

HB: (Gina's?) parents. Yeah.

GK: Were you close with them? Are you still close? Because (Marilyn's?) still alive.

HB: Yeah.

GK: Right?

HB: Yeah. She's ninety or ninety-one.

GK: Wow. Wow.

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

GK: [laughter] "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. But it's not often that people have half and half. It's exciting.

HB: I have to have half and half at night.

GK: [0:25:56] Yeah, I like half and half.

HB: I don't want a big cup because I had two this morning. [inaudible] I have to use Splenda. I have to watch my sugar.

GK: Splenda's not so bad.

HB: No. [inaudible]

GK: You want it on or off?

HB: Off.

GK: Okay.

[Recording paused.]

HB: I don't know too much about –

GK: No, I know. Well, I was just wondering if it's changed much around here since you and Buz moved back, just in that time, like the fishing industries or the houses.

HB: A lot of new houses. Out-of-staters got beautiful homes. Of course, shortly after we moved down here, two of the big stores burned on Main Street there.

GK: [0:27:09] Which ones were those? Big grocery stores?

HB: The hardware and the clothing – they had shoes. Years and years ago, had shoes. And then, where the other big stores, there used to be a restaurant – huge building, and I don't know what else, dear.

GK: But 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: Oh yeah, I've seen that. But there's not really that – I mean, there's Byron's where you can have – I think you can have some breakfast or lunch there. That's by Moosabec Variety.

HB: Yeah.

GK: [0:28:09] But there's not really many other restaurants or anything. Were there more when you and Buz first came?

HB: Yeah, Tall Barney had a big restaurant. 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 the late '90s, and then it was just gone.

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

GK: You moved back here in the '80s? You said you were fifty. So, yeah.

HB: '83 when we came down here.

GK: '83. Yeah, let's check our coffee. I like all the – I was glad (Gina?) showed me your canning, your pickling. When do you typically do the pickling? All summer? Are you done about now?

HB: [0:29:29] How much do you want in that, dear?

GK: Oh, that's good, that's good. That's a lot of coffee. Thank you.

HB: Want more in it?

GK: Sure, why not? [laughter] I'm going to be buzzing around now. [laughter]

HB: Is that all the cream you want?

GK: Yeah. That's good. Oh, does it stop? It stopped for you.

HB: I'm going to let it finish running. Is it okay?

GK: [0:30:31] Yeah, it's great. Thank you. How did you decide what parts of towns you wanted to have in the railroad? Because you have some towns, but it's obviously not every town in Maine or anything like that. But how did you decide?

HB: Oh, we just set in –

[End of track one. Start of track two]

GK: [0:00:00] Oh, my gosh.

HB: Buzzy worked in the sardine family here.

GK: Oh, he did? Can I record you?

HB: Yeah.

GK: With my headphones over my hat? [laughter]

HB: Buzzy worked in the sardine factory here when he was younger and bean factory that was up in Columbia.

GK: Bean, like canned beans?

HB: String beans, yeah.

GK: Oh.

HB: Now, do you want me to tell about the potatoes?

GK: Yeah.

HB: When I was twelve, I picked potatoes for a farmer and peas and string beans. Two cents a pound for them. Potatoes was twenty-five cents for one of those big barrels when you got it full. Back-breaking work. We were tough, but we had to help our parents however we could.

GK: [0:01:08] How did it –? Did someone till the earth, or were you actually digging in?

HB: No, we didn't have to dig; they had a potato digger that would roll the potatoes out. We'd have to go behind, pick up the potatoes, and dump them in the big barrels.

GK: Is Milo in Aroostook County?

HB: No.

GK: It's not.

HB: Piscataquis County.

GK: Piscataquis.

HB: Yeah.

GK: Right. Right. So, picking potatoes. And your parents were working in the thread factory – your dad?

HB: No, my dad worked on the railroad.

GK: Oh, your uncle worked at the thread factory.

HB: Yeah.

GK: And your dad worked on the railroad?

HB: Yeah, Bangor & Aroostook Railroad. There were six of us kids, so mom was home cooking all the time.

GK: [0:02:09] What was your home like? Did they have gardens or grow their own food or anything like that?

HB: Yes, Daddy did plant a garden, and we raised a pig once. The neighbor down the road had a smokehouse that you cured the ham with. It was a lot of fun, but it was hard work.

GK: Did your mother can? Did you learn that from her?

HB: Yeah.

GK: And you still do it.

HB: Yeah. And she taught me how to cook.

GK: That's great.

HB: I had watched her before do it, so one day, my mother and father went to play cards with the neighbors. They used to play Sixty-three. I decided I'd be a good girl; I'd make some bread. Well, I heated the yeast too – got it too hot, and it killed the yeast. The bread didn't rise, and I had to throw it out before they got home. But she knew I'd done something, so she asked me, and I had to tell her. And she said, "Well, I'm not mad. I know you tried."

GK: [0:03:54] Yeah, what can you do? You tried. [laughter]

HB: I tried.

GK: Did you make a successful loaf of bread after that?

HB: No. When I got a little older, she taught me how to do it. Done it ever since.

GK: You still make homemade bread?

HB: Yeah.

GK: That's great.

HB: White bread and wheat bread.

GK: Yeah, I feel like being able to have your own pig and then smoke the meat is kind of a special thing, in a way.

HB: Yeah. Made lard. That's what we made a pie crust out of.

GK: Yum.

HB: And donuts.

GK: You made donuts out of lard?

HB: Fried them in it.

GK: Oh, yeah. [laughter] That sounds delicious.

HB: And they were better than using oil or Crisco.

GK: Oh, yeah.

HB: [0:04:54] The lard made them taste so much better.

GK: Yum.

HB: Of course, now they say it's not good for you.

GK: I think now they say you can eat it [laughter] if it comes from your own pig.

HB: Oh, really?

GK: Well, I don't know, but I think the animal fat, some of that, they're saying it's not as bad for you as some of that vegetable oil.

HB: Vegetable oil.

GK: Which is really nasty stuff.

HB: Yeah.

GK: It's like what you put in your car. [laughter] It's gross. And whoopie pies with the real lard – I love those.

HB: Oh.

GK: The whoopie pie with lard. Because I think now they mostly make them with Crisco, and I don't like that as much. The whoopie pie. "Main Street." [laughter] Do you remember when Buzz worked at the sardine factory? Which one did he work at?

HB: [0:05:58] The one where the Coast Guard station is that they tore down. No, I don't remember, dear, because that was long before we got married.

GK: Oh, it was?

HB: And before we met.

GK: Okay. He just told you about it.

HB: Yeah.

GK: So he was working there probably in the '60s, maybe, or the '70s.

HB: No, before that because he wouldn't –

GK: Wow.

HB: He graduated in '52. Shortly after that, he went in the Coast Guard. It was when he was young and still in school that he worked there.

GK: Was that closed down by the time you moved here?

HB: Oh, yeah. Years ago. Yup. All of them were.

GK: Yeah, I knew in Lubec when a lot of things closed down, but I didn't know up here when it was.

HB: [0:07:07] They all closed about the same time. I think there's dates in there about it.

GK: Says it in here. "The smokehouse at the Jonesport Packing Factory." Was that it, the Jonesport Packing Factory? I need to read all this stuff.

HB: Yeah, I haven't read it all yet.

GK: Oh, no, because that one's still there.

HB: That's just –

GK: That's still in town.

HB: Yeah, I think there's two wharves that are still in town, Sid Look's and his brother. Can't think of his name. Those are the only two left in town – buildings.

GK: [0:08:11] Moosabec Mussel. That's still around. This is amazing. Just amazing. I got to really read this book because these pictures are really amazing.

HB: They're selling them –

GK: Yeah, I bought one.

HB: Oh, you got one?

GK: I bought one. Yep. Yep.

HB: Good, dear.

GK: Yeah.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Molly A. Graham 7/14/2023