

Interviewee: Helen Austin

Project/Collection Title: The First Coast Deer Isle and Stonington

Interviewer Name and Affiliation: Galen Koch, The First Coast

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Interview Description: This interview is with Helen Austin. She discusses her life growing up in Brooksville and working in Blue Hill. Helen talks about growing up in poverty and working throughout her life to learn and improve herself. She discusses being a beautician, a nurse, and raising her son, Timothy. She talks about the value of adult education programs, the importance of doing things for yourself, and seeking out help when you need it. She briefly mentions the importance of the sea and lobstering to the livelihood of people in Maine and her son's work fishing and seining. She also discusses the changes that have occurred in Brooksville and Blue Hill in her lifetime and why she thinks they have occurred. She remarks that things used to be much more peaceful, and she wishes she could go back to those times.

Keywords: Blue Hill, poverty, beautician, nurse, mother, education, community, lobstering, fishing, seining, Brooksville, change

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Transcribed by: Annika Ross

Length: 00:48:20

HA: Helen Austin

GK: Galen Koch

Galen Koch: [0:00:00] I have my headphones on.

Helen Austin: Oh, good.

GK: Then I'm going to lean towards you with this. Will you just tell me your first and last name?

HA: It's Austin, Helen Eunice. Spelled with an E.

GK: Helen spelled with an "E" or Eunice spelled with an E?

HA: Eunice. See, Eunice can be spelled both ways, with a U or an E. I was named after my great aunt, who helped take care of me [during] my first two weeks of life.

GK: Oh, wow.

HA: I am Helen Eunice.

GK: Helen, where were you born?

HA: On my grandfather's farm in their bedroom. [laughter] May 26th, actually, but it was twenty-eighth before it was recorded – my birth – 1940.

GK: [0:01:08] And where was your grand –? Where was the farm?

HA: South Penobscot. It is less than probably a fourth of a mile from the main road. You know where Snow's Garage is? Well, it would be probably about a half mile from there. And then there's signs out there on the left. There's a brook that runs down, and you take a left-hand turn, and you can keep continuing. You come to an open field. It was a full farm, but unfortunately, it burned.

GK: Wow.

HA: And my grandfather was in it and lost his life.

GK: He was in the fire?

HA: Yes, about seventy percent burns.

GK: Wow.

HA: Gram escaped. She called out to him, her husband, and he didn't respond. He stayed to fight the fire.

GK: [0:02:17] Wow.

HA: And his eyes – he had cataracts. You know what those are?

GK: Yeah, it's cloudy? [inaudible]

HA: Yes. Both of them. But he stayed to fight it. No good. He was caught in it. He was crumbling down to the floor in front of his bed, the bed that I was born in.

GK: They found him?

HA: Yes. He was brought out of the fire. There was a very faintness of pulse.

GK: What happened to the –? Go ahead. What were you going to say? Go ahead.

HA: Well, everything burned. There was the main house which was two story with attached shed, the main barn for the horses and cattle with a hay mound to store hay. Then there was a creamery house, an ice house, and then a smaller barn that housed oxen.

GK: [0:03:50] And then, after it burned – does your family still own that land?

HA: No.

GK: No. Where did you grow up? Did you live your childhood on that farm?

HA: I lived my life from the time I was two weeks old in Brooksville. Right on [inaudible] Nathaniel Perkins Hill, and that would be a fourth of a mile from (Bill and Peasley's) garage, the intersection there. I attended all schools. Graduated.

GK: The school was the school in Brooksville?

HA: Well, the school was Brooksville Elementary School, and that was in 1955. Then I went on to Brooksville High, which was four years there, with a high school diploma. Then I went on to Eastern Academy in 1959 and became a hairdresser. Bangor. Nine-month course that I passed.

GK: [0:05:08] Where did you work? Did you work at a salon?

HA: Blue Hill Beauty Shop.

GK: I bet you heard a lot of stories at the salon. [laughter]

HA: No, I never listened to them. I attended the phone when it rang and what I was there for. I always greeted people and all. No. Gossip is not my thing.

GK: That's hard when you're in a beauty salon, maybe, but you avoided it.

HA: Well, you got to concentrate just like everything else. You know?

GK: How long did you do that work?

HA: I don't know how long it was. Just a few months. The owner was on her change of life, and she was pregnant [with] the last child. She was very jealous of someone else that could really take over things, and I did. That was my job. I was accused of doing things which I was innocent of, so I left with no words.

GK: [0:06:35] What did you do after that?

HA: Just plain home with my parents. Work in the country, dear, is you either work or there's absolutely no purpose. You've got to have transportation to come and go, and that I couldn't afford because I was just starting.

GK: So, you moved in with your parents in Brooksville?

HA: I had been living with them previously, but I moved to Blue Hill near my work.

GK: To be near your work?

HA: Yes, because I was a licensed hairdresser. Licensed by the State of Maine. I had my rent card and diploma from Eastern Academy of Beauty Culture in Bangor, one of thirty-six [inaudible] –

GK: [0:07:43] Wow.

HA: – class and four instructors. [The] teachers were four ladies that helped us.

GK: What was it like in Blue Hill when you lived there?

HA: Just country-like. There was a restaurant there, a post office there, general store. The only time you had time for that was evenings.

GK: Because you were working?

HA: Yes, trying to stand on my own two feet as the [inaudible] expression is.

GK: Eventually, you had children? Did you marry?

HA: No. Didn't marry. I didn't even have time for that. Not even a thought because I was taking care of my own self. Okay?

GK: [0:08:56] So, you were working at the hairdresser, and that ended.

HA: I had to go home until I found more work, not in the same field of work; it was at the Blue Hill Inn. I helped wash dishes and dust and vacuum, change beds, clean the bathrooms, etc., which gave me employment.

GK: Who was staying at the Blue Hill Inn when you worked there? What was the clientele like?

HA: Well, it was Mrs. and Mr. (Conrad Rupert?) [who] were the managers, and you worked under them. Okay? I set tables up for meals. Excuse my hair's grown out, and it tickles. I am not a long hair lady. From there, I met a guy, and we dated for seven years, and complications on his side of things became – no, it wasn't him, but his family, and so that failed. Still, he came and saw me whenever he could. Very special.

GK: [0:10:47] That was a special relationship?

HA: Yes. Very [respectful].

GK: Yes. It's good to be respected.

HA: Well, that's what it was. He was in his forties, and I was only in my twenties, but he didn't make a bit of difference to him. It was the company we needed, and we were there for each other. I saw him when I was pregnant with Tim, my son now that I have – only child. He wanted to know so much, and we talked. He's passed away, of course now, a long time ago.

GK: But he was a special person.

HA: Yes, he was. He was smart, neat. He was [the] manager of the IGA store in Ellsworth. Yep.

GK: [0:11:56] That's a good job.

HA: Yes, but he always made room for activities like going on picnics and watching the moon rise and fall and go to races – car races – special movies.

GK: Where would you go to car races?

HA: Unity.

GK: Oh, wow. That's far.

HA: Yes. Oh, yes. We used to spend the whole day. Yes. But nothing occurred. We weren't thinking about marriage. It was just friendship mainly. But it was something we felt we both needed [to] be able to communicate, to be respected, to go places, do things, and so on.

GK: [0:13:15] Yeah.

HA: I met someone, and it wasn't a real pleasure meeting this person, but it happened, and he gave me a child, which I don't regret, but the situation. I moved from Brooksville upon Tim's birth. I took a course at Home, Inc. for homemaking. Therefore Tim, as much of a toddler as he was, just a little baby, went right along with Mom. They had daycare, and I studied and graduated from Home, Inc. They taught us how to cook and manage our homes, and he was happy.

GK: [0:14:35] That was in the home in [the] Bucksport area.

HA: Yes. Yes, Home, Inc.

GK: Yeah, that's great. Was that a new facility when you were there? How old was that spot?

HA: No, a while. It was organized by - it was there for the sake of taking. You know what I mean?

GK: Yeah, it was there to be used. Would you like some water or something?

HA: No, no.

GK: So you attended Home, Inc.

HA: Yes, and graduated, but Tim was always with me. They organized a swimming class for him, little pollywogs. We used the town pool at the Y, and this is Bucks Port, where we lived then. Right next door to Orland, as you know, probably. He was being taught how to swim. He looked forward to that. He'd say, "Oh, good mommy. I can splash."

GK: [0:16:05] That's sweet.

HA: So, he's a full swimmer now. Yeah.

GK: He's a good swimmer?

HA: Yes, like his grandmother, my mother. Yeah.

GK: What does he do for work?

HA: Who? Tim?

GK: Yes.

HA: [laughter] Shall I list it? He has been a game warden. He has been a rigman. He drives the big trucks. A deputy sheriff. State trooper. To name just a few.

GK: That's a lot of jobs. Wow.

HA: Yeah. He'd been on a seining boat down here in Stonington, out to sea, fished. They call it fishing. Oh, yes. Tim is also a certified nurse's aide and a certified PCA [personal care assistant] like me, but I'm one section more than him. He's right in my footsteps. I am a licensed practical nurse besides a certified PCA, where we did private care, and that was over thirty years. He's been about fourteen, fifteen years.

GK: [0:17:37] Wow. You got that certification after you went to Home, Inc?

HA: Yes.

GK: Tim was little. You were living in Bucksport. What happened next? What was your next move?

HA: Well, I attended school again. I went back to school in Ellsworth in [the] Training and Development Corporation, and that was a twelve-month program. It was just twice a week, and I gained credits just like high school. I needed help way back in the lower grades, which I didn't receive, but I graduated [with] enough to give me that privilege.

GK: So, you had to relearn some of those things?

HA: Oh, yes, but they made it fun. They taught us computer, the big Apple ones. There was another type – Sears brand software. I took literature, spelling, and arithmetic. I don't know. It was four, five subjects. I went back to school and graduated with better than a high school diploma and better than a GED [general education development].

GK: [0:19:10] Wow.

HA: Yeah, I was one of two that had gone there twelve months.

GK: Sounds like you kept improving yourself.

HA: Well, it was there. The state required that because my son had become of age, and I was mother and dad to him. It helped rear him up.

GK: The state made you go back to school?

HA: No, they didn't make me, dear. They gave me a choice, and I accepted it because I had a home to take care of and bills. I had a car to maintain and everything – parts and everything, so finally had to. I feel it helped me because this institution right here gave me the opportunity to become a certified nurse's aide. I was one of ten members of thirty-some that have the certified nurse's aid pin.

GK: [0:20:31] Did you work here?

HA: No, over in the first building.

GK: Oh, okay. But you worked in the nursing home?

HA: Yeah, here. Seventy-two hours.

GK: A week? [laughter]

HA: Well, until it was done.

GK: Oh, yeah, the course. Yeah, yeah.

HA: Yes.

GK: Wow.

HA: Yes. I learned a lot through them. Deer Isle-Stonington High School was my sponsor.

GK: That's great. It was an adult education program?

HA: Yes.

GK: That's great.

HA: Yes. Those programs are there. You just need to reach for them. I was well in my forties then.

GK: Then you had a new profession. Did you have a new career?

HA: [0:21:31] Yes, worked almost eight years at Penobscot Nursing.

GK: Wow.

HA: And then four years in-home health. So, I tried.

GK: Tell me about your painting. When did that start?

HA: [laughter] Well, that was just a hobby at home, but here they have a course to do paintings – and not with oil. This is with the pens, different color pens, ink.

GK: But you started a long time ago doing that?

HA: Yes.

GK: How did you get started?

HA: Well, I have an ancestor that I never knew, only by picture, but her name was Ellen Perkins from my mother's side of the family. She used to draw and sketch and also make the most beautiful [inaudible] three-dimensional.

GK: [0:23:01] Wow.

HA: I guess I'm taking over that. I don't know. I'm not a one-credit plus in it, but I enjoy it.

GK: That's important.

HA: Well, it's good for the mind, dear. It's good for the hands to do things because when I came here, I could hardly use this hand. Look, as far as touch, I don't have, but they open and close.

GK: Wow. Why wouldn't they work before?

HA: Well, different incidences have taken place health-wise.

GK: And then you had some sort of – doing some sort of rehabilitation while you've been here?

HA: Yes. Rehab. Yes. I'm grateful.

GK: [0:24:05] Yeah, that's great. That's great. Can you tell me –? You told me that you have a lot of knowledge of lobsters. What do you mean? [laughter]

HA: Well, my ancestors were fishermen. They used to row their boats with oars, and they'd set traps, and they'd catch scallops and crabs, lobsters. Being a Mainer, that's a pretty good selection. [laughter] And to eat them – they're delightful.

GK: Did you eat a lot of seafood when you were young?

HA: Yes, because I grew up in poor-ness, a time when – well, it was the '40s, and you ate what you could from your garden, and the prices were so low that you could afford some things in the stores. There was a store in every section of Brooksville.

GK: [0:25:33] There were small general stores?

HA: Yes.

GK: There were lots of them.

HA: But they always had things.

GK: What did they have? What sort of things would they have?

HA: Oh, they had homemade cookies, pies, bread. Bubble gum – one cent. Chewing gum – five cents. Color crayons. These are pencils, but you could buy eight probably for a dollar or two and coloring books – fifty cents.

GK: How did you make money when you were little? Did you have jobs that you did?

HA: No.

GK: Your parents would buy you things?

HA: Yes, because I was a minor, dear.

GK: Right, you couldn't necessarily work. Some people did weird jobs when they were little.

HA: Well, [during] my son's young growth, I raked blueberries, but he, again, was right there with me, too. I never was a parent that he was taken one place and me somewhere else. I could rake five-gallon pails of berries and get extra money to put away for school, and he would go and shop. I taught him.

GK: [0:27:14] He'd go shop?

HA: Yes. He'd pick out his shoes, socks, dungarees the style that he wanted, a jacket to go with it, etc., and his school's supplies – books, notebooks. I think he had colored pencils, too, besides wax – colored crayons.

GK: Was it important to you to be able to help him and provide for him?

HA: Yes. I had been really both mother and dad right from birth.

GK: That's a lot of pressure.

HA: Yes, it is. Yes. But if I had to do it, I would all over again because he has tried to prove himself. This is the way I feel. You don't do it for someone else – any accomplishment. You do it for yourself, and then that person, maybe. This is my rule, okay? When I trained and became more than just a parent, I didn't do it just for him; I did it for myself, but to help take care of him was a part of that.

GK: [0:28:59] Excuse me.

HA: God, dear.

GK: I kept it in. [laughter]

HA: Oh, you're not bothering me. So, life goes on. Becoming a hairdresser, I could go house to house and practice with a state license, which I had.

GK: Did you do that? Did you go house to house?

HA: Yes, yes. A lot of people didn't feel comfortable getting into their automobile and going beyond the town of Brooksville, so they would call up, and I would make an appointment for them, and I would go to them. My mother had a driver's license and a car, so she would go, and that was an excuse for her to get out of the house.

GK: [0:30:04] Go get her hair done?

HA: Yeah. I used to do it for her. I did. Yes.

GK: Did they live in Brooksville until they died? Your parents?

HA: Well, [laughter] yes and no. She was a South Penobscot resident not all of her life but partially until she was young and ready to go to school because she went through the first eight grades. That would be probably about six years old or so. She was born in North Brooksville. Her parents were Harry and Lucy Dodge, I think – grandparents – because her parents were Agnes and (Wylen?) Perkins. And that was at North Brooksville, where the homestead was.

GK: [0:31:31] And then your parents lived in South Penobscot?

HA: No, my parents didn't. That was mother. My mother.

GK: You're mother, okay.

HA: Tim's grandmother. My parents lived in Brooksville. Yes. My so-called father, which isn't – [laughter] – not going into detail – was born in the town of Brooksville. And she was born in the town of Brooksville, and they met working at a general store in the town.

GK: And one thing led to another.

HA: Right. She was sort of like a maid. You know what I mean? She'd wash floors, sweep, dust, change beds, etc. like that – cook some. He would be a clerk at a small little general store, and he would go haul grain from Bucksport to Brooksville, sell the horses and cows, etc. – could have food. They met, and they [inaudible] over forty-some years together.

GK: [0:33:30] Wow, that's a long time.

HA: My so-called father passed away twenty-two years ago, I believe it was – up to date time. My mother passed away after the fire. It just devastated her.

GK: Oh, yeah, that would be very sad.

HA: She was only fifty-five of age.

GK: Wow.

HA: Too young, yeah.

GK: Yeah.

HA: But she enjoyed school, and she wished more than anything to go on and go to high school. That would be the Clark High School in South Penobscot just there above the farm.

GK: [0:34:34] And you were able to do that. Was she proud of you, do you think?

HA: Yes. I'm a lot [of my] mom. I mean, I enjoy education, drawing, sketching, coloring pictures, cooking. She taught me how to cook, and not that I'm [inaudible].

GK: But you like it.

HA: It was country cooking, dear. Just plain food. You know, simple.

GK: Like what?

HA: Oh, apple pie, pumpkin pie, puddings that you would steam, make. She would roast a turkey or hen and make sure it was completely clear, of course, of anything that would be bad for health, and make stuffing, gravy, squash, raising the garden.

GK: [0:35:54] Scotch?

HA: Squash.

GK: Oh, squash. I was like, wow, you were making your own whiskey. [laughter]

HA: No. Turnip, boiled onions, and either yeast rolls or a biscuit because that's what we lived with. You could buy flour in bulk, almost nothing in price. That's where I'd love to go back and live because it was more peaceful then, too.

GK: In what way? What was peaceful about it?

HA: Well, if there were disagreements, you didn't have anything to do with them. I don't mean an enemy. I mean, you wouldn't interfere. They had a reason because they were country people, poor.

GK: [0:37:00] You kind of minded your own business?

HA: Right. Right. Relied on the saltwater for clams and scallops. Like I said – I'm just repeating – crabs, lobster, and such.

GK: And people relied on the ocean.

HA: Right, right. That was their livelihood. And also vessels with lumber that would go from North Brooksville wharf to Bangor, Portland. Some would go as far as New York. Now is this giving you info?

GK: Yeah. It's great. I mean, now, when you go to Brooksville, there's not a lot happening in the Harbor, really.

HA: [0:38:07] Just the yacht club, dear. Yes.

GK: That's a big change from when you were little.

HA: It is. It is. It used to make my hometown so small. But I grew up. I graduated from the schools, so I have that preciousness inside me. Gladness of being able to. It was there. And, of course, it required that you go, but there were so many that enrolled [at] the same time I did that were dropouts. When you're a dropout, it isn't good, always. But they have courses now that help you, and I highly recommend that.

GK: [0:39:10] Yeah, that adult education really helped you.

HA: Yes, it did. It was there. They paid my gas and oil to come back and forth, and I could take as much home with me that I needed, you know, to help me, and take it back, and give it. Also, we had one teacher. I liked that idea. Yes. She taught first grade, kindergarten, up to college, and including college.

GK: Wow. I wonder when the town started to change so much. Do you remember?

HA: Well, it has through the years, really.

GK: [0:40:10] Just gradual?

HA: Yes. I don't know exactly what the status is right now because I'm down here. But it was local townspeople that used to help make up the members that helped lead the town through. But I don't know what's up. I don't have the least idea. A lot of people have passed away, so I don't know. I don't have an answer. But I became, at age twenty-one, a registered voter, and I always voted to help my town and also the state itself. I figured that they had helped me, so at least I could maybe help them.

GK: [0:41:25] Yeah, yeah. Do you have any other stories or thoughts that you want to share?

HA: No, not really.

GK: Well, thank you very much.

HA: Oh, you're welcome.

GK: That's an incredible story of – you just kept on going back for more your whole life.

HA: Yes, because it was available, and that's the only way to help yourself, to improve, to make better. That's what I told my son. I said, "It's there, young man. Go reach out." And he did, and they helped him to become a rigman and also gave him summer employment too. He was a teen at that time, so really, Training and Development Corporation was a great help.

GK: [0:42:29] That's great.

HA: He was there, and all he had to do was reach.

GK: Take advantage of it.

HA: Well, yes. So that's what I did. I got nine certifications in late years, my high school diploma, my eighth-grade diploma, Eastern Academy of Beauty Culture diploma, and a state license. It's invalid now. I would have to renew it. Also, here, when I trained for this building – state license and seventy-two hours training, and then in services at Blue Hill Royal Hospital. That gave me the right to use a [inaudible] and to practice, and applying – hopefully, that someone would call and you would go and interview just like I am with you now. Okay?

GK: [0:44:05] Yeah.

HA: I was just a country person, but it was there.

GK: You did a lot.

HA: Well, I figured that that's the way it should have been. Mother, until her last of her life, she was very pleased. Her life was upside down at times. I sat for hours with her, make her a cup of tea, and such.

GK: And talk with her?

HA: Yes, never a harsh word. I thought the world of my mom.

GK: She was important. A special lady.

HA: Yes, just because she had married a man that it wasn't really the choice. But she was more mother and dad to me, just like I've been mother and dad to Timothy. She was smart. It's too bad she couldn't've taken a course and become a high school grad.

GK: [0:45:43] She would have liked that.

HA: Because she had gotten her driver's license and had a car at that time when those things [inaudible] became available. Yep. It wasn't meant [to be?]. But her daughter's gone on, and I proved to myself that it can be done.

GK: Great, Helen. That's great.

HA: Well, I started when I was in my forties, dear, for the so-called education reason, and here I am seventy-seven, and I worked thirty years in the healthcare field. That was just with Penobscot Nursing.

GK: [0:46:51] That's great. Did you go to people's homes?

HA: Yes, I was assigned. I was one of a team and worked with LPNs [licensed practical nurse], RNs [registered nurses], and the doctors. Yes. Might have been for a month, might have been for six months, but I generally saw them out of this life.

GK: So, maybe hospice-type care.

HA: They were there. They were there. I worked with them. Blue Hill Hospital was my foundation for that.

GK: Right. For thirty years. That's amazing. It is. You started somewhat late.

HA: [0:47:54]Yes, I did, but I didn't have any choice of that. My son's support had stopped, and I needed to stand on my two feet completely and help him in between. So I just reached out.

GK: Great. Anything else you want to say?

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

Reviewed by Molly A. Graham 6/5/2023