

“The Kellams Rowed Their Dory, Tracing An Island Story”

by Laurie Schreiber

"Tremont — For nearly four decades, Nan and Art Kellam rowed their 20-foot wooden dory, the BLB, on regular round-trips between their year-round island home and the mainland.

The Kellams bought Placentia Island, in Blue Hill Bay, in 1949 in order to live a life of seclusion and self-sufficiency. From Bernard boat builder Clifton Rich, they bought the dory that would serve as their vehicle for the runs they made to Bass Harbor to pick up supplies and mail.

Today, the BLB is back in the shop, this time under the care of Rich’s grandson, Robert “Chummy” Rich.

Sixty years after it was built, the BLB is in pretty good shape. But the boat was upside down in the weeds on Placentia for about 10 years, so the top planks, and the top of the frames, transom and stem, had rotted out. The iron fastenings had also disintegrated in the oak frames.

Placentia Island now belongs to the Maine chapter of The Nature Conservancy. The Tremont Historical Society acquired ownership of the dory from a member of the Kellam family.

The dory will be an outdoor display at the society’s Country Store Museum in Bass Harbor, said the society’s president Muriel Davisson. So they asked Chummy Rich if he would take on the job of stabilizing the condition of the boat for the display.

Rich said he readily agreed to the project in memory of his grandfather and the Kellams. Rich Helmke is the lead builder on the project.

According to the 2010 book “We Were an Island: The Maine Life of Art and Nan Kellam,” by Peter P. Blanchard III, the couple met in 1934, a year after graduating from college. When they married, they moved to California, where Art was a World War II-era aeronautical engineer for the Lockheed Corporation.

But the Kellams had long contemplated a change in lifestyle, according to “Island.” They wanted a simpler life that eschewed the conveniences and pressures of modern living. The couple embarked on “an extensive search before they could select, purchase, and finally set foot upon an island home,” Blanchard wrote.

They liked Placentia, he wrote, because it was isolated, habitable and affordable; its terrain was varied, there was plenty of woods, a year-round stream traversed the island, and the beaches were accessible by small boat.

The Kellams arrived on their 552-acre island on June 8, 1949, towed with a boatload of gear, in the BLB, by Chummy’s grandfather, Clifton Rich.

The name of the boat, BLB, stands for “Bear loves Beum,” their nicknames for each other. The nicknames reflect the love story that endured throughout their lives.

When they first met, wrote Blanchard, “Both wrote later of an immediate attraction, a spontaneous recognition of the other person as a potential life partner. Nan would later use the analogy of two black bears converging on the same hollow tree that harbored a honeycomb. The bears were so absorbed in the quest for honey that they were unaware not only of the bees, but of each other, until the two foragers literally collided. After impact, each rolled into a sitting position, where he and she remained, gazing for some moments upon the unexpected ‘intruder.’ Each was stupefied by a mutual discovery. For the duration of their life together, husband and wife would refer to themselves as ‘the Bears.’”

The couple lived year-round on the island, in all seasons and types of weather, Blanchard wrote. They built their homestead, which they called Homewood, and lived without running water and electricity. The BLB was large enough to carry much of the materials they needed.

Wrote Blanchard, “At various times during its 36 years of service... the BLB carried out – in addition to its crew – furniture; a cook stove; a shower stall; and an array of material for Homewood’s construction, including windows, lumber, pinewood paneling for the interior, and shingles for the roof.”

The flat-bottomed boat was initially powered solely by Art, Blanchard wrote. Then Art built oars specially crafted for his petite wife, and she was able to row also.

“Proceeding seaward with Art at the stern oars and Nan at the shorter oars in the thwart before him, the Kellams quickly developed confidence in their craft, regardless of the vagaries of New England weather,” Blanchard wrote.

The boat was equipped, wrote Blanchard, with a compass and flashlight, for returns in the fog or at night; a towrope; a bailing scoop and tarpaulin in case of rain; and a large basket to hold cargo.

Art died in 1985, and Nan in 2002.

“Upon the death of both of the island’s most recent inhabitants, a chapter in the history of Placentia had closed,” wrote Blanchard. “The Kellams’ buildings and their dory became full participants in the process of dissolution. As its beams rotted, Homewood seemed to be leaning in on itself...Down by the shore, the dory lay upended like a small whale, beached on an islet of wildflowers and grass.”

At Chummy Rich’s shop recently, Helmke explained that the BLB’s time upended in the grass meant that about five inches of its top edge had to be cut back to remove rot. The top planks are in the process of being replaced.

“We’re trying to preserve it, hold it the way it is,” he said. “We cleaned it all up and we’re just trying to hold its shape.”

Still, said Helmke, he marveled over the great condition of the remaining cedar planks, oak frames, and the copper and bronze hardware handmade by Clifton Rich.

Chummy Rich said his grandfather built quite a few dories and punts. The BLB, he said, is likely one of his bigger dories. Typically, he said, a rowing dory would have been perhaps 14 or 15 feet long, compared with the BLB’s 20-foot length.

“This is big for a rowing dory,” he said. “But the Kellams had to have one bigger to haul supplies.” The plan is to have the BLB on display at the Country Store Museum in the summer seasons beginning this July, said Davisson. The exhibit will be accompanied by a plaque about the Kellams.” – The Bar Harbor Times, February 2, 2011.