

The Kellams Rowed Their Dory, Tracing An Island Story

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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 Davison. 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.

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