

*Placentia Island*

# THE KELLAMS OF PLACENTIA ISLAND

Peter P. Blanchard III

*Into the wind for a first glimpse of Placentia shining in the sun as we rode toward the bar. Sudden sense of all that it means – somehow we managed what we wanted most of all – a kingdom for the Bears.*

(The Kellam Journals, October 27, 1955)

Each of Maine's coastal islands harbors numerous layers of history and prehistory. Occasionally one of these layers – an era of habitation – completely captures the imagination. More than any other, this era thereafter becomes intimately associated with that particular landscape, circumscribed and defined by the sea.

Lying approximately two miles south of Mount Desert Island, the island of Placentia was undoubtedly frequented by Native Americans over the millennia and was used as a base of operations by farmers and fishermen of European descent in the 18th and 19th centuries and even into the early 20th century. Today, however, the name "Placentia Island" most immediately evokes the year-round residence of Art and Nan Kellam in the mid-20th century.

Placentia's time-honored name was derived from *Plaisance*, a name that had been bestowed on the island by early French explorers and that can be translated as "sailing" or "boating," in possible reference to the island's resemblance to a great vessel on the sea's horizon. The English mistranslation or mispronunciation of *Plaisance* has persisted and has metamorphosed further into a local Maine expression – "Plasench."

During the Kellams' island tenure, local parlance reflected the degree to which the couple and Placentia were viewed as one entity. Watching the Kellams at sea as they rowed their dory – the *BLB* – from Placentia to Bass Harbor or landed at the wharf in order to load groceries, supplies and mail, locals could be heard to say, "Here comes Plasench!" or "There's Plasench!" The name "Plasench" had come to be used

interchangeably to designate the island, the dory, and the couple themselves.<sup>1</sup>

On June 8, 1949, the day of their first landing as island owners, Art and Nan Kellam began a 40-year saga as year-round occupants of a 500-acre forested kingdom. At that moment in time, husband and wife, both at the age of 38, were setting out on a seemingly improbable, if not impossible, quest.



*Nan & Art Kellam*

The lure of the Kellams' life experiment lies in their determined and eventually successful pursuit of a dream that would appear implausible and unattainable to the majority of Americans of their time and even of our own time. This was the dream of leading an independent and simplified life in the face of the modern world – a world characterized by materialism, over-reliance on technology, and endless demands on the individual.

For the Kellams, independence was achieved through a premeditated and carefully planned withdrawal to an offshore island, which they were fortunately able to purchase. Here they would carry out the myriad tasks necessary for survival – tasks ranging from cooking, gardening, harvesting timber for firewood and lumber, and maintaining the vital heat of the winter stove to working in stone and wood in the creation of their island homestead. This house was fondly known as “Homewood.” Leisure time, perhaps an oxymoron for those living so close to the earth, was spent in writing, reading, enjoyment of classical music (and particularly opera), and the contemplation of nature. Many of the comforts, conveniences, and impediments of life on the mainland, in addition to a



major portion of societal pressures and expectations, were left behind.

Recalling the first morning of their new life after they had set themselves down upon a Placentia beach in the midst of their belongings, Nan Kellam eloquently described the scene and the motive:

*The ponderous pile on the bank must have looked like the birth of a colony or the means of abandoning civilization forever. Actually, for beginners, it was a conservative collection. Our modest tangle of goods matched a wish to leave behind the battle for non-essentials and the burden of abundance – and to build in the beauty of this million-masted island a simple home and an uncluttered life.<sup>2</sup>*



*An evening in Homewood*

Individuals who have the courage to follow their dreams and take an unexpected and relatively uncharted path in life typically become the focus of inquiry and endless speculation. In the absence of real knowledge of the Kellams, numerous myths evolved and swirled as thickly as the summer fogs around Placentia. Such myths included Art's purported roles as: a former German spy; an active Russian spy; and a former physicist with the Manhattan Project, working to develop the atomic bomb. In actual fact, Art had been a physicist working on airplane hydraulics for Lockheed in California and therefore was admittedly a contractor for the military. He was not involved, however, in espionage or atomic weaponry.

The plan to lead an islanded existence took shape soon after their marriage on November 16, 1935 (when both were 24) and came to fruition at the end of World War II, at which point “life diversions ceased” and Art decided to leave his job and begin an island search. Their quest took Art and Nan to the West Coast and the St. Lawrence River Valley before they began to focus on East Coast islands and eventually narrowed their search to the State of Maine.

Art and Nan Kellam presided over their island kingdom with pride, but, contrary to uninformed opinion, they were certainly not hermits. While distrustful of uninvited strangers on Placentia, the couple developed friendships with a wide range of people, including local Mainers, summer residents and visitors to Mt. Desert Island – “folks from away.”



*Homewood was built on an old barn foundation*

Through light signals and reciprocal visits, the Kellams maintained direct contact with inhabitants of Great Gott Island, a neighboring island to the northeast with a year-round community. Monthly dory trips to Bass Harbor, where their 1936 Ford V8 coupe, the “Spizzler,” was stationed, also opened up the broader world to them. But each trip away from their beloved home – whether a few hours or several weeks in duration – confirmed the values of an island-centered existence. When storms or fog did descend on Placentia, Art and Nan invariably rejoiced in their momentarily guaranteed seclusion. Nan responded to a procession of days with strong winds in the following early journal entry: “Much of the same, wind and a little rain preventing the trip to town or is it reluctance?”

What Art and Nan described as their “Great Adventure” was fortunately captured in the pages of extensive journals (conscientiously kept by Nan from 1949 to 1968); in a larger, unfinished work – the “Big Book” – to which both husband and wife contributed; and in additional pieces written by Nan. Despite their hopes and a prolonged absorption in reading and writing, Art and Nan were unsuccessful in publishing, during their lifetimes, either an account of their Placentia days or Art’s fictional writing.

Happily, however, their Placentia days are not being allowed to drift away into distant memory and rumor. An edited compilation of the journals and other writings is currently in process. It is the editors’ hope that a most unusual and inspiring story will be preserved – the story of Art and Nan’s love for one another and the saga of their islanded existence.

It can be argued that, even after their lifetimes, Art and Nan continue to be present in spirit on their island. Over the past two summers, field trips have allowed members of the Mount Desert Island Historical Society to explore Placentia’s shoreline, woodlands, and the Kellam homesite and to experience deeply a sense of place.

While forty years appear to be quite a long time to inhabit an island, the poignancy of the relative brevity of the Kellam endeavor – a reflection of all human endeavors – becomes apparent to those who travel the interior path and emerge into Homewood’s clearing in the forest. Its porch roof and great green swing removed; its windows boarded and, in places, broken; and its roof and floors beginning to buckle, the grey and intricately shingled building that was their home now totters on the edge of dissolution.

Now ruling the island in the absence of human habitation and endeavor, Nature persists. Yet despite her evident victory, echoes of the Kellam era remain in the form of flowering cherry trees, shoreline paths now partially overgrown, and a towering white spruce, which stands alone on a rise above the northeastern beach. Under this tree and under the wheeling constellations visible through spruce boughs overhead, Art and Nan spent their first island night and savored their new freedom.

It must be noted that Art and Nan held hopes and made plans for the future of their island, as well as for the record of their island sojourn. Fulfilling a long-held plan to create a nature reserve on Placentia, Art and Nan willed the island to the Nature Conservancy, while retaining a life estate. Following Art’s death of pneumonia in March 1985, Nan



continued living on the island for a full year and then maintained a summer residence there for several more years. From about 1988 to her death on November 29, 2001, Nan, who became a resident of Summit House in Bar Harbor, was still able to visit her beloved home during the summer.

As the mission of the Nature Conservancy is the protection of natural areas and not the preservation of man-made structures, the Kellams' Homewood, hand-built on the foundations of a 19th century barn, has continued its long process of deterioration. This building and the Bandstand, the couple's writing retreat on the eastern shore nearby, are scheduled for final demolition in the spring of 2007.

Set side by side in concrete at the base of the stairway leading from the front door to the entrance of their living room are two footprints – his and hers. These imprints were made at the moment of the couple's departure from "civilization," the moment when they realized that they had literally "kicked themselves free" from the world of their former experience. Hopefully, the process of demolition will spare the footprints along with the foundation and granite steps so carefully crafted by the Kellams as they charted a bold and novel course for living.



**Conservationist Peter P. Blanchard III, his wife, Sofia, and their son, Theo, have a home at Mason Point in Somesville. Peter, with the assistance of Ellen Church, is in the process of preparing an edited version of the Kellam journals for publication.**

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> *BLB*, the name of the dory, is a playful reference to the expression "Bear Loves Beum." Art (Bear) and Nan (Beum) developed a unique and extensive vocabulary that described their love and life together on Placentia.

<sup>2</sup> Nan Kellam, unfinished chapter of the "Big Book"

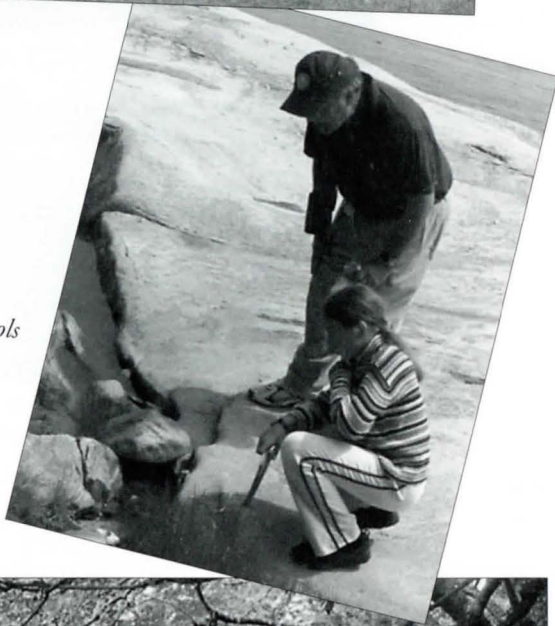
#### PHOTOGRAPHS

The photographs on pages 42, 46 and 49 were taken by MDI Historical Society member Donna Healy during the 2005 Historical Society field trip to Placentia Island.

The photographs of the Kellams on pages 44 and 45 are courtesy of Edward N. Kenway.



*The wood shed*



*Exploring the tide pools  
on Placentia*



*Homewood in 2005*