

Oral History Interview - Belvia MacDonald

Isle au Haut Historical Society

Date: August 21, 2012

Location: The 'Ark' – summer residence of the Dice-Little-Schonenberg clan

Interview included: Fran Schonenberg

Interviewer: Kristen Carlson-Lewis

Written Transcription by: Kristen Carlson-Lewis

Kris: This is Kris Carlson-Lewis and I am here to interview Belvia MacDonald. It is August 21st, 2012 and we are sitting at the Ark with Belvia MacDonald and Fran Schonenberg. We just interviewed Fran but we are going to spend a little time with Belvia and find out a little bit about her life here on Isle au Haut.

I first wanted to ask where you grew up?

Belvia: In Deer Isle. Graduated high school and six days later got married.

Kris: Oh my goodness. And your husband was?

Belvia: Jack MacDonald.

Kris: How did the two of you meet?

Belvia: At a dance hall in Deer Isle. He was about three and a half years older than I. He went there to dance and I went there to dance and we danced together and there it started.

Kris: And this was while you were still in high school?

Belvia: Yes, ma'am. It started when I was a junior in high school. So, for two years, we just dated and the last year actually we were engaged. Then, we married June 12, 1959. A long, long time ago...

Kris: That wasn't all that long ago. It seems that way sometimes and not so other times. Right?

Belvia: Seems that way, yes.

Kris: Having grown up on the mainland and then moving to Isle au Haut...

Belvia: Moving to Isle au Haut... It couldn't have been any more different [a] world than where I grew up. There was no electricity which means no telephones. Which means you don't plug in your radio and listen to music. You had battery-operated radios. I would go through one whole battery per week 'cause I had to have my music. Jack was a lobster fisherman. I went out with him for the first year and a half [on the boat].

Fran: You were stern man?

Belvia: No, I was just enjoying being on the water. I got spoiled. Well, I did help him a little bit. Two years later, I had our first child which was a son named Daniel. I enjoyed being a mom. And 21 months later, I had a daughter...we had a daughter. I shouldn't say 'I' anymore. But I was the one who did all the pushing. Back then, the sad part was that husbands were not part of the process of birth.

Kris: That's so true. You're right!

Belvia: You had your child and you stayed in the hospital five days. And the husband could look through a window and see the baby.

Kris: All five days?

Belvia: All five days, not allowed to touch the child until you brought that child home.

Fran: I got to cut it down to four days when Mark was born. I got a homemaker early.

Belvia: Times are different.

Kris: When you were pregnant back then, did you have to go off island before the end of the pregnancy?

Belvia: I will say I did. I didn't want to go. The reason was the Isle au Haut thoroughfare filled with ice in February and they weren't sure that I would be able to get off island. So, before it completely sealed from here to Stonington, the Sunbeam had come in and broken it up temporarily. But, they felt I should not be here. The baby wasn't due until May. They didn't want me caught in case something went wrong. So, you go away. I was resentful of having to but I did go. Jack did not go with me because he had to be on Isle au Haut.

Kris: That must have been a difficult time for you.

Belvia: I was not a happy camper. It didn't freeze over; I came back as soon as it was clear. Obviously there would be no more ice. So, I did have to in that sense. The second one [pregnancy] we went off island. Actually, the two couples, Billy and Bernadine and Jack and I went off island while I was pregnant. I was due in February and we moved off in November and stayed until March in my parent's house. And I had [our] daughter then. The hospital both times, no home births.

Kris: Was that the closest hospital back then?

Belvia: Blue Hill. I think there was a Castine one but we didn't go in that direction. I am not even sure it was still working then. As a child, I had gone to the Castine Hospital. Anyway, so here I am...we lived in a very tiny camp that Jack built, one room for 4 years.

Fran: Where did you live?

Belvia: Right where my house is now.

Kris: Oh really.

Belvia: When we had two children, it was too small so we bought what was then Dot [Dorothy] and Irville Barter's house. Now, Dot and Irville were Billy Barter's parents. They moved to Stonington. You know the house is Greg's [Runge] house now. So, we moved down there which seemed so huge compared to this one little house, 18' x 12' in size.

Kris: That's amazing, I wonder how you managed.

Belvia: I don't know how but I did. You make do with what you have. Our policy has always been you don't go into debt. You buy what you can pay for. So, anyway, we moved down here in this field...whatever it is called now. From there...kids. You wanted to know about kids. I was a mom who thoroughly enjoyed her kids. That doesn't mean I didn't get frustrated. Part of the difficulty was no babysitters. Winter was gruesome and it was gruesome. The lowest population was 17 people in the winter.

Kris: I hadn't realized there were so few people some years?

Belvia: And I was kind of somewhat separated from people in that the closest one was Dottie and Stan Dodge up in the thoroughfare, for people.

Kris: Was it gruesome because of the isolation factor?

Belvia: Yes, yes. The last time that that happened, Jack went to Stonington to go scalloping with another fisherman and this is before power.

Kris: And did you go out for extended periods of time when you do scalloping?

Belvia: He went to Stonington and stayed with the fisherman and his wife in Stonington.

Fran: For how long? A week at a time? A month?

Belvia: Probably a couple weeks or something like that and touch base. I was alone with two kids. No car, no electricity. I did have a generator. So, I would lug from the store to that house, a 5-gallon can of gas to have electricity for the kids to watch TV before they went to sleep at night. One of the experiences I had that made me uncomfortable was Hurricane Island. I don't know if you know of that group. It was the Hurricane Island Company. They took in kids rather than have them go to jail when they had done something wrong. They took them out into Mother Nature in boats. It would be like a great big peapod that about 8-10-12 people could be in. They came down to Moore's Harbor. The Bowditch family owned the property and allowed them to come in to Seal Trap and camp.

Fran: Oh yes they would...

Belvia: Which one? James Bowditch? I don't remember...

Fran: Ernest occurs to me.

Belvia: In Seal Trap they were allowed to come in. And they had no communication with their Center [Hurricane Island]. So, Center didn't know if they had gotten here safely. During a big bad snowstorm,

they came from Rockland over in a pea pod. So, two of the kids came to my door. I am alone with two children between four and six [pm]. [They] knocked on the door and said, "Can we use your CB radio?" Well, do you or don't you?

Fran: Which way did you go?

Belvia: I went their way of course. You didn't know if they were safe or not to let in.

Fran: You got lucky that time.

Belvia: I was lucky that time. They just wanted to call headquarters to say they were safe. That was the last time that happened. After that, they did some kind of communication maybe a CB radio themselves. They never came back again. I have to say it made me uneasy. So, at the end of that time period, I said to Jack, "That's it. When you go off island, I am going off island. You can forget it. I am not staying here alone." If you want to stay here, the thinking process was 'stay here to keep the school open so it didn't get closed by the town folks.'

Billy and Bernie at that time were taking their children and moving to Jonesport to stay with her folks all winter. So, there really was nobody on this end of the island. If you go off, I go off. If you stay, I stay...that's fine. But I am not going to stay alone with two children. This was my ultimatum to Jack.

So, we talked it over and we decided well, we need company to keep us company. We went down and talked to Billy and Bernie. This is the way it is, "If you go off, we're going off, that leaves a teacher hired with no students." Likely the townspeople will say, 'Why are we hiring a teacher with no students?'

Kris: Well, if there are no students...

Belvia: "Are you going to pay a teacher not to teach for 6 months? I don't think so..." So, they decided to stay with us and we started trying to build up the community. From there, we built the house I have now. That was in 1973 or 4. That was when Jack became selectman.

We approached the Acadia National Park problems. Prior to that, Acadia National Park had been dormant on Isle au Haut. They had the property but didn't do anything with it. When they got an overflow in Bar Harbor, they decided to start shifting people over here but with no supervision. So, the trails that we all had the summer people and year round people had made these trails.

These Acadia Park visitors were picking up these existing trails. They wound up coming out in private people's back yards. They bring a picnic with them and would sit in the door yards and have their picnic. They would leave their trash behind and go off to catch the boat back home. That didn't set too well with the island community.

Kris: I wouldn't think so...

Belvia: So, then we said, "Okay, Acadia, you have some responsibility here." And so that is when the big battle [communications] started. That was a summer person/year round community effort, a whole community working together to fight this problem of imposing on the local community was corrected.

Fran: You had complete support.

Belvia: I think that started in 1976 and it was 1980-82 before the effort was completed.

Fran: It was organized and everybody helped find solutions.

Belvia: Many senators and legislators went through my house having luncheon meetings and conversations.

Fran: It was beautifully done.

Kris: It's wonderful how the whole community pulled together to address that.

Belvia: It was key. It was an important factor for both. I think that is when the summer people and island people came together. You don't want to say summer people.

Fran: Summer complaint.

Belvia: I didn't want to say that either. That's when the two groups came together and became a family is how I like to think of it as.

Kris: Is that the same time they put the landing at Duck Harbor?

Belvia: Not yet. Where, let me see...You know where Lincoln Tully is living right now?

Kris: Is that Head Harbor?

Belvia: You know the trailer up here on the corner?

Kris: No, I didn't know that he was living there.

Belvia: You know where the Miss Lizzie house is?

Kris: I know the trailer...

Belvia: He is living there. When I left that is where he was living, I don't know now. That was park property. To gain this legislation with Acadia, many summer people gave up some very good land to protect a lot of fauna and flowers, etc. and bird's nests and all that in exchange. Let me back up now. I am getting ahead of myself. Acadia National Park would own a little plot over here where there were residents and other little plots here and there. The agreement was 'we are going to keep Acadia Park on the lower side of the island keeping the trail walkers down there.' In exchange, they would give the Island community some of their land up here as long as it was protected. So, the summer people helped us swap land with them.

Kris: To change the park boundaries?

Belvia: To change the park boundaries to one location. They did maintain where the park headquarters are now so they would have access.

Fran: What the bargain was?

Belvia: The bargain was, for instance on the high ridge, the land the island community got was the Mt. Champlain area. We can't build three hundred feet up, you know.

Kris: There are some restrictions? It sounds like it benefited both the park and the town.

Belvia: It made them aware that you can't just send people down in the wild without affecting the community. They were a nuisance. They didn't have any direction. That's when they started having a ranger come or hiring local people to be rangers.

Fran: Having the town year-rounders so deeply involved was terribly important. At Moore's Harbor, the town road borders a driveway [Priscilla Davis]. We were talking to Priscilla Davis who asked, "If I ever wanted to, could I make a separate driveway?" The town's answer ended up yes. There were these ripple effects. There was a lot of give and take.

Fran: More by the summer folk than I realized...

Belvia: There was a lot of exchanges going on there.

Kris: I think Fred was very active in that process.

Belvia: We would never have accomplished this without Fred Eustis. You are absolutely right because he knew how to get it done. That's when we first started a planning board and also started a comprehensive plan. That was never accepted, I don't think. When I came to Isle au Haut, there was this wilderness. You might just as well say it was pretty much going backwards in time.

Kris: It must have felt like you were moving back to the 1920's?

Belvia: What a shocker it was! And the community didn't really want much change. They didn't want people to come here. They didn't want businesses to be here. Just to have the church and the store and the school. That's all they ever wanted.

Fran: The post office.

Belvia: Well, yeah, the post office.

Kris: They didn't want other fisherman to help build the island community.

Belvia: They needed fishermen because a lot of the older folk and it was probably when I first came, a lot of the older folk started to get too old to stay. And so they moved to Rockland. Back then, transportation was to Rockland pretty much. The mail came from Stonington. But prior to that, I think transportation was to Rockland.

You didn't go to Stonington. So, you really had a small community who didn't want change. The older fishermen moved away. That left the grounds of fishing that the older folk had been fishing empty. So,

now there is nobody fishing these empty spots down near Head Harbor and down around the southern side of the island, southeast. And so the Stonington fishermen came in.

Kris: So, that's when that transpired.

Belvia: Two [Stonington] fishermen bought houses here. One fisherman bought a house and that's the Wilson house, so they could come and live in that house, fish Head Harbor and that area. Then, go back to their winter home and bring their families with them. That's how they got established.

Kris: I see...I was wondering how that happened.

Belvia: That's how that happened. They eventually said, "We don't want to do that. We'll sell that for big time money." So, they sold it. I don't know if the Wilsons were the first to buy it or somebody else. And I can't remember the timing on that. Once they've gotten established, it's much harder to get rid of them. You'll never get rid of them. The truth is, it will never happen. If we had 50 lobster fishermen here, you probably could accomplish that. But, we only have about 12-14 fishermen and some of those are kids in outboards. [We] don't stand a chance.

So, where do go from there? We have the planning board, we have the comprehensive plan that was drawn up but, the people did not want change. They did not feel that you, the planning board, had the right to tell us. "If I want to cut a tree in my door yard, I will cut the tree in my door yard. I own that property and you're not going to tell me what to do or not to do."

Fran: For example, in Moore's Harbor, we had two clearings down from our cottage, one toward the Davidson cottage and the other one was towards the Hazeltons. And I think the plan said, "Since we had cleared the area to get the views and I think the plan said, "No cutting. Thou shall cut no more trees." The principle...the concept was right.

Belvia: We needed the planning board. It was time to have a planning board. You had to do this to prepare to get the legislation in Washington, D.C. passed.

Fran: It really was a law.

Belvia: The good part of it when we did the comprehensive plan and they did surveys to accomplish that, that the same thinking process then which is working with summer people and wanting the same thing to happen or not happen on Isle au Haut was the same results as we had with the last comprehensive survey that we did. It shows the summer people and year-round community together and it shows we don't want too much industry but we want a little. So, anyway, it was hard because I think those people then just didn't want change.

Fred Eustis thinks we passed the comprehensive plan. So, he's having Sue [McDonald] look into it. He called me and said, "Did we or didn't we?" I said, "I remember 'no' and how disappointed you were that we didn't and wondered why they didn't understand it."

Fran: Who had to approve it?

Belvia: The island community voters.

Fran: It has to be town-approved?

Belvia: It has to be town-approved or it's no good. Now they make it that it has to be state approved after you do the town approval.

Kris: Oh, is that right?

Belvia: If the state doesn't approve it, you have to go back and work on it some more. It has more clout in a court of law if anyone challenges it. That's the bottom line. You don't have to have the state approve, but if you get into a court of law, they can throw it out because the state hasn't set their stamp on it.

Fran: While you and Jack were select people, did you conduct yourselves as if the comprehensive plan were law?

Belvia: Yes, we basically did. We used that concept to build a community. The ideas in it were used, it just hadn't gotten the town approval. That's my remembrance. I can remember wrong too.

Fran: Good for you.

Belvia: Jack was in there nine years as first selectman [1976-1984] and I went three years beyond him. In that era, no it was in Jack's era, is when we got the power. We would not have gotten power if it hadn't been for Pat Tully. That was done I want to say, early 70's. We did the Magic Mile which was from Billy Barter's house to the top of Annis Hill which is where Bill and Brenda [Clark] live. That's the Magic Mile.

Kris: How long has Bill Stevens been doing the roadwork?

Belvia: A long time but I can't tell you how long.

Kris: So, the roads were paved before?

Belvia: The road wasn't paved when I came, from Billy Barter's house...it wasn't even Billy Barter's driveway. Where did it end? I lived in that house and the dust used to fly in my laundry on the line. I want to say maybe about where the parsonage driveway is. When I first came...it started there.

Fran: That was the first?

Belvia: That's what I remember. No, I said it started at the parsonage driveway and it went...

Kris: And then went halfway up the hill?

Belvia: This is tarring now we are talking. I think it went to Dennis's pasture. But you don't know where that is. That's the sharp corner just before you get to Tina Tully's house.

Kris: Oh yeah.

Belvia: I think it went over there because of mud season. And the reason they had dirt roads and then another asphalt down there. That was because the asphalted area was always bad in the spring. They [Head Harbor residents] had to have two cars: one to drive up where the mud came, the really bad mud. They had to have another car on the other side of that section. So, they'd walk across and get into the second car and drive up town and get their groceries and gas and whatever and drive back.

Fran: That gets old fast.

Belvia: That's what I was told.

Kris: You do have that huge section where there's no paving. I was always wondering...

Belvia: That is what I was told that was before I came. Where do we go from there?

Fran: I like the selectman's part of it.

Kris: I don't think that is written down other than what's in your minutes...

Belvia: In the era of me? I go back to Jack. He got through in '84. I did '85, '86, '87 [1985-87] and that was the era when we got the telephones.

Kris [speaking to Fran]: That was your brother-in-law, John Dice.

Belvia: There were lots of stories but I am not going to tell on tape. We got telephones. I was totally against them until my daughter moved away from Stonington where I couldn't reach her. And then, it was two years after we had telephones before we [my husband and I] got our telephone...

Fran: Okay, your privilege.

Belvia: I can't remember and there was some stuff in between there. I had a second three-year time period, approximately 1992-94 and backed off again. The town was purchasing some waterfront property jointly with the town of Stonington. Then there was a third time, approximately 1998-2000. The third term addressed 'the new town dock.'

Fran: I was wondering about achievements. What were Jack's achievements? And I know you had achievements.

Belvia: Jack's achievement was starting up the Lobsterman's Association. But that had nothing to do with being selectman. His accomplishment was the legislation with Washington, D.C. that was his accomplishment there. Also, back then, the assessors were the selectmen.

Kris: So they had a dual role...

Belvia: I think that's why he wanted to get out of it. He didn't have enough time with lobstering. "I want to talk to the assessors about my property taxes. Why did they change?" You know, you get home from hauling and you have to go meet with a summer person who might not be happy. He said it's just getting too complicated.

Kris: it can be very time consuming.

Belvia: Were you thinking of something else?

Fran: You went in with your eyes open because you'd lived with Jack. I felt at the time you were doing constructive work for the town. I think you must have felt the same way.

Belvia: I do...I think I've accomplished some good things.

Fran: There are things you want to point to and say, "Hey, that might not have gone through if not for me."

Belvia: I don't like to talk that way.

Fran: You don't want to brag?

Belvia: We did do the telephone in the 1980's.

Fran: Your timing influenced...you tried to make people rational...and you speak to everybody.

Kris: I agree with that. I felt very welcomed and it's been wonderful having her as a neighbor since we have been in the house across the street.

Belvia: Where are we going from there? I did do three two-year terms. One of them was when Matthew had gotten started as a town selectman buying property in Stonington to be owned by Isle au Haut jointly with Stonington so that we would have a place for the barge to go in and out of. Matthew got it started and I came in on the tail end to finish the project. And Matthew was involved too as he was on the board with me.

Fran: That was really constructive. Not being a boat person, I wasn't as engaged in it.

Belvia: I had higher hopes than we accomplished. But, we accomplished the job and that's all that really matters.

Kris: Can you tell me a little more about that?

Fran: Explain the place and why and where.

Belvia: it used to be the old Colwell Brothers, a lobster buying business property. It was at the point where there was no land in Stonington where a barge could land for pick-up trucks, get sand to be brought down, get trucks to come down and work on Isle au Haut. This was going to be the last shore privilege that we could be able to use. The thinking process was and as I said, Matthew started this and he worked together with the Stonington manager. We were going to buy this together with Stonington. Each town has three representatives on the board that runs that property. The difficult part is going to be, I think, Stonington wants that property to be used for their overflow, like having people launch boats there. There is now a float there to tie up the skiffs, that kind of thing...in other words, for tourist use.

Isle au Haut, we feel like that is the last place we can live and land and all this stuff via Stonington; the last hope that we have of having a place...it is very important to us to have that link.

Kris: To tie up when you need to go off?

Belvia: You can't do that either. The barge is important to get in there. For awhile, Bill Stevens was having barges that were too big to go in there. Like the Transporter that comes from Rockland.

Kris: That is a pretty good size vessel.

Belvia: They can't get in there. They are too big and there are too many boat moorings. Now, there are still problems because Stonington, the manager of boat's in the harbor...

Fran: The harbormaster?

Belvia: Thank you...the harbor master is allowing fishing boats to anchor and block the way for the barge to get in there, so I guess that is now in conversation with this committee.

Fran: Who are the three Isle au Haut representatives?

Belvia: It's always one fisherman. I don't know who is on it this time. I suppose my son probably said he would do it. I think Bill Clark might be on there. See, I don't know. The way we worked our system for Isle au Haut; we elect two for the board at town meeting and then we pick a selectman that should be part of that committee. Stonington appoints their own community representatives. There is an agreement somewhere, if someone hasn't lost all that material between the two towns and the people of each town have voted to approve those rules and regulations for that committee.

Fran: I was looking for the latest town report.

Belvia: I think I moved it on you. She gets the town report.

Fran: That's a vital thing.

Kris: I hope there is some resolution soon.

Belvia: You hope what?

Kris: I hope there is some resolution. I know you have some plans. So I think we should wrap it up at this point. I really appreciate the time you both took to talk with me today. We'll go enjoy the rest of the day. I'll get back to you. Thank you very much.

Fran: It has been a pleasure.

Note: slight changes were made to the written transcription per request of the interviewee.