

Oral History Interview – Billy Barter and John DeWitt

Isle au Haut Historical Society

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Location: Isle au Haut

Interviewer: Kristen Carlson-Lewis

Transcribed by: Kristen Carlson-Lewis

Kris: This is Kris Carlson-Lewis and it's November 1st, 2019. We are sitting at our place here, the old homestead, on Isle au Haut. I have with me Billy Barter and John DeWitt. Today, we are going to talk about hunting and trapping here on the island [Isle au Haut]. I am a member of the historical society, so this is the purpose for this taping.

First of all, I wanted to find out from you. I thought we would start with trapping. I wanted to find out how old you were when you started trapping animals here on the island. Who introduced you to the idea of trapping and what you have known about it from the past. You must know a lot, Billy, from having grown up here and talking to people who have lived here for years before you.

Billy: I was about 10 years old when I started with my grandfather.

Kris: Was he trapping at the time?

Billy: Trapping mink.

Kris: Is mink the only thing they trapped here on Isle au Haut, do you know?

Billy: Could you speak a little louder?

Kris: Is mink the only thing they trapped here on Isle au Haut or did they trap other animals as well?

Billy: Just mink, I guess.

Kris: Did you do it because it was something to do or because you could earn money doing it?

Billy: Income. It was income in the winter.

Kris: Who was your grandfather?

Billy: William—Bill Robinson.

Kris: Oh, okay. Did he do it just here on Isle au Haut or other—?

Billy: We did it on Isle au Haut. We had traps on Burnt Island. We had traps on Merchant's Island. On nice calm days in winter, we would row up from—

Kris: Like in the 1940s?

Billy: No, no. Probably '50s, early '50s.

Kris: Had they been doing that on Isle au Haut for quite some time, I would assume?

Billy: Yeah, they did. Then the ranch mink—they started raising ranch mink and then the price went way down.

Kris: Oh, where did they have a mink farm here?

Billy: No, not here.

Kris: No, where?

Billy: On the mainland.

Kris: On the mainland. Oh, that's when they stopped looking for mink trapped on the island.

Billy: The prices had dropped considerable.

Kris: What did you do with the mink when you actually caught them?

Billy: Had to skin 'em.

Kris: Then what did you do with the skins?

Billy: We mailed them to Sears & Roebuck.

Kris: Oh, really. What did they normally—I remember that being a mail-order catalog.

Billy: Wrapped them up in a brown paper bag. After you skin 'em, you put them on a stretcher to stretch out their legs in a shape like a board pointed on the end. Nail, pull the hind legs back, and tack 'em to the back end of a stretcher.

Kris: How long did they have to dry? Was that a drying?

Billy: Not too long. We didn't have to scrape the skin or anything to get the fat off, a little bit of fat we would take off. You had to be awful careful skinning 'em. They wanted every toe, the skins, you know. You had to save the toenails and the lips.

Kris: Oh my gosh, really?

Billy: You had to be careful skinning them, you didn't cut a hole in the skin.

Kris: I am trying to think of the furs that you would see people wearing. Were they more expensive or whatever if they had the toes and the extra—

Billy: Yes, it used to affect the value, what we used to get if you weren't careful. Every time you made a mistake or made a wrong cut, well, it would cost you money.

John: Did you have to salt the skins?

Billy: No, no. White's Sporting Goods Store in Bangor and Sears & Roebuck bought 'em. Wrap 'em up in a brown paper bag and mail 'em off.

Kris: How much did they pay you for them?

Billy: Anywheres from \$20 to \$50.

Kris: For each one?

Billy: Oh, yeah.

Kris: Oh, wow.

Billy: Females were cheap, not worth as much as males.

Kris: Is there a difference between their furs?

Billy: Just the size.

Kris: Oh, so the larger ones.

Billy: My grandfather set a trap over Kimball's under the wharf nearest Moxie. A' course, I had to run ahead and see what was in it. I laid on top of the dock and leaned over to see. The mink squealed right in my face. Just about scared me to death. He was alive. The mink was alive. I think that's the first one I ever saw in a trap.

Kris: What were the traps like? Were they the jaw kind?

Billy: Yeah, the jaw. They were small, only about like six inches. We used sculpin and rabbit for bait. Rabbit was the best.

Kris: I'm not familiar with sculpin. What's a sculpin?

Billy: A horndog or a skunk.

John: A fish you catch in your lobster traps, bycatch. They're not the prettiest fish around. Some people would say they're ugly. They have a big head on them and a small body. Usually, fisherman just bait them back on when they set the trap back.

Kris: Okay. So, you didn't hunt for rabbit at all. I mean, trap rabbits.

Billy: We used to catch them in a live trap. Do you want to hear all about that?

Kris: No, I don't want to hear the details, the gory details. But, did people trap them for a source of food?

Billy: No, no, just bait.

Kris: Just as bait for the mink.

Billy: Of course, they used to shoot 'em to eat.

Kris: That would be the difference then. How did you determine where to set your traps? And where did you set them?

Billy: In brooks. The weather got cold, it'd freeze the brooks. We'd set them in brooks. Of course, mink travel brooks quite a lot. Out on Barter Creek out on the point there, that was a great place. Black Head, they call it now.

Kris: Black Head?

John: He means Barter Creek, the old cove.

Billy: East of Barter Creek—you know the point that necks out. There was a little run there in the ledges. The mink always travel that. We always set a trap there.

Kris: That was one of the places on the island that was a good source.

Billy: We had special places. Seal Trap, we used to set. Down Seal Trap—there is a brook down there.

Kris: I haven't been out there for a while, but I didn't remember there being a brook out there. What time of year did you usually hunt or trap?

Billy: November. Pelts weren't in prime until later in the season. If they had little spots on them, they wouldn't take 'em.

Kris: So you would start in November and go through the winter?

Billy: We did, but now it's not legal.

John: I don't know if it's legal now or not.

Billy: I know it used to be legal just the month of November. But we used to trap all winter when nothing was—

John: I don't know what the rule might be now. Maybe you can't even trap 'em now.

Kris: I'd be surprised. It doesn't seem like they are that common. Are they?

Billy: You don't see them very often, once in a great while.

John: We had a big one down at our house this past summer, right in the middle of the summer. I finally had to shoot it because it set up house right underneath our barn where ducks and geese are.

Kris: That would be what attracts them.

John: Right in the yard there. He moved right in quick. So I had to take care of him. He was a good-sized one, too.

Billy: They don't show themselves too often.

John: You don't see them that often, but they're around.

Kris: Paul thought he saw one between the garage and our woodshed last summer. Since then, the rabbits that were here have disappeared. What do they normally eat?

Billy: Mice. Usually they eat a lot of mice. They can dive and eat fish like sculpins. I've seen them where they've dragged them up through the snow. They have a den somewhere.

Kris: I've never really thought about what other animals are here on the island or were back in the old days. I mean, we have deer.

Billy: Foxes.

Kris: Do we have any still or just in the past?

Billy: Before my time, there were foxes on the island. Rats and foxes.

Kris: I know there's plenty of mice and squirrels. I don't remember seeing chipmunks here.

John: Never been chipmunks.

Kris: How about skunk or raccoons?

John: Raccoons, but no skunks that I know of.

Billy: Nope, I hope not.

Kris: I understand there has been some beaver off and on.

Billy: Down the lake, I guess. I guess they swam on last year or the year before last, though.

Kris: Were they plentiful in the past?

Billy: They must have swum on.

John: I think so.

John: Over the years, you hear about one now and then. But there was a family of them I think, and they did quite a bit of damage on the hardwood trees along the pond.

Kris: I heard that.

John: A lot of people were pretty upset about it. They were taking down quite a few trees. I went to come into town one morning. It was early and I went around the bottom of the pond there and there was a tree across the road. It was right in the middle of the summer and not even breezy at all. That's funny that tree fell down like that, you know. So, I got out and looked at it and a beaver had chewed it down overnight. It fell the wrong way, I guess. It fell over across the road instead of into the water.

Kris: I guess he was on a learning curve.

John: They never know which way they're going to fall.

Kris: That was very quick, talking about trapping. Is there anything else about trapping? I know you said you used to do some trapping.

John: I never did any trapping for pelts or money.

Billy: My grandfather had a dog who used to drive them under a rock or something, under a ledge. He had a little terrier that he used to take around the shore and around. When the dog drove it under the rock or something, he'd build a little fire to smoke it out to shoot it.

Kris: The mink?

Billy: Yeah. He'd build a fire so the smoke would drive the mink out from under the rock and he used to shoot him.

John: Couldn't sell that skin though, could he?

Billy: Clyde Turner had some hens and one of them died. So, he tied a string on it and towed it around the shore and tole mink up. My father was telling. He had a long overcoat on and a string on this chicken dragging it around the beach trying to tole up the mink. Lot of stories!

John: I heard Dennis Eaton tracked one for the better part of a day.

Kris: Just trying to hunt for it.

John: I guess so.

Billy: I could tell you a lot of Dennis Eaton stories, take half a day probably.

Kris: I've only heard Ted Hoskins told one time about the cow getting wrapped around him that he had staked out in his yard. And he got caught up in it.

Billy: That was a ram.

Kris: Oh, it was.

Billy: It was up to Cogan's. Jasper Chapin had it. Over two days it would clean up all the grass. He'd drive a crowbar or something in the ground and tie 'em to it. He'd circle around and then Dennis'd have to go and move him. So, Dennis went to move him and he was wrapped around the crowbar and he'd have to unwind him. Of course, he was giving him more rope. The ram got off about 15, 20 feet, put his head down, and did it. Top of the head. Dennis said, "It's a wonder I didn't kill that ram." Drove his head back into his shoulders there about six inches.

Kris: Almost like a football tackle head-on.

John: Right.

Kris: That's funny! How about hunting? I think there was a lot of duck hunting in the past, wasn't there?

John or Billy: Yup.

John: I used to do quite a bit of that when the boys were growing up. We'd take our retriever or retrievers with us. It was a lot of fun. We ate the birds we shot. We didn't have to go hunting for food, you know. It was more sport. They used to take quite a few birds. Billy knows more about that. A lot of coots and eiders.

Billy: Black ducks.

John: Black ducks.

Billy: They was the most popular, I guess. They was the best eatin,' I guess, black duck.

Kris: Were there certain places on the island you were more apt to find them?

Billy: Burnt Island and along the east end. You know the pond hole there?

Kris: I've not been to that part of Burnt Island. I've only been to the houses there.

Billy: My favorite place for black ducks.

Kris: Were they larger? Is that why?

Billy: No.

John: The ducks, you mean. Black ducks are practically identical to mallards except they don't have as much color. The drakes don't show off the green head or anything like that. The two sexes are about the same. But they are better eating than the sea ducks. Black ducks aren't considered to be sea ducks really.

Billy: They're more of—they kind of stand on end feet in those ponds.

John: The marsh down in Old Cove, Rich's Point.

Billy: Merchant's Cove is a great place. My father and my grandfather used to go to Marsh Cove. They drank fresh water and they used to hang around at the freshwater brooks. They'd come in to drink fresh water.

John: At the outlet of the pond, down where Jerry and Grady's house is, in there and over where the outlet goes down, there's a little pond down there too. After that froze up, they'd come into Sheep Thief Gulch to drink the fresh water from the brook there, the outlet of the pond.

Kris: What time of year did people normally go hunting for them?

Billy: Fall and winter.

Kris: When it wasn't as easy to get food out here. Anything else? You mentioned the coons.

John: I think originally they were brought on here back in the 1980s. Then, they got hunted for pelts. Then there weren't any left. Apparently, there were a couple on York's Island or something. They must have had litters or something and one or more of them swam over here. We have coons again now.

Kris: Oh, great.

John: I had to take care of four of them last spring as they were trying to get our birds, ducks and geese.

Kris: Is that as in raccoons? Because I've never seen them here.

John: Yeah. Here they come out at night.

Billy: Birds are pretty scarce now. Seabirds, hardly any.

John: I see very few eiders.

Billy: Coots at Head Harbor used to come out. My father used to tell about a lot of coots they used to shoot for winter. They used to cut the breast meat off and salt it for winter. I can't imagine. Two or three would go down to the Brandies. They said my grandfather and father, they'd go down and shoot 40–50 coots. They used to shoot 40–50 coots. Salt them for winter. Can't imagine eating them.

John: Sounds awful.

Billy: Must have been, that's what they said. I mean, there was no way to freeze 'em or anything in those days.

Kris: So does that mean you would go out in your boat, shoot them, and scoop them up with a net or something?

Billy: No, no. Shoot 'em, shotgun.

Kris: And then they would fall in the water.

Billy: Yeah. They had decoys they used to set out.

John: You'd go out and pick them up.

Billy: Skeet was always telling about Gooden. Gooden was shooting the wounded ones off the boat there. His neck was about that long. Skeet said first you'd see the big gun coming up to his neck on one side and pretty soon, his neck come out the other side. Skeet had more fun watching Gooden shoot the cripples than he did birding. He said it was funny.

John: You know, these crippled birds, it's hard to shoot them because they duck. They dive down into the water so fast that you miss them a lot of times if they're not really close. Then they'll duck the shot before it gets there. I don't know if they see the fire at the end of the barrel come out or what.

Kris: They're fast, huh.

John: They're very fast. I don't know how they do it. It can be kind of frustrating. You don't like to have it happen, you know.

Kris: Have you ever heard of duck driving? I was just reading about the history of Deer Isle back when we were still part of Deer Isle and they were talking about duck driving years ago.

John: Was this the settlers or before that?

Kris: He was just defining it because it was something that wasn't allowed any more legally.

John: In Duck Harbor, I've heard, I am not sure how much of this is true. The native Americans used to drive the eiders in there. I thought before they got their feathers back at the end of the summer when they couldn't fly, so they would go out and herd 'em up. Force them into the cove there, way up in there, and then they could just club them or whatever.

Kris: I heard they did that with boats too. From around the bay and drive them into Duck Harbor and wondered if that's how it got its name.

John: Small boats drive? Herd them up and drive them into there.

Kris: They can't really walk on land so it was easy to catch them.

John: The sea ducks aren't very much on land, I guess.

Kris: So, once you kill one of those ducks, you said to keep them to last, they would salt them?

Billy: So they would skin 'em. I guess they just cut the breast meat off and salt them like you would fish.

Kris: Didn't they used to salt the fish to preserve it?

Billy: No refrigeration. Codfish—they used to catch 'em, put a layer of fish and a layer of salt. Then you had to freshen it—it was so salty you couldn't eat it. You had to bring it to a boil and you had to drain it off four or five times before you got it fresh enough to eat. Saltfish and potatoes was a big food, big menu in those days.

John: A staple.

Kris: How did they manage to survive with eating that much salt? I would think there would still be a lot of salt left. The diet back then—

Billy: They used to dry out pork fat and pour it all over the fish—the potatoes and the fish—pour the pork fat and little scraps. Used to eat that and cubes of pork.

John: It wasn't probably the healthiest diet, but it was better than dying.

Billy: The last grammar school teacher said that Nettie Grant used to cook everything in lard. She'd warm up peas in lard, everything was in lard.

Kris: I understand she was quite the cook because I was reading her diaries and it seemed like she was constantly baking. She would do these big meals but she had just as many desserts, it seemed. She did regularly.

John: It's like Edna, the way she used to cook.

Billy: When you shingled the roof, you didn't starve, did you?

John: You could hardly get back up on the roof after we ate at noontime. It was like eating a banquet, you know. She'd just keep bringing stuff, one dish after another. You'd say you couldn't eat anymore and she'd start on the desserts.

Kris: Oh, my gosh.

John: It wasn't one dessert, but two or three or four. Every day, every day.

Kris: Every day, it seemed like she was making tarts or pies or cakes, bread. She sounded like she was constantly cooking. I couldn't survive with all of that food in the house. How old—you were about 12 you said when you started trapping?

Billy: Ten.

Kris: How about hunting? How old when you started hunting? Do you learn with bow and arrow at all? Or was it all with a gun?

Billy: My grandfather—we carried a gun everywhere we went, a 22. I learned to shoot maybe when I was little, eight or ten years old. Everywhere we went, we carried some kind of firearm.

Kris: Why was that?

Billy: In case you saw something you wanted to shoot, like a squirrel or a bird, rabbit or whatever.

Kris: So was it in a vehicle?

Billy: No, walking.

Kris: Did you have something to put it in?

Billy: No, just carry it in your hand, across your arms. It depended on whether someone in front of you turned around barrel pointing that way. Whether you held it across your arm or a person ahead of you.

Kris: Did everybody do that in general?

Billy: Everybody did that went hunting.

Kris: Oh hunting, that wasn't a full-time thing. Just when you were purposely hunting.

Billy: No, no.

Kris: Was there a lot of deer hunting back when you were growing up as well?

Billy: Oh, yeah.

Kris: Mostly in the fall and winter?

Billy: The fall mostly.

Kris: How did they put the venison away to last through the winter? Did they can it?

Billy: Well, some people did. A couple of women canned it. Not too much meat on a deer, just the hindquarters and the tenderloins, the front quarters not much meat. My grandmother used to make mincemeat out of the neck and the forequarters.

Kris: My mother used to make mincemeat pie for my father.

Billy: Venison was some of the best meat for mincemeat.

Kris: I can't say I've ever tried it.

John: There's not much on a deer. It's a big animal, but there isn't that much meat.

Billy: It didn't last long. It's what we had to eat in the wintertime. We used to raise a pig.

John: If you have a bunch of kids, they don't go far.

Kris: I think you are right. So it was your grandfather Robinson who taught you how to shoot as well?

Billy: Mostly. My father used to shoot a lot of ducks and deer.

Kris: Did you often go with your granddad?

Billy: Every time, I was right at his heels. Every time he went somewhere.

Kris: It sounds like he was a big part of your life.

Billy: He was.

Kris: What about Merchant's Island? I know it was bought by—Theresa Damon owned it and now her descendants do? Did you ever hear much about hunting on Merchant's Island?

Billy: No.

John: I would bet there has been a lot of deer hunting on Merchant's Island over the years.

Billy: I mean, they come on in hunting season.

Kris: How large is that island anyway? A few acres anyway, I would think.

Billy: I traveled there enough when I was a kid chasing sheep. I should know every acre of it.

John: It's a pretty large island. It would take a while to walk around it. It's one of the larger islands in our township, I think.

Billy: It's the biggest one, isn't it?

John: I think so. I think it's bigger than Kimball's.

Billy: Not Marshall's, is it?

John: Marshall's is probably the biggest.

Billy: It doesn't come under Isle au Haut, does it?

John: I think it does.

John and Billy: Well, I'm not sure.

John: Fog Island is.

Billy: I thought the assessors went on Marshall's one time.

John: Well, they might—I know as far east as Fog Island is in the Isle au Haut township.

Kris: I've not been to most of these islands.

John: I don't remember seeing anybody from Marshall's Island on the tax maps.

Billy: I think it is part of Knox County.

Kris: I don't think there are any year-round residents on any of the islands now, but Kimball's is seasonal, and here is the only year-round.

Billy: I can remember when a schoolhouse was still standing on Merchant's.

Kris: I heard there was one there 'cause weren't there quite a few kids there at one point in time?

Billy: I don't know what the population was. Enough for a schoolhouse.

Kris: I think they included Merchant's, Wreck—is Wreck Island near there? There were three islands—Wrecks?

John: Wreck [Island], Round [island], and McGlathery [island] are to the east of there.

Kris: They combined some of those [islands] into one school district.

John: They are to the northeast from Merchant's there. I can't imagine those kids all got in a boat and went to school on Merchant's, though. It gets to be this time of year, you don't have many days—

Billy: Mitchells used to live on York Island in the winter. They used to row across to go to school at the Little Red.

Kris: Was that when you were younger or years before that?

Billy: A long time.

Kris: Wasn't that the Conleys? Did the Conleys own that [York island] for a long time?

Billy: Yeah.

Kris: Were the Mitchells after that?

Billy: I guess so, I'm not sure. Jim Conley used to run the store on there [York]. I think he used to go to Rockland in the wintertime.

Kris: So he just ran a seasonal store?

Billy: Probably. I don't know for sure. There used to be a lot of mackerel seiners around those days. I've seen pictures of all the mackerel boats in York Island Harbor.

Kris: It seems like Isle au Haut was a big stopping point for a lot of the fishing vessels going up and down the coast.

John: I imagine Isle au Haut had the most people on it back then. All those steamers coming over from Rockland.

Billy: Must have been about a hundred year-round when I grew up. I'd have to count them up. I was going to do some writing and write stuff down but I never got around to it. Start at Henry Erikson's place and tell who was there. That was built in '46, wasn't it?

John: I don't know the exact year, 46 or 40s.

Billy: I remember he sawed the lumber and brought it over.

John: From Rockland.

Billy: Wherever he lived. Where'd he live?

John: Cushing?

Billy: No.

John: Friendship?

Billy: Nope, where [] used to be.

John: Warren?

Billy: Yeah, Warren.

Kris: That's in Head Harbor. The little red house?

John: The little red house we have there was Henry and Reena.

Billy: Kendra's aunt or great aunt.

John: Great aunt and uncle, I guess.

Kris: He built that himself from what Kendra was saying one time.

John and Billy: Yup.

Kris: We ought to drive around with you with a tape recorder someday, Billy. Get the lowdown on all the different homes. There is a lot of interest in knowing more about the houses here on the island.

Billy: I could tell you who lived in every one.

John: A lot of houses are gone now, too.

Billy: I guess there was a Knickerbocker ice place up on the hill. Bill tore down, I guess, where Del and Mary lived.

Kris: Where was that?

Billy: Just above. Do you know where the Hopkins house is?

Kris: Yeah.

Billy: Towards John's house, right on top of that hill.

John: You can still see the chicken coop.

John: They cut a lot of ice on the pond.

Billy: Three. Betty and Mary and Del lived in that upstairs in that little house, some crowded. That's where I saw my first television.

John: Really.

Kris: At their place?

John: It's funny it was down there.

Kris: Back in the 50s, right?

Billy: Early 50s.

Kris: Wasn't that Charles Bowen's workshop for a while? Is that the same one?

Billy: Downstairs was old man Charlie's workshop.

Kris: Is that the one that's on the back cover of Charles Pratt's book?

Billy: Probably, I don't know.

John: I can't remember that.

Kris: On the flyleaf, I think.

John: There used to be a lot of swallows in that house in later years when it was all falling down.

Kris: Is that it? Is that the one? [Kris shows back flyleaf of Pratt's book.]

John and Billy: Yeah, that's it.

Kris: Kendra talked about that one. She has a picture of it, actually.

John: Yeah, there are probably a bunch of pictures of that. I don't remember anybody living there. I was too young I guess. The swallows—after it started to get run down—the swallows lived in that house. All kinds of swallows.

Billy: At Head Harbor, people just up and left. All of a sudden, they just moved away.

Kris: Weren't some of them out there because they were fishing, and then they'd live in Rockland in the winter?

John: They lived there a couple years just to get established fishing down there and then didn't they move to Stonington?

Billy: The Bridges, you mean?

John: Yeah.

Billy: They bought Jim Jenkins's house to just get a foothold in Head Harbor. They fished out of there a couple of winters and they sold it to Jim Wilson. Now they own the area.

John: They own the water.

Kris: That's why a lot of them got established out here, wasn't it? So they could use—

John: At least down there they did that. I don't know if anybody did that in town here. Get established and move to Stonington. Do you know if anybody moved into town down here and got established here and moved back to Stonington?

Billy: Not that I know of, just Head Harbor.

Kris: Although Charles L. Bowen, Kendra's grandfather, he married Beatrice Hamilton. So I assume that was one reason he was out here originally.

Billy: They didn't live here winters much. They fished out of Rockland.

Kris: During the winter?

Billy: During the winter.

Kris: And in the summer they came out here, right?

Billy: They spent the week fishing and went back to Rockland in the boat. Kendra's got that tape of Charlie Bowen.

John: I haven't heard that tape.

Billy: You haven't heard that tape?

John: I don't think so.

Billy: You've got it.

Kris: Yeah, I taped it.

John: I know of it but I haven't heard it.

Kris: I transcribed it. I think it's online now with the others on the historical society website.

John: I'll look at it.

Kris: Well, I don't want to keep you guys. Is there anything else hunting or trapping related to the island we might want to know?

Billy: I don't think so. We used to eat a lot of loons. Loons, not everybody. A few people liked to eat loons. Steve Bridges used to.

Kris: Hunt them?

Billy: Yeah, if one came into the harbor and he got his eye on it, he'd shoot it. If he missed it, they slowly went out through by the parsonage. He'd chase it along and get the last shot before it got out of the harbor. He could cook 'em so they were pretty good. Jack and I used to go up and eat with him. Loon stew. Gladys Bowen, Gladys Hamilton could cook them, and Bernie Sellars—three women who knew how to cook them.

Billy: Skeet always said—

John: Crazy as a loon. Well, I know of a couple people that have eaten crow. And they happen to be related to you and me. And they said it wasn't too bad.

Billy: Skeet said you put a brick in with a loon. You'd stick a fork in the loon, took the brick out, and ate it. That's how tough they were. I don't know how they cooked them.

John: It couldn't be that different than the ducks, really.

Kris: Roasting them.

John: I guess they must have roasted it. Did he roast them or did he breast them out?

Billy: They didn't roast them. They made a loon stew like a meat soup with a loon, coots.

John: A lot of the birds were clean, like if you buy a turkey breast at the store. That's most of the meat on the bird there. Especially the ducks, the legs or wings on the ducks really hardly have anything on them. Most people would breast them, flay them, and take the bones out. Fillet them like you would fillet a fish, and you'd get the meat off like you would a couple of little steaks off the birds. The seabirds all had pretty big breasts on them. There'd be a good chunk of meat, you know, when you did that.

Billy: Black duck, they used to be bake 'em, roast 'em, stuff 'em like you would a chicken.

John: Most of the sea ducks were breast meat out.

Billy: They're not quite as gamey as the eider ducks, but they're pretty gamey—coots and eider ducks. I don't think I could eat one now.

John: I thought the eiders were better than the coots. It might just be a mental thing.

Billy: Probably got tired of that when we was growing up. That's about all there was on the menu.

John: Well, my boys, I didn't let them just go shooting. You know, they had to eat what they shot. So not go out and waste wildlife. So we ate quite a few sea ducks. There are different ways of cooking 'em, and it probably depends on how they are handled, too, after you get 'em back in.

Billy: Soak 'em out with saltwater usually overnight. That's what you did?

John: Yeah.

Billy: Put a little saltwater in 'em and let 'em soak overnight.

Kris: Does that tenderize it?

John: "Takes out the gaminess," quote, unquote. We ate a lot without doing that. I mean, Lincoln and Landon, we'd come home with birds, and they cleaned them out. Sometimes they cleaned them, too. Sometimes, they put it right in the pan and eat it.

Billy: Black duck, we used to pick the feathers, take a torch and singe them, the little fuzz.

Kris: Just to get it off?

John: I am never going to pick another bird. Never, ever.

Billy: If you baked them, roasted them, you picked them, black duck.

John: You had to pick them, pluck them.

Kris: I would think, otherwise, you would have the feathers.

Billy: That's why you had to singe off the ones you couldn't pick out.

John: You had to hold your nose while you did it.

Billy: It didn't smell very good.

Kris: Somehow, I don't think of that. Well, actually, my grandmother had chickens.

Billy: I don't know how they do hens now. They used to scald them.

John: I've done that. I don't know.

Billy: I don't know how they do it in those big industries.

John: They have those rubber fingers. Those machines with rubber fingers. Actually, there was a video on Facebook the other day that Steve Johnson, the guy up in Stonington there. They raised some meat birds I guess, chickens. Somebody had this little machine. It was a barrel probably about this big and it had a whole bunch of those rubber fingers about the size of your fingers—semi-rigid rubber—and it spun around in there. It looked like they dipped the birds in water first, or maybe they just threw them in. I can't remember. Put them in there and bounce them around in there and those rubber fingers catch onto the feathers. It would go around for less than a minute and it would be all plucked. I've seen them advertised in catalogs. It would be like a drumhead you put on the end of an electric motor, about that big around, with the fingers

sticking up out of it all the way around. You turn it on and you just hold the bird up against it and it'd take the feathers out. I've never seen one in person.

Kris: Well, I like to just buy them at the store on the occasion. The one thing I miss hearing is the loons. It seems like the loons have become very rare. There's only a few times now and then I have actually heard them out on the water.

John: You see a lot more in the wintertime in Head Harbor than we do any other time. Half a dozen around most of the winter down there.

Kris: Really?

Billy: Not many in this harbor, two or three. I've counted up as high as 20 in the harbor here.

Kris: Even just recently?

Billy: No, no, a long time ago.

John: In the spring, they tend to gather up when they start to get ready to go north. You'll see more of them in flocks. About 20 would be a flock, I guess.

Kris: Do they usually travel together?

John: I don't think they travel together, but they tend to gather up. You see them flying singly in the spring. Certain days of the spring, you see them flying down east. That's where they are headed.

Billy: A few days ago, I saw some mergansers, three or four. We call them sheldrake.

Kris: You call them what?

Billy: We always called them sheldrake.

Kris: Sheldrake?

Billy: Yeah. Real name is merganser. They got these little feathers that stick off the back of the head.

John: We have a lot of them in Head Harbor.

Billy: I haven't seen any old squaws yet.

Kris: Which ones?

Billy: Old squaws.

John: You know the cold weather's coming when you see them. They live up north in the Arctic.

Kris: What's their name again?

Billy and John: Old squaw.

Kris: What are those?

John: They're ducks. Sea ducks. They are very pretty ducks.

Billy: They're not much good to eat.

John: They are smaller and have like a pintail on them. They have this funny noise they make. It sounds to me like they are singing.

Billy: "Ow, ow, ow, ow, ala. It's cold." "Uh, uh, uh, oh, it's cold." "Uh, uh, uh, oh, it's cold."
[imitating bird sound]

Kris: Oh, really? I don't know that I have heard them.

Billy: You can see them going to Stonington on the mailboat in the winter when the winds blowing really hard and it's rough. They fly right ahead of you and then dive right into the waves. Those waves, they dive right into them. They like rough, cold weather.

Kris: One thing I saw here, it must be five years ago in the spring. I can't remember what kind of bird but you would know. They clustered on all our apple trees all at once.

John: Red? Cedar waxwings.

Kris: They came and they went on this feeding frenzy with all the apple blossoms.

Billy: The baffle heads are not many.

John: Hardly any, they are really tiny ducks. The size of bathtub toys. They're not small. They're about this big.

Kris: So they are seasonal here.

Billy: They hang around Moxie mostly, the little cove near Moxie. We see them.

Kris: Is that because of the bait having been there?

John and Billy: No, no.

John: They don't like the rough water. They'll go into the lee when it's blowing northwest and go over in the lee there. We get whistlers or golden eyes.

Billy: There's not hardly any of them. Saw two or three maybe last winter.

John: Last winter.

Billy: We used to hunt those, golden eyes.

John: Their wings make a whistling noise when they fly. You could hear them.

Billy: They were called whistlers but golden eyes the real name.

John: Their eyes are bright yellow, yellow eyes on them.

Kris: Many of the ducks you used to hunt don't exist here any longer.

John: Wasn't too long ago, do you remember those big flocks of eiders in the harbor here for a few years? They came up and cleaned out all those mussels.

Billy: There's no mussels for them to eat now.

John: Hundreds used to come right down and—

Billy: I've seen rafts and everything—

John: Down by the lighthouse, and then they'd come back up through and they'd hang around here all day for a few years.

Billy: The mailboat would come and they'd drive down through and when they left, they'd come back up through.

Billy: There used to be rafts and rafts of eider ducks. Thousands of them in a bunch.

Kris: And now they don't—

Billy: Hardly see them around anymore.

Kris: Seems like they've gone, like everything else.

Billy: In front of this house, they'd get together, a whole flock of them.

John: They like to eat the little mussels on the rocks. If there is that many of them, they clean 'em out pretty quickly and then they go have them somewhere else.

Billy: They used to come in on the channel at high tide, a big bunch of them come in there and they sound like a big crowd talking.

John: nrrruuuurrr [imitating the birds]

Billy: Sound like a bunch of people chattering.

John: It's funny the ducks are so at home in the water they wouldn't come when it was low tide, and they could just walk on the mussels and eat them. They'd come in at high tide and dive down to get 'em. That's how much of a waterbird they are. They're much more at home in the water than on dry land.

Kris: They can't really walk on dry land, can they?

Billy: They'd come into Collin's Beach and wait for the tide come up and they'd go down on the mussel bed to feed.

Kris: Sound like total waterbirds.

Billy: Thousands of them. Some of those flocks probably 3 or 4,000 of them. You'd go up the bay and scare them and the air'd be just black with them.

John: Eiders are big ducks too, they're the biggest duck.

Billy: The male eiders are real pretty—green, white, and black. Three or four different colors.

Kris: Well, like everything else, they are becoming scarce it sounds like.

John: Or they've gone somewhere else.

Billy: We've got one sparrow in our bird feeder, one sparrow.

John: We've had a couple of blue jays and a couple of sparrows.

Billy: Don't talk about blue jays.

Kris: Any chickadees?

Billy: Not this year.

John: How do they taste? How do the blue jays taste?

Billy: I don't know. I know your father never liked them. Three or four doves.

John: Keep them out of the feeders.

Kris: I heard there used to be a lot of songbirds here but there aren't any longer.

Billy: Hardly any. No finches this year.

John: What I miss the most are the swallows. We used to have barn swallows and tree swallows and cliff swallows out here all summer, and we haven't had any for quite a few years.

Billy: Up to Cogan's before they closed it in, they used to nest all around under the eaves.

Billy and John: At the store.

John: You'd go up to the store and these cliff swallows built these nests.

Billy: Down at Moore's Harbor, the carriage house down there, they used to leave the door open and tons of swallows used—up at the store they had to keep knocking them [the nests] down, they made such a mess.

Kris: Right over the doorway?

Billy and John: Yes.

John: They'd get mud off the beaches and make nests out of them.

Billy: Dotty and Jack used to leave their cellar door open. They'd go in and build a nest in the cellar.

Kris: Really.

Billy: Plenty of mosquitos for them to eat if they show up.

Kris: The mosquitos have become intolerable.

John: I hope next year's not like this year was. This was like the year of the bug.

Kris: I agree. So that's hunting and trapping on the island and all the wildlife that exists here. Thanks to both of you for taking the time to do that.

Billy: You're welcome. I am sure we can give you a lot more if you need it.

Kris: Well, actually, I think we could come up with a bunch of other topics. Sounds like a plan. Thanks so much.