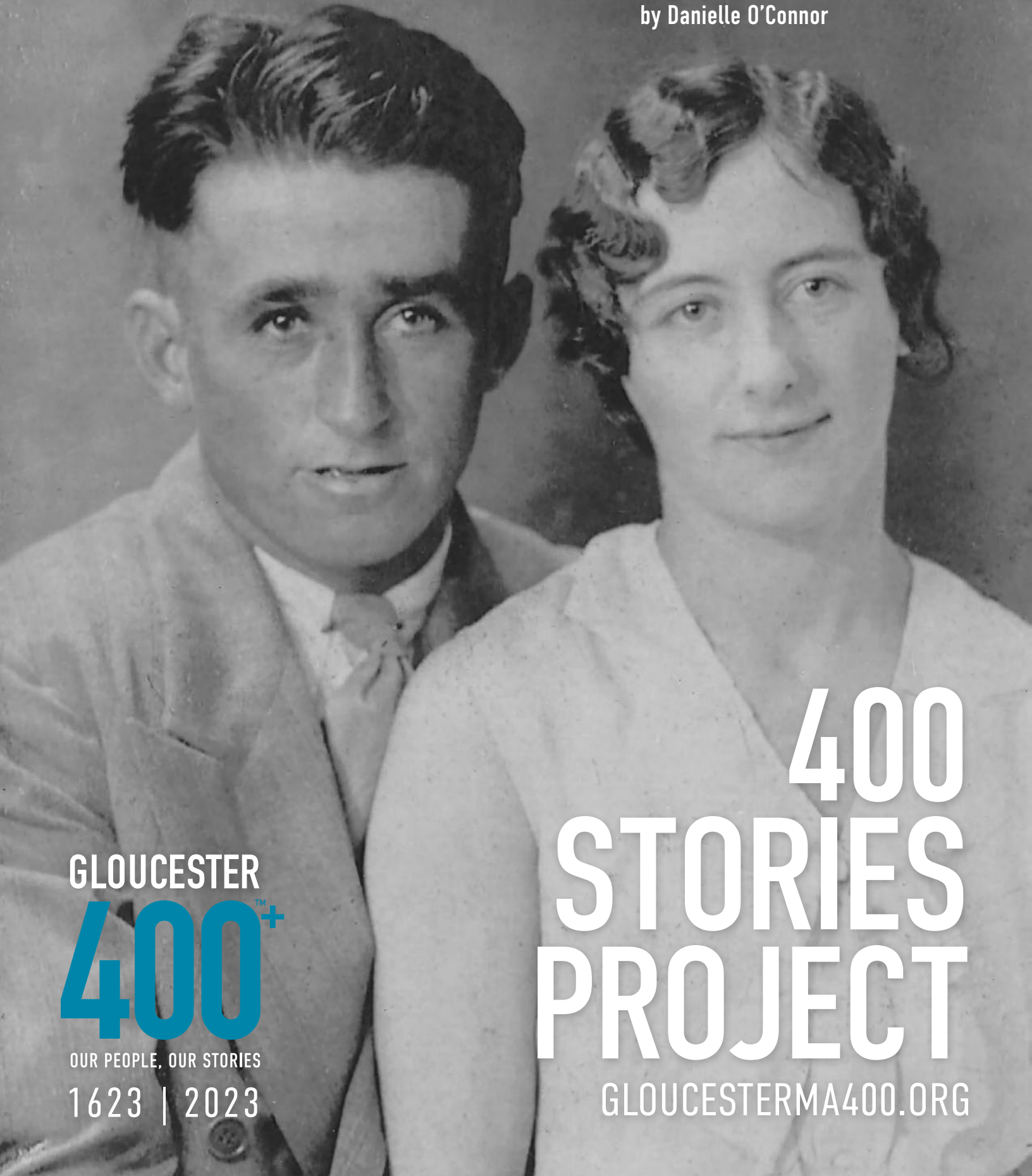


John Ball

Portrait of a Gloucester Fisherman

by Danielle O'Connor



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## FOREWORD

My grandfather, John Matthew Ball, was born on January 8, 1908, in Rencontre, Newfoundland, Canada. He arrived in Vanceboro, Maine, on March 22, 1930; he came to Gloucester shortly thereafter and married my grandmother, Mary Ann (May) Ball, also from Newfoundland, on September 26, 1931. He became a naturalized citizen on June 25, 1937. John began fishing as a young boy when he left school in sixth grade at the age of twelve in Newfoundland.

## ABOUT THE COVER PHOTO

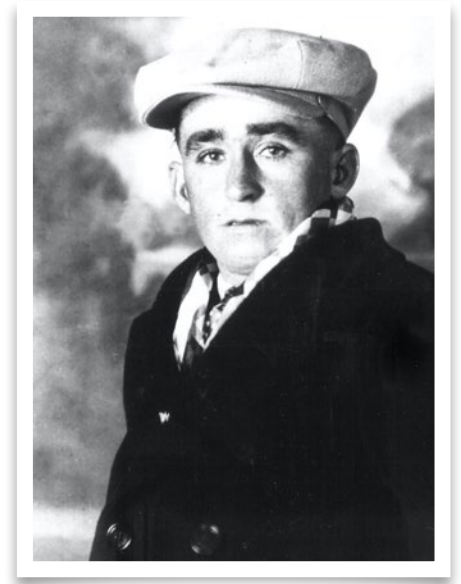
On the cover are the author's grandparents, John M. and Mary Ann (May) Ball, circa early 1930s.

# John Ball

## Portrait of a Gloucester Fisherman

BY DANIELLE O'CONNOR

My grandfather, John Ball, was a great storyteller, and no matter how many stories he shared, I suspect there were many more that he never told us. My grandparents were great friends with Joe and Helen Garland, and Joe had asked my grandfather to allow him to write the story of his life. My grandfather simply replied, "No." After my grandfather's passing, Joe Garland said in a letter to the editor of the *Gloucester Daily Times*, "John Ball's sparse, straight-line life said something about Gloucester and beyond Gloucester."<sup>1</sup> My grandparents remained friends with the Garlands until they both passed.



John Ball, circa 1920s.

One of the stories shared by my grandfather was told to me by my cousin, Norman Neves. It was the story of him running rum from Newfoundland to New York City during Prohibition. Because of an oversupply of fish and low prices, fishermen could no longer make a living from fishing, and many began using their vessels in the rum-running trade to provide for their families. Rum-running was dangerous; the rumrunners had to evade the Coast Guard, police, and pirates.<sup>2</sup> My grandfather made many trips running rum. On one trip to New York City, as they were waiting to unload the rum, the boat he was on was boarded by machine gun-wielding pirates who took the rum. The men aboard didn't put up a fight and were left unharmed but without their rum.

Another harrowing tale my grandfather recounted was in April 1926, while fishing on the *Bluenose*. The *Bluenose* was caught in a storm off Sable Island, known as the graveyard of the Atlantic. The storm was so rough that the crew went below deck after they tied Captain Walters

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1 *Gloucester Daily Times*, 4/27/1989, "How will we remember them?" by Joseph Garland

2 *Fairview Historical Society Articles Archives*, 3/1/2023, "The Prohibition Era and Rum Running," by Devonna Edwards. Fairfax, Halifax, Nova Scotia Historical Society, <https://fairviewhistoricalsociety.ca>

to the steering wheel.<sup>3</sup> When the storm finally died down, the crew emerged. The captain was still alive; his skin was worn raw from the ropes, and the deck of the boat was coated in several inches of sand, but they all survived.<sup>4</sup>

Before my grandfather died, his son, Maxwell Ball, took him on a cruise on the *Bluenose II*, an exact replica of the famed schooner *Bluenose* John had worked on. It was a trip of a lifetime for him.<sup>5</sup>

Life as a fisherman was hard and dangerous. On June 20, 1952, John was working on the 100-foot dragger *Albatross* owned by the B & B Trawling Company out of Gloucester. The dragger was making its way in heavy seas when at 2:30 AM, about three miles off Highlight Light, she collided with the 10,000-ton tanker *Esso Chattanooga*. John was one of the twelve-member crew who got into a dory to abandon ship. The captain, deciding the dory was overcrowded, stayed behind to wait for rescue. He was last seen floating by the wreckage before disappearing. My grandfather said the captain was lost when the wreckage sank, and the pressure pulled the captain under with it. The tanker rescued the dory.<sup>6</sup> The story was the subject of a United States Coast Guard investigation, and story a published in the *New York Times*.<sup>7</sup>

John was a staple in the fishing industry in Gloucester. He was a former doryman, and later, a cook on the *Adventure*. Joe Garland described him as “[from] a group of dedicated, hard-working fishermen who are sadly disappearing.”<sup>8</sup>

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3 Ship captains were sometimes tied to the wheel during severe storms in an attempt to steer the ship without getting washed overboard

4 *Saltwire*, 03/26/2021, “Interactive Timeline: The History of the *Bluenose*, 100 Years After Launch” by Paul Schneiderei, <https://www.saltwire.com>

5 *Tourism Nova Scotia, Canada*, accessed June 1, 2023, “*Bluenose II*” <https://www.novascotia.com/trip-ideas/stories/bluenose-ii>

6 Marine Safety Information United States Coast Guard, Merlin O’Neil, [https://www.dco.uscg.mil/Portals/9/DCO%20Documents/5p/CG-5PC/INV/docs/documents/MSIB-10-20\\_Novel\\_COVID-19\\_Drug-Testing\\_Requirements.pdf?ver=2020-03-27-144839-417](https://www.dco.uscg.mil/Portals/9/DCO%20Documents/5p/CG-5PC/INV/docs/documents/MSIB-10-20_Novel_COVID-19_Drug-Testing_Requirements.pdf?ver=2020-03-27-144839-417)

7 *New York Times*, 6/21/1952, “CRASH SINKS BOAT; HERO CAPTAIN LOST; Skipper Leaps Into Sea Lest He Crowd Dory After Trawler, Tanker Collide – 12 Saved”, Page 10

8 *Gloucester Daily Times*, 4/22/1989, “A Reunion Aboard *Adventure*” by Richard Salit, Page 1

When he was a doryman on the *Adventure*, John knew that the cook was the third highest paid crew member after the owner and captain. He knew he wanted to become a cook and turned to my grandmother to teach him how to cook. Using all the knowledge she gained as a young girl in Newfoundland, my grandmother taught John to cook, and that was the beginning of his career as the cook on the *Adventure* and other vessels. When a reunion, organized by Joe Garland, was held aboard the *Adventure*, my grandfather had passed just days before. Joe spoke of my grandfather at the reunion. He said, "He (Ball) exemplified the old-time dorymen, that old-time tradition which is fast leaving the stage. He was one of the breeds of Newfoundlanders, like Leo Hynes, who came down here and contributed to the fishing industry. These were tough, old guys."<sup>9</sup>

The list of schooners and fishing vessels John worked on is long, including some of the most notable schooners of the time including the *Adventure*, the Schooner *Esperanto* (at one time considered "the Queen of the North Atlantic Fleet" in Gloucester), the *Gertrude L. Thebaud*, the *Columbia* and the *Bluenose*. Less notable schooners and vessels he worked on included the *Killarney*, which burned off Cape Cod in 1957, the *La Dunton*, which is in dock at the Mystic Seaport, the *Holy Cross*, and the *Phantom*, to name a few. He also worked on the *Albatross* and *Seafreeze Atlantic*.

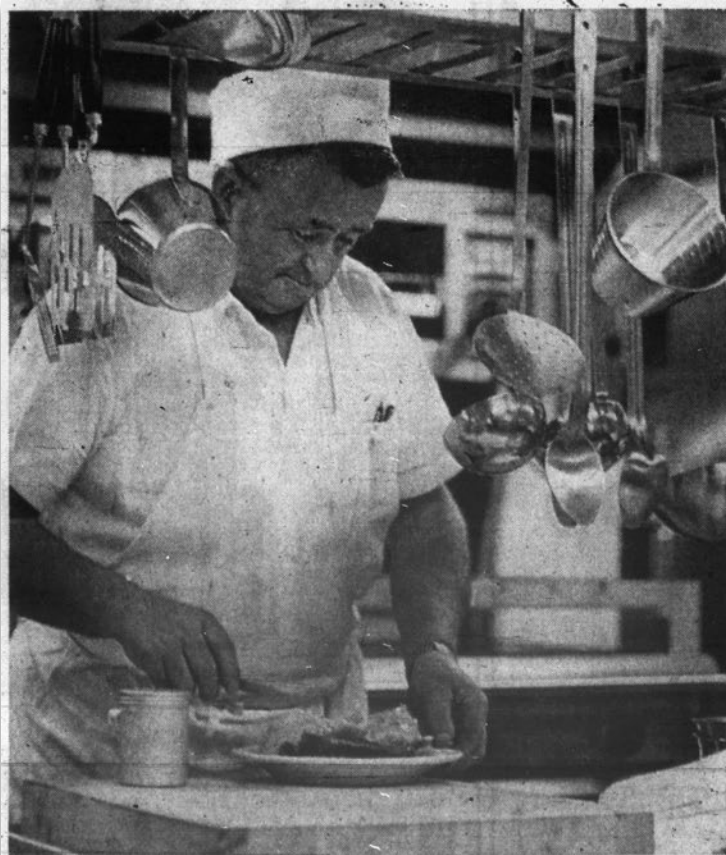


*Seafreeze Atlantic*, circa 1969.

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9 Ibid

In late March 1969, my grandfather boarded the *Seafreeze Atlantic* for her maiden voyage with a 64-man crew, including 34 from Gloucester. During an interview in 1980 with Bill Cahill, a writer with the *Gloucester Daily Times*, John described the *Seafreeze Atlantic* as "...almost a floating hotel. That ship had everything. They even had curtains." He went on to say, "We had ten toilets, suites for the skipper and engineers, bed sheets, pillowcases—all the food you could eat—always more than enough. We had movie projectors and a barrel of films. They even had bathmats."<sup>10</sup> When the *Seafreeze Atlantic* set out, they would be at sea for 40–50 days at a time. John, who made every other trip, missed the last one.



THE BEST FRIEND a fisherman can have aboard ship is the cook. John Ball of Magnolia fills the role on the *Seafreeze Atlantic*, now at sea on her trial voyage. (Harrigan photo)

## John Ball keeps crew smiling

By PAUL HARRIGAN

BALTIMORE — Day in and day out, probably the best known man aboard the *Seafreeze Atlantic* is 61-year-old John Ball of Englewood Road, Magnolia, the chief cook.

A native of Newfoundland and a veteran in feeding the crews of many Gloucester fishing vessels, Ball's loud voice and chronic complaints suggest life on ship is as normal as it might ever be.

Not that he should have any complaints about his galley aboard the nation's first factory fishing vessel. Approximately 10 by 15 feet, it is appointed almost completely with stainless steel equipment.

Drawing from three walk-in freezers and a walk-in dry storage area, Ball has already come up with these menus:

Dinner: A choice of corned beef and cabbage, pork chops or steak, with potatoes, carrots, peas, apple pie and ice cream.

Breakfast: Sausages, bacon, eggs, toast, marmalades, cereal and coffee.

Lunch: Lamb chops, potatoes, carrots, a jello dessert and coffee.

Dinner again: Steak or spare ribs, potatoes, green vegetables, coffee and...

And since crewmen never seem to lose their appetites,

they have their own pantries in the officers' mess and the crew mess.

Open 24 hours a day, these contain hot coffee, cold juices and a selection of cold cuts with which to make sandwiches.

While living conditions are good aboard the *Seafreeze Atlantic*, working conditions are somewhat up in the air.

No job assignments were made to the crew before she sailed for Georges Bank, and a labor question seems to be developing.

Most of the men, if not all, are members of the Atlantic Fishermen's Union, and American Stern Trawlers Inc. has been negotiating with the AFU toward a contract.

But during the weeks of preparation for this first voyage, organizers from the International Maritime Union have been circulating among the crew.

It is possible that a National Labor Relations Board election among crew members will be necessary before the *Seafreeze Atlantic* can sail regularly.

The *Seafreeze Atlantic's* first test of her fishing gear was scheduled for this morning, south southeast of the Nantucket Lightship.

If this test is successful, Captains James D. Ackert and Kurt Arnoldt were to steer her to... See SEAFREEZE Page 16

CREDIT: PAUL HARRIGAN / GLOUCESTER DAILY TIMES, DECEMBER 1968

John Ball onboard the *Seafreeze Atlantic* as cook, 1968.

### ★ SEAFREEZE

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

ward the edge of Georges Bank to begin fishing in earnest.

With this catch, the processing and blast freezing equipment was also to get its first operating test.

Faults which might be found will be ironed out before the ship is permanently berthed at Gloucester's State Fish Pier.

10 *Gloucester Daily Times*, 1/4/1980, "Remember the Seafreeze? The Factory Ship May Make a Come-back" by Bill Cahill

While a crew member of the *Seafreeze Atlantic*, my grandfather was on board February 28, 1969, when the *Seafreeze* collided with the coast guard vessel *Yakutat* while docking in New Bedford as the crew was preparing for her maiden voyage.<sup>11</sup> The *Seafreeze Atlantic's* last voyage was in February 1971.<sup>12</sup>

After his time on the *Seafreeze Atlantic*, my grandfather retired and became a "snowbird" in the winters. During the summers, John would work for the Yankee Fleet in Gloucester cooking in the snack bar and would do overnight fishing trips on the *Yankee Captain*. The Yankee Fleet led fishing excursions to Stellwagen Bank, Jeffreys Landing, and Tillies Bank for deep sea fishing.

In the late 1970s, my grandfather turned in his sea legs and became the cook at the Patio Restaurant on Lexington Avenue, Magnolia. He remained the cook there until his "second" retirement. If you ask people today who went to the Patio, they will remember him and his cooking skills.

Why Gloucester? I can surmise that during my grandfather's days at sea on various schooners out of Newfoundland, he met sailors out of Gloucester. It may have had something to do with his friendship with Howard Blackburn. Although Howard Blackburn died in 1932, my grandfather told us of his friendship with him. We never asked how he became friends with Blackburn. Whatever reason he came to Gloucester, my grandfather and grandmother sponsored many relatives who also settled in Gloucester, and today, four generations of us still call Gloucester home.

From my grandfather's early days as a doryman at twelve years old in Newfoundland to running rum during Prohibition and facing pirates yielding machine guns and having the rum stolen, to his stories of collisions at sea, he certainly had a story to tell. After his wife and children, John's greatest loves were the ocean and Gloucester.

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11 *Defence Media*, "Yakutat, 1948 (WHEC 380)," United States Coast Guard, <https://www.history.uscg.mil/Browse-by-Topic/Assets/Water/All/Article/2199141/yakutat-1948-whec-380/A>

12 *Gloucester Daily Times*, 1/4/1980, "Remember the Seafreeze? The Factory Ship May Make a Comeback" by Bill Cahill

## ADDITIONAL SOURCES

Family oral history; interviews with family members

*Bluenose II*, Nova Scotia Communities, Culture and Heritage, 2023, <https://bluenose.novascotia.ca/about>

"The Graveyard of Ships," *Techno Ocean: Massachusetts Wrecks*, Thunder Child, 2007, <http://thethunderchild.com/TechnoOcean/Wrecks/UnitedStates/Massachusetts.html>

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Danielle O'Connor has lived in Gloucester her entire life and she raised her family here. She was an ELA teacher who taught at the former St. Ann School in Gloucester, and St. Mary School and The Saints Academy in Beverly.

## AUTHOR'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My deep love of my grandparents and the love they had for Gloucester inspired me to share the story of my grandfather. A special thanks to my aunts, Judith Neves and France Smiledge, my mother, Sherrill Beaulieu, who kept many newspaper articles written about my grandfather, and my cousin Norman Neves who not only shared stories I didn't fully know, but also shared with our grandfather a great love of fishing and the ocean.

## ADDITIONAL PHOTOS

### MORE FAMILY MEMORIES

How shall we remember them? To me I'll remember my Nana and my Grampy. I'll remember blueberry picking with my grandmother and I'll long remember the look in grandfather's eyes each time he held my small son. My cousin Norman, I'm sure, will remember by grandfather for the love of the sea and love of fishing that he gave to him. My cousin, Jack, will remember the times that he spent at wrestling matches with my grandfather and Rita will remember their Thursday shopping and lunch dates. To my sister, her birthday will never quite be the same; my grandfather's and her birthdays were one day apart and they were usually celebrated together; she will think of my grandmother each time she sees a butterfly. My brother Fran has memories of a summer spent with them both. My brother Kevin will recall with fondness special moments he had with them both.

To my mother, my aunts, and my uncles, their loss is great, but they have many happy memories.

I wish to all my family love and peace and comfort in this time of great pain.

These are but a few of our memories – this is how our family will remember them;

With love, happiness, respect, thankfulness, and a bit of sadness for the lost of their presence in our lives.

GLoucester Daily Times

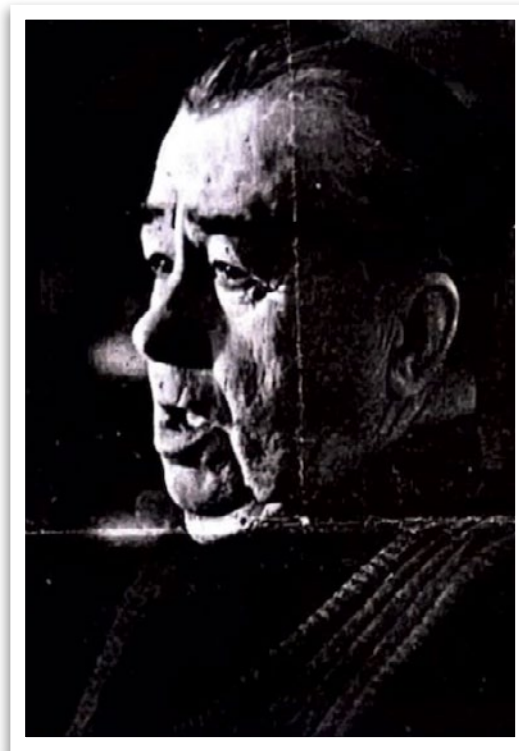


PHOTO CREDIT: GLOUCESTER DAILY TIMES

An excerpt from a letter to the editor of the *Gloucester Daily Times* written by Danielle O'Connor, 1989.

John Ball in 1980 at 72 years old.





Author with her siblings and grandparents, 1969.  
Left to right, Francis Beaulieu, Jr., Danielle (Beaulieu) O'Connor, Mary Ann (May) Ball holding Michelle Beaulieu, and John Ball holding Kevin Beaulieu.



Danielle O'Connor at her wedding with her grandfather, John Ball, 1984.



PHOTOGRAPHER: LESLIE JONES. PUBLIC DOMAIN

Another boat where John Ball once served as crew:  
The steam trawler, *Holy Cross* (all iced up at South Boston Fish Pier).