

KENTUCKY CRAFT HISTORY AND EDUCATION ASSOCIATION, INC.

Interview with Minnie Adkins  
Interviewer is Adrian Swain  
October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2009

( ) This symbol refers to an inaudible word or phrase.

. . . This symbol refers to an interruption to the speaker

Swain: . . . at the Kentucky Folk Art Center at Morehead State University in Northern Kentucky on October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2009 for the Kentucky Craft History and Education Association. In a sentence, describe the type of work that you do.

Adkins: Well, I'm a self-taught wood carver, I guess...

Swain: When and where were you born?

Adkins: I was born in Isonville, Kentucky March 13<sup>th</sup>, 1934.

Swain: Describe your childhood and family background.

Adkins: Well, we grew up in a productive neighborhood. If you wanted to make your own garden and your own vegetables and we had not many toys to play with and stuff like that so I learned at an early age that I could make things like sling shots and pop guns to enjoy playing with.

Swain: Discuss your early education and any career choices other than art.

Adkins: I completed the ninth grade and I never had any desire for school or education and I know now how important it is, but as for myself, my life has been satisfying.

Swain: What motivated your interest in your craft?

Adkins: When I first took interest in making and selling things, I had seen Adrian Swain's shop and the things that he had and I told him I could make the kind of stuff he was selling and he said he'd like to see my stuff and that's really what made me get interested in what I was doing, what I had done all my life.

Swain: Have you worked in any other media besides wood?

Adkins: With my cousin, I do pottery. She does the pots and I decorate them with my designs. So I've done pottery and I do quilting. And we have designed coverlets. And then I even designed . . . at Pilgrim Glass Company, I designed a cameo glass bare vase.

Swain: You've painted too, am I correct?

Adkins: Yea, I do paintings.

Swain: How were you trained in your art?

Adkins: I just did what I enjoyed doing and I've always said that folk art is the art that comes from the heart.

Swain: Were there any significant teachers or experiences that contributed to the type of work you're now doing?

Adkins: The only thing, when I first started, I was making very small pieces and after I got to selling my work, then my husband, Garland, got interested in what I was doing and we found out the bigger the piece, the higher the price, so that's how we enlarged into bigger stuff.

Swain: Did you apprentice with anyone or work in anyone else's studio before you set up on your own?

Adkins: No.

Swain: How much of your current approach has been a result of exploration by you and how much of other's contributed to your knowledge?

Adkins: Well, without the people that have helped me in the folk art, I wouldn't be where I'm at because they've sent books and like the Folk Art Center we have here at Morehead, it has helped everybody. And I've tried to reach out and help people, which I hope I have.

Swain: Have you had any continuing education experiences? Workshops or a week or two in any sort of specialized institution?

Adkins: No.

Swain: Have you traveled in this country or internationally and what impact has it had on your life and work?

Adkins: No, I've not traveled any. I guess the farthest way I've been was down to the Owensboro Museum of Fine Art and I really enjoyed the exhibit they had there and the things we did there. And I have done schools all over Kentucky with Mike Norris, the one that I made the Blue Rooster book with. And we used to travel a whole lot to the different schools and stuff, but I've not been out of range.

Swain: Does the function of objects, play a part in your work?

Adkins: No.

Swain: Does your work contain any sort of message? About gender or race or ethnicity? Spirituality, humor, environmental or political or anything else?

Adkins: I have made some Noah's Ark and I like to make religious pictures and, you know, use scripture so I enjoy doing that.

Swain: What about humor?

Adkins: Oh, yes. I love a good laugh in my artwork and I enjoy making people laugh.

Swain: Can you give some examples of pieces that you've made that . . .

Adkins: Well, like the radio that's here at the Folk Art Center. The way I decorated it and stuff, and on top of it is supposed to be a self-portrait of Garland and myself and it said, "Did you know Garland and Minnie is on the radio?" And there they stand. So I thought that was good and another one was a ( ) and Garland and Minnie was sitting on, they're called boughs on the yolk, and it said, "Garland and Minnie are so funny. One lacks art and one lacks money".

Swain: What are the major influences on the content of your work? The subject?

Adkins: I don't really know.

Swain: Has the content of work changed over time?

Adkins: Yes. It's changed quite a lot because we don't leave all the knife marks and stuff, now we sand them out and our work is more refined than it was in the beginning. We have better equipment to work with.

Swain: Describe your studio or your workshop.

Adkins: Now or then? I'm working in my lounge chair now in front of my fireplace. I spread a towel over my lap and I go to work. But I've got a workshop and it's got an air conditioner and a heating system and a telephone, so what more do you need? And a band saw and. . .

Swain: Which, it goes on to the next questions which is describe your working process and how it's changed over time.

Adkins: Well, I'll tell you what I'm really doing now as opposed to when I used to work with Garland and myself, Mack, my son, has a workshop in his home and when I work serious, I go over to his workshop and he and I work together and I hand down what I'm doing to Mack, my son and to my grandson. Because they're both involved in what I'm doing.

Swain: What about early on when you first set yourself up in your studio or workspace?

Adkins: My studio was a hatchet and a pocketknife and I had no band saw or nothing like that to work with.

Swain: Do you work alone or when others?

Adkins: I love working with people, but most of the time I work by myself or with my son and my grandson. I work with him.

Swain: Do you use any unusual techniques?

Adkins: Not really, I don't think.

Swain: Have you involved unique processes working in your craft? Is there anything that you do that is unique to you in the way that you work?

Adkins: Not really.

Swain: What tools do you use?

Adkins: A pocketknife is mostly my main tool.

Swain: How and approximately when did you acquire your knife? Do you use up . . .

Adkins: As far back as I can remember, my father gave me a pocketknife when I was a little bitty girl and I began to whittle then, because I didn't like dolls and girl toys to play with, but I loved the pocketknife.

Swain: And you've replaced those over the years.

Adkins: Yea.

Swain: How many knives have you been through?

Adkins: A lot of them. A lot of them.

Swain: What impact has technology had on your work and working process?

Adkins: What do you mean?

Swain: Well, I think what this really means is computer technology.

Adkins: I've got a computer and I learned to draw pictures on the computer, but that's interesting.

Swain: Does that influence your work?

Adkins: No.

Swain: Describe the development of your career as an artist. Think back and think forward and how it started and how it has changed over the years.

Adkins: Well, in the beginning it was all about making money and selling stuff. And now, I have been involved in it so many years, that I mean, I can't imagine life without being able to do it, so I don't look forward to the day when I can't do it.

Swain: Where do you exhibit your work?

Adkins: It's been shown like in the Huntington Museum, at the Folk Art Center and Owensboro and different museums, but my grandson goes to Folk Fest in Atlanta once a year. So that's really good. This makes four years he's been.

Swain: That's a good experience.

Adkins: Yea. And I'm hoping to go next year.

Swain: Do you do commissions.

Adkins: No. I don't even like to take orders. I just like to make stuff and then when somebody calls, if I've got it, then I, you know, let them have it.

Swain: Have you exhibited at fairs?

Adkins: Oh, yes. I guess. Let's see. Like county fairs and stuff like that or?

Swain: Any kind of fair. For example, I know you started your own fair, didn't you? A Day in the Country. Do you want to talk about that?

Adkins: Well, you and I together started that. If you'll remember, it was one little occasion and you brought the watermelon and I was doing the cooking and so we had a small group for the

first one and then it did develop into more than I could handle and I was proud to have Morehead take it over and I said, "I feel like it will prosper and grow here at Morehead after I'm not around to be a part of it".

Swain: Can you describe A Day in the Country like it used to be when it was out at your house?

Adkins: It was hot and sweaty and lots of sweat bees and a big crowd and everybody having fun and everybody loved it, but we were younger then.

Swain: Were there a lot of artists?

Adkins: Oh, yes. Yes there were plenty of artists and craftspeople too.

Swain: Were there people there to buy?

Adkins: Yea.

Swain: And would people come from quite a distance?

Adkins: Yea, we've had them from ( ) from California used to come. From all over different states. There were lots of people coming. But it got more than I could handle out at my place and I am so thankful when I got to A Day in the Country to know that I have been a part of it.

Swain: How else do you promote and sell your work? Or does it sell itself?

Adkins: I don't promote it. It promotes itself, I guess.

Swain: So, are you saying that people basically come to you.

Adkins: Call me up.

Swain: Rather than you having to sell you work, take your work somewhere else.

Adkins: Yea.

Swain: What recognition have you got for your work?

Adkins: I won the Governor's Award and I won an award called Jane Norton Award, that was a big honor and Mikhail Baryshnikov and danced in live ballet that night. So that was a big thing and I was the first person that ever won the Jane Norton Award. So that was big in itself, wasn't it? Now they give it every year. The Norton Center had been there, as I understood it, twenty years and I was the first person that ever won that award.

Swain: What about National Awards? I think I'm correct in saying that you received an award from the Folk Art Society of America?

Adkins: Yes and they were presenting it in New Orleans and Adrian Swain went down and got it for me because I wouldn't fly or wouldn't go. (Laughter, Adkins)

Swain: Do you belong to any craft or art organizations in Kentucky?

Adkins: We've got a little arts center up at Isonville, Kentucky where we mostly just have fun when we go and take stuff to eat and we have it in our elementary school now.

Swain: Has being a part of that organization been important to your development as an artist?

Adkins: It is real good. We plan things. I made a basket. I wove a basket from being a part of it. We plan different things, you know. It's real good.

Swain: Have you taken any leadership roles in organizations?

Adkins: No.

Swain: What services provided by agencies or institutions or organizations have you participated in? Or have you?

Adkins: I won the Al Smith Fellowship Award. \$1000 one time, which at the time was a great benefit to me. It was back when I was, you know, really needing it and I have always treasured that.

Swain: Do you subscribe to any periodicals or magazines for your crafts or your art?

Adkins: The Folk Art Society of America, I get it. I guess that's about the only one.

Swain: Are you involved in teaching or writing or other activities directly related to your craft?

Adkins: No, but I've written a little book called Bloom Where You're Planted and I made 500 of them and I don't even have one now to give to my great grand babies.

Swain: Has your family been supportive or involved in your work?

Adkins: Oh, yes.

Swain: Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about, about your work and your experiences as an artist? What it's meant to you?

Adkins: After Garland was gone, my first husband, after 46 years, I didn't think I'd ever be able to do anything else, but my grandson encouraged me and said, "Mamaw, we've got to go on. You've got to keep going". And this man called me up on the telephone and his name was Herman Peters and he wanted to come down and see my work. He lived in Minford Ohio and when he came down to see my work, I saw he wasn't interested in my work, he was interested in who was making the work. And I told him, I wasn't interested in the man and sent him on his way, but he kept calling me and anyhow, we ended up husband and wife and he told me anything I could make out of wood, he could make out of iron and I said, "But, prove it". So he's got iron roosters and horses and foxes and stuff scattered all over the United States. So it was a joy. I had almost 9 years of happiness with Herman, so I treasured that.

Swain: Is there anything else you'd like to share with us?

Adkins: Not that I can think of.

Swain: Thank you very much. I really appreciate it.

Third Voice: Can I ask a couple follow-ups?

Swain: Absolutely.

Third Voice: And address your answer to Adrian. You said something earlier about using technology and how you learned to draw on a computer, but you didn't enjoy it very much, because you didn't find it interesting. And I just wondered if you had anything you could say about what you find interesting about the things you do with your hands as opposed to working with computer art.

Adkins: Yes. To me, being in touch with what you're doing is far greater fulfillment than something you do on the computer and stuff. To me, I like the computer and I enjoy that I've learned to email and do a few things like that with the computer, but as far as, you know, drawing it and doing things with the computer, it doesn't give you the satisfaction it does to be in touch with what you're doing.

Swain: In physical touch.

Adkins: Yes.

Swain: One other question. You do use a certain number of power tools.

Adkins: Oh yes. We use sanders and we use, you know, the band saws and stuff.

Swain: For rough cutting a piece?

Adkins: Yea and chain saws for the bigger pieces.

Swain: But your first love is the pocketknife, right?

Adkins: Yes, that's it.

Swain: It's like an extension of your hand?

Adkins: Yea.

Third Voice: You may have asked this. I've lost track. But are there any artists that you particularly like or inspire you?

Adkins: Dolly Scaggs is doing the best work right now and the most different things. Dolly is really doing good and I like what she does. It's pure and it's simple and I just like what Dolly does.

Swain: Is it original?

Adkins: Yes. I think so. Well, Dolly is like everybody else. If you see something, it might inspire you to do something of your own.

END OF INTERVIEW