

KENTUCKY CRAFT HISTORY AND EDUCATION ASSOCIATION, INC.

Interview with Calvin Cooper  
Interviewer is Adrian Swain  
October 27th, 2009

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

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

Swain . . . Kentucky. On October 27th, 2009, for the Kentucky Craft History and Education Association. Calvin, in a sentence, describe the kind of work that you do, in your art.

Cooper: Well, most of it is carving with a knife, old fashioned.

Swain: ( ) knife?

Cooper: ( ) knife. It depends on what I'm making you know. My big thing, of course, has been, all along, chickens or roosters. And, I always had to use them to do that. Of course, the first thing ( ) the wood. Find a piece that I could make a rooster out of.

Swain: The right piece of wood.

Cooper: Yea. It had to be just right. I had to do it before it was green. Bring it into the shop, take the bark off of it, and go ahead and do ( ) what I wanted to do on it. And split the wings and wedge them and just lay it back for a while, let it season. But it's a long process from start to finish.

Swain: Right. Ok. When and where were you born?

Cooper: Born in Flemming County in 1921. Just about a, well, about a mile from here, I guess. Where I live now.

Swain: In Plumber's Landing. I mean, Plumber's Mill, right?

Cooper: It was called Crane Creek, where I was born, it's on around the road here, just about a mile from here.

Swain: Can you describe your childhood and family background?

Cooper: Well, I was born in a family that was about all girls. I had seven sisters and two brothers, so we had a crowd at our house most of the time and you know what that would mean with seven girls and just two boys in there at one time. Excuse me. There's a spider going on, see it?

Swain: Thank you!

Cooper: My oldest brother, he married and left, I think I was about seven. And then it was ten years before my other brother was born. The girls were all between that, see. And I had a pretty hard time.

Swain: Just you and seven girls.

Cooper: Me and the girls (Laughter, Cooper)

Swain: Right.

Cooper: Yea. They gave me a hard time. We did fine, we were always together. And back then, all the work was done by our neighbor, you know, on the farm. We raised a lot of cattle and a lot of corn. ( ) My dad owned a place on Indian Creek, up here. He had it rented, and the guy, he got after the corn and he shucked it and I'd go load it with the horses and wagon. Haul it back to

our place and put it in the crib ( ). I did that, I guess after I was. . . well, ten or eleven, I'd say I was doing that. It was hard, but it was a good life too, really.

Swain: Can you discuss your early education and other careers that you had before you became an artist?

Cooper: Well, I went to school on Green Creek. . .

Swain: What grade did you go until?

Cooper: Until I was in eighth grade.

Swain: Okay.

Cooper: And they moved it right here, where I'm living and built it on what they call a butler school. I went into the eighth grade here. My dad was sick then, and I was having to do everything at home. I didn't go to high school at all. I went later and got my GED and then I went to service in '42, spent about four years in the service. ( ) We actually went into combat during the Bulge.

Swain: The Battle of the Bulge?

Cooper: ( ) 101 infantry was surrounded there and we had to break in there to get them out. The night before we went in, our company commander said, "we're going to where they'll be firing going on, but it's friendly fire" he said. It wasn't friendly. We made it and I got to come back home, thank goodness.

Swain: And you stayed on after the war for a while in Germany? Or you came back in 1946?

Cooper: No, I came back the next year after they had signed our papers. Then I ran a service station for, I guess, 25 years, right up the road here. Then I went to ( ), went into the grocery business for my brother and was there not too long. Then I got a job at the state and that was a pretty good experience. I got into the safety and. . .

Swain: Highway department.

Cooper: Yea. Worked my way up in it and did all right.

Swain: So, that's what you were doing when you retired?

Cooper: Right.

Swain: How did you get started making art?

Cooper: Well, I had. . . Ever since I was just a young boy, I had done crafts and stuff. I hadn't done carvings and stuff, just saw out stuff, you know. I went to Prestonsburg, or up in the area, with a load of stuff and sold it. And Tom Sornel happened to be up there.

Swain: Tom Sornel was from Morehead State University.

Cooper: Right. He was there and saw some of my work. He bought a piece or two if it. He asked me where I lived and if I could give him my phone number. When he got back to Morehead, he called me. He said, "Could I come over and talk to you?" I said, "Yes, anytime you want to come, I'm at home." I don't know if it was the next day or not, just a day or two anyway, he was here. He said, "Why don't you start carving on this stuff you're making?" He said, "You can make dollars, where you're making cents now." I said, "Well, I'll try a piece and bring it over and see what you think about it." Well, I made a rooster, the first thing I made. Took it over and I walked in the door, he was coming down the hall. Before he got to me, he said, "Oh boy, that is great. That is a great piece", you know how he'd go on. I thought, well I'll jack the price on it a little, see what he says. (Laughter, Swain). I'd been selling all this stuff I had been making for ten, fifteen dollars, you know, a piece. And he said, "How much for that?" I said, "Well I don't know, I guess I ought to get about fifty for it." He just went back in his billfold and gave me a fifty dollar bill. He said, "If you can make any more stuff like that, what you make, he said, bring it over here." So, that's what started me.

Swain: Have there been any significant experiences that led you to do the kind of work that you do? I mean, you've described how you got started? Is there anything else besides that? I mean, that's enough, but is there any other kind of experiences that have led you to do the kind of work and the design of work that you do?

Cooper: Well, I had been traveling around a little bit, seeing things that people have made and I thought oh, well I can do better than that, I think. So, that was the main thing that I tried to do, was when I made a piece, I aimed for it to be right. Never had no problems with anything or anybody.

Swain: Did you learn from anyone else, before you began working on your own?

Cooper: No.

Swain: Or was it all kind of your own exploration. . .

Cooper: Just my own.

Swain: Your own experimentation?

Cooper: Yea.

Swain: Okay. Have you had any educational experiences that contributed to you work?

Cooper: No.

Swain: Okay. Describe the development of your career as an artist, in other words, you started out making a few things, but, you know, there was a period of time, I understand when you were making an awful lot of things.

Cooper: It got to be a six day a week job.

Swain: Your health was good and you were really active.

Cooper: I could work from daylight to dark, if I wanted to.

Swain: Does your work contain any messages about society or your religious beliefs or race or humor or the environment or politics or anything else?

Cooper: No, not really.

Swain: What are the major influences that determine the subjects that you portray? What makes you decide to do the kind of things that you produce? Sometimes you produce roosters, you've done other things as well. What makes you decide to do one thing as opposed to another?

Cooper: Well, I've tried to make almost everything ( ). And I have made a few pieces. Some of them are hard and I don't enjoy making them, others I do. My main pieces, of course, more than any others, was roosters and what we call a chicken man. Of course, I made all kinds of animals, horses and cows and calves and I've made about everything I can think of.

Swain: Right. Well, I think I know the answer to this question, but is your work influenced by the materials that you use or the techniques that you employ as you create the piece? I think you've already answered that in a way. You've talked about needing to go out in the woods and find. . .

Cooper: I look for pieces that was grown, like for roosters. It had to be four forks. It had two wings and a tail and head or neck. What I used for their heads, pine knots, in most cases. I started with pine knots and I would ( ) with a head on. Then I had to get my legs would look like a roosters legs have the little...

Swain: Shaped just in the right way so that they would ... yea...

Cooper: And the same way for feet, so they'd stand up. Most of that wood was made from maple. Most of it.

Swain: From young maple trees?

Cooper: Yea.

Swain: From saplings? Because they had those easy to get at, small diameter twig pieces?

Cooper: At the top, usually, they would fork out, you know.

Swain: Do you feel that your work reflects an interpersonal feeling that you have? Is the work a reflection of you?

Cooper: Yea, I guess so. I would say so.

Swain: Because you didn't answer, when I asked you about humor, but actually I see a lot of humor hidden in some of the creatures you'd created. It's not a yuk yuk, joking humor but they're amusing.

Cooper: Thank you.

Swain: Ok, moving on.

Cooper: I've enjoyed it to be honest with you. I have had, well, about twenty years of it. And I enjoyed every minute of it.

Swain: Something quite different. Because you said you had done craftwork before, from a young age.

Cooper: Yea.

Swain: But you didn't start to do these more personal, or individual things until you were...

Cooper: Until I retired.

Swain: In your late sixties. Correct?

Cooper: Past sixty-five.

Swain: Right. When you've been active and working, can you describe your workshop? The working environment you actually made the pieces in? Where you worked? I mean, you have a shed, out in the back that you worked in. Can you just describe that for us?

Cooper: Well, it was actually just a place to work. And that was a place that I had fixed to stay warm in the winter time ( ).

Swain: And what kind of tools did you have?

Cooper: Mostly it was done by hand. Knives, chisels, wood chisels, had a couple of saws that I first roughed them out with, you know. Then I'd work on them with my knife, chisels and whatever. Line tools.

Swain: There wasn't anything special about the space itself, aside from the fact that it was dry and warm in the winter and would stay cool in the summer, it was a place to work.

Cooper: Right.

Swain: Since you've been making this kind of sculpture, has the way that you've worked changed any? I mean, as you've moved through doing this from one year to another, in that time from the late 1980s up until the mid-2000s. Did you find that you were working differently or did it pretty much stay the same?

Cooper: Pretty well stayed the same. I think I maybe improved it on some of it, you know.

Swain: You became more efficient.

Cooper: Yea. I could do it quicker. Then when I was looking for a piece to make something out of, I got to where I could see it before I got to it.

Swain: Sooner, yes.

Cooper: My son-in-law, he went with me a few times hunting pieces. He had no idea what I was looking for, you know. He saw some of the pieces that I had gotten myself. When he wasn't with me, he'd say how about that piece there, how about that? How about that piece? I said, "no, it doesn't have enough forks on it for a rooster. And it's not any good to make a chicken man out of. Don't bother with that." And so I got to work. If he was with me, I would show it to him. Maybe

he'd cut it for me. (Clears throat) But he finally got where he could spot them pretty well and here he'd come with them, you know. In fact, I've got two or three pieces out there in the shop now that never did have the bark taken off, that he brought in, since I haven't been able to do anything.

Swain: Right.

Cooper: And they're pretty nice pieces.

Swain: Well, aside from going out and looking for the wood itself, do you work entirely alone or do you ever work with others?

Cooper: Not with others, I do all of it myself.

Swain: That's what I thought.

Cooper: I do my painting and everything.

Swain: The whole business, right? Do you use any unusual techniques in doing the work that you do? Anything that you can think of that would be something that, you know, you developed yourself or is it more logical...

Cooper: Well, like I told you a while ago about the rooster's tails and wings, you know, I learned pretty quick how to get them to work. The first one I made, I don't believe it was split out. I just had maybe some little nips in the ends of them, you know. But I thought, I believe these would be better if I'd split them out and let them season and they would stay there. Then I can take the wedges out after they season. So that was one of my main things that I had come up with myself.

Swain: Okay. And we've talked already about the tools that you use. It's primarily a, sometimes a draw knife and a knife and occasionally a power saw and band saw? Or no, is it pretty much hand tools?

Cooper: Well, most of it was...the tools that I sought out was fire tools. I got a band saw, it works better than anything else that I tried.

Swain: This is a question that...What impact has computer technology had on your work or your working process.

Cooper: Not really anything.

Swain: Okay. Where do you exhibit your work? Where does your work get shown and where does it get sold?

Cooper: Well, most of it was sold at the Kentucky Folk Arts Center in Morehead and like I said, I sold the first piece I made there.

Swain: But you have had work in exhibitions as well besides that, right? Maybe more than you know...

Cooper: We've had a few shows and then I've had people come here to the house, you know, from different states, different places...

Swain: People that come here, collectors looking to buy your work, right? When you were most prolific, when you were working and producing the most work, did that increase, would you have more visitation, would you encourage that or was that something that...

Cooper: Well, if you could move everything at one place, I'd say that would be the thing to do. Let somebody handle it, that's, you know, in the business for selling. That way you wouldn't be bothered, you know, by everybody coming in. Lot of them are just looking, when you price something he'd drop his head and take off, you know. Scare him, I guess. But, I have met a lot of wonderful people, that's come here at the house and maybe they didn't buy anything from me here at the house, but they had bought a lot of my pieces from Morehead. And I saw a lady not very long ago, where was she from? (Cough, Cooper) Seems like it was New York or some state up east. She said, I've got three or four of your pieces, she said, I love them. I don't know whether you knew her or not. I can't think of her name.

Swain: Well, but you've had a fair flow of visitors through here, people coming and still coming to see you. And now, do you like that now? I mean, is that something you enjoy more now or is it still sort of a . . .

Cooper: Well, I like people coming to, you know. . .

Swain: Right.

Cooper: Visit me. I haven't so much lately because of the economy, you know, has hurt it.

Swain: And you haven't been able to make work as much, either, have you?

Cooper: I haven't been able to do anything in the last year. This year, I haven't made anything.

Swain: Have you done or do you do commissions? I mean, do you work to other people's requests or do you pretty much sell the work that, make you want to make and then. . .

Cooper: That's usually the way it is.

Swain: So, you don't really do commissions?

Cooper: No.

Swain: Have you exhibited at fairs? At like craft fairs? I know you've exhibited, I know, at the Day in the County Fair in Morehead since it moved there. Have you exhibited or tried to sell your work at any other kind of craft fairs?

Cooper: No, I give quite a bit away to people who are putting on shows, you know?

Swain: Oh right, to support them?

Cooper: I had a piece, not very long ago, that went to Banana Tree in Flemingsburg. They had a show and I donated a piece for the show.

Swain: How has the experience of selling your work changed? How did that change from the time you first started selling it to now. I think we have the answer already, really. That you preferred and continue to prefer really, trying to place your work away somewhere and in this case, at the Kentucky Folk Art Center, am I right? Rather than have this as a selling place, at your home. Is that right?

Cooper: Yea. I never sold a whole lot from here. Some, but not a whole lot.

Swain: Did the experience of selling and what you sold influence what you made?

Cooper: Yea.

Swain: In what way?

Cooper: Well, if you had, say you had ten pieces of two or three different items, made, and everybody come along wanted one...

Swain: That would be a signal to you.

Cooper: That you give you an idea that that's what I better be making.

Swain: Right. Well, you don't use computer technology to promote your work, obviously that's not part of it, because you really leave that to somebody else. What recognition have you got for your work? Outside recognition.

Cooper: Quite a bit, really. You know, from different sources. A lot of it from individuals, you know. Somebody showed their neighbor what they got, you know, tell them who made it. That kind of stuff. Then they come looking for it. That's the best recognition you can get.

Swain: So that's been a nice thing for you.

Cooper: Yea.

Swain: Do you belong to any art or folk art organizations?

Cooper: No, not anymore. The Folk Art Center. I'm a member there.

Swain: Has being a part of the art or folk art community been important to you development as an artist? In other words, having that connection with other artists, has that been a useful thing for you in your development as you have grown as an artist over the years?

Cooper: Yes.

Swain: It has? It's been an enjoyable thing, useful?

Cooper: Enjoyable.

Swain: Enjoyable. Okay. Do you subscribe to any magazines or periodicals relating to folk art or art or crafts?

Cooper: I have got a book or two that is folk art oriented to, you know?

Swain: Those are book that have been written about folk art, are they?

Cooper: Well, I've only saw one really, that I've ever got a hold of.

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

Cooper: I've tried to teach and also tried to encourage them, if they had time to, you know. . .

Swain: Who?

Cooper: My son-in-law, grandson . . .

Swain: People close to you?

Cooper: My son never did take any interest in anything like that, but Brad did, my grandson. In fact, he made two or three different pieces, back when he was going to high school and I was his teacher, you know. His instructor. He made it here at my shop. But he got so wrapped up now in his business, he doesn't have time to even look at a piece, much less make one.

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

Cooper: Well, they've all been supportive of it, yes.

Swain: You have felt good about that.

Cooper: Yea.

Swain: Is there anything else that you would like to, any comment that you would like to make about what it's meant to you, for you, to be an artist and be involved and have had this activity in your life for the past twenty or so years?

Cooper: Well, I would like to say, probably, if I hadn't gotten into this, I probably wouldn't have been here, you know. I got into that and enjoyed it and worked hard at it and did a lot of walking, climbing the mountains and it helped me in a lot of ways. Mentally too, I think, you know. I've been fortunate, of course, to live as long as I have and been able to do things that I like to do. I really enjoyed it. I wish I was able to do it again.

Swain: Was it a surprise to you, when you discovered, you know, that you (audio cuts out) in the latter part of your life, and was that I surprise to you? Was it something that you found unexpected?

Cooper: Well, yes. Actually the folk art was unexpected, I never... I was doing, like I said, cut out crafts, you know, there's a lot of different in folk art and crafts as far as I'm concerned. After I got into the folk art, I enjoyed it much more than I did, making the crafts and made more money at it.

Swain: So you were given a challenge basically, weren't you?

Cooper: Right.

Swain: And you like the challenge, right?

Cooper: I liked the challenge. (Laughter, Swain) I guess I would have to give Tom Sornel a lot of credit for that.

Swain: Tom, who was the chairman of the art department at Morehead State University in the late 1980s.

Cooper: Yep.

Swain: Because he saw something in your work that led him to believe that there was something else inside you that was yet to come out, perhaps?

Cooper: Yea. He said, anything you make bring it over here. That's what he told me that day. First time I ever met him, well not the first time I ever met him, but the first time that I ever took a piece of work over there. And as soon as he saw it, I mean, he just, went, as the old saying is, hog-wild. And I thought, boy, well I ought to get a little something out of this maybe.

Swain: And apparently, he was right because, you have work in a lot of private collections around the country, people who value your work for the way it affects their daily existence when they walk past your pieces in their house and see them and make them smile or react in whatever way.

Cooper: Right.

Swain: Thank you very much. I don't know if there are any other questions. It's been great. Thank you very much Calvin. I really appreciate it.

Cooper: Well, I've enjoyed it. This isn't the first time you've interviewed me, I don't think. (Laughter, Cooper)

Swain: Can we just sit still for a second? He's going to just take the sound in the room, so he has a way of balancing the sound on the tape.

END OF INTERVIEW