

KENTUCKY CRAFT HISTORY AND EDUCATION ASSOCIATION, INC.

Interview with Tim Lewis
Interviewer is Adrian Swain
October 27th, 2009

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Swain: This is Adrian Swain interviewing Tim Lewis at Kentucky Folk Art Center at Morehead State University in Morehead, Kentucky on October 27th, 2009 for the Kentucky Craft History and Education Association. In a sentence describe the type of work that you do.

Lewis: Stone carving. Something that will last forever, I hope. (Laughter, Lewis)

Swain: When and where were you born?

Lewis: My birthday is tomorrow. It was October 28th, 1952 about 500 feet from where I live now.

Swain: You were born at home?

Lewis: Yea, at home. You know, the doctor comes out.

Swain: And your home was where?

Lewis: Elliott County in Newcomb Creek area, Isonville. We didn't have any electric at the time. (Laughter, Lewis) Well, actually they didn't get electric until 3 years later. The doctor comes out, you know, I guess they could drive out.

Swain: Describe your childhood and family background.

Lewis: I enjoyed it at the time. I guess we were poor, but we didn't know it. (Laughter, Lewis) We'd chuck our shoes in the spring after school was out and run around all summer, run around the woods, play in the creek with the neighbor boys. We'd make our toys too. I remember making little boats and we'd put them on the creek. (Laughter, Lewis) Little cars. I enjoyed it.

Swain: Did you come from a big family?

Lewis: There was four of us. Well, my dad died when I was ten. There was four kids. 3 boys and a girl.

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

Lewis: Well, I made it through high school. I was the first one in the family to get a high school diploma and then I went in the army for 6 years and I did a lot of other things. I've logged, worked on radios, stripped mines, oil wells, janitored, farmed a lot, drove a coal truck. That's my last job before I started art work.

Swain: What motivated your interest in art?

Lewis: Everybody else was doing it too and there wasn't really that much work around. The neighbors, Minnie Adkins and Junior Lewis, I was driving his coal truck () and when I wrecked his truck (Laughter, Lewis) you know, the logical thing to do, "I can do that" I said.

Swain: Did the wrecking of the coal truck have anything to do with your deciding that you needed to do something besides driving the coal truck?

Lewis: Well, that was my job. He didn't have any more trucks that he wasn't going to buy one back. That was my job, so I hauled a few more loads of coal, but that's not much of a way to make a living, you know. Get there at 3 in the morning and get back about 12. (Laughter, Lewis)

Swain: You said you were a stone carver. Have you worked with other materials in making art?

Lewis: I've carved wood. I've made a lot of canes for a while. Wood canes. Made a few more wood things, but I liked the idea of stone carving for some reason. The permanency of it. Long lasting. It will be here when I'm gone.

Swain: How did you learn your art?

Lewis: I bought a two dollar hammer and a seven dollar set of chisels and sit down. (Laughter, Lewis) Put it on a wooden stump, I think, the first one and went to chipping. Seemed like a good idea at the time.

Swain: Can you name significant experiences that contributed to the type of work you're now doing?

Lewis: Well, everything I've done so far. (Laughter, Lewis) A lot of religious and animals and people. Some abstract, but not much. And humor. I like a lot of humor.

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

Lewis: No. Today, I've still never met another stone . . . Well, one or two stone carvers. Met this girl over in Morgan County. Let's see . . . I think that's about the only one I've ever met. She quit and went to a bluegrass band.

Swain: So you didn't really learn from her by any means, right?

Lewis: Well, she started a long time after I did. No, I was the only one doing it, but it's similar to wood. I did find a library book that had one chapter on it. (Laughter, Lewis) And I read it and I said, "Well". Then later, somebody gave me a stone carving book, but it was more confusing than anything. I just thought that it was their way of showing their stuff off. It had a couple pages about how it's supposed to look. That didn't seem right to me.

Swain: How much of your current approach to your art has been the result exploration or experimentation by you and how much of others contributed to your knowledge?

Lewis: Well, I try to learn as I'm going. () I've learned a few tricks. (Laughter, Lewis)

Swain: So it's really all been learning from doing it, right?

Lewis: From doing it, yea. I can pretty well tell what's going to happen to one now.

Swain: Have you ever had any education experiences that have contributed to your work?

Lewis: You know, my whole life, I guess. (Laughter, Lewis) It comes from inside, I guess. Not out of a book.

Swain: How you traveled either in this country or internationally and what impact has it had on your work as an artist.

Lewis: I traveled when I was in the army.

Swain: Where did you go?

Lewis: Let's see. I went to New Jersey, Texas, California, New Mexico. Back to Georgia. Alaska and then back to Louisiana.

Swain: Did those experiences have any impact on your work now that you're doing, do you think?

Lewis: Maybe some of the animals. Like bears. I saw some bears up in Alaska and they're not looking at them in a zoo. (Laughter, Lewis) You see one out in the wild and you're impressed. And fish, I make some fish every now and then. I saw the salmon up there.

Swain: Can you describe the development of your career as an artist? How it went from beginning to now?

Lewis: I started making a few odd looking things. (Laughter, Lewis) I think Morehead's still got some of them. Keep them hid, thank you. (Laughter, Lewis) Let's see, Larry Hackley said, "I'd buy canes" so I started making some canes. That's when I started building my house, you know, made some artwork. Get me some lumber, make some more canes. Well, I did go to a show at Huntington Museum and I saw some stone carvings, or it wasn't really carvings. They said they turned it on a lathe and I said that's not right. Turning stone on a lathe. So I said, I'm going to try that. I got a rock, it actually came out from under one of those old buildings at the house. (Laughter, Lewis) And chisels and I sit it there and went to work.

Swain: What did you make?

Lewis: I made a Noah's Ark.

Swain: That was your first proper stone carving?

Lewis: First one.

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

Lewis: Humor. A lot of it's humor. Politics, just leave me out of that. (Laughter, Lewis) Well, you know, some of the religious things.

Swain: Those show up in your work, some of your subjects are typical scenes . . .

Lewis: When I was a kid growing up that's where we had to go, you know. Go to church. There was one close to the house, so if you went anywhere it was to the church or sometimes the drive in. Of course, we didn't have that much money so I went in the trunk a few times. (Laughter, Lewis) Let me get out of the trunk and watch a movie. But church usually is where you went. Humor . . . I aggravate my wife to death, I'm always in a good mood. Not sure why.

Swain: Well, that's too bad. (Laughter, Lewis) What are the major influences that determine the subjects you portray in your work?

Lewis: I like it to be the rock, itself. You know, a lot of times I can see something in one. Sometimes even a little chisel mark on one. I had one on the bench for about 3 months and I'd hit it with a chisel and a hammer every now and then, I finally saw a mark on it and "Oh, whoa". (Laughter, Lewis) It's in this traveling show, it was a shark's tail and there was a whole lot of rock left over so I made an octopus fighting a shark from that one little mark. (Laughter, Lewis)

Swain: So, it's the stone itself speaking to you.

Lewis: Exactly. I tell people that and they think I'm crazy. I say they talk to me. (Laughter, Lewis)

Swain: Was that true of your work with walking sticks?

Lewis: Yea, a lot of it, because you know, I dig root canes and they've always got a shape in them or some kind.

Swain: So the stick suggested the subject to you?

Lewis: I'd rather it be like that. It's a lot easier to make one or a lot easier to interpret one, you know. And chip away all the stuff that's not supposed to be there, than it is to make one. I do that sometimes, but I don't like it, you know, you just go out and make it and force it out of it in other words. It works a lot better if I can use chip away. It's in there already. I have lost a big chunk here and there, you know, don't panic. Back up and "Oh! That's supposed to be like that". It's talking to me. (Laughter, Lewis) Then go on and get with it.

Swain: Have the subjects you portray in your work changed over time?

Lewis: Yes. I like to think that I'm getting better at it, but you know the subject is still the same about everything.

Swain: It's broad.

Lewis: Yea. I've made a few broads too. (Laughter, Lewis)

Swain: Obviously, your work is influenced by the materials and technique that you use.

Lewis: A lot of it is. I'd rather have it like that, you know, you'd be surprised the shapes. Well, no you wouldn't. You've seen a lot of them. (Laughter, Lewis) Shapes that come out of them when I start chipping. I like to see it before I even start what's in there.

Swain: I think what I'm hearing you say is that you end up developing a sense about the piece of stone, a particular piece of stone that you're working with. That sort of speaks back to you.

Lewis: It does all the time. (Laughter, Lewis)

Swain: So it tells you what the subject is?

Lewis: Yea. Exactly.

Swain: Do you feel that your work reflects an inner personal feeling?

Lewis: The humor ones do and maybe a little bit of the religious ones. I've made rocket ships. A person can dream, can't they? (Laughter, Lewis) Airplanes. I made some eagles. I made an eagle breaking a flag.

Swain: You just mentioned dreaming. Is your work with stone a means by which you interpret the world around you?

Lewis: I've been trying to. I noticed some of it has. Like when me a Lola was expecting, you know I made one or two of them with the big bellies. Had the baby, had some younger, had some babies, made some babies. Sometimes it does, yea.

Swain: Well, describe for us your workshop. Your working environment.

Lewis: Well, I built it myself and talk about junked up and dusty. (Laughter, Lewis)

Swain: Now, is it in your house or is it separate?

Lewis: No, it's outside. No, it's outside. I put it out there. You know, I've got my rocks laid out in one end. Plywood is what I use. Concrete floor, but nobody knows it. (Laughter, Lewis) Nobody's seen it since it first started. When I clean up, I get my shovel and . . .

Swain: Rock dust.

Lewis: Yea. It's all over and stuff's piled up. I've been cleaning it out now for 5 or 6 years. I got me a () in the edge of it, where I can pick the rocks down. It used to, I could pick them up, but now I can't anymore. I boom them in there, you know, and put them on the bench. Or if they're too big, I stack some blocks up in the floor. I put them there sometimes. My old yard sale chair, it's about had it. I've had it for 15 years.

Swain: Describe your working process. How you actually go about creating one of these carvings.

Lewis: Well, you've got to go find a rock first. I like to use ones off of interstate 64, along the ditch line there.

Swain: Pieces that have fallen off the cliff face.

Lewis: And I pick them up, take them back. They'll lay there a long time and I'll go look too, you know, see what I can see. Sometimes I'll split them in half, if they're too big. Put them in there and start chipping a little bit. "Oh, what's in there, what's in there?" "Oh! That's it". I like those ideas that knock your head back. (Laughter, Lewis) "Whoa! That's what it is". I should have known that. And go to chipping like everything. Chips go flying.

Swain: And then, as you work on a piece, how do you . . . Once you've got it to basically where you want it, how do you finish it? Do you use any kind of power tools?

Lewis: I've got some air tools. I use air tools. But a lot of times a hand tool, you can do more damage I call it. (Laughter, Lewis) Not really damage, you know. A flat chisel and my hammer, you can take a bit chunk off with an air tool, you know, you can steady. I've got an electric grinders and air grinders and drills.

Swain: Do you use those tools for the finishing?

Lewis: No, I use the hand tools for finishing. You know, this is for roughing out, the air tools and the grinders. And to cut space in the middle, I use a drill.

Swain: How do you produce smooth surfaces?

Lewis: Grinder works good. A side grinder and little die grinders and you know, there are different textures you can use.

Swain: How has your working process changed over the time since you first started carving stone?

Lewis: When I first started, I used all hand tools for the first few years. I wanted to get, you know, to feel the tools, because you can't hardly do an eyelid with an air tool. (Laughter, Lewis) It's all fun and games until you lose an eye. (Laughter, Lewis) So I do it with a hand tool. It's basically just buying better equipment.

Swain: And familiarity with the tools themselves, just experience.

Lewis: Yea. Experience. And wearing a lot of them out.

Swain: Do you work entirely alone or do you ever work with others?

Lewis: I've never worked with others. You know, nobody knows what I'm thinking. (Laughter, Lewis) I don't half the time.

Swain: Is that something you want to do or you prefer . . .

Lewis: No, I prefer it. My wife once said, "I want to help you". (Laughter, Lewis) Canes, said that about the canes. I said, "Well, you can undercoat these canes". Primer coat. Took her about 30 minutes, she said, "What else can I do?" You can paint all the stuff on . . . She said, "No I can't". I said, "Well, you're done". (Laughter, Lewis) That was the one and only time. That was the last time.

Swain: Do you use any unusual techniques in the actual making of the pieces?

Lewis: Well, I don't really know, because I've never seen another stone carver so I have no idea. I've seen a little bit on TV, but some of that I've seen in that book, chapter I read. I started it, but its just, you don't need it. Unless you want a texture.

Swain: So the tools that you use are hammer or mallet and chisels and grinders, I mean air powered grinders . . .

Lewis: And electric grinders and little air grinders. Basically, let's see, three tools. Air hammer . . . Well, maybe four. Air hammer, electric side grinder, air die grinder, a little one and a drill. And I don't use the drill much.

Swain: How and approximately when did you acquire the power tools? Because you started out, did you not, with just simply hand tools.

Lewis: Hand tools. I think it was about 3 or 4 years.

Swain: And you've been carving for how long, stone?

Lewis: Since 1989.

Swain: So, 20 years.

Lewis: Yea.

Swain: And you used hand tools . . . How soon did you . . .

Lewis: I used hand tools for about 3 or 4 years.

Swain: And then you began to incorporate power tools?

Lewis: Yea.

Swain: Okay, so sometime in the early 1990s?

Lewis: Well, two years later, I started getting electric die grinder. They got to wearing out, but you know, you get a smooth surface. You can do the same thing with a flat chisel, but it takes a lot longer, you know. Just smooth and smooth and a little sandpaper, where as with that die grinder you go bzzzz and you do a half hour's work. (Laughter, Lewis)

Swain: Okay, here's a different question. What impact has computer technology had on your work or your working process?

Lewis: None.

Swain: Where do you exhibit your work?

Lewis: All over.

Swain: Such as . . .

Lewis: Here at Morehead, they've got some, let's see . . .

Swain: Kentucky Folk Arts Center.

Lewis: Smithsonian's got some. Atlanta, Georgia. Louisville. Museums are all over the country. France, Japan. Like I say, museums all over the country. I don't know all of them. They're widely spread out.

Swain: Okay. Do you do commissions?

Lewis: Yea. The first big one was 1995 when they had the Olympics in Atlanta Georgia. They did a folk art part. (Laughter, Lewis) What did they call it? The first major exhibit of outdoor folk art. I was pleased to get in that.

Swain: And what did you do?

Lewis: I did three big things out of concrete.

Swain: Oh, so you worked with concrete for that.

Lewis: Well, I had to because on interstate 75 right on top of it, the overpass. They had a weight restriction, so everybody had to use concrete. They were 5 feet high, dinosaur head and a () headed thing and a big devil looking head. Five foot high and some of them were 4 foot wide. That would have weighed tons, but you know, concrete . . .

Swain: So they were hollow concrete?

Lewis: Yea, what do they call that, an armature?

Swain: Yes.

Lewis: The first ones I ever did.

Swain: These were in a pedestrian area above the interstate on an overpass?

Lewis: Yea. You know, when they made this overpass they had a lot of extras left over. There was a lot of artwork. Harrod Finster, R.E. Miller. Burgess Delaney. To name a lot of the big ones. And all the homeless people stay there. They like them. (Laughter, Lewis)

Swain: Have you exhibited at fairs?

Lewis: Not so much, no.

Swain: You've exhibit at a Day in the Country fair.

Lewis: Is that a fair?

Swain: We'll call it a fair.

Lewis: Ok. Yea, I've done it then. I've gone to a few. I never really did any good. You know, these country fairs, you know, people come in . . .

Swain: Or craft fairs.

Lewis: Yea. I don't really do that good. Hell, I went to a Laura () show today and I sat there for two days and talked to the people.

Swain: So what you're saying is, I think I'm hearing you say that craft fairs or art fairs are not the place where people go to find the kind of work that you do?

Lewis: Yea. I went to one down in Berea one time, Indian Fort Theatre and I didn't do much good there.

Swain: You exhibited your work there.

Lewis: Yea. I didn't do much good there, you know.

Swain: Was that with stone or walking sticks?

Lewis: I had stone and I had some of the smaller wooden things. Canes, snakes and lizards. Sold a few lizards and a snake or two. But you know these country fairs or whatever, you know, 20 to 100 bucks, if you've got a lot of those things, you can sell them.

Swain: Right, but your work in a different price range? Is that what you're saying? It's not a good opportunity for you.

Lewis: A little higher than that. You know, it's a lot of hard work the stones are. I can't really sell them for 100. Although, I did when I first started and I was tickled to death to get it.

Swain: Before you realized how valuable your work was?

Lewis: Well, really when I first started.

Swain: How do you promote and sell your work?

Lewis: Well, Morehead does pretty good. (Laughter, Lewis) The Folk Art Center here and I've sort of an agent. He goes all over the country, Bruce Shelton. You know, he'll buy a lot of them and put them in his yard and take them to shows and different museums and galleries. Works out pretty good.

Swain: And do collectors, customers come to you . . . So a lot of your sales are direct?

Lewis: A lot of them are. A lot of people have come through off and on.

Swain: How has the experience of selling your work changed over your career?

Lewis: I still don't like it. Never did. Probably never will. That seems to be the worst part of it, you know, something I've made. () a time or two. Hit it with my finger, you know, how can you put a price on it?

Swain: As a follow up to that question, early on, it was more difficult to sell your work. Today that's not true.

Lewis: Yea it is, it's still difficult.

Swain: I mean not the actual parting of it but the ability to part with it, in other words, is there more demand for your work?

Lewis: Yea, there seems to be a lot more demand.

Swain: Can you keep work?

Lewis: No.

Swain: So, in other words, you're very successful in the terms of selling of your work or the fact that your work is selling. You don't like to do it . . .

Lewis: Don't like to sell it. I can't make as many as I used to with all this arthritis stuff. Gout. Can't get my hands together, but I can still hold a hammer and a chisel.

Swain: Well, in that regard do power tools . . .

Lewis: They help a lot. You know, I don't pay much attention to it.

Swain: But power tools ease the pain from work than if you didn't use them.

Lewis: I've always got pain. (Laughter, Lewis) It's easy to ignore when you're working on something.

Swain: Do you use computer technology in promoting your work?

Lewis: No.

Swain: What recognition have you gotten for your work?

Lewis: Oh, I've got a lot. () Fellowship Award when I first started. Numerous awards. Folk Art Society of America, when was that, 2 or 3 years ago? Gave me their . . .

Swain: Artist of the Year award?

Lewis: Yea and when they first started buying a piece of artwork from a living artist in the state they . . . I was the first one. I made a lot of firsts like that. (Laughter, Lewis) Louisville, they made tree guards out of canes, that came through Morehead.

Swain: It was a public () cast out of cast iron. The same piece that formed a tree guard around the tree in the city of Downtown Louisville.

Lewis: Yea. I thought it looked pretty good.

Swain: Well, tell us about the exhibition. There's a retrospective exhibition of your work of your stone carving. Can you talk about that?

Lewis: Yea, that was two years in the works. They borrowed all these stone carvings off of different people. That's why there's 30 left. It started out with 60. (Laughter, Lewis) The people want their stone carvings back.

Swain: Has that been a good experience for you to have had that exhibition and have that recognition and there's a public catalog. The exhibition is called Time Makes Real: The Carvings of Tim Lewis.

Lewis: That's a good name. I could have thought of a few different names, but yea it worked pretty good. That made me feel good.

Swain: Yea and in the process four or five different scholars wrote essays about your work that were incorporated into the exhibition catalog, correct?

Lewis: I don't really read them. You know, I just feel uncomfortable reading about me and they had a film with it, you know, and I never did watch it. (Laughter, Lewis) I've got a few copies. Sometimes I'll watch the films, but I don't really like to.

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

Lewis: I go to that one around the county. Heritage network.

Swain: In Elliott County.

Lewis: Yea. Once a month they always have potluck food, when the wife's working me and my daughter go down there and have our meeting and have food.

Swain: Have you taken any leadership roles in any organizations?

Lewis: Nah. If I can boss me around then I'm doing good.

Swain: Has being a part of the art or folk art community been important to your development as an artist?

Lewis: No.

Swain: Have there been any services that have been directed toward artists by agencies, institution or organizations . . .

Lewis: One really helped, that Al Smith Fellowship Award. That came with \$5000 bucks. I bought a lot of tools.

Swain: That enabled you to progress in your work because of the tools?

Lewis: Yea. And I remember that guy telling me, said you can buy tools and advance your art and he said in other words finish your house. And I said okay! (Laughter, Lewis)

Swain: By finishing your house that enabled you to go on with your work, right?

Lewis: Exactly. Well, I was staying in an old camper. () It's a lot more comfortable, you know. You need to be comfortable when you're working. Or I do. Old guy () Wells told me that, he said you want to climb up on the high places and get comfortable. I don't get high, you know, I sit on my chair and get comfortable. Have the rock, you know, about right here.

Swain: Do you subscribe to any magazines or periodicals relating to folk art . . .

Lewis: I did at one time, what's that. . . Folk Art Finder or whatever it is. They've changed the name of it now. I'm not subscribed, but they sent me a few copies when I'm in. I need to get that again, I guess.

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

Lewis: I used to go over to the schools, you know, one day a year, but I don't know, that was sort of fun, but (Laughter, Lewis) see, I couldn't teach.

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

Lewis: My wife says get out there and make us some money! (Laughter, Lewis) Does that count? She'll travel with me all over and my daughter likes it too.

Swain: And your daughter is how old?

Lewis: 13. She'll be 14 in December.

Swain: Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about your life and how you feel about it and what difference it's made in your life?

Lewis: I probably wouldn't be alive if I didn't do the artwork. Wouldn't have been married . . . You know, it built my house. Bought my vehicles.

Swain: You said you wouldn't be alive?

Lewis: I was still drinking a little bit and I was trying to do something one day and the drinking . . . you know (). And 20 years, 1989. That's when I quit drinking. So it's been twenty years.

Swain: So you attribute the work as an important reason why you say, quit drinking for example.

Lewis: Yea. That's one of them. There's a feeling you get when you make something. Or when I make something. You know, I've got chill bumps and I've laughed out loud and I try not to do the sad ones. Some of the more patriotic ones, you want to stand up and salute, or I do. And I listen to Morehead public radio and Saturday night's the blues. I have stopped working to dance a little while.

Swain: Do you work on any particular schedule or is it just when the mood strikes you?

Lewis: No. I've been out 2 or 3 in the morning. (Laughter, Lewis) And I've been out 3 or 4 in the afternoon. Depends on aches and pains.

Swain: Do you foresee yourself continuing to work?

Lewis: Yes. Even if it's crawling out and working an hour or two.

Swain: So you'd say it was a rather important part of your life?

Lewis: Very important. That's where the soul is for me. That's where the soul is for me. I need to get better too. I got to thinking about that the other day, you know, put more soul into it. A lot of times people, well, feel more than I do about it, but I'd like to . . . I can blow people away sometimes, but I'd like to maybe touch the sleeve of art one of these days. (Laughter, Lewis)

Swain: Well, thanks very much. Is there anything else that you . . .

Cameraman: Are there any artists, folk artists, classical or whatever that you particularly like or inspire you somehow or that you just like what they do?

Lewis: I like a lot of artwork. Some I don't like, though. You know, the ones you don't like is the ones you want to look at longer and see if you can figure out something to like about it. You

know when somebody makes something, how can you not like it? But you know, I have some that are more favorite than others. (Laughter, Lewis) Some of it I like better.

END OF INTERVIEW