

KENTUCKY CRAFT HISTORY AND EDUCATION ASSOCIATION, INC.

Interview with Terry Ratliff
Interviewer is Amanda Fickey
July 30th, 2013

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

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

Fickey: Ok, Terry. So, I'm going to start by doing an announcement.

Ratliff: Sure.

Fickey: So the date is July 30th, 2013. The interviewer is Amanda Fickey, on behalf of the Kentucky Craft History and Education Association and the interviewee, would you state your name for me?

Ratliff: My name is Terry Ratliff.

Fickey: And we are located at Terry's home in Floyd County Kentucky. So let me start by saying thank you Terry for sitting down and doing this interview with me today.

Ratliff: It's my pleasure.

Fickey: I thought we would begin with just some basic biographical information. Maybe you could tell me a little bit about where you grew up and how you became interested in wood working.

Ratliff: I did a lot of growing up right here. This is my grandpa's land that I live on now and I lived here, ran around with a BB gun, hiked in the woods, did things kids used to do. I knew every tree in the woods, every rock, every big hickory, you know, when I turned 11 or 12 I start carrying a little 4 10 shotgun, hunting in the woods. In doing that, I learned all about timber, about what a hickory tree was, what an oak tree is. And then my grandfather and my dad too, helped me identify trees because it was a real handy device, a real handy tool to have. In my grandpa's time, he grew up as what they call a subsistence farmer, where they live on the land, almost how people describe third world countries now. My grandpa grew up without any currency. If they wanted money they had to trade off, sell a cow, sell hogs in the fall, sell eggs, trade eggs for ribbon or fabric at the local store. It was the last of the agrarian lifestyle. And during my grandfather's lifetime, it went more to the industrial and he had an interesting perspective on the coal mines, he said when the coal mines came to this country, you could go put your 8 to 10 hour shift in and get a dollar. That's what you got for it was a dollar. Before that you didn't see money, so he saw it as a good thing. He was fortunate in that, he hung on to the lifestyle he grew up with. You raise your food, you had your pigs and your cows and you raised and canned everything you had in your garden and he was able to prosper when the coal mines came. He didn't go into the coal camps and get into the whole . . . He dealt with the company store, but very little. I came along, grew up just over the hill there in a little house that's now there anymore until I was 12. And like many people here, the coal mines shut down when I was 12 years old. I say you're a true native of around here if you had to move away at some point and at 12 my family moved away and went to northern Indiana. I got a different kind of education there in high school, they had a larger tax base, more industry and you know, people say there are better schools. Who knows? Came back here after I finished high school, went to a community college and transferred to U.K. where I finished the whole thing in 4 years and came back here to work, which a lot of people, when I went to school there they were saying you don't go back, you know, they were asking my plans when I graduated, and said, "Terry, this is what we're doing here is to get away from that place". But this place is what I really like, I have lived other places and I really like the idea of the family land. I'm living here on my grandpa's place. I'm carving out . . . You see my log house that I've built here long time ago now. Carved out a career in nothing I went to school for really, but I even had a very prominent lady one time say you through away your college education, but I use my college education every day. It gives me confidence and what I learned in school is how to learn. And becoming a self-taught chair

maker, I did get pointers from an old chair maker that lived, as the crow flies, about two miles that way on Buck's Branch. Buck Justice who taught me some things about gathering the hickory bark, I go out in the springtime and I gather the bark from hickory () and that's what I weave into the chair seats. That's what's in the chair back here. () right underneath the () that you see. Irving Messer was a chair maker over in Knott county and he had made chairs since the, I don't know, late '30s and early '40s. WPA is what helped train him in chair making and that's what he did all of his life. And I kind of used him as a business model, I wanted to . . . My goal was to live up here and have people seek me out as a chair maker and buy my wares where I didn't even have to go to craft shows, but early on in the career I had to do a lot of craft shows and as they say, beat the bushes to get my name out. And I got associated with David Craft's just six miles, less than that as the crow flies, but here the roads are pretty curvy and winding as you learned getting up here. And David Craft's, I made a rocking horse and hobby horse. I made it out of poplar and it had oak rockers on it and I called it Old Sarge and spent untold hours making this thing, I put it for sale at David Craft's and it was just there for a short time before it sold. And that gave me the inspiration transition from the hobby phase or doing things because it's what I liked to do, what I wanted to do. In college I worked summer jobs, I had a job at a boat factory where I was the wood cutter, wood carver and I cut out the boat frames that were made out of wood. So I came back here, David Craft's sold the hobby horse and I thought, well maybe there's something to this and at the same time I started thinking I could, you know, support my family, support myself making crafts, I started building the log house too. So for about 6 years I would work, I would produce chairs, I would produce hobby horses, tables whatever I was making. I didn't put chair maker after my name for three or four years. I made a little bit of everything. Put in whole kitchen cabinets, whatever it took. Hauled house coal and . . . Just what it took to get by, to live but then after a few years of it, I put chair maker after my name and () focus and I found that helped a lot in the business that people could identify me with this one thing and the world's big enough and I pretty well . . . Excuse the pun, but I carved out that career of being known just as a chair maker and from learning and from studying other chair makers and I'll say Buck and Irving again. There was another chair maker who passed away about the same year I made my first chair. His name was Chester Cornett and I have learned from stories, I've collected Chester stories, I've collected . . . I've read books, seen films about Chester. Studied Chester's chairs. Different chairs that I've seen that he's made. He was eccentric, to say the least, he was a little bit eccentric. A different kind of character. He got a disability check from the army, they said he spent too much time alone in the Aleutian Islands during the Cold War. That helped support his chair making. So Chester, he was a chair genius and I hope someday to make chairs like Chester did. And what I've adapted from Chester is the 8 sided posts on my chairs. That throws back to a time when even Robin . . . When I go to school I tell kids about Robin Hood days when they had the guilds in Europe. A chair bodger was someone who went into the woods, set up a shaving horse and made chair parts. Because he was not a guild member, because he wasn't a master, he wasn't allowed to assemble to chairs, but he could make all these rounds up and he'd go into the woods and he'd make his shaving horse, he would have a few tools, maybe an axe, wedges, a () and he would split out parts and make parts all day or for months and then he would take his cart in and sell those to the cabinet makers or the chair makers who were masters and part of the guild and he wouldn't get into any trouble with the guild that way. So Chester got tired on his machinery and I think he saw where mechanization was going, industrialization and all that and he wanted to throw back to just using the shaving horse. And just using the hand tools. And that's real attractive to me. That's something that really appealed to me is just using hand tools and going to the woods. When I talk to high school kids my business is economically vertical, that is, I produce everything. I don't outsource, I don't go to Lowe's to buy parts and I don't have someone else, somewhere, you know, making a million chair legs and I put them all together.

Fickey: Right. Well, let me ask you just for a minute to go back and when you're making that decision where it's not going to be a hobby for you anymore and you really want to be identified as a chair maker and you want to take this seriously, make this your career. What was the role, you know, you mentioned David Appalachian Craft's and taking the rocking horse there and once that sold you felt a little bit more confident about it. What else did that organization do to help you step that up and to make that into a career? Did they provide guidance or assistance or did they help sell your products for you?

Ratliff: Now the question is how did David Craft's help nurture my transition from hobby to what I wanted to do as a profession and the biggest part that I see is they . . . Well, the sale didn't just sell. It wasn't just the sale. It was a sale to one of the biggest craft collector's in the world at the time. I thought well, if somebody is collection crafts and they have the largest collection in the world recognized this that is really good. That was one of the biggest feathers in my cap or that was one of the biggest pats on the back that I could get, right off the bat. And I feel like they made that available to me. And they did offer some of my wares for a while, I did put work at David Craft's besides the hobby horse, I had other pieces I put over there. And that is mister the dog. So they helped with that and mostly provided a model or showing that it could be done and encouragement is what I got from David Craft's that's the biggest part. So getting back to the question about David Craft's and their facilitating or helping me make the transition. They were doing craft shows and they were encouraging me with the hobby horse and at that same time, I think it was the first or second year that they had Kentucky Crafted: The Market and Phyllis George Brown was in her office and one of her big things she was working towards was helping craftspeople out and that helped too. I feel like each time that I . . . I've been in this over 30 years now, every time that I got into a slump and thought I really need to get a real job, something came along and gave me a poke to let me know I needed to stay with this calling. Old timers describe it as a calling. It was Phyllis' book Kentucky Crafted Handmade and Heartfelt. It was published in 1990 or so. That was one, at a time, I was getting ready to take safety classes to see if maybe I wanted to get into coal mines because people were making money, you know, there was money to be made there, when instead I adapted a lifestyle where it didn't take so much money and that's what . . . In building my house I used timber right here off the land. I used to logs. The foundation stones I gathered right here from the land and I was into a green movement before they started describing it as a green movement. That's what I was doing then. David, just the fact that they were and the fact that chair did sell to one of the biggest, prominent craft collectors in the world at the time, that was the encouragement I needed at the time, to stay with it and try to make a go of it.

Fickey: Beyond David Appalachian Crafts are there other organizations that we should touch on that made a difference in your career or how did you grow as an artist? What are some of those?

Ratliff: Oh, sure. Well, Kentucky Crafted. Kentucky Crafted the Market was a big one, early on. They called me on a Monday . . . I applied to go and they said, "No, no. Sorry, we're full". And they called me Monday and said, "We've had some cancellations, you can show up on Wednesday". Like, a week from this coming Wednesday. So I threw together some things, went down there, sit it down on the bare concrete floor, no pedestals, no props, no you know, no signage. And was very green, didn't know anything. They offered workshops at the time, Kentucky Crafted did and the Kentucky Arts and Crafts Foundation out of Louisville did, where I learned how to kind of dress your booth up a little bit, your booth when you go somewhere. Don't just sit it down on a concrete floor. And I even went too far at times, if I took a rug, people were interested in buying the rug and I made a quilt rack and if I hung a family heirloom quilt on it, people would knock my furniture out of the way to get back to pull the seams apart on the

quilt and see how it was made and is it for sale. That was part of the . . . I had to kind of learn if it's not for sale, don't put it in your booth or be very minimalist with what you put in there. And those are lessons that happen along the way as you go. But Kentucky Crafted the Market, the Kentucky Arts and Crafts Foundation at the time. They've changed their name now, they're the Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft. They're the same . . . Only the name was changed to protect who knows what. They've gone through a couple name changes, but they're at 612, 611, 613 Main Street. It used to be 609 West Main Street in Louisville. Yea, it's the same place there. But they were pretty instrumental early on. And just having the encouragement to see that people are out there doing this. Names early on there . . . The turner from Berea who's passed away now, but it's real famous, I'll think of his name here in a second. Seeing these older guys that were doing it, had done it. Gosh, I'm getting that, you know. (Laughter, Ratliff) I'll remember it after you all had already left. The fellow's name that turned the little whimsy candlestick holder things.

Fickey: If it comes to you . . .

Ratliff: I can see his face. Well, anyway. That will come to me later. But knowing there's people out there that are doing it. Later on in my career, I heard of Sam Maloof from California there, who is one of the most famous chair makers in the world. And at 80 he had 20 years' worth of orders and was going to fill them all. Now I think he filled most of those orders that he had when he was 80, but tried to follow his career somewhat. The Kentucky Guild of Artists and Craftsmen based in Berea was very instrumental in helping me along and that was a stepping stone toward my dream of getting my name out there enough, of getting enough work, body of work and beating the bushes, going to shows in Connecticut, going to shows in Washington DC. The National Crafts Wholesale show there for a couple of years. I did a show in Cincinnati for a bunch of years. Getting me back to that dream of being able to stay at home, produce my wares and people would search me out.

Fickey: So even though you were here in eastern Kentucky, you know, one thing I've heard over the years is eastern Kentucky crafters feel like they're sort of just left out and no one's helping them. But you know, you're listing some organizations that are in Louisville, that are in Berea, that are, you know . . .

Ratliff: In Kentucky.

Fickey: Yea, they're in Kentucky. So maybe that's not as big of a disconnect as discourse in conversations would lead us to believe.

Ratliff: Doesn't have to be. It'd be nice if I lived just outside of Berea, the craft capital of Kentucky, but people who are really looking for . . . I'd like for eastern Kentucky to be where you'd find chairs or where you look when you want to find . . . right now in the past 10 or 12 years, gosh, I kind of lend my support to the Knott County group over there. The Kentucky Arts and Crafts . . . What is the name of that? (Laughter, Ratliff)

Fickey: Kentucky School of Art and Craft?

Ratliff: Kentucky School of Art and Craft is one thing, but the . . .

Fickey: The Appalachian Artisan Center?

Ratliff: The Kentucky Appalachian Artisan Center of Hindman, which people confuse with the Artisan Center down at Berea. But I've been associated with them for a number of years. They have a string instrument going on right now that I would think is . . . If they come across something that's going to make it for them, I think that's it, is the string instruments. And I just happen to make chairs that go great with the string instruments. The handmade chairs I make. So, I see that in the future as something that could really . . . you know, we could work on that, both of us could. My chair patterns, they produce the chairs, that type of thing. I'm just trying to go through the associations or groups that have helped.

Fickey: Well, and to get back to David Appalachian Craft's, I wonder too, since that was such an integral group for you and they did so much to help you, I know they're facing a situation where they're going to have to let go of the director, Ruth Ann. And they're not sure if they're going to be able to keep the shop open or if it is open, it might turn into more of a heritage museum sort of facility. Do you think that's going to hurt the industry and do you think there are enough organizations to sort of, step up and take over, providing guidance and assistance? How might that change things?

Ratliff: It's my hope that if David Craft's does decide not to be craft anymore that the people who are making the quilts, the pillows, that's been they're stock and trade. That those individuals will be able to take up the slack with the Kentucky Arts and Crafts of Hindman or with groups around the Prestonsburg area., this local eastern Kentucky area. That's the hope and I've just learned in the past few weeks that they're thinking of closing their doors so I'm still, gosh, wondering what's going to happen with that. And my concern is with more individual craftspeople that they have helped support and they have helped sell their wares.

Fickey: Well, and I wonder to think very broadly about that, what are some changes that you've seen in the industry over the years and where did it come from and where is it heading?

Ratliff: Personally, I haven't seen a lot of changes. When the stock market did its thing, it took probably two years for that to affect me. That's why I started noticing it, because I have, fortunately, knock on wood, you know, for the past long time, I've been at least a year out in orders and commissions to fill. So it took a while for that to catch up with me and I hope it's over with by the time it does. (Laughter, Ratliff and Fickey) I hope it's over with, I hope we're through that now. Changes? I haven't noticed a lot of changes, I mean personally, I haven't seen a lot and as far as trends go, I've heard people say "Oh, it's a trend". Well, it's been a trend since around 1900 that's when the first big crafts movement, just before 1900, the arts and crafts movement kind of like swept across the country. When people were tired of industrialization, they wanted to get back to handmade. Still, today, if young people, you know, kind of believe in themselves, believe in what they're doing and pursue it, I still think they have a chance. If they want to work at it. In the beginning, I put in 14 hour days. For lots of them in a row. I didn't take a vacation for probably 12 or 14 years. The vacations were traveling to Washington DC with a truck load . . . Jed Clampett going to Beverly Hills it what it looked like, you know I have the chairs hanging everywhere on the truck and being taken off, you know. And working my butt off for hours. Setting up. After driving 10 or 12 hours, you set up and then you're a nice guy three days in a row and then you tear everything down and you haul it all back home. That was the vacation I had for 12 or 14 years in a row. But I had time to work on the house, building it. But I think that even today I have some musician friends in the Whitesburg area. I wasn't aware of this, but they said when they saw me making chairs, they thought that maybe they'd have some chance to make it at what they do, pursuing their art. And they were already into it before I even learned that I had influenced those people. Had that influence on them. In a way, where I've seen the changes is through more support systems and it might be less difficult to break in to

the arts and crafts. To make a living with your arts or make a living with your skills that you have. It may be less difficult now than it was back then because there is more support, there's more acceptance and the movement is not dying. Not to knock TV reporters, a lot of times when people come out with a camera, they already have their story and they're just looking to support the ideas they already have and I even had a local TV reporter say, "Well, things seem to be waning. You don't see as many people out at the craft shows". Many people demonstrating, many people working. And my goal was to turn that around as fast as I could. That wasn't the message I wanted to get out there. So I let him know that no, more craftspeople don't have to get out there and beat the bushes now. They're getting commissions, they're staying in their studio and they're working and pursuing the life and dreams that they wanted in life. Because it's work to get out and do a show. You know, it's kind of fun . . . And that's what peer recognition or peer . . . When I get to see people who do the same thing I do at shows that's one of the best things about doing the markets and doing the shows. And I have learned a lot, going to shows, from other woodworkers. "Oh here's a tip on what you do, you know, putting paraffin on the end grain of a log when you first cut it and that way it won't crack so bad". I mean just little tips that people will share with you when you go to shows, markets and you see other people that are doing the same thing you're doing. So that's been a real good part of going to shows that I've liked. But as far as changes and things that have happened, I think there are more resources there and there's a better support system for people that are trying to jump into it right now.

Fickey: Well, and do you think that they conversations, sort of, vie for craft producers to make more locally and be part of that conversations of we need to produce locally and we need to buy locally, whether that's agriculture, whether that's . . .

Ratliff: Oh, definitely. Definitely.

Fickey: Are you part of those conversations? Can you think of examples?

Ratliff: I'm just a bystander in those conversations. I sit back and listen and say "Yea, that's what I did in 1980". That's what I've been doing since 1979, 1980 and 81.

Fickey: First time you've heard these conversations, they just recycle you think?

Ratliff: No, no. I think that people are becoming more enlightened. They are becoming more educated or they're beginning to like wake up and smell the coffee. It's nice to have those blueberries from Argentina or Peru, you know, but if we can get them here, that would be much better. If they had to truck these in from California, but wait, your tomatoes are coming from Mexico. Tomatoes are happening right here this time of year, you know. And with the farmers market movements with the locally grown, locally sold, locally consumed stuff, I think it's a great idea. And kind of along those lines, the first fifteen years that I was making chairs, I had a local merchant in Prestonsburg say, "Well, Terry, you know, we'd like to put your chairs up here in the window and maybe put some ties on your rocking chair or drape something over your chairs and use them for front window display and we'll help you do that and you can bring them on in but people around here are still throwing this stuff out and buying the good stuff. They brought on. People are still getting rid of these old homemade chairs". That was in the early 80s when that comment was coming to me. And to sell my wares I had to go to Columbus Ohio or I had to go to Fairfield Connecticut. I had to go to New Smyrna Beach Florida. Had to do shows in Washington DC. But after 10 or 15 years of that, word of mouth and the kids that I went to school with, they're growing up. (Laughter, Ratliff) But locally is where my market is these days. Pike County, Johnson County, Floyd County and right in Kentucky, you know, places west of

here. That's where the biggest part of my market is. It's almost like the story that once you make it big out there, you get more recognition in your hometown. And I've been getting more recognition locally the past while now.

Fickey: Well, I mean, this sounds really optimistic. The fact that you're able to sell your wares locally. That people are willing to invest in it. I mean, this seems like a good change.

Ratliff: It is. That's the change in my personal career that I've seen and it does help a lot that shows like Antiques Roadshow or shows like, you know, there's some shows on TV and there's stuff like what I make, the chairs that I make. The people that first bought my chairs for \$250 for a rocking chair in 1980. The first ones that I made. \$280, I think. \$300 in that range. Well, that chair is now worth, you know, a chair a lot like that one, of course, I've grown. Things have changed. I've changed things about how my chairs are made, but that chair is now selling for over \$5000. And that's what art investors call an investment. Whenever I'm gone, these chairs, you know, they'll still be valuable. They'll still be as good of a chair as they were when I first made them. So that's what I hope to offer. When people buy my work, they're not just supporting me continuing these skills and keeping these skills alive. You know, what do you do with a draw knife? What is post and rung joinery? Greenwood joinery? I'm keeping those skills alive. That's what they're supporting when they buy my work, but it's also an investment that that chair's value is going to go up after they buy it.

Fickey: Now Terry, what do you think is going to happen ten years down the road?

Ratliff: I'm going to have more gray hair.

Fickey: You're going to have more gray hair. (Laughter, Fickey)

Ratliff: My back is going to hurt just a little bit more. My chairs are going to cost a little more than they do today.

Fickey: Okay.

Ratliff: And they're still going to be selling and by then, even today in the past 5, 6, 8 years, my dreams started to be real. You know, I wanted to build a log house up on the hillside out here on the land I grew up on and make furniture and have the customers seek me out, find me and buy my chairs.

Fickey: Now, what about for the rest of the craft industry. How do you think it might change?

Ratliff: I think the more people and the more people that are . . . even all around the world they're doing what's been happening in America for the past 50 or 100 years. Out of the country and into the cities. The more city life people get, the more demand is going to be for handmade objects. And I think that the more industrialized or more technical, technology people have in their lives every day, the more they're going to feel wood and to get on a personal level here, the more they're going to have a clay dish that somebody threw with their hands, maybe even have the imprints of their fingers still there. You can see where somebody's finger actually shaped that bowl or shaped that coffee cup mug. I think there will be more of a demand for that. I think it does something for people's life, for their soul, for their inner . . . You know, the right kind of person and it's not everybody that appreciates art, but those people who do appreciate art, who do appreciate humanity, I think there will be more people doing that and I think there will be a higher demand for the handmade object.

Fickey: Now, what about an appreciation for Appalachian studies? I know you've made a couple references to working in the schools. Tell me a little bit about that and if you think you've seen any interesting . . .

Ratliff: I was real lucky at U.K. and having John Stevenson as an Appalachian studies professor.

Fickey: Okay. Yea.

Ratliff: Very influential. I mean, it didn't really change my life any, but just reinforced what I already felt. When I'm invited and I try to solicit invitations sometimes to everything from kindergarten classes through the local community college and technical schools. And I have different presentations for each class. Kindergarteners, I'll talk to them about how trees grow out of nut sprouts. Where did the nut come from and growth rings on the tree. And high school, college kids, I'll talk to them about economics. About the economics of running your own business. You know, I've mentioned being economically vertical before, about how I don't outsource. In Appalachian studies I think . . . These are Appalachian chairs I make. These are the old time hickory bottom chairs that people rock back on their porch fifty years ago, forty years ago and a lot of people are fortunate enough to still have these. And since I've been doing shows and my chairs sell in the neighborhood of \$400 to \$5000, they appreciate their grandma's chair a little better. They're not leaving that thing out in the yard anymore. (Laughter, Ratliff and Fickey) They're bringing it in and taking better care of those chairs. Down the road as far as having these artifacts from another generation. Having artifacts from grandma's or from . . . I think people are appreciating at least their wooden items or their chairs more. And they'll bring me photographs. I do the same markets over and over and people bring me photographs or bring their chair in that grandma had. Show me how it was made or how the arms were shaped. So yea, I get that and I have noticed, I don't know if it's my influence or it's back to Antiques Roadshow or some other show, things are going on, that people are appreciating the arts and what the culture (). A culture with the arts, the music is what is identified with the Appalachia anymore. Hope so anyway.

Fickey: Well, I agree with you and what's interesting in this particular cosmic moment is the coal industry begins to decline, people tend to look at alternative livelihood strategies, you think a lot of people will turn to craft and agricultural production out of that or do you think that's a possibility?

Ratliff: It's a possibility. I think the nature of the coal business, any historian will tell you, it's been boom and bust. We're on another bust right now. In some areas, lots of places it's going to take 10, 20, 30 years for these coal plants, electric plants to wear out or to stop using coal and as gas prices go up, coal will be more attractive. It's a matter of economics and had a group here from Wisconsin and talked all about economics to this college group of volunteers that was here about a month ago and tied economics in with my chair making, but in high school I had an economics teacher say you know, everything, your marriage, how you vote, where you live, economics determines so much of that and with coal, I'm not so sure that it's dead. I think that this is a slumps and I think there will be other uses whether it's carbon fiber, you know, stranding strings of carbon together. Using it for carbon fibers. They're making everything out of it now. From airplanes to kayak paddles and your Tevlar suits you wear. So who knows, they may find another use for it and still have the environmental downside of it. I'm somewhere between a tree hugger and an advocate for my neighbors and friends here that make their living with coal.

Fickey: I feel like a lot of people are that way. You know, they have friends that make a living off coal. They feel like they're encouraged to choose one side or the other, but they can't really do that.

Ratliff: Jason, a friend of mine, he's a kayaking buddy, he runs a D11 or D12, whatever the biggest dozer in the world is now, that's what he does. And he pushes rock and he uncovers coal and he really hates it when he has to push those big trees down and destroy this stuff, but that's how he makes his living. And that's how he can buy everything that Walmart makes and get along as good as anybody. How do I say, "Oh, you shouldn't do that"? "You should raise turnips and maybe you can make almost as much money raising turnips" you know, but it's a hard sell. It's a hard sell to people who already have their career, to think that person at 50 years old or 55 is going to go out and now he's going to be a farmer, when he is a specialist at repairing bulldozers or he has specialized in operating an excavator, which is a daredevil activity. I mean, they put them on a cable, they lower them down what looks like a cliff and they build a rubble ditch that they help enforce what Jimmy Carter wanted when he was in the presidency it. That's the laws that are being enforced now. They've been on the books for years, since the 70s. And now, you know, we have politics says we need to enforce these laws and I'm not so sure, you know. The whole thing. The global warming? I think the damage is done. That trap's already sprung, we're going to have to live with that.

Fickey: Yea, I agree. It's really messy and complex and you can't really choose sides. I mean yes, the damage is already done, but in all of this I see an opportunity to revisit the importance of being able to grow and produce things locally. Maybe this is the right thing . . .

Ratliff: Instead of rattling, carrying signs and going to rallies, I'm just trying to do what I do. That's my light. I'm shining my light up here by producing chairs. Even the trees I get the bark from, I'll cut a high stump. I don't cut it real low. I cut a high stump. That sprouts back out and I'm going back now after 30 years and visiting those stumps and getting the hickory . . . You don't want to get much bigger than six or eight inches with a tree that I gather the hickory bark off of. The bark gets really thick, the scales you cut off on the outside gets really hard to work on bigger trees. Now I'm going back after thirty years, the trees I cut and the sprouts off those are coming up and their nice poles that I can use again. And trees that I use to make my chairs, most of the time I try to get trees that are wind blown over, wind damaged, you know, uprooted by storms or whatever. That's another nice thing about going to schools and going out to shows locally is that somebody will say, "Well, I'll got a walnut in my backyard". Well, that was going to cost them hundreds of dollars to get it cleaned up, but I'll go in clean it up and haul it away for the log.

Fickey: It sounds like you're very mindful when you go get your trees.

Ratliff: I try to live life being a thinking person. (Laughter, Ratliff) It can't be said for everyone, I don't think, but I try to be a thinking man.

Fickey: Well, let me ask you Terry, is there anything that I haven't asked you about thus far that you think is really important for us to touch on or for us to discuss more about the industry or about your work or about David Appalachian Craft or?

Ratliff: I really hate to see David Appalachian Craft's go, because I feel like that has been . . . I'm not the only person that they've influenced or helped to think this is something . . . I feel like the most of what they've done is kind of help people get a little extra money along for

household. As far as really turning out somebody that's really . . . If you're really just going to make this happen in your life and make a living of it, it takes more than just one or two sources helping you along or kind of giving you encouragement. And David has been a good source and I think Ruth Ann has poured a lot of her heart into it and a lot of her life and I hate to see her go because she has such knowledge. She has a lot of knowledge about doing craft shows, about setting up, about making sales, about filling orders and commissions. So I hate to see her go. Yea, I don't know. (Laughter, Ratliff)

Fickey: Well, I mean, I think you're right. We did an interview with Ruth Ann and with Lewis and with Anna Hicks today and, you know, Lewis was talking about the fact that David Appalachian Crafts just played a crucial role for him in learning how to, you know, go from being a hobbyist to being an entrepreneur and selling his works. You know, he was grateful that Dave Appalachian Crafts would take his products and sell them for him, because it allowed him more time to do his work and so he saw that as an asset.

Ratliff: In my work, you know, I have really limited production. It's just me doing it, it's pretty slow. I used to have a joke, I'd tell my customers I planted an acre last week, your chairs will be coming along in a year or two, you know, or a few years now, you know. It's slow work when you produce each piece and then you assemble each piece and once I get it together . . . This chair, I've got to apply about 3 or 4 more coats of hand rubbed oil on that. That'll take the next over a month now to get it right. Drying in between and all. It's going to be my showpiece this fall. I was fortunate enough, the customer lets me keep it to take it around to different shows, venues I'm doing. David's . . . Just knowing they're over there has been helpful, I mean someone may contact them that hasn't heard of me and they'll send people here as may have happened with this film, this whole thing. It may have come through David Craft for all I know. If David hadn't been there, would they have known Terry Ratliff was up here and was making chairs? That's happened before, so they've been helpful in that way. I'm back to thinking of changes, thinking of influences. I'm pretty much running out on that. Changes I hope is that there will be more and the markets will grow. There will be more demand for handmade objects in general all the way across the spectrum from oil paintings to pottery, wooden objects, the instruments over in Knott county at the . . .

Fickey: Kentucky Appalachian Artisan Center.

Ratliff: Kentucky Appalachian Artisan Center and the Kentucky School of Craft and everything that's going on at Hindman.

Fickey: I know there was a recent expose in the Herald Leader that kind of looked at the crafts over time and, well, I ask, you know, how do you feel about the overall reason that project was initiated and where it's at now and where it might be in the future?

Ratliff: Wow. We're talking about the initiative. The Appalachian Regional Commission decided to pour money into one or two focus points, instead of sprinkling the whole lawn, now they're going to just nurture a few plants in the lawn. I think that was a great idea. The timing was right for it. They had the right politics. All the way up and down the line.

Fickey: It was in the 90s right? The early 90s.

Ratliff: In the early 90s the governor was from here in eastern Kentucky. There was a group of very influential politicians that helped pull that together and sway the Appalachian Regional Commission the national group, into focusing on one or two little groups. I feel like there was . . .

If they would have been lucky . . . It takes a certain amount of luck to make something like that work and having the right personalities involved and I feel like as far as directors . . . Of the Artisan Center at Hindman and of the School of Craft at Hindman, somewhere they did not connect. That had the right personality been in there in the beginning, things would have been different. It's like the stars were in alignment and out of alignment and I'm hoping now as far as Heinemann goes that they're aligned again. With their string instrument program, with their Kentucky musical instrument, the dulcimer, they were hoping to turn that into the dulcimer capital. They have a great history, a great heritage around the dulcimer there with Jethro Amburgey and other people who made dulcimers. The first ones made in Kentucky there. I feel like now after how many years, what was it the papers say? 8? 10? It's been a number of years and not quite that many directors but at least 3 or 4 directors changing. It's hard to get a direction. And that's what directors do is direct the board. Help the board decide which way to go. The board is still together, now they have a director that may be able to work with them, I hope so. He's still new, but to me, now they have what they haven't had before. And that is a direction with the string instruments, with the studio spaces, with the incubators. So I'm encouraged and I think that as far as eastern Kentucky and that part of what's going on in eastern Kentucky and that represents about 40 counties here, over 40. So I see that as a shining light that may turn into something. It may be what we needed here for some time. And I hope it takes up the slack from David's closing. I hope they can take up the slack for the budding or the fledging craftspeople and artisans here in this region.

Fickey: Well, and I know Knott County has faced some economic hardships lately.

Ratliff: Well, eastern Kentucky has.

Fickey: I mean who hasn't faced economic hardships, but Knott County is pretty rough right now. (Laughter, Fickey)

Ratliff: Yes it is. And what's happening in eastern Kentucky is happening across the country now in that eastern Kentucky has always had the very few, really, really up there as rich as anywhere in the world, but many, many all the way down here who are surviving on food stamps or welfare and the working poor. Now that's happening all across the country. More. Or in the past few years it has been.

Fickey: You know Appalachian historians say that it works that way, right, like you can see it play out here before it hits the rest of the nation. Depression in the 60s. That tends to be how it goes. (Laughter, Fickey)

Ratliff: This is really the center of the universe here.

Fickey: Yea. (Laughter, Fickey)

Ratliff: We've had it all before L.A. Before L.A., we had the violence, we had the drive by shootings . . . (Laughter, Ratliff and Fickey) we really are the center of this world () really starts here. And I hope the trend is on the upward swing here. You know, because we've been at the bottom for some time. Education level, health wise, so I'm hoping it's time for a turn around. I'm pretty much an optimist.

Fickey: Is there anything else we should add, Terry, that's really important or that I didn't think to ask about that you think . . .

Ratliff: We could probably go to peace in the Middle East or (Laughter, Fickey) what about that Snowden guy? He was an American patriot, you know? He let people know he was a whistle blower, he let people know what was going on. No, I don't know. I'll think of more things later. Coulda, shoulda, mighta, oughta mentioned . . . still the guy that turned out those things, right on the tip of my tongue.

Fickey: Yea. Well, if you think of anything else, let me know.

Ratliff: Rude Olsonik. I didn't know Rude all that good. I saw him at craft shows, but when I first started, here was this guy who was, you know, up there in years and he had made his living doing this. And that's something that the Kentucky Guild of Artists and Craftsmen helped me with, being associated with those people.

Fickey: Well, I'm glad you thought of his name.

Ratliff: You know, I knew it would sometime. It would pop in there. Still made the connection, as they say, just takes a little longer sometimes. (Laughter, Ratliff)

Fickey: Well, with that we'll wrap it up, but I tell you what, would you like to take some footage of Terry working? Can we include some of that?

Ratliff: Is this going to be like a voiceover and then I do things or?

Cameraman: I don't know what it's going to be.

(Sound of wood carving)

Ratliff: Change is the constant, you know. I'm not afraid of change, it doesn't scare me a whole lot, but change is what you can count on. Every town from towns in Maine to San Diego now, they're all looking to snag that tourist dollar and some of that's competition I see. I was in New Hampshire a couple weeks ago and they have an association of artist and craftsmen up there. They're up there making their things and we're down here making our things. And that's what I like. There's enough for everybody. The pie is big enough for everyone. You get that locally here, be it Paintsville down the road from Pikeville and I'm kind of buzzing in all those places. I'm the honeybee buzzing in all those different little towns and I want everybody to shine, you know, I don't want it to be like the local basketball competition or something, you know, that my team . . . I want everybody. Because the world is big enough and the market is big enough. Playing on your strength, this is a strength. The crafts that have been here, the music that has been here, the storytelling and that's how I'm getting those Chester Cornett stories. I still pick some of those up. He lived in Cincinnati in his waning years of his life. And Old Chester, one of his nephews came to him and said, Chester, would you sign this wood chip for me? I'll give you a dollar and he signed it and the kid gave him a dollar and he left. A few years later, he came back, and Chester wore bib overalls and he reached down in his pocket and he said, "Easiest dollar I ever made" and showed it to the boy that had given it to him, like it was the same dollar he had back then . . . (Laughter, Ratliff). The easiest dollar he'd ever made by signing his name. Chester story. Michael Louis Jones documented Chester in a book called, well the latest edition of it is called Craftsman of the Cumberland's. It's 1989 U.K. Press. His first edition was called The Handmade Object and His Maker and it focused on a few other chair makers besides Chester. I guess Dr. Jones is still using up good air up in California somewhere and I would like to make contact with him sometime. Have some of my California friends at least try to put a bug in his ear that somebody's out here doing . . . and trying to adapt Chester's style and continue

his work in chair making. I wouldn't want to have his life. He had a pretty rough time. But I like his chair making, now.

Fickey: They have an exhibit of his chairs.

Ratliff: At Morehead? This year or next year?

Fickey: Maybe next year.

Ratliff: Oh okay. I thought it was going to be this summer when I first heard of it.

Fickey: () I know there's one in the making.

Ratliff: Yea, I've tried to follow that. I'd be real interested in it and see chairs I haven't seen and I've seen a lot of his work. Appalshop did the film Hand Carved about Chester's life and I talked to him. We had a conversation when I watched that film. (Laughter, Ratliff) We were like, "Yea that's what I do" and "That's how you do that". Yea, I'm real interested in that exhibit. I've always wanted to get it going. I think he made the same chair so many times that he wanted to see how crazy he could get with it, just how out there he could get, so he produced that 8 post 2 in 1 rocker, he called it.

END OF INTERVIEW