



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Tape-recorded notes on Willard Watson

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Transcript

Preface

Tape-recorded Notes on Willard Watson

in [Boone, Deep Gap], North Carolina

March [20, 21], 1977

Willem Volkersz, Interviewer

Editor's Note:

This transcript is from a series of recordings made by Willem Volkersz over a number of years. They are not formal interviews, but rather records of conversations, often taped during photo-taking tours of the artist's studios or home collections.

The naive/visionary artists in these interviews have unique verbal mannerisms, many of which are difficult or impossible to transcribe accurately into written form. Thus, for grasping certain nuances of speech, researchers will find it advantageous to listen to the original tapes.

Our intent in transcribing these interviews was nonetheless to translate as accurately as possible the spoken word into a comprehensible written form, making changes to clarify but not to interpret. Thus the speaker's grammar is unedited. For example, "them" for "those," "theirselves," and "gotta" were all transcribed as heard. On the other hand, certain changes were made for clarity: "'cause," was transcribed as "because," "'fore" as "before," "'yo" as "your," etc.

Other editorial notations are as follows: Bracketed words are of two types. Those with "[—Ed.]" or "[—WV]" are inserted by the transcriber, editor, or Volkersz. Other bracketed words indicate uncertainty: Two or more words or phrases indicate possible alternatives; "[unintelligible]" and "____" indicate words that are garbled or incomprehensible on the tape, the former being a much longer phrase than the latter; "[noise]" is self-explanatory.

The original format for this document is Microsoft Word 365 version 1908. Some formatting has been lost in web presentation.

Interview

[Tape 1, side B; Volkersz' No. M1-1]

[This is recorded on the same tape with interviews with Ed Martin, C.McGriff, and B. O. Ward.—Ed.]

Notes on Willard Watson:

Willard Watson and his wife, [Olie, Ollie], live on Wildcat Road just outside of Boone, and his mail comes to Deep Gap, North Carolina.

He is a wood carver. Before he started to carve about 10 years ago, he did all kinds of work. As he kept on saying, anything to feed his six children, much of which, of course, was during the Depression.

He worked in Montana. I believe, in a mine. He worked in coal mines in West Virginia. No, in Montana he worked in timber. He worked in timber in other places as well, I believe.

His popular pieces are the dancing doll, which he played for us, and the man walking the pig. It appears that he mass produces a lot of the pieces that are popular and takes them to craft fairs. He's been to a crafts fair in Washington D.C.—which it seems is organized by the Smithsonian—a number of years. And some years ago Charles Kuralt of CBS apparently did a story on him, so he is fairly well known and his work is somewhat sought after.

He has some good tools. He has a wood lathe. He has a sander, drill press, lots of hand tools. His studio—or workshop, rather, as he calls it—which is across the road from his house, is filled with lots of clutter. He cuts

templates for all the pieces that he makes, and has made, so that he can repeat himself. And there are also, on shelves, many pieces in process, being finished. Many of the pieces, at least that I saw, were unpainted and apparently remain unpainted. He gets most of his wood from a sawmill, which his son, Sid, works at, who brings the scraps home and occasionally finds a very good piece of wood that cannot be used in the—actually, it's a furniture factory, I think, that he works in—that the company cannot use, and he asks them permission to take it home to his father who uses it.

He is turning 72 soon. His wife, Olie, is a quilter.

He appears very proud of his mountain heritage. He grew up about a mile from where he now lives. He was raised by his grandparents. His father disappeared when he was four years old, and 44 years later he hunted his father down in Sheridan— I believe it was Sheridan, Montana—and found him.

He kept on saying to us that he wanted us to tell people that some people in North Carolina hadn't changed, implying that the hospitality that they showed us was the same as it had been shown to people and visitors for many years.

He apparently used to play the banjo and continues to visit the annual fiddler's convention at Union Gap. And this year was going to be his 13th year at the fiddler's convention.

He was somewhat behind in his work because of the cold and dampness of this winter and spring. He had not been able to get into his workshop and get it warm enough so that he could work, so he'd been in the house much of the time. He'd only recently started up work again.

Several years ago he made a trip with one of his children—I believe one of his daughters—and had been as far as California, and was very impressed by the redwoods. He kept on referring to "those beautiful redwoods."

Willard is a first cousin of Doc Watson [the musician—WV] who lives only about a mile up Wildcat Road from Willard's house. Willard was not truly a Watson because he was born out of wedlock, but, as has been usual for centuries, he took his mother's maiden name which was Watson as his own last name.

He must be making some money on his work because his tools are obviously are not very cheap. The sander cost him—rebuilt I believe—\$600, and I think the lathe was \$800 or something like that. [I mean] the planer [was \$800—Ed.].

[End of recording]