

"IT GETS IN YOUR BLOOD"

Harry Evans, a third-generation metal founder, talks about his craft and his heritage in an interview by Ralph Rinzler.

In a sense, the ideal program for the Folklife Festival would be a collection of talks with each of the participants—the sort of conversations that are deeper and more revealing than those possible during a festival exchange. The irony of this event is that it is a celebration of people and, like most planned programs, the event tends to overshadow those it celebrates. Each year, a few participants' statements, included in the program, enable us to get back to the fact that the people who carry our cultural traditions have more to say than the music or objects they produce might belie. These statements remind us that objects of a culture are only symbols when taken out of context.

Harry Evans, like many carriers of folk traditions, shows us clearly the impact of community and of early childhood experience in influencing a carrier of folk cultural traditions.



"It was the iron, I guess, and the glow and the white-heated iron—pouring it in all these molds. It was sort of a magical thing—to see all these piles of sand, literally like so many statues—pour all this liquid iron in and a few minutes later take out a casting that could be used. Just continued to fascinate me.

"I went to school in St. Michael's—we were only just a block or two away from the foundry—I'd go by and see the steam coming out of the windows; that meant that he had just poured and they were shaking the castings out of the sand, you know. I was very useful, I guess, as a little boy to carry off their jackets and the flasks that they were poured in and pile them up outdoors or whatever because they wouldn't let us fool around the hot castings. It just continued to boil over in me.

"I'll never forget the first day, all these sparks flying everywhere. It was a lot like I had imagined, you know. My granddaddy said, 'Well, you can pour this one.' After that, I was his sidekick because he was, my lands, at that time he was, I guess, 75, 78, near 80, and he was still very active, active almost to the day he died, 90, and still had a great love and interest in the foundry.

"As a boy he started in the foundry; about 14 his father died. They had five children—and he was the oldest and had to go out and make his living, and this was the Roanoke foundry down in Virginia. His father must have worked there too. Now this is going back about 1865, right after the Civil War, you see.

"Later on, after he left Roanoke, he came up to Cumberland foundry—in Cumberland, Maryland. Then he lived in Baltimore after Cumberland, and they told him at 34 he had to get out of the foundry business or else he was going to die. So he came to Talbot County at 45 and bought a little farm near St. Michael's.

"He bought this little farm and within *'Everything is done literally by hand. Every mold is all hand-rammed and packed—no pneumatic hammer or squeeze machines.'* Photo by Ralph Rinzler.

three months he built a little foundry on the farm, determined to stay in the business. Well, he poured molds, boards, and plowshears and all kinds of farm implements. It'd begun to grow. Then he decided it was almost beyond his control on the farm, they were doing more foundry work than farming, and so he bought a little property in St. Michael's and built the foundry in there. He was 60 years old then, and he stayed there another 30 years and worked that foundry.

"He made all the manholes and grates for Easton at that time, which was developing into a town, you know, water meter boxes and valve boxes. Salisbury and Cambridge area, he made a lot for those. All these towns were beginning to grow up.

"I'm amazed to this day as to how they did it, with such little space and little knowledge and little up-to-date equipment. They had wheelbarrows to haul the castings out, wheelbarrows to move the sand around, shovels to pile it up, and every mold was all hand-rammed and packed; they didn't have any pneumatic hammers or squeeze machines; everything was done literally by hand, the hard way. They were doing everything just like the way they did 100 years ago.

"My father was one of the younger brothers who decided to stay near his father, so after his father built the foundry and he came back out of the service in 1919 he didn't know what to do, so his father said, 'Well, I'll sell you the lot next to me'—my grandfather had bought enough property at St. Michael's. So he did. He built his own shop there and stayed next to his father all of his life. It's a very tight family, you know.

"My dad, all he was fooling with was brass castings, you know, making props for the early boats and rudders and the various parts that would be needed around the boat. I guess primarily because of the need, in St. Michael's, there are a lot of boats. He found himself repairing a lot of blades that shouldn't have been repaired,

should have been replaced. Well, the guy's average income was \$6 per day from the water—5¢ a pound or less for his crabs or oysters—so they really couldn't afford a \$20 or maybe a \$40 wheel.

"And then in the 30s the grass came so bad and the watermen complained about that. Yeah. So he designed a blade that would spin off the grass, instead of wrapping around it. It was an awkward looking thing, it didn't look like much more than a big screw in the water, you know, it was twisted so bad, but it worked fine. Then later on, the big industry got it and they capitalized on it; he never patent it or anything. He was just interested in making a living and standing in the community, and he passed up a lot of opportunities.

"Well, besides the propellers he made a lot of rudders, bronze rudders. Again, the little average waterman had to replace his rudders every couple of years. Just a wooden blade, it wasn't safe. He'd hit some rough season and the wood would break, and then they'd be tossing around, so he made them a lot of bronze rudders. For just the little work boats, he wasn't interested in yachts. I don't recall him ever making a yacht rudder. All were made for work boats, everything he made.

"I would like to have (I don't know what I'd do with it) the money that was owing him when he got out of the business. I guess he just figured, 'Well, the guy hasn't got it.' And sometimes they would bring the wife's wedding or engagement ring up. 'Well, hold it until I get some money.' 'Well, I can't do that,' he'd say, 'hold your wife's wedding ring.' Or they would bring him vegetables or other things to pay.

"So, really, and without boasting about him, the community really cherished him, because he was everybody's man. If something broke down during the night, whether it be the little church furnace or in the old hotel they have there, or maybe the boiler wasn't working right, he'd go up in the middle of the night, in the winter, and fix it. Or

go down in somebody's little boat down in the country somewhere and get the engine going. You might say he was on call all the time and he was. Even today people still talk about him and miss him because you know there's nobody who will do that kind of work today. This was his interest in there's nobody who will do that kind of work today.

"It goes back a long way, and as one guy says, it gets in your blood, the foundry business, the interest of making things with your hands, and I wouldn't be interested today in modernizing as some of these founders have, you know. Poor guy never gets to see what he's making. He just pushes a button and the sand drops in, the mold machine squeezes it, and out it comes, and all he sees is the block of sand moving out of the machine. He never sees what he's making and he's hired just to push that button. That's it. He's not a molder, he's just a machine operator.

"It's been kind of a rough road, on your own. Independent little operator, you know, he has a much harder time than a big company where you can have machines to do all the work, and it goes right back to labor, that operation, the machines; I wouldn't want to get into that.

"I suppose those big foundries that make thousand of one antique reproduction are pretty happy with the amount of money they've made over the years; I don't think there's any complaint, but again, they're only copying, they're not creating; copying what someone else did 150 or 200 years ago, the same old patterns. Most of our stuff is what I have created and started with a block of wood, and have carved out and have put it on the market and had read good success with it.

"Initially, we'll make a hundred—which may take us three or four months—and see how good they go. If they go good, then we'll make another 100, but they never reach the 1000s, you know. I don't think so. In fact, if it does, I'd stop it and start something else.

"My granddaddy figured a molder, if

he knew how to mold he likewise knew how to make a wooden pattern that would work in the sand. Because a lot of people that are woodcarvers are great craftsmen, with wood, but it won't work in the sand. There's no way it'll come out in the sand if you don't understand the basic principle of why it won't come out, you know. He was the type of fellow, if you made it, it was your pattern and with him, you had to mold it. And then you had to pour it. It tickled me to death, you know.

"I like to work in wood that eventually is going to become casting. I keep looking at a piece of wood—what's it going to look like when it's cast. When its details are going to come out and so forth. Even today, I enjoy these carvings, they're beautiful. But right away, I start thinking about how that would look in brass or bronze. I just keep thinking about transposing it into metal.

"It's bound, some of it, to rub off, you know, being around sand piles all your life until the time I went into the service, and even in the service I kept looking around for a sand pile, but never found one. You can have all the furnaces in the world but without a good sand pile you just never get a good casting.

"Well we've had seven children—one boy. He's 17. He likes to fool with electronics, so I don't know where he'll go. I have a feeling, though, that somebody, some youngster is going to come along and be genuinely interested in doing this kind of work eventually. There's bound to be. I just keep hoping that somebody will come along that will have the same interest as me.

"I've talked to one school group, Kiwanis and Lions as a group, trying to feel out somebody that may not even be in this area, I don't know, maybe in The Cambridge or Salisbury area or maybe from the city; I don't know. But I think there is somebody around that may be interested in doing this kind of work. I think so. I never get tired of it. I can't wait till the next morning to get back down here.

"I really feel guilty sometimes—enjoy too much, you know."