## Championing Crafts in the Workplace by Archie Green

The ancient word "craft" holds intricate patterns of meaning which shift about as we turn from work to worker and custom to community. Dictionaries explicate "craft," carrying it far back to Old Norse notions of strength, skill, dexterity, and artistry. Today, potters and weavers, quilters and carvers, and a multitude of other skilled artisans together breathe life into the joined language of work and art. Hence, crafts continue to be important while technological change alters work's social setting, as craftspeople match their skills against computers and robots.

I see craft as a set of configurations within a personal kaleidoscope — each twist reveals new significance in old practices. Like other adults, I cannot dip far enough into memory to recall when I first heard the word "craft." My father had learned harnessmaking in his youth, but had left his lumbercamp bench behind when trucks displaced oxen and draft horses. I have never looked nostalgically at the stable or leather shop; they belong too far back in family experience to touch me directly.

In college years, however, I knew that I, too, wanted to take up a skilled trade and to become a trade unionist to boot. Accordingly, in 1941 I began as a shipwright's helper on the San Francisco waterfront. At once I plunged into the realm of old-country mechanics as crafty as Merlin, as wise as Solomon. The journeymen who took me in hand — Ben Carwardine, Art Scott, Billy Dean, Jimmy Allan, Jock McIvor — were Scots and Clydesiders.

My mentors had learned their skills in Scotland's yards on the River Clyde, serving long apprenticeships in wood and steel. Also, some had sailed in the "black gang" on coal-fired steamers or on deck as seamen and ship's carpenters. Bringing a sense of experiential reality to the ever-present abstract drawings in the shipyard, they knew that a vessel had to be buoyant, graceful, strong. To place a keel plate, to set a mast, or to shape deck camber was to strike a close bargain with Father Neptune.

The journeymen who introduced me to template and adze, to blueprint and maul, were members of Shipwrights, Joiners, and Boatbuilders Local 1149: United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America. None, then, could separate craft skill from union consciousness. One observed trade and safety rules, guarded jurisdictional territory, and honored labor's sense of solidarity. Apprentices with mechanical aptitude were pushed ahead; those with rhetorical capacity were encouraged to attend union meetings.

From the beginning, I faced the power of customary practice and expressive code on the job. Along with other learners I was told to wear blue, not white, overalls, for "housejacks" – construction carpenters distant from the docks – favored white overalls. In those

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A journeyman machinist at work. Photo by Robert McCarl, Smithsonian Institution

Italian-American stone carver Gary Sassi carves a granite memorial in his father's stone shop, Celestial Memorial Granite Co. in Barre, Vermont. Photo by Marjorie Hunt, Smithsonian Institution





years no one had made hard hats mandatory. We wore visored white cotton caps common to the maritime trades. Elders told us to display our union buttons on these caps and admonished: "To be a shipwright, you gotta look like a shipwright." We were proud to conform and belong.

I knew, of course, that friends in sister trades — boilermakers, electricians, steamfitters, riggers, cranemen — were similarly indoctrinated in job custom and union belief. The phrase "to shape up or ship out" resonated, for the hull towered above daily tasks. Beyond our launching basin we could see ships at anchor in the Bay — the fruit of our toil. To become a craftsman involved a symmetrical relationship between the hull's growth on the ways\* and one's reach for personal maturity.

Pearl Harbor marked a watershed in rites of passage for trade craftsmen. Young men, usually indentured for long apprenticeships, were quickly advanced to journeymen status; young mechanics, overnight, became leadmen and foremen. Along with many waterfronters, I joined the Navy, continuing work in drydocks and on repair tenders across the Pacific to the Whangpoo River.

During post-War years I moved slowly into "uptown" building trades and subsequently to the academy. With new credentials as a folklorist, I shifted away from a focus on craft skill within modern industry to an attention to "old-fashioned" crafts within folk society. Like fellow scholars, I asserted frequently the importance of weaving and quilting. With other teachers, I tried an instructional formula: at home the quilt articulated beauty as it kept family members warm; on a museum wall, the same quilt commented upon the large society's aesthetic codes and power relationships.

\*way(s)—An inclined structure usually of timber upon which a ship is built or upon which a ship is supported in launching. Built by skilled shipbuilders, the Robert E. Peary Liberty ship is ready on the launching ways, November 12, 1942. Photo courtesy Department of Transportation, Smithsonian Institution

## Suggested reading

Abell, Wescott. *The Shipuright's Trade*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1948. Archibald, Katherine. *Wartime Shipyard*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1947. Green, Archie. *Only a Miner*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972.

Ohrlin, Glenn. *The Hell-Bound Train*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973.

"Apprenticeship: Past and Present." Washington, D.C.: U.S. Bureau of Apprenticeship and Training, 1982.

## Suggested film

*The Stone Carvers*, by Marjorie Hunt and Paul Wagner. 29 min. color sound. Paul Wagner Productions, Washington, D.C.

My initial academic study had concerned recorded coal-miners' songs. I knew clearly that the plastic discs holding the texts and tunes of "Dark As a Dungeon" and "Dream of the Miner's Child" were not hand-crafted gifts. However, on visiting miners at home, I did see handiwork and learned that some men sculpted bits of hard coal into art forms. Other coal diggers — working in maintenance shops or with heavy equipment — used welding rod or acetylene torch to fashion metal sculpture. In their transition from pick, shovel, and hand-drill to giant machines, miners often channeled craftsmanship into home hobby or surreptitious art.

During 1962 I met cowboy singer/storyteller/saddlemaker Glenn Ohrlin. As a folklorist, I helped him issue a recorded album of his songs while urging him ahead with his book, *The Hell-Bound Train*. Few teachers saw Glenn as a craftsman. Instead, they reserved this rubric for those working by hand, not upon the stage. Yet I knew intuitively that Ohrlin crafted every song he presented "back of the chutes" or on a festival platform. This cowboy's ease with song and saddle serves as an example of a folk artist from an occupational community who, everyday, defies norms for conceptualizing craft.

The word "craft" can hold no single meaning. At its core it will always convey strength and skill, but it cannot be restricted as a label for the medieval armorer, the handworker in a traditional society, the building or metal tradesman, the contemporary urban hobbyist, nor the fine arts practitioner functioning as a craft revivalist. Even in showing craftsmanship's array we know that a technological society, committed to rapid alteration in work, seldom pauses to honor the folk artisan. Hence, folklorists wisely focus their efforts to present traditionality in festival, monograph, and classroom.

Teachers must always explore the categories — conventional or pioneering — which govern their disciplines. Accordingly, I have been helped in the preservation/presentation of folklife by recalling the wise Clydesiders who taught me their craft. From them I learned to plumb a stern post on the ways and face controversy on a union floor. Later, from coal miners in Appalachia, I learned that demanding machines neither deskilled nor dehumanized all workers. Meeting Glenn Ohrlin, I learned that one who rode horseback for a living might also enjoy saddlemaking as a parallel to ballad singing.

Each turn of the kaleidoscope brings dazzling new patterns into sight, and each shift requires imaginative projection. In this manner, by turning and marveling, we rework fixed meanings for "craft" and its cognate terms. Old skills, newly explicated and employed, serve well to temper modernity. Time-tested values in craft artistry complement a community's wisdom. To have learned an ancient trade and to have championed craftlore on the campus and in the public sector is to have experienced the kaleidoscope's wonder.