

# SWOPE ART MUSEUM

IN COLLABORATION WITH TRADITIONAL ART INDIANA



## ART OF THE ADZE

BOWL HEWING IN INDIANA

# ART OF THE ADZE

## BOWL HEWING IN INDIANA

### CURATORIAL STATEMENT

When the opportunity to co-curate this exhibit with Jon Kay first presented itself, the possibilities of what we could include and how we would display it seemed endless. I had little prior knowledge of hewing and became acquainted with the tradition as we gathered text, images, and bowls, and began chipping away to find the most important pieces to include. Just like when hewing, those initial endless possibilities that we began with were carved out by the materials we had on hand.

One of the hewers had mentioned to me that they allow the piece of wood to speak to them and dictate what it will become, and I realized that our exhibit's end-form had existed all along: we just had to hew out the pieces and allow it to take shape. We have chosen to accompany the bowls with the stories of their makers in order to share how traditions can create meaningful communities through their revival and continued practice.

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EXHIBITION CURATORS: JON KAY AND KATYA CHOMITZKY  
CURATOR OF THE SWOPE ART MUSEUM: AMY MACLENNAN



Hewing wooden bowls is widely considered one of the oldest crafts. For thousands of years, makers have carved useful basins and trays out of wooden slabs. In Indiana bowl hewers use an adze, a hatchet-like tool with the blade turned sideways, to shape and hollow their bowls. While the craft nearly vanished in the early 20th Century in the United States, it enjoyed a revival in Indiana when Bill Day started hewing artfully rustic bowls out of cherry, poplar, and sassafras in Warren County.

The distinctive aesthetic forms Bill Day and his students created are noticeably different from the Scandinavian and Appalachian bowl carving traditions sometimes featured in museum exhibitions. In the early 1980s, journalist Peggy Sailors and state folklorist Betty Belanus documented Bill Day's craft, which they featured in their exhibition "Materials at Hand: Indiana Folk Crafts Today." Since 1999, Traditional Arts Indiana has continued Sailors' and Belanus' early work by interviewing and documenting bowl hewers across the state.

# BILL DAY

WEST LEBANON, INDIANA

Bill Day's interest in bowl hewing began when his wife, Marion, brought home a hand carved bowl from an antique store. Wondering how it was made, Bill taught himself the nearly forgotten craft through trial and error. Bowl making soon became his retirement career. Bill opened his "Chop Shop" in West Lebanon, Indiana where he made bowls, visited with customers, and sold his wooden wares. Using unseasoned or green wood, the artisan chopped bowls in a range of shapes and sizes, each with a distinctive textured surface. Once dried, he oiled his creation and woodburned his name on the bottom of the bowl, noting the species of wood from which it was made and the date it was completed. No additional embellishments were needed.

Bill became a long-time demonstrator at the Indiana State Fair's Pioneer Village, where he introduced the craft to millions of fairgoers. He excelled at demonstrating his bowl making. He was quick-witted and generous with his time, always ready to explain the process and share his talents with others. Bill was featured in an exhibition of Indiana folk crafts, Materials at Hand, and demonstrated his hewing talents at the Smithsonian Institution. While Bill received recognition for his craft during his lifetime, his legacy lies in the generations of bowl makers he influenced in Indiana and beyond.



# KEITH RUBLE

TERRE HAUTE, INDIANA

In 1980, Bill met his most dedicated student, Keith Ruble, who volunteered to build a log cabin in the Pioneer Village at the State Fair. Keith, who served as the superintendent of Vigo County Parks, had built several log structures using historical methods and enjoyed working with hand tools. Already experienced at hewing and notching logs, he honed his woodworking skills by learning to chop bowls. Keith took Bill's revived craft to the next level by producing pieces that were thinly hewed and finished in various shapes and sizes. Each year, the two fair volunteers would demonstrate alongside each other until Bill's passing in 1999 at the age of 84, after which Keith became the fair's primary bowl hewer. Since then, Keith has taught dozens of people to chop bowls, and continues to refine the style of bowl carving he learned from Bill. Keith Ruble was recognized in 2021 as an Indiana Heritage Fellow, the highest honor for a folk artist in the state.



# BLAINE BERRY

WEST TERRE HAUTE, INDIANA

Raised by his grandparents in Clinton, Indiana, Blaine Berry began cutting firewood with a handsaw when he was seven years old. He grew up to be an arborist, turning bowls on a lathe in his spare time. “I’ve always had a lathe and I used to make round bowls,” he explains, “all I could make was round bowls!” Blaine learned bowl hewing when he met Keith Ruble in 1984 at the Bridgeton Covered Bridge Festival. A few years later, Blaine began demonstrating at the Indiana State Fair where he met Bill Day. He occasionally visited the elder’s “quaint little shop” and learned about Bill’s tools and techniques. Today, Blaine sells his handmade chairs and hewed bowls at craft festivals, where he enjoys interacting with his customers. “When I get through with that bowl-- I feel good.” he explains, “I feel good again when somebody buys it. And I feel good the next year when they come back. So, I get paid over and over and over again, and each time it makes me feel good.”







## CHARLIE CARSON / UNION MILLS, INDIANA

Charlie Carson is known for his Indiana bowls. With attention to detail, he gouges and saws their winding edges to produce their artful contour. Charlie taught himself to chop and carve out wooden bowls after meeting Bill Day and Keith Ruble at the fair. “Bill could out chop me any day,” Charlie says, “when he was 82, he was still making 300 bowls a year.” Today, Charlie hews about one hundred bowls a year, which he sells at the State Fair and other festivals. He also makes Windsor chairs and trains oxen to work and perform demonstrations at traditional agricultural events.

## GLEN SUMMERS / PARKE COUNTY, INDIANA

While visiting the Indiana State Fair in 1982, Glen Summers spent the afternoon talking with Bill Day watching the elder bowl maker work. After that chance meeting, Glen found a bowl adze at a flea market and taught himself how to hew bowls. Glen reconnected with Bill years later, occasionally visiting his “Chop Shop” to talk about bowl making. Glen produced flat platter-style bowls, which he would sell at the Covered Bridge Festival. He made hundreds of bowls through the years but stopped chopping after developing tendonitis. In 2015, Glen moved to eastern New York to work with the U.S. Forest Service.

## MICHAEL COMBS / MONROE COUNTY, INDIANA

Michael Combs' life was forever changed when he saw Bill Day chopping bowls at the Indiana State Fair in 1997. “I was really drawn to it,” he recalls, “I just kept watching, and it came to me-- I need to try that.” His first bowl was “not much to look at” but it encouraged him to make another, and then another. With Bill's help, Michael continued to improve, developing a chopping technique that gives his bowls a distinctive texture. “It's a simple craft,” he explains “all it takes is one tool, one piece of wood, and one very good arm.” Michael averaged making a bowl a day for two decades.

# APPRENTICES AND STUDENTS

SOME OF KEITH RUBLE & BLAINE BERRY'S STUDENTS

## ANDY AND LUKE AND KASEY RUBLE / KEITH RUBLE

TERRE HAUTE, INDIANA

In 2019, Keith taught the craft to his sons Andy and Luke, and his daughter-in-law Kasey Ruble, through Traditional Arts Indiana's Apprenticeship program. Since the family is actively involved in forestry work and tree-related arts, such as maple syruping, hewing bowls was a natural next step. This apprenticeship was a time for the next generation to learn Keith's techniques and tips for safely making bowls, deepening their understanding of the craft.

## DALE FINDLEY / KEITH RUBLE

WEST TERRE HAUTE, INDIANA

Under Keith Ruble's direction in 2020, Dale Findley began making wooden bowls. He produced twenty-four bowls in his first year of hewing, all carved from wooden blanks cut out by Keith. Later that year, the pandemic forced the fledgling bowl maker and his wife into social isolation. He recalls, "We were concerned about COVID, and we didn't go any place, so bowl making was a real godsend... it kept me going."

## ANN WELCH / KEITH RUBLE

TERRE HAUTE, INDIANA

Having previously experimented with wood turning, Ann Welch now finds bowl hewing to be very therapeutic. She met Keith Ruble through their church, where she admired the bowls he donated for various auctions. Ann asked Keith to teach her how to hew and now enjoys her time working on bowls. "I can have my music on, and I just relax... I have created something, and I haven't wasted my time."

## LUKE BOYLL / BLAINE BERRY

WEST TERRE HAUTE, INDIANA

At fifteen, Luke Boyll is learning to hew from Blaine Berry. "I've known him since the day he was born," Blaine says "I knew his dad from the day he was born. And I knew his dad from the day he was born." Now living across the street, Luke visits Blaine's shop daily. "I'd come over here and I'd watch him," Luke says. "I guess I bugged him so much he finally gave me a piece of wood to chop on."



## KEVIN HARVEY / KEITH RUBLE

TERRE HAUTE, INDIANA

Kevin Harvey took a bowl-making workshop with Blaine Berry in 2017 and began hewing for fun. In 2020, he juried his new craft into Indiana Artisan. During the pandemic, he “intensified” his bowl production, and used the time to “fine tune” his skills and to expand his repertoire of bowl styles. Today, Kevin sells many of his bowls through the Indiana Artisan Marketplace and Galleries, where his work is met with an enthusiastic market.



ANDY, LUKE,  
AND KASEY RUBLE

DALE FINDLEY  
ANN WELCH

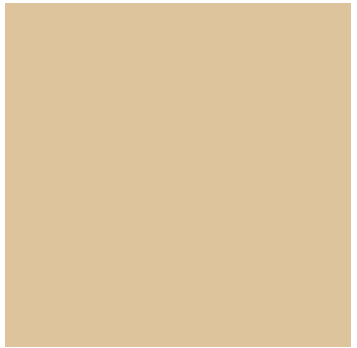


LUKE BOYLL  
KEVIN HARVEY



# TRADITIONAL ARTS INDIANA

A partnership between Indiana University and the Indiana Arts Commission, Traditional Arts Indiana (TAI) is a statewide folk arts program that identifies, documents, and promotes Indiana's traditional cultural practices. Through its work documenting traditional arts, facilitating apprenticeships, curating exhibitions, and supporting heritage fellowships, TAI is actively training the next generation of public folklorists and scholars.



# PROCESS

While each bowl hewer has their own process, Keith Ruble's method is a common approach to the craft as it is practiced in Indiana. He starts with a cross section of a green or unseasoned log, which he cuts along the grain to produce a rough blank. He then discards the center, or pith, of the wood. Next, he traces a bowl pattern onto the blank and cuts the bowl's general shape using a bandsaw.

Using a bowl adze, Keith chops the outside of the blank, creating the desired shape and surface texture of the bowl. He then hews the interior of the bowl. Once the inside is hollowed with an adze, Keith uses gouges to refine and smooth the texture. The bowl then needs to dry and be finished.

To remove excess moisture from the bowl and to help prevent cracking, Keith microwaves the green wood bowl for about a minute. He then sands the bowl to contour its shape, making sure to preserve the hewing marks on the wooden surface. Next, he rubs a mixture of mineral oil and bee's wax on the bowl and microwaves it again. This helps the finish soak into the wood. Finally, Keith numbers, dates, and signs the bottom of the bowl with a woodburner, also noting the species of wood from which the bowl is made.



A SPECIAL THANK YOU TO INDIANA ARTS & HUMANITIES

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