



Smithsonian
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Transcript of interview with C. P. Ligon

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Transcript

Preface

Tape-recorded Interview with C. P. Ligon

at the Artist's Home in Toccoa, Georgia

March 31, 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

CL: C. P. Ligon

WV: Willem Volkersz

DV: Diane Volkersz

[Tape 1, side A; Volkersz' No. L1-1] [23-minute tape sides]

[Volkersz and his wife, Diane, accompanied Ligon on a tour of his home. Ligon often moved away from the microphone to find objects to show Volkersz—Ed.]

CL: Here it is. Someone from Cave Spring [unintelligible passage] Georgia, west side of Georgia, she come over Saturday straightening out [unintelligible passage]. (chuckles)

WV: What is she going to use the stuff for?

CL: For the school.

WV: She's going to use it for the school?

CL: Yep.

WV: To display it out there, or what?

CL: Well, I'm going to give her, give her a bunch, some of it. And some of it I'm fixing up some other stuff for them.

WV: Oh, they sure are nice.

CL: ____ ____.

WV: Oh, look at that.

CL: (laughs)

WV: How long have you been making these?

CL: Huh?

WV: How long have you been making these?

CL: Well, I started about 1967.

WV: Uh huh. Do you find all the roots right around here. . . .

CL: Oh, the roots. . . .

WV: . . . or do you go to a particular place, or. . . .

CL: Oh, I just pick them up and ____ thing one thing and another.

WV: Uh huh.

CL: ____ ____ [by, buy].

WV: What made you start making them?

CL: Well, I got retired and. . . . ____, that's the last piece of the eagle outside.

WV: Is that going to have some other pieces to it?

CL: Huh?

WV: Is that going to have some other pieces to it?

CL: No, I. . . .

WV: That's finished the way it is, huh?

CL: I'm going to let it be like that.

WV: Yeah, that's real nice.

CL: There's another old piece of duck.

WV: Yeah.

CL: I'm going to give her that walking stick right there.

WV: That's a nice cane. Look at that! The snake head.

CL: That's something you very seldom ever see.

WV: Oh, look at that! The way they grew together. That's very unusual. Where'd you find that?

CL: Right down the ____.

WV: That's nice.

CL: On my home place down here.

WV: What did you do before you retired?

CL: I was a roofing man. . . .

WV: Huh, right here town?

CL: Uh, I _____ the last while, but I was in Atlanta and down yonder before I come up here. I come up here in '43.

WV: Uh huh, 1943. Boy, these sure are wonderful.

CL: Yessir. That's a coat of arms of the family.

WV: Of your family?

CL: Oh, yeah.

WV: How did you find the coat of arms?

CL: Huh?

WV: How did you find that that was the coat of arms?

CL: Well. . . .

WV: Just been passed down?

CL: Well, actually I belong to the. . . .

WV: [Let's see. What have we got here?]

CL: Oh, come in here, and you can see some of my [nice] stuff.

WV: Oh, thank you.

CL: Yeah, now, this here's _____ is a, that's a boat. That's made of one piece.

WV: Oh, that's beautiful.

CL: Canoe. . . .

WV: Pride of Fishing Creek.

CL: Yeah.

WV: Where's Fishing Creek?

CL: It's over in Carolina.

WV: Uh huh.

CL: Well, and that pair there is thing Mr. Williams made up. (chuckles)

WV: I'll be darned.

CL: _____.

WV: That's real nice. That's out of clay, is it?

CL: Clay, um hmm.

WV: Yeah.

CL: And I've got a whole. . . . [unintelligible passage] book back in yonder.

WV: Oh, you find your coat of arms in this book?

CL: Oh, yeah, it's right in there.

WV: Oh, The Ligon Family.

CL: Yeah.

WV: It's an old family, uh?

CL: Oh, yeah.

WV: Look at that. The Ligon Family and Connections.

CL: I go back, I can go back to almost a thousand years.

WV: Does it go back to England, or where?

CL: Yeah, I belong to the association.

WV: Oh, yeah, "The Ligon Family and Kinsmen, Association Member. It's great to be a Ligon." Must be a real large family.

CL: Oh, well, no, not too large.

WV: No?

CL: Oh, that there, that is my son.

WV: Uh huh.

CL: And over there. [He's a] doctor down in Marietta, Georgia, that was a . . .

WV: Did I read that you made some canes before you started making the sculpture?

CL: Huh?

WV: Did you used to make canes before you started making. . . .

CL: No, why, about. . . . Well, first thing I made the, made a _____ without. You see that thing standing out there?

WV: Around the house?

CL: Uh huh.

WV: No, I haven't been there yet.

CL: Well, we'll go out there in just a minute. I'll see if I can find that other book.

[Interruption in taping]

CL: . . . this shirt here, I reckon that's _____ in here. There's a bunch of stuff in there.

WV: Oh.

CL: That little piece, see, I took that flag off and put an eagle on top of that.

WV: Oh, that's good. It's sort of like a totem pole, isn't it?

CL: Yeah.

WV: Where is that piece at? Is that outside the house?

CL: That's piece is up, over on Lake Hartwell somewhere, I don't know. A fellow _____ who run a newspaper over there.

WV: I see.

CL: Oh, we've. . . . I've got the. . . . Let's see, this is book number three. Two, three, and. . . .

WV: It says here you also painted some pictures, huh?

CL: Huh? Oh, yeah.

WV: Oh!

CL: I painted that one there.

WV: Oh, you did!

CL: And I painted. . . . That's a . . . ____ you get a ____ for my paint _____. I didn't like that painting much, and I. . . .

WV: That's a real nice one.

CL: I painted that with. . . .

WV: Tempera or something?

CL: Huh?

WV: Is that with tempera paint?

CL: Well, that's. . . . Oh, what you call the, what kind of paint you call that stuff.

WV: Oil paint, or acrylic?

CL: Oh, that's the only oil paint.

WV: That one's oil. Is this one acrylic, maybe?

CL: Huh?

WV: Acrylic paint?

CL: No, it's the old kind you paint on a ____ _____. What you call it now? I just picked up some cans of it up town and some of _____.

WV: Huh.

CL: Yes sir.

WV: Oh, yeah, you've got some work in there [Missing Pieces: Georgia Folk Art, 1776-1976—WV]. I've seen that catalogue.

CL: You've seen this?

WV: Yes. You have some nice things in there.

CL: I haven't got but two pieces in there.

WV: Yeah.

CL: But if you look in this there one here, that's that old _____. That's the one that some folks _____

WV: Oh, there you are. With some your pieces, yeah.

CL: [They're there.]

WV: Do people buy these pieces from you, as well?

CL: No sir.

WV: Do you sell some of them?

CL: [shakes head no—Ed.]

WV: You don't sell them.

CL: I give them to schools and. . . .

WV: Yeah, so you give them away. That's real nice, yeah.

CL: There is a school. It's up at Foxfire. [CL was interviewed for Foxfire 4, Anchor Press, 1977—WV]

WV: Uh huh. Oh, at Foxfire!

CL: Yep.

WV: Huh.

CL: Here, I be. . . . There they are, right there [showing me the book with pictures of him and his work—WV].

WV: Oh, yeah, those are great.

CL: That's my daughter and husband in California. She's teaching out there in a. . . . We're looking through. . . .

WV: It said here that you've painted about 150 pictures.

CL: Yeah, I've give them all away to ____ [double]. (laughs)

WV: Oh, that's great.

CL: Yeah!

WV: "I've made a lot of friends with school kids."

CL: [Looking at photographs—WV:] [That's a] niece and two cats. That white cat that I had. But then both of them got killed, and. . . .

WV: Huh.

CL: Right there. Them two trees are growed together. See that?

WV: Yeah.

CL: And that's up close to the house, too.

WV: Did you take those photographs?

CL: No, somebody else took that. . . .

WV: Somebody took that for you?

CL: . . . and give them, give me. . . . And a totem pole I make them for my son, and he sat down in his office and made another.

WV: Oh. They're wonderful.

CL: That. . . .

WV: Oh, look at that. That's a nice face.

CL: Now here's a. . . . That one's a totem pole. Right there, that was ____ mother. And that's about all of it.

WV: What's this little cabin or church, here? Is this something you made?

CL: Oh, that's a li'l church.

WV: Did you make that?

CL: Yeah. [Belong to it. A long ____.]

WV: Oh, that's beautiful.

CL: That there's at, up at the Young Harris College.

WV: Huh.

CL: I give it to them.

WV: Huh. That's beautiful.

CL: And then I made another one and give it to [Reinhardt] College.

WV: Uh huh.

CL: And. . . . You can ____ ____

WV: Yeah.

CL: . . . I had a little wagon and [unintelligible passage].

WV: You've had a few articles written about you.

CL: I'm still looking for something.

WV: [Reads:] Quote, "'I was sitting around one evening; it was raining and all, and decided I'd paint a picture. I guess that's when it all started. And I took up carving, first one thing then another. I like to do it for the school kids. I go by the schools with some of my work about twice a year. The teachers tell me it's good therapy for them, and I know it's for me,' he grinned." [pause] "'I bring rocks in from the fields and woods and make animals out of them,' he said." [pause] "'You know the nickname for Stevens County is the Indian. You see that, don't you?' he said, showing an Indian carved out of wood."

CL: [Speaking to DV:] That's a [mama].

DV: [unintelligible]

WV: "'I take all the time I want with them,' he said. 'They seem to enjoy it.'" [speaking to CL:] Oh, that's nice. You painted that on wood.

CL: Um hmm. And. . . . Here's something I got from [Reinhardt] College. A little plaque they sent me.

WV: Isn't that nice. [reads:] "The enclosed plaque is sent to you in recognition and appreciation of your support of the college in 1975-1976." Did you give them some pieces?

CL: Oh, yeah, I give them a bunch of pieces ____.

WV: Yeah. That's great.

CL: I give them a little church and ____ one] thing and another a little wagon. I'll give them old stuff some of these days, pretty soon.

WV: How old are you, Mr. Ligon?

CL: Well, Saturday week [April 7—WV], I'll be 76.

WV: 76.

CL: Yeah.

WV: A week from Saturday. I'll be darned.

CL: Don't get around too well now. Haven't for a year or two. I broke a hip.

WV: Oh, no. Did you fall or something?

CL: Yeah, I fell right out there in the yard.

WV: Oh, no.

CL: Right up there. That's the thing I was telling you about.

WV: Oh, yeah.

CL: See this thing here? This thing here was. . . .

WV: That's the ribbon, huh, that you won with this?

CL: Yeah.

WV: [reads:] "Toccoa-Stephens County Arts Festival." You got a prize, a fifty-dollar prize. That's wonderful.

CL: Yep.

WV: Well, that's real nice. Do you think I could take some of these and put them in. . . .

CL: Any pictures you want to take, why it's up to you.

WV: Could I put them in the sun to photograph them? I could get better pictures of a few of them in the sun. Would you mind if I move them over there in the grass?

CL: That's all right.

WV: Fine. Thank you.

CL: That's a little one.

WV: Oh, look at that.

CL: ____.

WV: Look at that!

CL: That's Heaven now.

WV: That sure is. What kind of tools did you use to carve that?

CL: Oh, a li'l old screwdriver and a hammer and. . . . (chuckles)

WV: That's a picture carved out of stone.

CL: Yeah.

WV: I'd like to photograph that, too.

CL: Here's another piece. [moving noises]

[Interruption in taping?]

CL: . . . you know that.

WV: You must have worked pretty hard to send them all [through college—Ed.].

CL: Well, I did, but they have to help, too.

WV: Did they work when they were going to college?

CL: Yeah, they worked, too, and I done all I could for them.

WV: So one of them teaches.

CL: Yeah, one ____.

WV: And your son is a doctor, is that right?

CL: Yeah.

WV: Boy, that's amazing.

CL: He is a nose and throat specialist at Marietta.

WV: Where does he practice?

CL: Down in Marietta, Georgia.

WV: Oh, right, Marietta.

CL: They wanted him to come here, and I told him to stay away from here.

WV: (chuckles) Why is that?

CL: Well, he knowed too many people here.

WV: Oh, yeah.

CL: And has lots of kinfolks around here.

WV: Yeah.

CL: I told him he'd better be. . . . And they wanted him to go to Atlanta, and they wanted him to, the old doctors there wanted him to come and take, work for them. I told him to forget it. Own business first thing.

WV: Is he in private practice?

CL: Private practice. Running his own office and everything, and bought the equipment. Kitty! Come back, kitty. Come on. (chuckles) [CL is calling the kitty back to play with Volkersz's baby.—Ed.]

WV: [working on taking pictures—Ed.] Diane, you want to operate that ____ thing?

DV: Now?

WV: Yeah. Just hold it in the up position. Get it from a few other angles here.

DV: Here, kitty, kitty. You're looking the wrong way, boy. Here's the kitty.

CL: (chuckles)

WV: Hi, kitty.

CL: They wanted. . . . My oldest daughter, she teaches first grade. She got a master's degree and they wanted her to teach in high school, and she told them no, she'd just teach the first grade; said, they'd need her more than in the higher grades.

DV: Yeah.

WV: Good for her. Where's she at?

CL: Down in south Georgia, near [Windsor].

[Interruption in taping]

[During the following passage they searched through and examined Ligon's works, producing considerable microphone noise—Ed.]

WV: Ah hah! There's your prize. That's a beautiful piece.

CL: That's my ____ basketball. I have a football there from football season [CL changes the ball with the seasons—WV]. I give that to the high school over there. That belongs to them, and I get it any time I want to show it, and I wanted it ____ _____. I'd a had to picked it up this morning over there.

WV: That what?

CL: And brought it over.

WV: This is the one you got the prize with, huh?

CL: Yeah, that's that ____ ____, worked out there. Just like a old deer.

WV: It does. It looks like a deer head, yeah.

DV: A lot, yeah.

WV: Yeah. We'll move that separate from the. . . .

CL: And the other pieces up here are for. . . . There's that old piece of. . . . Somebody's brought and give it to me. People bring me stuff like that. (groans) Stand it up like that. [unintelligible]

WV: That's his prize that he pinned on there. [taking pictures]

CL: [unintelligible]

WV: This one here?

CL: Yeah.

WV: Oh, that's your coat of arms. No, it's not. That's not the same as is on the other one, is it?

CL: Yeah, it's the same as the other.

WV: Oh, it is.

CL: I make everything a little bit different. (chuckles)

WV: Yeah, right. That's nice.

[In the next section, we walked around examining CL's carved wood boats—WV]

CL: That's one piece. Make thirteen of them. And one for each state of the, one, in the Union. ____ thirteen, and three, the next one in before the turn of the century. And that was the flagship, back there.

WV: Oh, that was real nice. That must have been nice to put them together.

CL: Huh?

WV: Did you ever have them all together, all seventeen?

CL: Yeah, oh, I can't get them together right now because ____ ____.

WV: Look at them all. Oh, they're beautiful. What kind of wood are these?

CL: Oh. Black gum.

WV: The New Jersey, and the North Carolina. . . .

CL: [unintelligible]

WV: . . . the Flagship Potomac. . .

CL: Boat ____ Connecticut in that, in that ____.

WV: . . . the Tennessee, the Pennsylvania. . . . Look at that. The Maryland, the Georgia. . . .

CL: That there. . . .

WV: Oh, they're real light wood.

CL: Perhaps one of you. . . . I'll ____ ____ here, sometime in the. . . .

WV: The Vermont.

DV: What kind of wood are they?

CL: Black gum.

WV: Black gum.

DV: Black gum, oh.

WV: And the New Hampshire. And this was the Vermont.

CL: I have another piece here. I thought it was in this box here, but it's not.

WV: There's one stuck up there, too.

CL: Huh? Yeah.

WV: There was the Rhode Island. Hah! South Carolina. And the Massachusetts.

CL: And this one, I got. . . . I think all of them is here.

WV: The Virginia. "1/3/76."

CL: I ____ them out with old. . . .

WV: The Delaware.

CL: I think that's all of them. Nine. . . .

WV: The Kentucky. Are these all. . . . Which states are these? The original Union?

CL: Yeah. And there's something there. I have a whole ____, a ____. I don't know where [unintelligible].

WV: The New York.

CL: Well, that's all of them. I don't know what's ____ ____.

WV: Is that the original states of the Union?

DV: ____ ____.

WV: Are those the original states of the Union?

CL: The original thirteen.

WV: But you said you made. . . .

CL: Except Connecticut, I believe one other. . . .

WV: Now, you said you made seventeen.

CL: I made seventeen of them. I made thirteen—thirteen original states.

WV: Yes.

CL: And I made Kentucky. . . .

WV: Yeah.

CL: Kentucky and Tennessee and. . . . What was the other one? Then I made them; they're the one states coming in the Union and that. . . .

WV: Yeah, after the thirteen.

CL: After the thirteen, before the turn of the century.

WV: Right.

CL: Then I made this here flagship to go with it.

WV: Yeah.

CL: And that made the seventeen.

WV: And that's why the seventeen.

CL: Um hmm.

WV: That's real nice.

CL: I ain't got but sixteen of them now. ____ ____.

WV: Where'd you get the wood for that?

CL: Oh, people down there have a tree down there they cut down and it broke down, and asked me would I cut it up and use some of it, and I brought it up here and used it.

WV: That's nice. It's real light wood, isn't it?

CL: Yep.

WV: That's real pretty.

CL: That's natural painting.

WV: Oh, yeah.

CL: Now, you can't paint that yourself.

WV: Right.

DV: Yeah.

CL: That's natural.

WV: Beautiful.

CL: The old Indian head there, see.

WV: Right!

CL: And I don't know, you turn him different ways, you get different things.

WV: That's one of the little log cabins you built.

CL: Well, I just started on that and I quit on that. I didn't like that stuff.

WV: Huh! What was wrong with it?

CL: Oh, it wasn't working out like I wanted.

WV: Yeah.

CL: Nails showing and all of that.

WV: Oh, I see.

CL: I make a log cabin now; [I'd] stack the logs up. Right? That there Connecticut is the only one that's not in that bunch. Now, _____ in it.

WV: Hmm. You just did them last year, huh? 1976, it says.

CL: I made them _____ I had it last year, first of last year.

WV: Yeah.

CL: Took a li'l old chain saw. Cut that out in there.

WV: Sure.

CL: And this here here is a . . .

WV: Did you ever mean for these to be used? For bowls, or something?

CL: No, I didn't. I've got to cut that down a little bit. I'm going to cut down and give to _____. You got a _____ put in.

WV: Oh, yeah.

CL: And I, and that _____ . . . That's all. [meaning all the objects stored in that building?—Ed.]

WV: One feet. That's about four feet long.

CL: Yeah. I think that's just about all the stuff that I have in there. Just one more piece around in the front
l. . . .

WV: Yeah, I think there was another one sitting in the yard.

CL: This here piece here, I was fixing that churn for that lady coming. And I've got to get some stuff to put a
thing right there.

WV: Oh, that's a nice one.

CL: And [dasher]. And just put a [dasher] in there, and then that'll ____.

WV: Maybe I could photo. . . . What are you going to add to that?

CL: A thing right in here. They come down here, see? Goes right down in there.

WV: Oh, I see.

CL: When [you, your] leg is up, why. . . . [Talking about a carved figure sitting at a churn—WV]

WV: Right. Maybe I could photograph that, even though it isn't finished. It looks real nice.

CL: All right.

WV: Doesn't that belong in it?

CL: Huh? No, that's the other ____.

WV: Oh.

CL: That's a, I'm going to put some on the. . . . I thought about cutting that off there, but I want [to] put this
here pin down through there. [unintelligible]

[Tape 1, side B]

[The first part of this side repeats the end of the first side, overlapped when copying tapes. WV's original tape continues uninterrupted. During this portion of the taping, WV went outside to take pictures while DV and CL engaged in sporadic conversation just a bit too far from the microphone to transcribe.—Ed.]

CL: . . . get them things on the _____. I haven't got them ______. (laughs)

WV: Oh, that's nice.

CL: Now. . . . Stand up there.

DV: [unintelligible] boy.

CL: Kitty. [unintelligible passage] There's lots of petals come off that flowering tree.

DV: Yeah. That's real nice.

CL: That's a flowering crabapple, a flowering crabapple.

DV: Oh.

CL: I ain't quite finished with that. I've got to work some more on the. . . .

WV: Right.

CL: . . . _____ there, but. . . . [pause] _____.

WV: Right.

CL: How far you want that? About like that?

WV: Up a little further.

CL: Up a little further? How's that?

WV: Yeah, it's perfect. Right. [taking pictures—Ed.] Good. This one's got a nice hat, doesn't it?

CL: People've been pretty good to me. I take them stuff up there. Once in a while I go over to ____.

DV: Uh huh.

CL: ____ had people ____ _____. [pause] You got a cold, ain'tcha, there?

DV: Yeah, he does. He's getting over it now; he's better. Keeping a hat on so he doesn't get an earache.

CL: Yeh. I may make something out of that one of these days when I take a notion.

WV: That's a nice piece.

CL: That there.

WV: Oh, that one. Looks like a big saw or a wheel or something.

CL: Um hmm. I [ever] made one of them I put a ____ _____. I put a chain around here. And I put the _____, _____ put a piece in the middle there _____. _____ plastic.

WV: Oh, that's nice.

CL: I think that about gets it.

[Interruption in taping; wind noise interferes in following passage]

WV: [reading:] Let's see, this is Kathryn Tabor, who is in the second grade at Toccoa Elementary. She says, "I like the little seeds inside. I love all of it. It was cute. It reminded me of God. Jesus was in that little church. Someone was in that little church praying. You did hard work. It had a touch of fashion." Isn't that nice?

CL: Well, I got a stack [of letters]. I've got a stack about that high.

DV: That's real nice. [unintelligible]

CL: [unintelligible]

WV: That must be real rewarding when you get these back.

CL: Well, that's at the. . . . And you feel like you were accomplishing something. Then I keep the _____ with the schoolboard and all the schoolteachers. I go there, then they drop it for a while. [unintelligible] High school, junior high [unintelligible].

WV: That's great.

CL: Every day of the week. [unintelligible passage]

WV: What's that one?

CL: Oh, that's the old penguin.

WV: Oh, a penguin, yeah! Look at that penguin! Isn't he something?

CL: (chuckles)

WV: Oops. That doesn't feel right. [reloading film—WV]

CL: [unintelligible passages]

WV: What was he trying to show there?

DV: Pardon?

WV: He was trying to show us something, and I was busy photographing it.

DV: Well, I think it was in the album. Maybe another one.

WV: No, it was the same one.

[Interruption in taping]

WV: [Comment added after end of interview—Ed.:] He told me that if you get children toys that are nicely finished and manufactured in a factory, and let them play with it, and then give them a piece of his sculpture, that they would prefer to play with his sculpture. He also said that he never sells his work. He gives it away to schools and other institutions, primarily educational institutions and I suppose to occasional visitors, like myself. When asked, when I talked to him about showing slides of this kind of work to art students, he said, "No, I never had any training. It just came natural." He told me that he was going to be featured in Foxfire4 and that the people at Foxfire had treated him very well. He will soon be 76 years old, born 1901.

[End of interview]