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Oral history interview with Rude Osolnik, 2001 May 1

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Rude Osolnik on May 1, 2001. The interview took place in Berea, Kentucky and was conducted by Mary Douglas for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

Mr. Osolnik did not have an opportunity to review the transcript. He passed away on November 18, 2001. Mr. Osolnik's family has reviewed the transcript and made revisions where necessary. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose.

Interview

MS. MARY DOUGLAS: This is Mary Douglas interviewing Rude Osolnik at the artist's home and studio in Berea, Kentucky, on May 1, 2001, for the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution. Why don't we start at the beginning, and you can tell me when and where you were born.

MR. RUDE OSOLNIK: I was born in New Mexico. My father was a coal miner, and they made coke for the steel mills there. And when they got natural gas, that stopped, so we came to Illinois. I was two years old when we came to Illinois, and I grew up there.

MS. DOUGLAS: What part of Illinois?

MR. OSOLNIK: Southern part.

MS. DOUGLAS: And was he still doing coal mining there?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah, he went to the deep mines there.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, let's see, what year would that have been?

MR. OSOLNIK: That would have been 1916 to 1917.

MS. DOUGLAS: So you were born in '15.

MR. OSOLNIK: Fifteen.

MS. DOUGLAS: What was your childhood like?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, we had a good school system in Illinois.

MS. DOUGLAS: And what about high school? Where did you go to high school?

MR. OSOLNIK: Johnston City.

MS. DOUGLAS: In Illinois.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, what about siblings? Do you have brothers and sisters?

MR. OSOLNIK: I have a sister who resides in Chicago, Illinois.

MS. DOUGLAS: What did your mother do?

MR. OSOLNIK: She was just a housekeeper, but she was very good.

MS. DOUGLAS: So when did you first start turning wood?

MR. OSOLNIK: In eighth grade. I had this wonderful teacher, and I think all of my concepts of turning came from him, because he was the one that taught me about using natural edge, using the form, and using the wood, and not be concerned about voids or defects, and use those as part of your design.

MS. DOUGLAS: That's really interesting, at that time period, for an artist or a shop teacher to be talking about that.

MR. OSOLNIK: Well see, his father was a shop teacher over in Switzerland, and he taught turning over there, and then he brought it over here, his son did.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, did you pursue it in high school also?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes.

MS. DOUGLAS: What motivated your interest in wood turning, do you think?

MR. OSOLNIK: I guess it was a fellow -- the teacher's name was Rohner, Jack Rohner. And he was the one that got me involved in turning, and he was the one that stressed the use of natural forms, and using the voids as part of the overall design of the piece.

MS. DOUGLAS: Did you ever think about pursuing wood turning as a career when you were in high school?

MR. OSOLNIK: Not really. Then I went onto Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois. And there again, I was fortunate in having an instructor that was interested in turning. And he and I -- this was during the Depression -- and he and I would take contracts to do work for different organizations. And we had one contract to make 10,000 pieces for a theatrical company. They were curved at the bottom, and then a curtain would slide on a track. And by the time you get 10,000 of them done, you get pretty proficient with it. We could do those in about three minutes.

MS. DOUGLAS: How did you do them so quickly?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, we never stopped the machine. We'd turn it on, put our pieces in while it was turning, take them out while they were turning. So we didn't lose any.

MS. DOUGLAS: That sounds dangerous.

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, it really isn't. It's a matter of knowing when to let loose and when to hold on.

MS. DOUGLAS: So that was when you were in undergraduate school.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: What was your major in college?

MR. OSOLNIK: Industrial arts -- and that was furniture and everything. But I was more interested in the turning.

MS. DOUGLAS: What were you thinking of doing, when you got out of school, to make a living?

MR. OSOLNIK: Teaching industrial arts. But, actually, I got most of my ideas for form and all of that from my Swiss instructor.

MS. DOUGLAS: So he was a big influence.

MR. OSOLNIK: He was.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, let's see, you would have been in undergraduate school when, in the 1930s?

MR. OSOLNIK: In '37.

MS. DOUGLAS: And so, what did you do when you got out of college?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, when I got out of college, I got a job teaching at Berea College. And we had what we called -- at that time, we had a program that they called Westervelt Shop, which was they would open this shop to any student or faculty member that wanted to work in there. And I was in charge of that, and there's where I got to turning, and I got skilled in all activities of wood turning.

MS. DOUGLAS: So were you actually teaching industrial arts then?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, I read something about Berea's foundation courses?

MR. OSOLNIK: In those early days, the foundation school was part of Berea College.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, what age were the students in the foundation college?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, they were from eighth grade on up.

MS. DOUGLAS: So they were high school kids, basically, and they were taking courses at Berea College?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah see, it was all under Berea College.

MS. DOUGLAS: That's an unusual program.

MR. OSOLNIK: It is.

MS. DOUGLAS: Were you also teaching college age kids, too?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, it was open to anybody, adults, townspeople, or anybody.

MS. DOUGLAS: So that meant there was a lot of furniture making going on.

MR. OSOLNIK: Furniture making, turning. We had four lathes, and we'd have eight people working on those lathes, one inboard and one outboard.

MS. DOUGLAS: Let me ask you about the lathes. I mean, were they industrial-size lathes?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah, they were standard lathes.

MS. DOUGLAS: They're not like the lathes that people use today, are they?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah, basically. The old Olivers we called them.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, how did World War II impact your life and career? You did go into the service, didn't you?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes. And in service, this was in 1943, I was overseas most of the time.

MS. DOUGLAS: What branch of the service were you in?

MR. OSOLNIK: Navy.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, was your job waiting for you when you got back?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes.

MS. DOUGLAS: What was the difference between the schools before and after the war?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, it didn't change for quite a while; it didn't change until they came in with V-12 program.

MS. DOUGLAS: And what was that?

MR. OSOLNIK: That was a voluntary program for these kids, that they could go into and select a service they wanted.

MS. DOUGLAS: What do you think has been your most rewarding experience in education?

MR. OSOLNIK: Working with people. I enjoyed the school, but I enjoyed, after I retired, working with adult groups and with people interested in learning to turn. And I used to have workshops out here. I'd have as many as 12. And when I'd have 12, I would always get two others to help me. So it was a ratio of one to three.

MS. DOUGLAS: And you're talking about workshops you did at your house?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, how many people could work on a lathe here at your shop at one time?

MR. OSOLNIK: We had one lathe to one person.

MS. DOUGLAS: And how many lathes do you have out here?

MR. OSOLNIK: We had 12 at that time. So each person had a lathe.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, to go back to the program you were teaching in at Berea, did you develop it into more of a turning program, or did it stay furniture and --

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, it was both, because at that time, any student, faculty member, or townsperson could come and work in the shop and do whatever they wanted to. And we had good equipment.

MS. DOUGLAS: But you were teaching turning also.

MR. OSOLNIK: Turning at all phases of woodworking.

MS. DOUGLAS: At some point, the woodshop became part of the regular curriculum, didn't it?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes. We got certified as a college program in 1957.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, in other words, you could study industrial arts and get a degree in it.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes.

MS. DOUGLAS: Before it had been part of an extracurricular program.

MR. OSOLNIK: Extracurricular. That's the reason it was called Westervelt. And it was interesting. We had this donor from Westervelt, Ohio, that gave the college a fund to have this shop where anybody could come in and use it, and they could do whatever they wanted to. They could turn.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, what was happening with all this work that was being made in the shops?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, some of the kids kept it, some of them sold it.

MS. DOUGLAS: What about when you first started exhibiting or selling? What was it like then?

MR. OSOLNIK: I'd go to craft fairs.

MS. DOUGLAS: Were they here in Kentucky?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, we traveled all over, and we went to Asheville quite a number of times, Gatlinburg. And I always tried to get something new for each fair. And it got to the point I came out with these, what we called twig pots, just a little shaped piece with a hole in it to put a weed in it. And I went down to Gatlinburg, and we took a thousand of those with us, and we sold them.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, when you say "we," are you referring to your --

MR. OSOLNIK: My wife and myself.

MS. DOUGLAS: She helped you with your business.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: Where did you meet her?

MR. OSOLNIK: You know, it's funny. We had Westervelt Shop at that time, and it was about, I guess, 60 feet from where I was standing. I wasn't standing; I was on my knees. And she walked in the door, and I saw her. I said, "That's the one I'm going to marry."

MS. DOUGLAS: That's interesting to have that sure knowledge. So how long was it before you did get married?

MR. OSOLNIK: We got married before we left Berea. I went to Oregon State to do a summer school workshop, and we got married on the way there.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, was Daphne, your wife -- she was a student at Berea?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah, she was a student, because I had to get special permission from the dean of women. But it was interesting in those early days; I dated her only, I guess, one time. And the dean of women came up to me, and she said, "Young man, what are your intentions?" I said, "Strictly honorable." [Laughs.]

MS. DOUGLAS: And how did Daphne help you in your business?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, she did finishing, sanding, and packaging. See, in those early days, when we were trying to make a living at it, I could turn one of those in six minutes, one of those candleholders. And she would sand them up, and get the finish on them, and packed them.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, are you talking about your sort of trademark candlestick, very tapered in the middle and

flares out?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: What's your design proportion for those candlesticks?

MR. OSOLNIK: It's one and three.

MS. DOUGLAS: So the taper occurs a third of the way down from the top.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, have you done commission works also?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes.

MS. DOUGLAS: What have they been like, your commission works?

MR. OSOLNIK: I did these larger pieces for commission works.

MS. DOUGLAS: And was it a sculpture or a --

MR. OSOLNIK: No, it was a turning. I had one inside and one other one.

MS. DOUGLAS: So that sounds like a really important commission. Who was the patron? Was it a corporation or a –

MR. OSOLNIK: No, I sold it through the Southern Highland [Handicraft Guild, Asheville, NC].

MS. DOUGLAS: How do you think commissions are different from other work that you do, or is there a difference, in terms of the problems?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, Daphne and I would go to all these craft fairs and expositions, and she would sell and I would turn. She was a wonderful person.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, what about your family when you started having children? At what point in your career were you when you started having children?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, the youngest one was born in 1955. We'd take the kids with us when we'd go to fairs, and they could see what other people were doing. And so they're all really good craftsmen.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, did they help you in the shop?

MR. OSOLNIK: They did the sanding, the cleaning up.

MS. DOUGLAS: The hard stuff.

MR. OSOLNIK: [Laughs.] Yeah, the hard stuff. That's what they used to say, the dirty work.

MS. DOUGLAS: So aside from your shop teacher in the eighth grade, did anyone else teach you how to turn?

MR. OSOLNIK: No.

MS. DOUGLAS: It's just from doing it?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah. And I was always innovative; I would always try different things. And I made the first natural edge bowl that was ever turned. Because they used to think that they had to have that off, and I would leave that natural edge on there. And the guild is wanting the one that I have to put in their collection there. It was rather fortunate that we sold enough that Daphne would always go -- we'd go down early to help set up the fair. And after we got our booth set up, she would go help other people. And that's where she got interested in items that she really enjoyed, and she would buy those and put them in our collection.

MS. DOUGLAS: So you have a collection of other people's work.

MR. OSOLNIK: Oh, yes.

MS. DOUGLAS: Is it mostly wood or all kinds of things?

MR. OSOLNIK: Everything.

MS. DOUGLAS: Pieces from the guild fairs.

MR. OSOLNIK: From the guild fairs.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, did you trade, then, for these pieces, your own work, or just buy them outright?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, with some we traded and some we would buy them outright.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, talk to me a little bit about this property here that you live on. How did you come to live here?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, I got out of the service in 1946. I was overseas most of the time, so I hadn't spent any of my money, and I had $5,000. We came out looking for someplace to buy. We came out here, and she said, "This is what I want." So we bought this place for $5,000.

MS. DOUGLAS: And you've got 100 acres.

MR. OSOLNIK: It was 100 acres here, and later on I bought across the street, and there's another 100 acres. So we have around 200 or 300 acres up here.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, you've got a sign out front that says, "Poverty Ridge." [Laughter.]

MR. OSOLNIK: That's a story I would tell. I said, "I live on poverty ridge, and the further out you get, the poorer they get out in the last house."

MS. DOUGLAS: That's a good title, for an artist anyway, because most artists don't make much money. Now, did you build this house that you live in?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes, my wife and I built this house.

MS. DOUGLAS: But it's an unusual floor plan; it's an L-shape.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah, L-shape.

MS. DOUGLAS: And did you build your shop at the same time as when you built the house?

MR. OSOLNIK: Part of it, and then I added onto it. And that's one thing that I always did: I tried to work in a very creative atmosphere.

MS. DOUGLAS: You mentioned living out here in the woods –

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes, it is quiet and peaceful.

MS. DOUGLAS: Where did you get the wood for your projects?

MR. OSOLNIK: Mostly off the place.

MS. DOUGLAS: You turned from the trees that were around here?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah, we cut up all of the trees that were around here; and they were apple, peach, and pear trees. Some of them were slightly spalting, and I used that as part of the design of the overall piece.

MS. DOUGLAS: Spalting is when a tree has a deformity?

MR. OSOLNIK: No, when it's beginning to deteriorate.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, what would have been a typical day for you in the shop? You were still teaching, too.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah. I'd get up at 2:00 in the morning and turn till 6:00. And at 6:00 I'd come in, Daphne would have our breakfast ready and everything, and I'd put my school clothes on and go in and teach.

MS. DOUGLAS: What time did you go to bed, if you got up at 2:00 a.m.?

MR. OSOLNIK: Ten o'clock.

MS. DOUGLAS: Good gracious.

MR. OSOLNIK: I didn't need much sleep.

MS. DOUGLAS: So the ideas for your work, do those come from looking at the wood itself?

MR. OSOLNIK: From the wood, yes. And I guess I was the first one, as I said, to use the natural edge. It used to be they thought it had to be perfectly straight across the top, and I turned one with a natural edge and it looked good, so I said, “Well, we might as well incorporate those in the overall design.”

MS. DOUGLAS: How did that go over with your buying public, that natural edge?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, they loved it. Because, you see, most people saw the perfectly planed piece that was made out of a perfect piece of wood, and this was the first time they could see the wood had more than just the wood itself.

MS. DOUGLAS: I was thinking about functional things like plates and bowls and cups. And how much of that was important to your market, functional work?

MR. OSOLNIK: I used to turn an awful lot of functional pieces, and I tried to make unusual pieces. I used whatever defects were in the wood. I’d use it as part of the overall design. Instead of trying to hide defects, I would try to accentuate.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, what about the work you did with laminated wood?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, there again, I used to go to auctions, and there was a government-funded program up in eastern Kentucky, and they were going to auction it off. And I went up there, and they had this huge stack of wood on the outside, and I bought some other stuff and I brought it home. And the boards were 26 inches wide and 16 foot long, mahogany. And I didn’t see any sense in trying to hollow those out. So what I did, I would draw a circle, drill a hole through there, insert my band-saw blade, push it up in there, solder it back, cut out one ring. Then I’d go over and do the same thing for the other rings, and then I would glue those together, and I’d have one solid piece on the bottom and just three segmented pieces on the top. So instead of making one, I could make five or six out of one piece.

MS. DOUGLAS: Those are the big mahogany bowls you’re talking about?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah, yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: You’ve got one here in your house. Martha Connell recently gave the Mint Museum [of Craft + Design, Charlotte, NC] one of those.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: What about the pieces you turned out of plywood? When did you start doing those?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, there again, that was one of those -- you know when the Renwick Gallery [Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC] had *Craft Multiples*? You had to turn 10 pieces. And we had just gotten them a whole bunch of spalted plywood that they used for beds, and there was square, 10 by 12, that they cut out of each corner. And they had stacks of those down there, so I got some of those and glued those up and turned those, and started making the laminated pieces. And so, the first ones went up to Renwick Gallery.

MS. DOUGLAS: Oh, they’re beautiful, the way you made the form accentuate the rings in the plywood. Now, did you ever make your own laminations out of contrasting wood colors?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes. There’s some back there. I would take cherry and walnut and put one in the center, and then the others on either side.

MS. DOUGLAS: That’s become a very popular technique. You mentioned how you started using the natural edge. What other influences do you think you’ve had on the wood-turning field, in terms of techniques and design?

MR. OSOLNIK: I think people have gotten away from the idea that a piece of wood had to be perfect, and they’re using the defects in the wood as part of the overall aesthetic design of the piece.

MS. DOUGLAS: I can think of a few artists that do a lot; like Mark Lindquist does that.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, what about when you were working, did you work by yourself, pretty much, in the shop?

MR. OSOLNIK: In the beginning, yes, just my wife and I.

MS. DOUGLAS: But working at the lathe is pretty much a solitary thing to do.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes, it is.

MS. DOUGLAS: What did you have to do to prepare the wood before it went on the lathe?

MR. OSOLNIK: I just had to glue it up and put a backing block on it, and mount it on the lathe. And I would turn the outside and then start on the inside. And that's where I came up with the idea of having Powermatic design a moveable head that slides back and forth, because it used to be you had to lean over your machine to work on the inside. And I had that designed so that the head stock could move down, and I could stand directly in front of it and turn.

MS. DOUGLAS: To go back to talk about the wood a little bit more, what are the qualities of wood that you like as an art form?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, you noticed most of my pieces are very simple, the redwood ones with the voids in them. From the very beginning, I was very innovative. I would knot pieces on the lathe so I could get different effects. I wish I had some of those early ones that I did, because actually, I was pretty fast. I could turn a bowl in a very short period of time. Daphne, she was the one who was the quality control. She would do the finishing. And if it wasn't right, she'd bring it back into me, and I had to work on it.

MS. DOUGLAS: So you were together a very long time.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah. And she would go with me to the workshops; she would go with me every place. We were always together.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, I think I read somewhere that her mother helped you in your business, too.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah. Well, when she got ready to leave the mountains, she came up here. In order to make her eligible for social security, I put her on my payroll so she could get her social security.

MS. DOUGLAS: What did she do for you?

MR. OSOLNIK: She did sanding, packaging, and wrapping and so forth.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, has the way you've worked been pretty consistent over your career?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes.

MS. DOUGLAS: What about the technology? Has that stayed similar? The basic way you turn on a lathe is the same.

MR. OSOLNIK: Same, yes.

MS. DOUGLAS: Using the cutting tools and --

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, what do you do to prepare the wood before you -- do you turn it green, or do you let it air dry?

MR. OSOLNIK: I do both. I do some green; I do some that's rotten; and I do some that's dry. And what I found out way back there, that if you turned it thin enough, and the centrifugal force and your sanding would cause -- and then, I would just wet it at night. And then the next morning, I would dry it and sand it again.

MS. DOUGLAS: And what did it do?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, it stabilized the wood.

MS. DOUGLAS: What kind of finish do you use?

MR. OSOLNIK: I use the --

MS. DOUGLAS: Is it an oil-based finish?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah, urethane oil. And I used to buy it in five-gallon drums.

MS. DOUGLAS: It looks very natural, though.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes, it does.

MS. DOUGLAS: Like a Danish oil finish, almost.

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, the only difference is the Danish oil doesn't dry, and the other dries surface hard, so you don't have to worry about it. And there's a young lady that has kept everything together.

MS. DOUGLAS: You're talking about Zenobia.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: How long has she been with you?

MR. OSOLNIK: Ten years.

MS. DOUGLAS: Have you been working in that last ten years?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes. When's the last time I was out in the shop, Zenobia?

ZENOBIA: You were in the shop about six months ago, when you turned that snake wood.

MS. DOUGLAS: Do you help him when he's out in the shop?

ZENOBIA: I used to; I used to help him.

MS. DOUGLAS: So you're still out in the shop occasionally turning?

ZENOBIA: He was out there last Sunday. He had 35 people out there last Sunday from Southern Highland, from Asheville. And the whole staff of Southern Highland was here. We had hors d'oeuvres and turning, and Dr. Fifield gave a class -- didn't he, Rude? -- and Rude turned some. Didn't you turn some too?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: That's wonderful.

ZENOBIA: That was last Sunday, when all the people were here. As far as him really working in the shop, it's been about six months, I think.

MR. OSOLNIK: That's one thing, we get plenty of company out here.

MS. DOUGLAS: You do.

ZENOBIA: All the time just about.

MS. DOUGLAS: Isn't that interesting. You're out sort of in the middle of nowhere, it looks like, and yet, you have a lot of company.

ZENOBIA: Well, when I first came here, he was giving classes. Sometimes he had six, or eight, or 10 men and women out in the shop on the weekends, on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, working the whole weekend, and it was just people everywhere. And people come here from all over the world to see Rude, because he is an internationally known wood turner. And you can't mention Rude's name anywhere where there's wood turners that they don't know Rude or have heard the name. He is a master, and he is a dean of wood turning and everything. There's a lot of it in his book there. You've seen his book [Jane Kessler and Dick Burrows, *Rude Osolnik: A Life Turning Wood*. Louisville, Ky.: Crescent Books, 1997].

MS. DOUGLAS: I've read the book.

ZENOBIA: He has a video out also.

MS. DOUGLAS: I don't think I've seen the video, but I imagine it shows him turning.

ZENOBIA: Turning and talking and everything. It's *The Dean of Woodturning*, and it's the first one that AAW [American Association of Woodturners] put out, was Rude's.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, great.

MR. OSOLNIK: That's a very good tape.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, you were giving a demonstration a year or so ago at the Mint Museum?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes.

MS. DOUGLAS: It was a year ago, AAW's conference.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

ZENOBIA: Didn't you help get that started, Rude?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

ZENOBIA: That was the first video that AAW made, and it was of Rude.

MS. DOUGLAS: We can get a copy of this at the Mint, through AAW. So how did that come about, forming AAW?

MR. OSOLNIK: I guess we had a meeting in Gatlinburg, and we started the American Association of Woodturners.

MS. DOUGLAS: So there must have been quite a few of you by that point.

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, there were 12 of us, but there was a great deal of interest.

MS. DOUGLAS: When do you think that was?

MR. OSOLNIK: In '87, I think [1986]. There's a lot of -- several wood turners now in the association.

MS. DOUGLAS: So wood turners have been a community for you, other wood turners?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes. And actually, I enjoyed myself more after I retired from the college than I did before, because I was able to go around and do workshops and meet people from all over the world. We used to give workshops.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, since you brought it up, when you were teaching, you must have had students come to work with you, specifically.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes, I did, yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: You must have been getting a reputation for turning.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah, I had people coming from all over.

MS. DOUGLAS: I'm jumping around a little bit here, but I know that Berea College had a reputation for being a craft center back in the early days, with Appalachian Handicrafts, and what not, Fireside Industries.

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, we had the Westervelt Shop, which was open to anybody. We had people doing bowls, we had people doing beds, tables. And it used to be, like that dining room table, would cost a student seven dollars and a half.

MS. DOUGLAS: To make it.

MR. OSOLNIK: For the wood.

MS. DOUGLAS: The reason I brought up Fireside Industries was I wondered, when you were teaching at Berea, if that was sort of a legacy for the school.

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, it was craft oriented.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, have you always had a good market for you work, then?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes. I used to sell a world of stuff at America House in New York.

MS. DOUGLAS: That was part of the American Craft Council.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah. And I had a bowl that I made that Queen Elizabeth has.

MS. DOUGLAS: How did that come about?

MR. OSOLNIK: Eleanor Roosevelt bought it and gave it to her.

MS. DOUGLAS: Oh, that's wonderful. Now, you've made furniture too.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes, everything in this house.

MS. DOUGLAS: What about, did you sell much furniture?

MR. OSOLNIK: No.

MS. DOUGLAS: Focused on the turning.

MR. OSOLNIK: I focused on the turnings, the items I could do very rapidly.

MS. DOUGLAS: What do you think of the market today for wood turning?

MR. OSOLNIK: It's a good market.

MS. DOUGLAS: Did you ever think that would happen?

MR. OSOLNIK: No. But really, it is.

MS. DOUGLAS: What do you think has helped create that market for wood turning?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, by having more and more good wood turners; they're doing very creative work.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, do a lot of collectors come out here to visit you?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes.

MS. DOUGLAS: What's that community been like? In other words, today there's a lot of wood turners, but when you started --

MR. OSOLNIK: There weren't very many.

MS. DOUGLAS: Is wood turning an American art form, do you think?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, some of it reverts back to Sweden and Norway, some of the shapes. I know my shapes go back to that. It's the simplicity of form.

MS. DOUGLAS: So wood turning is directly tied into the lathes. And what's the history of the lathes been?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, the early lathes were the Oliver lathes, and they were heavy; and you had to lean over to do the inside, and it was always hard on your back. And you could do bigger pieces, because with that, I could glue up a 26-inch block of wood and glue it up and turn it.

MS. DOUGLAS: Were there lathes before there was machinery, hand powered?

MR. OSOLNIK: Oh, yeah, the Indians used them. I had one of my students that was from India that showed us how they did it over there. They would use their right hand with a bowl to move it and use their left foot to hold it against the tailstock, and with their toes, they would turn.

MS. DOUGLAS: It sounds like a potter's kick wheel.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

[TAPE CHANGE.]

MS. DOUGLAS: I wanted to ask you if you had been involved with some of the craft schools like Penland [Penland School of Crafts, Penland, North Carolina], or Haystack [Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, Maine], or Arrowmont [Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, Tennessee].

MR. OSOLNIK: Arrowmont, yes, but not Penland.

MS. DOUGLAS: Have you taught at Arrowmont?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes.

MS. DOUGLAS: What's it like teaching there?

MR. OSOLNIK: I really enjoyed it, because you had people that were interested in the same thing you were, and they listened, and they tried to follow. And I taught more of form, shape, and the use of materials. Because my theory always has been to use whatever material you have and get the most that you possibly can out of that

particular piece of wood. Like persimmon is a tree that worms like to eat into. I'd get some of those persimmon sections that had been eaten through with worms, and I would turn bowls out of those. I think there's one or two back here. And you see, again, you have to utilize whatever is in that particular piece of wood.

MS. DOUGLAS: So the wormholes --

MR. OSOLNIK: Adds to it.

MS. DOUGLAS: And you retired from Berea in the late '70s?

MR. OSOLNIK: 'Seventy-six. Is that right? I've been here 40 years [1937-1978], and I said "That's long enough to be in any one place. You'd better move on. Let somebody else come in."

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, that's an amazing career, teaching 40 years, especially from the late '30s to the late '70s. Now, if you were in industrial arts, you must have taught other areas, or did you stay just in wood?

MR. OSOLNIK: No, I taught crafts.

MS. DOUGLAS: What else did that include?

MR. OSOLNIK: That included carving, leatherwork, and jewelry.

MS. DOUGLAS: Have any of those programs taken off on their own?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah, they still have that.

MS. DOUGLAS: Could you talk to me a little bit about -- you've mentioned the guild a few times -- could you talk a little bit more about your involvement with the guild?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, we had the Kentucky Guild here in Kentucky [Kentucky Guild of Artisans and Craftsmen]. I was with the Southern Highland Guild for a long, long time. I started there in the '30s, I guess. And we -- at that time, we were having the craft fairs, and O. J. Mattil and myself, we were in charge of construction. And we had to physically build those booths in those early days with just a whole bunch of raw material. And then, later on, we got the pop-up tents and all of that, and that's completely changed.

MS. DOUGLAS: So each craftsman didn't build their own booth.

MR. OSOLNIK: Not anymore. But in the early days, they had to. They would come in there, there would be a pile of lumber there, and they had to nail it together and form whatever they wanted to form. And that's one reason that Daphne, we would go down early, because I was on the fair committee, and setting up. And when I got our booth done, she would go out and help others.

MS. DOUGLAS: You were on the board of the craft guild for a number of years.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes.

MS. DOUGLAS: What was that like, working on the board?

MR. OSOLNIK: It was really interesting. It was a challenge because we got to meet some very interesting people.

MS. DOUGLAS: Is it mostly artists that are on the board?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, it used to be, but now, it's potters, and it's a little different than it was in those early days.

MS. DOUGLAS: So the guild, the Southern Highland Guild, has had, it sounds like, a big impact.

MR. OSOLNIK: It has. And I worked many, many of their -- Daphne and I would go down and set up our booth. And the one thing I'd keep after them, we used to have what we called the Members' Gallery, which meant that people that didn't have enough to justify having a booth could take their stuff in and sell it, and we had somebody that would handle the sales, and then we would pay them a commission on the pieces we sold of theirs.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, you mentioned O. J. Mattil.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah, he was very active in it.

MS. DOUGLAS: Was he an artist also?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, no. I guess he did some crafts, but mostly, he was interested in building up the fair. He and I were on the fair committee, and in the early days, they'd throw a bunch of lumber out and we had to put the booth together. And then, later on, we got up all these fancy rigs that they have now. But he and I were responsible for going up the Blue Ridge Trail and stopping at Big Meadows, and stocking the shops.

MS. DOUGLAS: You mean you actually traveled and picked up artwork or craftwork and --

MR. OSOLNIK: And moved it from one shop to the other.

MS. DOUGLAS: So you were moving the inventory.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: Where is Blue Ridge Trail? Is that in Kentucky?

MR. OSOLNIK: No, it's North Carolina and Virginia.

MS. DOUGLAS: And Luray is in --

MR. OSOLNIK: The far end of the Blue Ridge Parkway. It's over close to Washington [Luray, Virginia].

MS. DOUGLAS: That must have been an interesting job, then.

MR. OSOLNIK: It was.

MS. DOUGLAS: The travel, probably, was a lot harder then than it is now.

MR. OSOLNIK: But it was only 40 miles an hour, and you couldn't go much faster than that anyway. And the other thing that we did, we brought up a lot of the timber that was down on the sides so they couldn't cut it.

MS. DOUGLAS: The fairs sound like they were a real important part of the job.

MR. OSOLNIK: It was, yeah. And one thing that I always tried to do for every show, I would try to have one or two new pieces so that you didn't see the same thing over and over.

MS. DOUGLAS: Did you have repeat customers?

MR. OSOLNIK: Oh, yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, the fairs are in Asheville today, but they used to be other places, didn't they?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah, they used to have one at Luray, and they had one at Big Meadows.

MS. DOUGLAS: Where is Big Meadows? What state is that in?

MR. OSOLNIK: That's on that Blue Ridge Parkway [Virginia].

MS. DOUGLAS: Gatlinburg.

MR. OSOLNIK: Gatlinburg. You know, we're responsible for Gatlinburg being the big craft center.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, you're talking about the fair.

MR. OSOLNIK: The Southern Highland Fair. They were in Gatlinburg.

MS. DOUGLAS: It's not there anymore.

MR. OSOLNIK: No.

MS. DOUGLAS: Do you still travel that much, get out?

MR. OSOLNIK: I'd say until my legs gave out.

MS. DOUGLAS: I read something about some work you had done in Belize and Guatemala.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah, I was there for six months.

MS. DOUGLAS: And how did that come about?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, the World Church Service wanted me to go down and make a study of the crafts in Belize -- this was shortly after they got their independence from England -- to see what we could do to use crafts as a means of income for the people. So Daphne and I went down there, and we spent six months going from village to village. And that was shortly after the Polaroid camera came in, because every place we'd go, we'd pull out that Polaroid camera; it would be there waiting to be snapped. We had this one man that, every time we took a picture, he was in the picture.

MS. DOUGLAS: What kind of crafts did they have there?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well see, that's what we were down there for, to see what they could produce and sell in this country, because Belize was a very poor country. And we were the ones that started -- they were good furniture makers, and the only thing is, they didn't have a kiln in Belize to kiln-dry their wood, which meant that when it was shipped up here, it would pop open.

I can remember saying, sitting in with the prime minister, and he was saying, "Well, we make beautiful furniture down here." I said, "Yes." But I said, "When you take it up there where it's air conditioned and cool," I said, "it doesn't stay together." And just about that time, there was a pop, and I said, "That's what's happening. It's the air conditioning in here, and your table popped loose." And he said, "Well, we're going to have to do something about building some kilns and kiln-drying this." Because they made beautiful furniture there.

[TAPE BREAK.]

MS. DOUGLAS: When the tape cut off, we were talking about your travels over to Belize.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes.

MS. DOUGLAS: And you were talking about how they didn't use kiln-dried wood, and so the joints were popping apart.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah, that was interesting. And it was amazing to me that, with all this beautiful furniture that they were making, that none of it was made out of kiln-dried wood. It was all from their native wood, just as it came.

I said, "What you're going to have to do is build some kilns where you can kiln-dry this lumber." So I guess they got some kilns in there, and it's being kiln-dried now. But they had beautiful mahoganies, boards that were 26, 27 inches wide.

And I know when we cut a tree, what you had to do was dig a pit and fill the pit with branches, so when the tree fell, it didn't shatter. The trees were that large.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, when you got back to the States from doing this trip, did that change the way you thought about crafts over here?

MR. OSOLNIK: Not really, because they had the same skills as we do. The only thing is they were working with materials that weren't suited to the North American climate, or the heated homes, or air-conditioned homes. But it was rather interesting.

MS. DOUGLAS: Did you ever figure out, when you were there, how the craftspeople had been trained in Belize, what their system was?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, most of them were like we are over here. They worked with their fathers, and so forth, because they all worked in wood, and they did some beautiful woodworking.

MS. DOUGLAS: So they didn't actually go to school to learn woodworking.

MR. OSOLNIK: No. In the early days, not many schools were available. Most of them were just taught by their parents.

MS. DOUGLAS: What about furniture making? How did you learn that?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, I had formal classes in industrial arts, and turning, and making furniture. I used to do that. I was fortunate that I had good instructors all through my years.

MS. DOUGLAS: Could you talk a little bit about the place of higher education in the crafts movement?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, it's becoming more and more prominent.

MS. DOUGLAS: What's been your teaching philosophy about wood?

MR. OSOLNIK: I'd always tell the students, "Get as much out of the piece of wood as you possibly can." I said, "Use all of the material in the wood, the voids, the natural edge, the irregularities, these spalted places, and make it a part of the aesthetic appeal of that piece. And those are the pieces that sell, because people want something that's different.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, when you were teaching at Berea, you were making your turned-wood pieces that were clearly artistic. That must have provided a model for your students.

MR. OSOLNIK: I would turn and leave pieces there for the kids, and I'd tell them, "Go ahead and try to copy it, or if you have another idea, go ahead and incorporate it."

MS. DOUGLAS: Did you ever end up working with any of the art faculty, the fine art faculty?

MR. OSOLNIK: Finally, after years.

MS. DOUGLAS: I'm interested in your early career at Berea, when the school was tuition free and they had a work program there. That was unusual, wasn't it?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes, it was.

MS. DOUGLAS: Could you talk a little bit about how that affected the average student?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, I think it raised the artistic level of the student. They weren't confined to the strict industrial arts rules, you know, just making a piece of a leg or a table, and they were allowed to move in any direction that they wanted to.

MS. DOUGLAS: Were the students, in exchange for tuition they -- what were the work programs that were there at Berea?

MR. OSOLNIK: It varied. Some in the woodcraft. A student would be involved in designing and constructing the piece of furniture.

MR. OSOLNIK: They got paid so much an hour. In the beginning, they were paid 10 cents an hour.

MS. DOUGLAS: Was that good money for that time?

MR. OSOLNIK: For that time it was, yeah. I used to tell the story that you could stand all the men on their hands and you couldn't get 50 cents.

MS. DOUGLAS: [Laughter] Well, it sounds like a progressive program to fund the school.

MS. DOUGLAS: So you taught there for 40 years.

MR. OSOLNIK: Forty years. And I thought that was long enough to be in one place. I can truly say I've enjoyed the years after my retirement much better than I did working there, because it gave you a chance to do what you wanted to do. You weren't structured by a set of rules and regulations.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, you've continued to teach after you retired from Berea.

MR. OSOLNIK: With workshops.

MS. DOUGLAS: And where have you taught those workshops?

MR. OSOLNIK: All over the country. All over the world, actually.

MS. DOUGLAS: How did you go about doing that? Did people approach you?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, when you get a request to have a workshop, we used to set the limit or the minimum number that we would do a workshop for, and they had to meet that, and then we could do whatever we wanted to after we got them.

MS. DOUGLAS: What would be the length of the workshop?

MR. OSOLNIK: Usually, four days.

MS. DOUGLAS: You must have had a lot of students.

MR. OSOLNIK: Over the years, yes.

MS. DOUGLAS: Do you hear from many of them?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes.

MS. DOUGLAS: Do they come by and see you?

[TAPE CHANGE.]

MS. DOUGLAS: The students that come by and visit you, do they ever bring you things?

MR. OSOLNIK: Oh, yes.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, you were talking over lunch about the influence you've had on so many people, but that you get it back.

MR. OSOLNIK: I've always said, "To receive, you have to give." And I used to tell that to my students. I said, "If you want to grow, you have to give. You can't take all the time."

MS. DOUGLAS: I also wanted to ask you about -- you mentioned over lunch that you worked a lot. You called yourself a workaholic.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes.

MS. DOUGLAS: I wanted you to talk a little bit more about what it's like for you now that you physically can't stand up and work all the time.

MR. OSOLNIK: I miss that more than anything else.

MS. DOUGLAS: Could you talk a little bit more about that?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, see, it used to be I'd get up at 2:00 in the morning and go out in the shop, and I would turn until 6:00, and I'd have 60 candleholders made by that time. And I would come in the house, clean up, have breakfast, and go down and teach all day.

MS. DOUGLAS: And so, I'm just curious. How do you define yourself when you're used to defining yourself through work? How does that change when you're in a retired place?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, actually, you have so many students, and with the students, you knew you had people that were interested in doing that. And, as a result, they were interested in taking whatever knowledge you had and incorporating it in their work.

MS. DOUGLAS: How so?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, they wanted to do creative work, and that's what they came for. And the one thing that I always did, I kept the best tools that I could possibly find. And they'd use the same tools I would. I didn't have separate tools; they had the same tools that I had.

MS. DOUGLAS: It's important to have good tools, sharp ones.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah, sharp, and learn how to sharpen them.

MS. DOUGLAS: I was going to say, you must have had to teach that part of it too.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah, that was the first thing we would do, have a grinding session, showing them how to grind a tool, how to get a nice cutting edge, how to get a clean cutting edge, and change the angle so that you can do shallow curves or deep curves. And I showed them how important it was to do that well before you start sanding, because if you tore it up, then you had to spend a lot of time sanding. If you got a nice, clean cut and your wood came off in shavings, then you can go ahead and sand it, and you didn't have to spend all that time trying to get the surface ready.

MS. DOUGLAS: What do you think is the hardest thing for a beginning wood turner?

MR. OSOLNIK: To be willing to experiment and not think that he has to make the same thing as somebody else. That's one thing I did teach. I made it very important for all of them to do their own thing, and I said, "Be as creative as you possibly can with what you're doing. Don't worry about what the others are doing in class."

MS. DOUGLAS: So beginners have a tendency to be too conservative.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah, and they try to emulate what somebody else is doing.

MS. DOUGLAS: Is turning something you learn by feeling -- you get a feel?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah, you have to have, really, a rhythm, because the more smoothly you can move your chisel, the sharper cut surface you'll get, and the less time you'll spend in sanding.

MS. DOUGLAS: I'm just looking at all your forms around here, and they all have a very clean line to them.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah, I use the classic lines.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, is that something you do by eye, or do you have to get out calipers?

MR. OSOLNIK: No, I don't. Everything is by eye. I used to study the Grecian forms, and I found out the ones with the nice, smooth lines were the ones that had the most appeal to me. And I tried to emulate all of those nice, clean cut lines. And I didn't try to put a lot of what I call bric-a-brac to make it look different.

MS. DOUGLAS: How do you determine the proportions of the foot to the body?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, I use that one to three.

MS. DOUGLAS: You use that on your candlesticks.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: Do you use it on everything else too?

MR. OSOLNIK: As much as possible.

MS. DOUGLAS: And what about the thickness of the wall? How do you decide how thick it should be?

MR. OSOLNIK: Depending on the size of it. If it's a small piece, you try to make it as thin as you possibly can. If it's a large piece -- you have to always keep in mind, wood has to have enough surface there to support itself. And if you try to get it too thin, then you can't do it.

MS. DOUGLAS: Will it warp if you get it too thin?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, it could, yeah. It would pick up moisture.

MS. DOUGLAS: Just looking at what you've got here and the range of different species of wood, the one that's very striped, is that a --

MR. OSOLNIK: Zebrawood.

MS. DOUGLAS: Zebrawood. What are some of the qualities of these striped pieces?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, by changing the angle that you mount it on, the faceplates will give you a different texture on the top.

MS. DOUGLAS: So you play against the grain of the wood.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: What are some of your favorite types of wood to work with?

MR. OSOLNIK: Almost any wood.

MS. DOUGLAS: There must be a huge range, though.

MR. OSOLNIK: I guess mahogany. But your mahogany, if it's only three inches or two inches shallow, it doesn't have much of an overall appearance. It has to go into your thicker pieces.

MS. DOUGLAS: That's why you laminated it.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, I see that you used a wood called Macasar Ebony.

MR. OSOLNIK: Macasar Ebony.

MS. DOUGLAS: What is it you like about that wood?

MR. OSOLNIK: It's got that very distinct color, and the trees are huge.

MS. DOUGLAS: Where did you get that wood?

MR. OSOLNIK: You have to import it.

MS. DOUGLAS: Do you have a distributor here in the States?

MR. OSOLNIK: You can buy it locally -- not locally, but you can buy it in the States, some of the places that handle wood. There's a place in Florida that I get all of mine from.

MS. DOUGLAS: Each wood must have its own qualities.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes, they do.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, compared to, say, furniture making, what kind of wood did you use making furniture?

MR. OSOLNIK: With furniture, you use native woods -- walnut, cherry, maple, pine.

MS. DOUGLAS: And the woodworking classes that you taught, did you do veneering also, or just solid wood?

MR. OSOLNIK: No, we did veneering.

MS. DOUGLAS: So looking around the room at all the furniture in here that you've made, how would you describe this furniture? Is it solid wood or --

MR. OSOLNIK: Solid wood.

MS. DOUGLAS: It's not veneered, is it?

MR. OSOLNIK: No.

MS. DOUGLAS: It looks like they're pegged together, the pieces.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah, they are.

MS. DOUGLAS: Would that be a technique that you'd use if you were gearing up for production? I'm trying to get you to talk a little bit about why you've made decisions on this furniture.

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, the wood itself did a great deal. Like on that one, notice I have a brass bar on the back of that, and that board mounted on there. That's part of the back, and that's all one piece.

MS. DOUGLAS: So it's creating a table at the end of the sofa.

MR. OSOLNIK: So you can use it as a table or you can use it as a couch. We've had 11 people sleeping in here at one time.

MS. DOUGLAS: In your living room.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, I was just noticing how this furniture is very modern, the lines and the design.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah, I have both.

MS. DOUGLAS: And then you've got very traditional furniture. I'm not sure what style it is.

MR. OSOLNIK: Traditional is just the traditional. But the other is – I would experiment with using plastic handles on some of it and using a very dark walnut against the maple. So you go period of times, and I haven't stuck with that very much.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, I was thinking about the furniture making you taught at Berea College.

MR. OSOLNIK: It was traditional.

MS. DOUGLAS: They had a tradition there of, what, colonial furniture making?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes.

MS. DOUGLAS: With that Wallace Nutting collection.

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, part of it was Wallace Nutting.

MS. DOUGLAS: How did that Wallace Nutting collection come to Berea, anyway?

MR. OSOLNIK: The Wallace Nutting people were interested in trying to find a place that would make the quality of stuff that they were making, and they thought the college was the place, so they gave the college all of its collection.

MS. DOUGLAS: And those served as style models for the students to --

MR. OSOLNIK: Copy.

MS. DOUGLAS: Because all of that's hardwood furniture that was being made -- well, not hardwood, but solid wood.

MR. OSOLNIK: Solid wood.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, furniture's not made like that anymore, is it.

MR. OSOLNIK: No. They've got 32ths-of-inch, of wood, and the rest is all plastic.

MS. DOUGLAS: Or particleboard.

MR. OSOLNIK: Or particleboard.

MS. DOUGLAS: Yeah, it's very hard to find solid-wood furniture.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: You said they made one of these dining tables for seven and a half dollars.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah, that's what it cost them.

MS. DOUGLAS: What did it sell for?

MR. OSOLNIK: Whatever they could get for it. Because all we wanted to get was our cost of the materials back. It's interesting, one of the students I had made a four-poster bed. And then, he was called in the service, and he didn't have enough money to pay for it, so he gave it to a friend here to hold for him until he got back out of service and he could use it. And when he got back out of service, he went up to him and said, "I've got the $14 that you let me have when I went to the service, and I want to get my bed back." [Laughter.]

MS. DOUGLAS: Did he get it back?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, when you retired from Berea, you were teaching workshops around the country. Was it all turning workshops?

MR. OSOLNIK: Mostly.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, I see here, you've got a collection of carving too, some carved animals, figures.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah, that's Zenobia's brother.

MS. DOUGLAS: He was a wood carver.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: I see you have one piece by Amanda Crowe, too.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: Did you collect the carving through the guild, through the craft guild?

MR. OSOLNIK: No, I usually dealt directly with the craftsmen.

MS. DOUGLAS: But they were all members of the guild?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, what about other artists that you've been around, say, potters, and weavers?

MR. OSOLNIK: It's interesting, Bernard Leach was here, and he was doing a pottery workshop down at the college. And he came out here, and I was turning a bowl, a simple form like that, and he seemed to like it. And then, later on, I was reading one of the English publications, and there it was in clay.

MS. DOUGLAS: Really?

MR. OSOLNIK: I thought that was pretty good.

MS. DOUGLAS: That is. He had quite a following, too.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: How is it that he was at Berea College?

MR. OSOLNIK: He was doing a workshop for the pottery department. See, they have a good pottery department.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, are you still selling your work?

MR. OSOLNIK: It goes through the different galleries. Martha Connell probably has the largest collection. And you might write to her and ask her to give you -- because she has a bibliography of the years for all of those pieces.

MS. DOUGLAS: So she still shows your work and deals for you.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah, in Atlanta at the Great American Gallery.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well so, what's a typical day for you like now?

MR. OSOLNIK: I usually get up around six, and by the time I get all ready to come out here, it's about nine o'clock. And then, I have my breakfast, and then I do whatever I can.

MS. DOUGLAS: Entertain visitors.

MR. OSOLNIK: Mostly. [Laughter.]

MS. DOUGLAS: Do you ever go out to the shop?

MR. OSOLNIK: I try to go out every day.

MS. DOUGLAS: And when's the last time you were out there doing a demo or working?

MR. OSOLNIK: Three weeks ago.

MS. DOUGLAS: What were you doing?

MR. OSOLNIK: I was turning.

MS. DOUGLAS: Were you making a new piece?

MR. OSOLNIK: I was working on that casser ebony piece, finishing it up. That's on the lathe.

MS. DOUGLAS: Is that the piece in the hallway back there?

MR. OSOLNIK: No, it's still on the lathe.

MS. DOUGLAS: Oh, I see. Now, are you doing everything these days? Do you do the finishing too, the sanding and the finishing?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, what advice would you give somebody today starting out in turning?

MR. OSOLNIK: Stand in front of the lathe until you get to the point where the tool and the wood are like one piece, and study the classic forms. I don't believe much in this porcupine quills in there and running rods through there.

MS. DOUGLAS: Do you think there's a good chance at making a living at wood turning today?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes, there is, but they have to stay with the classic forms. And your classic forms are the ones that you can make the most quickly. When you go into where you're putting all these porcupine quills and all that stuff in there, it makes it different, but it doesn't sell for that much more.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, would you say that there's been a steady market for your work your whole career?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah, I've been fortunate in that.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, I see the term "Osolnik Originals" on some of your work.

MR. OSOLNIK: That was in the beginning.

MS. DOUGLAS: That's what you had your business named.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah. But now, I autograph them with my own name on there, and the kind of wood.

MS. DOUGLAS: Were you doing more production work under the "Osolnik Originals"?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes, I was doing things that they could sell at the craft fairs. And the one thing I did try to do, every year, I'd try to get three new pieces I'd bring to the fairs.

MS. DOUGLAS: That was like new items in your line.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes, because I can remember, we were down in Belize. And while we were there, the woman was making these paper flowers. She would take bread dough and knead it, and add some colors to it, and press it, and put it onto a stem. And Daphne got to the point where she was pretty good at it, and we were up here one day, and she had a whole table. She was going to give them as gifts. She said, "Now that I've got all these, how in the world am I going to give them to somebody to show them off?"

So I went out and I shopped -- I made one little twig pot. I brought it in and gave it to her, and I said, "Is this what you're thinking about?" She said, "Yes, just make me a whole bunch."

MS. DOUGLAS: So she could put her bread-dough flower in.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: When you say twig pot, it's like it has --

MR. OSOLNIK: I'd drill a hole, and you could put your dried flowers down in there.

MS. DOUGLAS: But just enough for like one or two.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes. I'd never throw a pretty piece of wood away. I always would throw it in a pile. And when we got to those twig pots, I was using all this pretty wood. It had a beautiful grain, with a high polish on it, and I'd drill a hole in it, and we sold those things like hotcakes.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, that makes me think you must have a wood inventory out at your shop right now.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes, there's quite a bit.

MS. DOUGLAS: How many pieces do you have in production right now, different stages of production?

MR. OSOLNIK: One.

MS. DOUGLAS: You've got one on the lathe.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, do you have wood turners that come over and use your shop?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes.

MS. DOUGLAS: Do they live nearby, or --

MR. OSOLNIK: No, from all over.

MS. DOUGLAS: Who were some of the other artists that you admired?

MR. OSOLNIK: I admired Stockdale's work and Ed Moulthrop's, and Phil Moulthrop.

MS. DOUGLAS: I know the first three artists, and I can see they follow your guidelines about using classic forms. Have you traveled to Scandinavia?

MR. OSOLNIK: One trip.

MS. DOUGLAS: You must have seen a lot of classic forms up there.

MR. OSOLNIK: It influenced me quite a bit on a lot of that stuff.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, I was wondering, were you able to bring in visiting artists at the program at Berea?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes, I had Bob Stockdale, Dale Nish --

MS. DOUGLAS: Were you ever able to bring in any makers from overseas, Japanese or European people?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, we had Ray Key. Ken Sager, Liam O'Neil, and Soren Bergen to mention a few.

[TAPE CHANGE.]

MR. OSOLNIK: -- more people interested and seeing what could be done with some raw materials.

MS. DOUGLAS: So you're saying that the workshops you did have had more impact than almost anything else.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes, and the work over the years.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, you have been in big demand, both in your work and yourself. So when did you decide to start doing these kind of workshops?

MR. OSOLNIK: After I retired from the college.

MS. DOUGLAS: But you'd think, after retiring, you'd be sick of teaching and you wouldn't want to do it anymore.

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, it was a little different. You met different people. Excuse me.

[TAPE CHANGE.]

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, we were talking about how you were a workaholic doing these workshops, and I was asking you how that came about, how you ended up doing so many workshops, getting into that idea of doing workshops.

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, people were asking for them. I had requests from all over the country, from all over the world, actually.

MS. DOUGLAS: So it just sort of snowballed.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: That's amazing.

MR. OSOLNIK: And I've always found, as I said several times, to receive, you have to give; you can't take all the time. And if you give, you'll receive more in the long run. And I tell that to my students. I said, "You can't always be receiving; you've got to get to the point where you're giving."

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, you must know people all over the world now, from these workshops.

MR. OSOLNIK: I do, and that has been one of the gifts I have received – meeting these folks.

MS. DOUGLAS: Have you gotten to do much traveling to visit any of them?

MR. OSOLNIK: Not here lately, but I used to travel all over.
MS. DOUGLAS: You mentioned the Benchmark Gallery.

MR. OSOLNIK: That's a shop my wife had.

MS. DOUGLAS: How did that come about?

MR. OSOLNIK: She went down to the bank and asked them -- she wanted to borrow some money to set up her own gallery. And they asked her how much it would cost, and she said, probably around $60,000. He said, "Well, there's no use you borrowing it right now." He said, "Why don't you just start your building, and if you need it, we'll give you the loan?" And we built that building there.

MS. DOUGLAS: How long did she run the gallery?

MR. OSOLNIK: I guess 25 years.

MS. DOUGLAS: Good gracious. And I suppose it carried your work?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes, and it carried other craftsmen's work.

MS. DOUGLAS: Were there other craft galleries in Berea at the time?

MR. OSOLNIK: The college had one.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, it sounds like the Benchmark Gallery, then, was a good outlet for a lot of craftspeople.

MR. OSOLNIK: It was.

MS. DOUGLAS: Were most of them from Kentucky?

MR. OSOLNIK: Anywhere. Daphne bought from anyone, as long as it was made in the United States.

MS. DOUGLAS: So she was working at the gallery.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes.

MS. DOUGLAS: And was she also working for you, helping you in your business.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: So it sounds like both of you were workaholics.

MR. OSOLNIK: She was. She was a wonderful person. Tears get in my eyes when I think of her.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, she was part of your life for most of it.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah, for 50 years, one week short of 50 years.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, so, is there anything else you want to talk about?

MR. OSOLNIK: I love people; I love to share. And as I said, when you give, you get something, and probably more than you give. I know when we had our crafts fairs up here, they limited it only to Kentucky people. And I kept telling them that they had to bring in some new people. So we started the Berea Craft Enterprises, Sandy and Daphne and myself and Lila Bellando. And we would invite craftspeople from all over to sell. And in a little while, we were doing five times as much sales as they were.

MS. DOUGLAS: As the Kentucky Guild.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, is Berea Craft Enterprises still in existence?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes. Lila and Richard run it now, and Sandy.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, Kentucky has a very good reputation for crafts.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah, it does.

MS. DOUGLAS: It's gotten a lot of publicity with Phyllis George, the governor's wife.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah, you see her picture.

MS. DOUGLAS: She brought a lot of publicity to the area.

MR. OSOLNIK: She made Kentucky crafts one of her projects.

MS. DOUGLAS: Oh, I know one thing I had forgotten to ask you about -- your master's degree. You did go back and get a master's degree, didn't you?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes, at Bradley.

MS. DOUGLAS: And you had been teaching at Berea for a while when you went back for it. How did you do that? Did you take a sabbatical or go in the summer?

MR. OSOLNIK: I did it on my sabbatical. We used to get a sabbatical every seven years, for a half a year, or 10 years for a full year. And so, I took my sabbaticals, and I went out to Oregon State and Colorado, and different places.

MS. DOUGLAS: Were you working toward your master's when you did those?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: And you got your master's in what, industrial arts?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah, industrial arts at Bradley. That in all of the years that I've been doing workshops and working with students, I've never had one to get hurt seriously, just nicks and scratches.

MS. DOUGLAS: What do you attribute that to?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, I would spend a great deal of time showing them what to be careful of, what to watch for, and how to use their tools. And the whole secret was sharp tools and keeping them in a position where you're not going to get hurt.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, have you ever been hurt yourself? You've got all your fingers. I guess the answer to that is, no, you haven't.

MR. OSOLNIK: Oh, I get scratches.

MS. DOUGLAS: That's a really important thing.

MR. OSOLNIK: It is.

MS. DOUGLAS: And with as many students as you've had, that's an amazing track record.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah, I'm more proud of that than anything else.

MS. DOUGLAS: Because students are the ones that can be scary.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: Oh, another thing I wanted to go back and pick up on is when we were talking about your education. What made you decide to go into teaching as a career?

MR. OSOLNIK: Well, that's about the only thing you had to do in those early days.

MS. DOUGLAS: What do you mean?

MR. OSOLNIK: When I graduated from college, the only thing -- I had an industrial arts degree, so you had to teach industrial arts.

MS. DOUGLAS: You couldn't have gone into industry and worked as a designer?

MR. OSOLNIK: I could of, but I wasn't interested in being -- I don't know, that's kind of a routine.

MS. DOUGLAS: Or like, let's say, you did work for Caterpillar for a short time.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: So you could have pursued a career there.

MR. OSOLNIK: I could have, but there again, I was more interested in the courses taught in the art department

than I was in the ones that were taught in the industrial arts program.

MS. DOUGLAS: So teaching allowed you to pursue that interest.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: Were there any teachers in your family, aunts or uncles?

MR. OSOLNIK: Not that I know of.

MS. DOUGLAS: Teaching has been a very, I think, rewarding career for you.

MR. OSOLNIK: It has.

MS. DOUGLAS: Do you have any projects that you haven't finished that you'd like to work on?

MR. OSOLNIK: I've got a laminated bowl I need to finish, and I've got -- ebony bowl to finish up.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, you've had a couple of projects with them, haven't you -- a retrospective back in the late eighties. What was it like working with them to do that project?

MR. OSOLNIK: It was nice. They had a group of people that were interested in doing what they thought was right.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, did you help them select the work for that?

MR. OSOLNIK: No. I had a lot of tapes. They took the tapes and put them together.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, I meant the real artwork for the show.

MR. OSOLNIK: No, I let them select them.

MS. DOUGLAS: And did they get most of it from your collection?

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: What about this book project that you worked on with Jane Kessler? What was it like working on that project?

MR. OSOLNIK: She was a wonderful person to work with.

MS. DOUGLAS: There's a lot of history in that book.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes, there is.

MS. DOUGLAS: How did they go about writing that?

MR. OSOLNIK: Interviews.

MS. DOUGLAS: Interviews with you.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah. Jane spent a lot of time up here.

MS. DOUGLAS: And they also wrote some things about the history of wood turning too.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yes.

MS. DOUGLAS: Do you have any workshops scheduled, coming up?

MR. OSOLNIK: I have one.

MS. DOUGLAS: Is that coming up pretty soon?

MR. OSOLNIK: Sometime in June.

MS. DOUGLAS: Oh, right around the corner.

MR. OSOLNIK: Yeah.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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