

Charles Steven (Steve) Adams

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Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

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Charles Steven Adams

Charles Steven Adams is a hand-hewn bowl carver living in Martinsburg, WV. Originally from Nitro, WV, Steve worked as a social worker and took up bowl carving in retirement. He also makes wood furniture and hand-hewn carved sinks. His wife Jan works with him at local craft shows. Adams also teaches bowl carving workshops at his woodshop. <http://www.charlesstevenadams.com/index.php>

SA: Steve Adams

EH: Emily Hilliard

JA:

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00:00

EH: Alright. So could you introduce yourself and tell me where we are, and when you were born?

SA: My name is Steve Adams, I was born in Charleston, WV, grew up in South Charleston in Nitro and moved to where we're living now in 1976 to Martinsburg, WV. And approximately—well 1995, I ordered a little commercial hand adze from a magazine—a tool catalog. And promptly made 3 or 4 bowls and I got the idea by a man by the name of Rip Mann- M-A-N-N who made hand hewn bowls with a hand adze at the Harper's Ferry Arts and Crafts Fair- Mountain Heritage. And I watched him for several years—used to make fun of him behind his back saying anybody can put a hole in a piece of wood and call it a bowl! And sell it for lots of money, but after I started making a few, I realized there's a little bit more to it than that. (motions)

1:36

EH: What—oh—you want me to pause it?

JA: (laughs)

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00:00

EH: So had you done woodworking before that?

SA: Well not woodworking per se in terms of crafts, but I remodeled 3 homes and got into to... making a few things around the house uh... and I'll show those to you later on. But the bowls were the first thing that really attracted my attention. I was probably in my mid-50s before I started making them and I'm 75 now.

EH: Okay.

SA: So... I'm on the tail end of my...

EH: (laughs)

SA: Experience with wood. Because I use green wood, it also, when I chop the wood out, it requires me to have cut down a tree, or a lot of times people will call me now if a tree is blowing down or they've had one cut down. I've got a trailer and a wench and go out and...

JA: (motions)

EH: (laughs) And you're the helper?

JA: I go...

SA: She's the wench!

EH: (laughs)

SA: And so we... before that I had just come along and so my son and I did a lot of heavy lifting at the beginning but as time has gone on, I've mechanized up to a wench and once you bring the log in, I'll take it over to my sawyer and leave it in his yard. Wood yard and when I need some wood, he'll cut it for me in long 8 foot slabs, whatever thickness the tree will allow. And I'll cut off a piece of it and start making a bowl.

EH: Okay.

SA: Basically I use 2 tools other than a chain saw to cut with—a hand...

JA: To cut your tree down with.

SA: Well no, to make the bowls. Excuse me. Yeah. Cut the tree down with! But I use a hand adze and a scraping tool called a scorer. And a good bit of sandpaper to smooth out the lip. If you watch customers when they come into your booth, one of the first things the women do is they run their finger on the—around on the lip, so you always want it smooth.

EH: OK, yeah.

2:52

SA: And the other thing we've learned is that if the men wants to buy it but the woman doesn't want it, it doesn't get bought.

EH: (laughs) That's probably true.

SA: And about 85-90% of the bowls are bought by women.

EH: Huh. That's interesting.

SA: Yeah. We tried to do some shows where we were both working full time and that got to be too much. So when I retired in 2000, and Jan retired the next year, we started doing shows 3 or 4 shows a year and my level of production is very low. I make anywhere from 45 to 50 bowls a year and since I'm now making a little bit of furniture and some other accessory wood items, that number has dropped down even more.

EH: And what did you do in your...

SA: (makes motion for water)

EH: Yeah, sure, let me pause it.

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00:00

EH: Could you tell me what you did in your professional career?

SA: I was a social worker by trade. Got a masters—well I graduated from Alderson Broaddus and then in '65 and 6, or '66, '67 I think it was, went to graduate school in Indianapolis and when I came back, I worked for various agencies, several agencies. Welfare Department, Human Resources now or whatever and for a drug addiction program, and then we moved up here and the social work community here consisted of about 3 people at the time. This was in '76, '77. I ended up getting a job at an applesauce factory called Musselman.

EH: Oh yeah.

SA: And at that time we lived about 600 yards from it and so it was kind of rather ironic in that my grandfather was one of the 12 granters that put up money to have Hugh Musselman come down and build the plant because those 12 people all had orchards and they didn't have a way to get rid of their apples and so I ended up working at a place that my grandfather started and worked there for about a year and a half and then eventually ended up working for a small group home and then the last 20 years I worked as a social worker in 2 school systems. I introduced myself basically as your friendly truant officer. Not—the kids didn't know what truant officers were, but the parents did.

EH: Right.

2:11

SA: Then so when I retired, I moved into making bowls and found an outlet fairly fast for my product and I enjoy it. It's—it allows you to think about other things while your hand's busy and I've listened to a lot of books on tape while I'm chopping away and it's kind of nice to make something that's tangible, after having worked for 36 years with intangibles and it's sort of nice also to be able to pass on pieces of your work to friends and relatives and also make a part of a living from it. I think people today even though we've moved further away from making things ourselves, there's still something in us that encourages us to cherish and honor handmade items. And I see that when we go to a show. You can see people come in—they enjoy talking about their grandparents that made a bowl for them, or a piece of furniture and I guess it's partly a little bit of a yearning for a little simpler time when things were not quite so complicated. Like it's difficult for me to get the TV on anymore.

EH: Right.

SA: And it takes more than 1 remote. (laughs)

EH: (laughs)

SA: So Jan, my wife, has been asking me when we're going to quit and I told her whenever I can't pick the wood up anymore. So we don't know how much longer we'll be doing it. I've done several workshops here at the house for people who want to do a 3 day workshop and make their own bowl and I'm always hopeful that maybe 1 or 2 of them will continue. I know of 2 people that have been making some bowls. So I'm hoping it can continue and maybe they in turn can interest some younger people to get into the venture.

EH: Are you in the shop daily?

SA: Almost, yes. Especially in the wintertime. That's when I do most of my production. Early spring—I like to... as far as sanding goes, it's so dirty even with a mask, I like to do it outside. So most, all my

sanding is pretty much done outside so when the weather's real bad I end up doing most of my handwork with bowls and furniture comes kinda later in the year in warmer weather.

5:37

EH: I know we sort of did this, but can you walk me basically through the process of you know, tree to bowl?

SA: Sure. Well, if I get... I basically use 3 woods. Cherry, walnut, and maple. And they seem—cherry sells faster than anything else. I'll sell 7 or 8 cherry bowls to one of another species. So the bulk of my work is in cherry. Followed by—I'm not sure whether it'd be maple or walnut—pretty comparable. Um... once I... sometimes I have to advertise and I have people call and I'll tell people to go out and run a string around the tree and if it's um... 60 inches or more around the tree, then I might be interested. And it can't be close to a building or anything like that because I'm not licensed. So we cut the tree down or if the tree's already been cut down or blown down, I take my little trailer and my wench and we go and cut it in 8-foot slabs or a little bit longer. And take it over to Jenny Dunham who's an independent sawyer here in the county. And have it cut in slabs when I need bowl materials. 8-feet long and anywhere from 2 to 6 inches thick and that determines how tall your bowl's gonna be by how thick the wood is. And on a 2 foot section of log, I can get two bowls—one on one side and one on the other. The center of the bowl, you can't use because it's called the pith and it cracks. You have to step away at least an inch, an inch and a half from the pith and so each side you get one bowl. Again, there's a section on each side of the pith that sometimes if it's a real big log, I can get a long narrow strip and I make skinny bowls, as one person calls 'em. (laughs)

EH: (laughs)

8:17

SA: After I come back and I cut off a section, if it—I do 2 styles of bowl. I do what is called a form bowl, which has a definite shape, and I do freestyle, when I just sit down and start chopping and see what comes out. Um... sometimes I'll start one way and the wood will disagree with me (laughs) and it ends up going the other way. Often times with a form bowl it ends up being freestyle if I get a crack or something.

EH: (laughs)

SA: After I've actually—you shape the outside of the bowl first so you can see exactly what you're doing. Then you turn it over and you start digging out the inside also with a hand adze. And that way you can use your finger and your eye to keep track of how thick your side walls are and so that you don't go through the side wall. I still invariably lose a certain number of bowls due to cracking and I went through the side wall—what, about 2 months ago?—with the one sitting out on the back deck. So even after 22 years I still make quite a few mistakes.

EH: Is that frustrating when it happens?

SA: Uh... it used to. I consider it part of the experience and kinda go from there. When you're younger you tend to get frustrated a little more than when you get a little bit older. After I've made the bowl, and have signed it, I bring it up here and as you can see over here on the baker's table, I keep mineral oil on the bowl and at night I'll put it in plastic. And what that does is it slows the evaporation of the sap coming out of the wood, because that's what causes the cracks—when it comes out too fast? And I'll take it in and out of the plastic for 2-3 weeks and then when I feel like the mineral oil has gotten into the wood where it's very stable, I'll leave it out for another couple weeks and just put oil on it whenever it looks

like it's starting to dry out some. Once it is completely stable, then I'll put a coat of beeswax on it and the process is completed.

EH: Where do you get your beeswax from?

SA: Holland Mills.

EH: Is that a local spot?

SA: No. No it's... I'm not sure. I'd have to look. I think it's New England somewhere.

EH: Okay. Have you found a good market for the bowls, you know, here in the state?

SA: Well... Tamarack has not been especially good for me.

EH: And that's the Tamarack Center? Because there's the Foundation and then there's the Center....

SA: Yeah. Center. So... I would say probably 85, 90% of what we sell is at 3-4 shows we do a year. And... (motions to shut off recorder, uncomfortable with speaking on the record)

EH: (laughs)

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00:00

EH: So we were talking about the process from tree to bowl and then could you talk about how people should care for the bowls?

SA: Well, since you... you use mineral oil to treat the bowl, it tends to evaporate so consequently you should oil the bowl a couple times a year and if you use it quite a bit, sometimes the grain of the wood will come out and so some extra fine sandpaper to go over it and smooth it out, oil the bowl and let it soak in overnight and what we do is we give the people a small tub of beeswax with each bowl and after a couple of days when the mineral oil is soaked in, put a coat of beeswax on it—that'll help fill the pores of the wood up a little bit and hold the mineral oil in and you don't have to treat the bowl near as much then. And the other big factor is do not under any circumstances, set your bowl in a window where there's strong sun coming in. It will crack it—dry it out and crack it in a reasonably short period of time. Fact is, I make quite a few dough bowls, which is what people use to let their bread rise in and they did not crack because of the oils from the butter kept it lubricated.

EH: Ah! Cool!

SA: They only cracked when people quit making bread and the dough bowls dried out and you'll see a lot of dough bowls now that are cracked just simply because they haven't been oiled. Our houses are very, very tight now and the type of heat we have is very dry, so there is a natural process of wood drying out and cracking. Let's see—is there anything else about the bowl? Don't leave 'em in the refrigerators because they're dehydrators and they'll draw moisture out of the bowls also. Don't put your bowls on top of the refrigerator because of all the heat that's coming up from the back of the refrigerator and I guess that's about it isn't it, as far as care? A few things to avoid and keep it lubricated with mineral oil and beeswax.

JA: And use it.

EH: And use it—yeah.

JA: People say, “It’s too beautiful, I won’t use it” and I’m like—it’s made to use.

EH: (laughs)

SA: We always hope that some of the bowls, hopefully will get passed on down to the next generation and the best way to do that is care for it now so it’ll maintain its integrity.

EH: Right. So what would be traditional uses for wood bowls aside from bread baking?

SA: Oh, well...we use ‘em for salads, you can use ‘em for putting vegetables in...

JA: Hot or cold foods.

EH: Okay.

SA: Cold foods...

EH: So you put all...

JA: Potatoes, mashed potatoes...

EH: Oh, okay, yeah.

SA: You know treenware was what was used by people who were coming from the East coast colonies out west and to the wilderness. Many of these people had maybe a little cart and very few personal belongings, but they all had axes and had the ability to create rough furniture and treenware, woodenware and so wooden bowls have been around in use for food—all types of food—for years and years. The early colonial taverns—when you got your food it was on a wooden plate often times and wooden bowls, wooden tankards for your liquids that you drink from and it was only later when people began to have some money that they went to pottery and china and metal.

5:09

EH: Could you talk a little bit about how you got into making furniture?

SA: Well, as I was telling you earlier, there are certain pieces of wood in a tree or a log that has too many knots or imperfections or insect infestation that you can’t make a bowl out of it, but I hated to throw it away, so I kinda backed into making a few pieces of furniture a year, two, three or four pieces. Then I had to figure out some way to be able to dismantle and put ‘em back together, so I started making my own wooden nuts and bolts to put ‘em together and be able to pull them apart. And I kinda liked the looks of it so I continued to make ‘em basically with wooden nuts and bolts. And I’ve made probably more tables than anything else—side board tables and dining room tables. Made several coffee tables also. And a couple beds for us—not for to sell.

EH: Nice. And with those the imperfections really add to it.

SA: Absolutely. Absolutely. Yeah, as you can see on the corner of the table there and all, what is waste wood for one thing, often times, beautifies something else that you’re making. (clears throat) Excuse me.

EH: The insect infestation makes me think—there’s I think it’s in the last chapter of Walden where Thoreau is writing about this bug. He’s saying—I heard this story where a bug that was embedded in

wood comes to life after like 60 years in the wood. And you know, it's a metaphor for something but it made me think of that (laughs).

JA: Well you can also tell 'em you get the wood that you use for your tables...

SA: Oh yeah, right. I go several steps beyond cutting the boards at Jenny's sawmill, because if I'm making furniture and I'll take it over to across the river to outside of Hagerstown to the Mennonite community.

EH: Okay.

SA: And I'll have the wood become dried. And then from there I'll take it over to Hicksville Planing Mill which is also a Mennonite place and they'll run it through their big planer to rough plane it down. And so I get to load and take all of this to different places. But the good part of it, I think, is that each one of these places I go to are small business men working with wood in one capacity or another, so I tell people if they buy a piece of furniture from me, they're helping to support not just me but a lot of people in our communities. And that... that's important to me.

EH: Definitely. Yeah I grew up close to Amish country and we would always take things to... we had an Amish electrician.

SA: Ha!

EH: I think—I think he was Mennonite but... (laughs)

JA: Oxymoron.

EH: Yeah. But my dad would always take things—get wood from Mennonite or Amish folks and learn about tools and that sort of thing. It is really... they are carriers of a lot of knowledge.

SA: Oh, absolutely and extremely hard workers. They don't stay idle at all at the places that I've gone to. Outside of Hagerstown. That's for sure.

JA: And very honest.

EH: Mmhm. Were—did you make things earlier in your life?

SA: Oh, golly. I have... when I was growing up, my step-father um... was very handy with his hands and so I got to hold the dumb end of the stick (laughs) when you have a long board or the long, or the dumb end of a measuring rod. And I did pick up some stuff from him.

EH: Okay.

SA: As far as any formal training, I don't have any. Um...

JA: But you made several things when we were first married—remember that clock?

SA: Oh yeah, I still have it. Coffee table. Uh, I didn't even have any tools. We were in graduate school in Indianapolis and I don't know whose idea it was, but I went out and bought some wood and glued it up and then I had to go rent a saber saw to cut out the table. And I remember buying 2 or 3 screw drivers there and I still have one of 'em. This was 1960... let's see, I graduated in '67. '67 so it was '66, '67. I had forgot about that. I made a few little things.

JA: You made a cradle for our first child.

SA: Yeah, that's right—I forgot about that. And then mother wanted one so I had to make another one. And then I found out when I made the second one that I don't like production work. I dislike it with a passion! And so whatever I got into, after I made the second one, it was such a chore to make the second one. The first one was fun. So, that's the nice thing about making bowls. You're basically only limited by the size of the tree and your imagination because you can pretty well make any shape you want to with a hand adze. I don't own a lathe, but so many people when they come in think in the beginning that these are made by a lathe, but I don't even own one. So that's the reason why I always demonstrate when I'm at the show—I always have a piece of wood that I'm working on and a stump of a tree and just sit there and chop away until somebody asks me a question. (laughs)

EH: (laughs)

SA: And then we kinda go from there.

EH: Uh-huh. Nice. And with the furniture—do you oil it frequently?

SA: No, this is polyurethane. Anything that—any furniture, I put polyurethane on it. The other thing that I do make—I got back into making sinks out of wood. My son—well, I put a bid in for a homestead that was gonna be behind a dam the federal government was building and got... got the partial log house and log barn and we ended up putting it on the back part of our property and that's where our son lives now. The original idea was to turn it into a B&B minus breakfast. (laughs)

EH: (laughs)

SA: I'd be darned if I was gonna cook for anybody else! And our—our son and daughter-in-law and their family decided they would graciously move into it if I'd get it converted over to a house. So we worked on that and he said, well dad, why don't you make a bowl, couple bowls and we were working with some epoxy doing another job and so I said okay, let's try making sinks. So that was... I don't know, around 2000. And I made 'em and they didn't rot or fall apart, so I started making a few sinks and then Jan decided that we needed some here. And it was kinda slow starting out because they're fairly expensive and at the same time it takes people awhile to get used to the idea of a wood sink. And the other issue is that only a small number of people are actually either remodeling a bathroom or building and that's... those are the two occasions when people are interested in sinks.

EH: So, you sort of have your community like the sawyer and the Mennonite folks, but do you feel like you're part of another artists or artisans community here?

SA: To some degree. I'm probably more connected with the next county over because I do the artist studio show in November each year and we meet 2 or 3 times a year getting ready for the show. I know quite a few artisans in the area, but as you probably know, many of the artisans are very isolated in terms of their work as one person and I... I don't want to have to after 37 years of dealing with people and their problems, I don't need people working under me. I enjoy creating what I enjoy making and then trying to find somebody that might want it. I'm not very good about doing custom work.

EH: Okay. And as far as people you've taught, is that mostly through the workshops or have you had apprentices?

SA: No, I haven't had apprentices. I would like to get one of my relatives as an apprentice, but it's hard to get... (laughs) people to work up a sweat today.

EH: (laughs)

SA: You know what I mean. Air conditioning, electronics have made a big dent in people actually being outside and doing anything physical.

16:56

EH: We've gotten soft.

SA: Yes we have. Very soft. And unfortunately some of my grandchildren fit in that mold.

EH: (laughs)

JA: But you have taught several workshops.

SA: Oh yeah, probably 60, 70 people. 60 maybe.

EH: That's a lot.

SA: Over time. And, and several of 'em... you were in Berkeley Springs. There's a fellow there by the name of Glenn Horr who's a metalworker and he makes all my hand adzes for me.

EH: Oh cool!

SA: And I've had probably 15 people order hand adzes from him after they take the workshop. And of course I haven't... I don't know of any but 2 people that continue to make them but there may be some others out there I'm not aware of.

EH: Mmhm. Would he be someone I should talk to? Is he an active metal worker?

SA: Oh, Drew?

JA: Glenn.

EH: Yeah, Glenn.

SA: Oh Glenn, Glenn Horr—yeah. He lives about 6 or 7 miles outside of Berkeley Springs. Oh yeah. He's not what you consider a typical metalworker in that he probably weighs 130 pounds. You always think of them as big in strength. (laughs) But Glenn's a really nice individual—he does excellent work. Excellent work.

EH: Okay.

JA: He teaches some courses at an art school somewhere. Near Pennsylvania.

EH: Okay.

SA: Yeah. It's a little bit—it's over in—is it Maryland or Pennsylvania?

JA: I'm not sure.

SA: But anyway.

JA: He's very good.

EH: Nice.

SA: He's been in the business for a long time.

EH: Okay.

JA: And he has a website you could get on.

EH: Oh, okay.

JA: Just put in Glenn

EH: What's the last?

SA: H-O-R-R.

JA: Sounds just like it's spelled. People hesitate to call him because they're like "I don't want to call him that!" I said, "That's his name. He's used to it."

SA: I'm gonna have to go to the bathroom.

EH: Yeah, sure. I actually do too.

19:28

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00:00

SA: I've always enjoyed wood. I'm not very good in math. And reading a rule has always been a challenge for me. So what I have found is that wood allows you a little bit of margin for error and I need it. (laughs)

EH: (laughs)

JA: (laughs)

SA: Fact is, the table I'm working on yesterday I ended up having to cut off quite a bit of work that didn't turn out right, and had to do it over again. It also teaches you patience because you... The wood will only allow you to go to certain extremes, and then after that there's failure... of one type or another. I love the feel of it, I love the smell of it, I love the grain and the figuring and I like the idea that I'm making something that possibly will go on after I'm dead.

EH: Mmhm. Definitely. Yeah, I think I need that margin of error too. I'm a knitter and sometimes... and I think honestly that's what's kept me from learning woodwork because my brother and I both had tools when we were kids and everything, but it seems like it needs to be so exact. But maybe I have a future in bowls!

JA: We have had a lot of women take his workshop.

EH: Yeah, I would be interested actually.

SA: Yeah, we have! We have.

JA: In fact, he's had workshops with 3 women—

EH: All women?

JA: He only does 3 at a time and they were all women.

EH: That's cool.

SA: Three people, yeah.

JA: And they got him some little figures because the gnome would come out at night and help their bowl move along...(EH and SA laugh) which they had asked for. (laughs)

SA: Yeah, if they wanted some help from the gnome, they would put it by their bowl at night when they left.

EH: Got it. That's funny.

SA: Yeah, I stick to my workshop with a maximum of 3 people, just because I want to have enough time to make sure they leave with their bowl finished and some people need a little more help than others and so if I had more...plus you're working with a sharp tool and it's something that a lot of the people are not woodworkers that come here and just everyday people that decide they want to make their own bowl and they make their one bowl and that's usually the end of their experience, except they have the bowl and but... we've had other people return. I have one individual that's making a bowl pretty much every year for all of his children, each one of his children. So I think he has one more to go.

EH: Okay. Well even that one bowl, I'm sure, means a lot to people.

SA: I hope so. The way they act when they see the bowl when you put the mineral oil on it and it pops the color out, you get a big grin—that's for sure.

JA: Also, they come back to visit you at the shows.

SA: yeah.

JA: And they are thrilled with their bowl and tell you they've used it and what they've used it for and their wives are usually thrilled too.

EH: (laughs) And it's a 3-day workshop?

SA: correct. I do it on a Friday, Saturday, and Sunday so if the people are working most of 'em just have to take 1 day off. And we start at like 8:30 in the morning and go 'til about 3, 3:30, and by then we're all tired.

EH: yeah. That sounds nice! You'll have to keep me posted on your next workshop.

SA: Well, we can do that.

EH: Well thank you so much for taking the time to chat.

SA: Well, thank you.

EH: I'll turn this off.

4:46

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END OF INTERVIEW

