

Aaron Parsons

Where: Parsons Family Farm

Date: November 9, 2016

Location: Ravenswood, WV

Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

Transcription: Emily Hilliard

Length: 33:10

Aaron Parsons

Aaron Parsons, 20 years old at the time of this interview, is a native of Jackson County, WV. He makes turkey calls with materials (slate, native woods, bone, etc.) found on his family's land in Jackson County. He is also a hunter, trapper, fisher, and hide tanner.

I met Aaron Parsons at the Community Interest Fair at Gilmore Elementary School in Sandyville, WV, back in the spring of 2016.

EH: Emily Hilliard

AP: Aaron Parsons

00:00

EH: Okay. Could you introduce yourself, tell me how old you are and describe where we are right now?

AP: I'm Aaron Parsons from Ravenswood, West Virginia. I'm 20 years old and we're in my lathe shop.

EH: And could you tell me about some of the things you make here?

AP: Uh, I make turkey calls, I pour lead to make sinkers and bullets, tan deer hides, and skin most fur-bearing animals.

EH: Okay, let's start with the turkey callers. Why don't you tell me how you got into it, how you learned?

AP: My family's been turkey hunters as long as I can remember. My great, my grandpa's in the turkey hunting hall of fame and it's just been a family tradition. And I've always heard stories about people making 'em, so I started making 'em when I was young, out of snuff cans and slate, and it evolved into getting this lathe last year.

EH: And I remember you said that you had found one your grandfather had made?

AP: Yeah, I found—it was a broom handle he had whittled down, and then stuck a piece of dowel in and made a turkey call out of, years ago. And it works pretty good!

EH: And is that the only one you know of that he made, or...

AP: I have no clue. I'm sure he made more, which... back when people started turkey hunting around here, that's pretty much all you could do. They didn't really sell turkey calls so you had to make your own or you didn't have one. So there's some real weird ones out there that have been just thought of by people.

EH: What are some of the weirdest ones you've seen?

AP: I've seen a lot of 'em made with pins and shotgun shells. It's like the turkey bone wing calls, but they take the primer out of the shotgun shell and stick the pin down in it and it's the same thing.

EH: Could you walk me through—what are turkey calls for, and the process of hunting and using a caller?

AP: Um, you use turkey calls to get the gobblers to gobble and then you lure them in with it. There's different calls for each time of day—in the morning you want to get 'em gobbling on the roost so you know where to start at. Then once it's daylight, you use different calls to get 'em to respond to you on the ground. And then... so you can get close enough to actually call them in so you can get a shot on 'em.

EH: Huh. So is there a difference in how they make sounds?

AP: Yeah, It's just—a lot of the same like, sounds, just different pitches, and like the rhythm of the yelp will change from time to time throughout the day.

EH: Huh. Um, so what's the type of caller you have in the morning?

AP: Uh, I either use this hoot owl call, which, I don't know if I have one up here, it sounds like a hoot owl. And turkeys do a thing called shot gobble where certain sounds just make 'em gobble. Thunder does it, owls will do it, sometimes if you just slam a car door, they'll just gobble for whatever reason. And then it works really good in the morning time when they're still up in the trees before it's light.

EH: And then, afternoon.

AP: Afternoon? It's... That's right about the time it starts slowing down, throughout the day. Cause at noon's about when hens get back to their nest. 'Cause in turkey season, that's when hens are laying their eggs and so, best thing to do is just sparse calls throughout the day. Let 'em know... if they're close, let them know that there is a hen there, 'cause normally they're with hens by that point, so when they're done there, they can go to their next hen, which would be you.

EH: So you're trying to mimic a hen call.

AP: Yeah, you're trying to make them think there's a hen out there looking for a gobbler.

EH: (laughs) um, so why don't you get out your callers and show me some of the different varieties you've made. How did you teach yourself how to do this?

AP: I blew up a lot of calls, at first, on this thing.

4:34

EH: What do you mean?

AP: Well it spins real quick and if you do it wrong then the wood will actually crack and then as it cracks it just comes apart and chunks go flying. And it's kind of sketchy the first few times.

But when I first started, right there is what I was making—it's a snuff can—I don't even have anything to knock it out with. But all I did was, I didn't have no way to cut slate back then, so I had to cut it with a file and a pair of scissors and a hacksaw and it took about 3 days to cut one piece of slate. Then I just put stilts in the snuff can, and it took forever to get the right size. And you just slide it on there, and that's your call.

EH: Wow.

AP: Super simple, but it worked. That's what I called my first turkey ever with, is one of those.

EH: Wow.

AP: By myself.

EH: And then what do you scrape across there?

AP: It's called a striker. Here... Ah! I have a better one down there, I should have went and got it. But that's one I carved by hand before I had a lathe and it... same thing, it took about 5 days to make this one 'cause it's real hard wood. But it... it's just a lot easier with a lathe. But when you're doing everything by hand, it just... it turns out cool looking because there's little imperfections everywhere, and I like it, but by, by lathe it's so much easier to make them just... perfect.

EH: Yeah. Um, what kind of wood is that?

AP: This is white oak. It's actually a piece of firewood. Kind of borrowed it and made a striker out of it.

EH: You want to do the call?

AP: (makes call sound) That's called a yelp. Then you got clucks (makes shorter, staccato sound) and purrs (makes purr sound). Turkeys make all kinds of noises. So you just gotta try 'em all I guess sometimes.

EH: And would you do that sort of thing at what time of day?

AP: That's after they get off roost up to about, I don't know. I keep calling, I keep calling to get the gobbler before it gets to another hen.

EH: Got it.

AP: 'Cause once they get with hens they just kind of hang out together the rest of the evening, er the rest of the morning, so you want to do a lot of calls, quick calls, in that period to try to get them to come to you first. 'Cause after that you have to wait 'til after 11 o'clock. 'Cause you can't hunt after 12 for turkeys. But yeah. That's... (makes turkey calls) and when they're (makes tapping sound, makes turkey calls) you'd do that.

EH: So you really have to learn a lot about turkeys.

AP: Yeah, you have to watch somebody do it before you actually get decent. I watched my dad do it for years before I finally started hunting on my own. It's just, it's just one thing you have to be around to learn how to do it.

EH: Um, you want to show some others?

AP: Yeah. Uh, right there is, this one is the first call I ever made by myself. From the lathe. That actually turned out to be a call instead of shrapnel. And that on is... no that one's the first. Right? First striker I ever made. It's both walnut that we had cut up here and the guy brought the saw mill here and he cut it out and everything, so all this is from right here on this land and so is this slate. That's red slate... I have a piece right here. You don't really see it as common as the grey slate, but I really like it.

EH: Yeah, that's beautiful. So that you found on the land too?

AP: Yeah. This is old shingles from an old house that somebody tore down however long ago and... but it... this is real hard wood so it's a... (makes turkey call) so it's got a raspier sound. (phone rings)

EH: (laughs) that doesn't sound like a call.

AP: Sorry about that.

EH: That's alright!

AP: But the softer the wood, the more mellow of a call you can get, but these real hardwoods (makes call) you get that real raspy scrappy sound. And... what do I have here—I think this one's a real soft wood. Got that... (makes call) Ah! (makes call) yeah, so that's, I think that's oak. This one here, I think—that's cherry (makes call). They all... all wood has a different sound, just 'cause it slides across... I have one here, it's carved from pine. I lathed it down but it was too soft—it wouldn't even make any sound at all so I had to take a lighter and fire harden the tip a little bit, so actually it's real hard now. (makes call)

EH: Oh yeah.

AP: It's real loud, but it's high pitched. Then I took a... tie dye—from like tie dying shirts?

EH: Uh-huh

AP: And soaked it and turned it green and I liked it. I was wanting to try it and it was the perfect thing to try it on. But, uh...

EH: So when you go out hunting are you just bringing one with you or what are you bringing with you?

AP: I normally bring only one call, one actual call itself but I'll bring 3 or 4 or 5 strikers. Just for... each one's louder and quieter so will have a better sound, but aren't quite as loud as these ones, and different times... cause turkey season starts right at the beginning of the spring so and in the first week of turkey season in the fall, or spring, there aren't any leaves really, so the sound will travel real far. But as you get later in the season, leaves start coming and it will muffle the sound. You gotta get a little louder calls to reach out to the gobblers wherever they'll be at and uh, you just, you just gotta go with it more or less, depending on the situation. But uh...

EH: And so, this like... the way you're shaping them with the carved lines, is that something you came up with?

AP: It's just something I like. I just like having the lines on there. They just look plain without it to me. So I just do a bunch of random lines on there.

EH: That's nice.

AP: But uh...

EH: And then the curve of the...

AP: Yeah. That's just a personal thing I like. I like having that arch. I just think it looks better like that. Which, I started one here—I got to finish it, but it's got all kinds of... it's gonna be from there to there and about... it's gonna be real long, about this long. And it'll look down and then have that little thin part. I ain't finished it yet.

EH: That's beautiful. It's like a fine chair leg or something.

AP: Yeah. That's what my buddy said!

11:51

EH: (laughs) And are you spinning them on the lathe?

AP: Yeah, on the lathe. It... well I got the thing off now, but I put... this goes on this side. And you have to carve an X on the top and bottom of the thing. And you gotta put that thing on there and tighten this thing down and it'll actually push it in a little bit, and suck it down in there real tight. And this side it's got that big bow drill it'll spin it. Real quick and that's normally about what I use for strikers, like this one. And you just slide your tool back and forth across there 'til you get it where you want it!

EH: Cool.

AP: But...

EH: Do you... people sell callers?

AP: I've never sold a call. I've gave a lot away to like family members and stuff but I ain't sold any yet. I probably should, but that takes some of the fun out of it. It's a job instead of just kind of a hobby.

EH: Totally. Yeah. So most people are making their own or they're getting them from...

AP: Uh, now there's a decent-sized market for turkey callers. Companies are actually making it. 'Cause back in the 80s it was... there wasn't that many turkeys around here. So they're... it wasn't a massive sport. But that's when people were making their own and trying new stuff, and just an innovation time for turkey hunting. And as time went on, turkeys got more plentiful here because of management, and uh, companies started producing all kinds of calls and now more or less you usually just go buy one rather than make one.

EH: Mm. And the company, the manufactured ones, are they hand carved at all or what are they made out of?

AP: Ah. A lot of 'em are plastic. Plastic and glass and all kinds of weird stuff. It's hard to find a wooden slate call—store-bought anymore.

14:02

EH: Hm. And is there... like what are some resources that you go to for this sort of thing?

AP: For...?

EH: For calls, learning to make calls.

AP: Ew... I don't know where you could look it up.

EH: Did you go on YouTube at all?

AP: I just kind of... I've seen calls my whole life. I've been around 'em. My whole family's been hard core into hunting, and it... I just kinda had an idea what I wanted to do with it and just started doing all kinds of random things and it turned out... not half-bad. Some of them at least. Some of them are kind of ugly.

EH: I think they're all pretty cool. The corn cob one is pretty neat.

AP: Yeah, that's back when they first started making them, right there is what a lot of people did. They're real light so you can do real quick clucks and all kinds of stuff, but they're still got enough weight to actually make a good sound. That's a lot of 'em were like that back in the day.

EH: And you made that one too?

AP: Yeah.

EH: What kind of wood is that?

AP: I think that's white oak too.

EH: Okay.

AP: Real hard wood—that's why it's so screechy. I have one—this one. It's got a... osage orange. Which I don't think...

EH: Oh wow.

AP: What is that... I'll show you—I don't know if I have any sandpaper. It's actually orange wood, once you get it all sanded out. But it's been used so much it's all smeared over more or less. But it's a real bright, yellow-orange looking wood. It's real cool looking.

EH: Do you do anything with the fruit?

AP: Not really. There's only I think one anywhere near here and it's way back that way.

EH: Got it. Um, and then, so some of the other things you do—could you talk about how you learned to trap and um, and sort of what are the processes when you get an animal in the trap.

AP: Uh, nobody's ever really trapped that I've known. So... and I wanted to trap, just 'cause I've seen it in movies and it looked like it'd be fun!

EH: (laughs)

AP: So I got a couple books and read on 'em, read on 'em and tried to learn as much as I could and it took about 5 years to get everything I needed and all the knowledge I thought I need to start trapping. 'Cause my great-grandpa used to trap, and he died when I was 7 I think. And he, yeah, he wasn't trapping any time I was alive. But he had traps like them hanging up there—they're old traps. They've been sitting there 20, 25 years. And I'd been talking to people saying this is what I want to do. So I got 'em and you have to boil 'em because the smell of metal... apparently coyotes don't like the smell of steel. So you got to bury 'em in ash for like a month to get a nice even coat on the rust... see where they are starting to get

them pits—I haven't buried these yet. But it will give a nice even coat of rust for the dye to stick on. Then you boil 'em and it's called wood dye, I think. And it gets rid of a lot of the scent, it'll give them a nice even color (collar?) and after that you have to—it's called waxing 'em. You put wax on top of the water you're boiling 'em on. As you pull it through it'll coat 'em in wax and that helps conceal the scent a little bit more. And then you can't touch it with your bare hands because then you'll just ruin everything you spent all that time doing. So you gotta wear rubber or leather gloves to handle them after that went on. And what I do is I have a basket and I put pine boughs in it. Add a little bit of pine scent, so it's even a little more to conceal human scent on it. And then, more or less, you just go find... I go up that way (points up hill) go find an old trail and it's called... they're called lure, but it's just scent—different kinds of urine, different animals. What you do is you dig your hole and set your trap in there and... I don't think I got 'em up here, but there's these little like, mesh screens you put over top where the actual pan goes here. So that way dirt won't get down in here and all this stuff can still move.

EH: Okay

AP: Because if it gets... it can actually seize it up before it gets to the animal's foot and the animal will just pull out, which, I had that happen a couple times and it's not fun. Cause you get up there and all you see is a trap laying on top of the ground and no animal.

EH: (laughs)

AP: But you do all that, you dig a hole at a 45 degree angle. I use this feller here—it used to have a handle on it. You just dig down. You pour some scent down in the hole and you want to get it just about right. You want to use trees to your advantage, and brush, anything you can to get the animal placed the way you want it. So you can set the trap here where its foot's gonna be, so when it's down sniffing the hole where the scent is, there's no way it can get to it without stepping in the trap.

EH: Mm.

18:58

AP: And uh, every day you have to go run your entire trap line. I do it every morning. You start, do the whole thing, come back. And you have an animal, you just shoot it, and uh, bring it back here and skin it! Then, after you have it skinned... ugh. I have a flesh board, it's outside... when the skin's still soft and supple you fold it over it and you use... where'd it go? This thing. It's called a fleshing knife. And the board is actually about this big around and it's curved. And you just slide this down it and it'll take all the fat and the muscle and everything that's not what you want on there off. And uh, after that point, you stick it on that big metal wire thing—a stretcher. And it'll flatten it out, 'cause it'll be skin out, so the fur will be in there together, and you flatten it out. Then you hook these—that one to the back legs and this one to the tail, to keep it pulled tight so it will actually stretch it out a little bit, and that's where they get these funny looking, like the shape to them comes from that.

EH: Okay, yeah.

AP: When they're all stretched out. Pulls 'em like that, leave 'em on there awhile and a lot of times when people sell hides, that's all you gotta do. You take 'em and you sell 'em. But where I don't really sell 'em, I just keep 'em, I uh, while they're on there after they're dry, I'll mix up a batter, guess you could call it,

of mayonnaise, eggs, and vegetable oil is what it was. You slather it on there and let it set in for a day, and then wipe it all off. And you put it back on, let it set for 2 days and then wipe it back off. And then it'll get in there, all the bacteria that'll eat the root hairs out. So that the hair will fall out. It kills all that bacteria so you get this nice white looking skin. And it sets this stuff also will set the hair into the skin—kind of like cements it in.

EH: Uh-huh.

AP: So that the... you don't have to worry about it fallin' out.

EH: So if you wouldn't do that the hair might just fall out?

AP: Yeah, that's why there's hair in here. Everywhere!

EH: (Laughs) um, so, and you're putting the mayonnaise mixture on the inside, on the skin-side right?

AP: Yeah, all over the skin. On the outside, slather it down. And it also makes it real supple. 'Cause if not, then it's just real brittle and hard like—I didn't get the legs all that good (shows fox hide) and they're pretty stiff and you can see the head. I didn't get it because it was just tucked in like that.

21:46

AP: But uh,

EH: And what do you do with the... all the... everything else, the fat, the muscle, the guts?

AP: Uh, most of it you can't use because it's canine—you don't want to... can't really eat them or nothin'. Possums you really can't. I guess if you're desperate you could eat it! But I just take it back to the woods.

EH: Mmhm. Do you bury it?

AP: Na, somethin' will eat it.

EH: Yeah. And where do you get your scent from.

AP: Uh, buy it at the store.

EH: So is it real urine, or...?

AP: Yeah. It's a... grey fox urine, coyote urine, and bobcat urine. That's what I use now.

EH: How do people collect that?

AP: I have no clue. I don't want that job!

EH: (laughs)

AP: That stuff's potent!

EH: So a coyote is drawn towards bobcat urine?

AP: The curiosity thing is a big part of it, I'd say. Cause they're all super territorial animals. And if... it wants to know what this is doing in its territory—all that good stuff.

EH: Um, and how did you learn this?

AP: Uh, learn about the?

EH: The tanning aspect of it.

AP: Same thing—I think a magazine, actually is where... no, it was a book. I read Gary Paulsen books!

EH: Ha!

AP: And they're talking about tanning hides and making a whole bunch of stuff, and I looked to... researched it a little bit on the internet and got a couple books and then tried it on... my brother's ex-wife's first deer, so I tried it on my girlfriend's first deer and it worked then too! So I started doing small game.

EH: Was it *Hatchet*, the book?

AP: No, it was called—what was it... *Mr. Tuckett*, I think. One of them book series.

EH: I don't think I've read that one.

AP: About the 1800s wagon trail time.

EH: Cool! Um, and what was the other thing you said you do?

AP: Oh, I make sinkers and bullets.

23:56

I have a, uh, well same as that book. That book talks about having a 45 hawk and muzzle loader, I have one of them and I have everything to make the bullets for it. These are sinker molds. The... For catfishing. They're 2 ounce, 3 ounce, all the way down to like 8th ounce—small little 8th sinkers. I got... I got all kinds of molds. Those are the first one I got. And then I started buying a bunch. Just 'cause it's, it's kinda fun. And that's a splitshot, and little mini, a lot smaller sinkers. But my grandpa used to do it back before I was alive. He... I think these two were actually his. He, uh, he poured lead. That's where I got a lot of my lead casting stuff from. He worked for a phone company and when they pulled up all their old phone lines that were lead case, they replaced it with the plastic case, he just kept a bunch of lead, said he had a whole bunch of lead and I ingotized it, then I went to college for awhile... (sounds of tools)

EH: What does "ingotize" mean?

AP: Uh, take it, um, just a big chunk of lead with wire in it, pulled it all off, melted it down, poured it in these and it made little ingots. Like gold ingots? But they're lead. I have probably 100 pounds of that stuff saved now, but it... it was a lot easier to deal with when you don't have to worry about all the trash in there.

EH: Mmhm.

AP: Cause when you pour it and melt it all down, there's a layer on top of all the dirt and the rust and all the stuff you don't want in it. And you just scrape it off and then when you pour it in there you got good clean lead, instead of having that dirty lead from old phone lines. But, yeah, I've made bullets for my muzzle loader and actually went huntin' with it last year. For the first time.

EH: How'd it go?

AP: Eh, didn't shoot nothin' but I've shot a lot of bullets of it since then. It, it's a fun gun. Old muzzle loader, side lock. It was my grandpa's, he... it's old. 60s I think was when it was made. But it shoots amazing for how old it is.

EH: And what do you... what do you hunt with it?

AP: It's a deer. Deer muzzleloader. But I guess you can hung anything you want with it.

EH: And do you catfish?:

AP: Yes.

EH: Where do you go for that?

AP: Right up right here, there's a big dam called the Belleville Dam—I fish down there a lot. I used to. At least last year. I didn't really get to it so much this year, I work so much.

26:49

EH: So you use your own sinkers for that?

AP: Yeah.

EH: They work okay?

AP: Yeah! Do about all you want a sinker to do!

EH: (laughs) Yeah. Sink. Um, and... oh, where are you setting your sights on other, you know projects of skills?

AP: Uh, I'm sure I will. I just kind of, I see something and I want to try it and starting into it and then I just get way overboard into it and it's like the only thing I do for a year, and then the next year, same thing. It's been like that ever since I was little.

EH: It's a good way to build skills, though.

AP: Yeah.

EH: Do you... your mom was saying she was coaching archery. Are you a bow hunter too?

AP: Yes. I hunted bows about as long as I can remember. When I was, I think 7th grade, I got my first real hunting bow and that was the 3rd time I took it out, I got my first buck with a bow and it was the biggest, 3rd biggest buck now, but at the time it was the 3rd biggest buck I've ever killed in my life. That right there is... it's different than gun hunting. It's hard to explain but when you shoot the arrow at an actual animal, it's like slow motion. Your heart, you just feel everything. You watch it go. It's way different. It's a lot more of an adrenaline rush.

EH: Do you prefer that?

AP: I do, but I don't. I mean, it's a lot funner. But, I don't know. A lot of times you'll get mad because you can only shoot 50-60 yards with a bow. With a gun, if you can see it, more or less you can hit it, around here. But when they just hang out at just 70 yards and watch you all day, then they just walk off, that, that'll bug you.

EH: (laughs) Do you have to be... is it harder to kill something with a bow?

AP: It's harder to shoot a bow just because there's more into it. You have to be... it's harder to shoot a bow than a gun, because a gun, you just put in your shoulder, shoot. Bow you have to have your hand right and it's just. Especially the yardage thing, one of the hardest parts is as it arches, you have to know different yardages and you have to, well I have to, I ain't got a range finder, guesstimate where the deer is compared to where your bow hits at certain yardages. And try to get it where it needs to be.

EH: You said you took a class on welding?

AP: Yeah.

EH: Do you still do that?

AP: No, I went to college for a while, for a year and got a lot of, just a lot of new skills. Cause that's what I was gonna do, but I'm not getting around with it. But I went to school at first, when I was in high school, I took a 2 year class in auto body, to fix collision repairs, just to fix cars that have been in wrecks and stuff, got out of that and went to be a welder. When I was in school, I was kinda wanting to just build cars, like hotrods for a living, but that's not really a thing around here—you need to be in bigger cities for that to actually work out. But, you know...

EH: So what do you do for work?

AP: Uh, I work at a stamping press, stamping mill. I make car parts.

EH: Carports?

AP: Car parts, yeah for like...

EH: Oh, car parts. Mmhm.

AP: The inner part of like airbags and part of bearings and all kind of stuff like that. Just stamp it out with big old presses.

EH: Uh-huh. Nice. Well, maybe I'll take some photos of the callers. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

AP: Nothing I can think of.

EH: Um, oh do you have, other than your parents, are there other mentors you have who show you stuff or you are hunting with or that sort of thing?

AP: A lot of our family hunts together, like my uncles. Every muzzle loader season, we all get together and hunt together, do drives and stuff. But, other than that, not really.

EH: Um, oh I had another question. Oh! Are there other people around here you could think of that I could talk to that make traditional crafts or related to hunting like taxidermists... you know anything like that, woodworkers.

AP: Well, Gary Singleton, (interviewer's note: Gary is the husband of my host, Jane Singleton) he's big into woodworking. Um, trying to think of anybody else. Other than that I really don't know. I don't know nobody else that has a lathe except for just this. Some people got a lathe and make bowls and do that kind of stuff. There's a few people who make turkey calls, I talked to one guy at the arts and crafts fair at Cedar Lakes a couple years ago—he did the same thing, he lathed them down, but I haven't really seen him since then. He was there 2 years in a row, but after that, I ain't seen him.

EH: Yeah, you could probably get into some fine furniture building based on that. That caller.

AP: Actually, that think there is called a copy crafter. You'd mount it on here somehow, I ain't really messed with it any yet or nothing, but you make something like a table leg and then you put that table leg on that thing somehow, I still gotta read on it, and what it does is mimics it, so you have identical... it runs one thing down it and then it runs the knife the same.

EH: Oh wow.

AP: So you can have two identical things and you can do that over and over and over. So you have 4 table legs that are the same instead of being a little different.

EH: That's cool. Yeah, you could make, or like—stair railings.

AP: Yeah, that kind of stuff. But I ain't really messed with it too much, 'cause all these are different.

EH: Cool. Well thanks very much!

AP: No problem!

33:10

END OF TAPE