

# Donation of the Month

## Object: Roy Harris Carved Wagon

**Catalog #: M-9-C.1-7; E.8 a-b; E.50-51; E.59; H; I; M.1; O.7; 3.A; 3.D.3;3.I.4; 3.J.1; 3.K.1; 1977.630.1**  
**Donor: Museum Commission Purchase / Doyle O. Harris**

Pictures show him as a thin man in striped overalls with a good head of hair, a mass of wrinkles lining his weather-beaten face, and a cigarette clamped between his lips. In one image he's seated next to a hand-painted sign: "The Ol Whittler Display in Back of House." And that's how Roy Harris was known, as the ol' whittler.

Roy Elmer Harris (1893-1977) was born near Cassville, Missouri. He worked the land all his life, leaving school after the fourth grade to help out on his family's farm. After he retired he and his wife, Alma Ellis Harris, moved to the War Eagle community around 1958. He was hired by the manager of the newly formed Ozarks Arts and Crafts Fair (now the War Eagle Fair) to clean out fence rows and set up tables for the crafters.

Inspired by the wood carvers he saw at the fair, he knew he could make things as good as theirs, but the question remained: what to carve? After a few months of pondering he had an answer. He would carve what he knew — all the tools and implements and vehicles that he grew up with and used during his farming days. Because Roy Harris realized that the day was coming when youngsters wouldn't know a thing about farming, he wanted to leave behind something that documented the hard work involved in homesteading land, growing crops, and raising livestock.



Sometimes Harris made a pattern of what he wanted to make but mostly he relied on his memory of what farm equipment looked like. This eye for detail was learned at an early age. When new equipment came to town, farmers studied it to learn how it worked and how it was made. They knew that when something broke they would have to fix it themselves, maybe with a homemade part or two.



Roy Harris' attention to detail meant that his carvings were time consuming. It might take a few hours to make a simple plow but 30 to 40 hours to make a wagon with hitches that moved and wheels that turned. He fashioned his own tiny nails, made harnesses out of bits of leather, and bent hickory after boiling it on a stove to make it pliable. Whenever he needed a bit of metal it was down to the holler and the Model A, saw in hand. His wife made the rustic clothing for his small figures and sewed the harnesses together. Harris had a natural talent for carving but sometimes even he got stumped. He once said, "When I get tired or things don't go right, I put it away and come back to it later."

When Harris took his carvings to the fair he was astonished at the attention they drew. The \$7.50 he made on his first sale — a plow — probably seemed like a lot of money for something cobbled together from scraps. That weekend he made \$115 and used the money to purchase tools and supplies for his workshop. While he enjoyed carving, his greatest pleasure was visiting with the people at the fair who were fascinated by his miniatures. Harris used the opportunity to pass along his knowledge of old-time farming methods and pioneer life, regaling his audience with all the steps involved in making soap or producing sorghum.



With his whittling a success, Harris made more and more pieces, eventually making enough for a massive display of over 800 items. In order to depict early farm life, he created detailed scenes for numerous farm activities, making all the necessary tools and structures to tell the story. The blacksmithing area included tongs, chisels, ballpeen hammers, an anvil, and a forge and bellows while the butchering display featured tables, knives, barrels, a smokehouse, and gutted hogs and the poles to hang them from.

All of these activities were centered around a rural Ozarks homestead that featured a log cabin, barn, corncrib, well, and outhouse. A split-rail fence lined the perimeter and contained all the chickens, horses, mules, oxen, and hogs with their curly pipe-cleaner tails. Nearby, treed raccoons kept a nervous eye on several baying hounds. Various farm conveyances including a log wagon, an oxcart, a Conestoga wagon, a buckboard, a sleigh, and even a surrey “with the fringe on top.”



In 1964 the Harrises moved to Frost’s High Sky Inn, an old tourist motor court on a county road between Springdale and War Eagle, and set up their farm display. Shop owners and collectors offered Harris quite a bit of money to part with his collection — one offer was for \$4,000 — but Harris refused. At his age he felt that he might not have the time to replace his more detailed pieces. While he joked about his collection as his “bank account,” he hoped that one day it would find a place in an Arkansas museum. Harris continued to carve and sell small pieces but the bulk of the collection wasn’t for sale. Instead, he made it available for visitors to see and enjoy at no charge. Open seven days a week, the Harrises averaged 10 visitors a day and eventually had folks from all 50 states sign their guest books.

Unfortunately, the much-repeated story about Roy Harris’ carvings being in the collections of one of the Smithsonian Institution’s museums is untrue, but there is a connection. In 1967 Carl Fox and Ralph Rinzler were visiting Arkansas and the War Eagle craft fair because they wanted to feature Arkansas at the annual Festival of American Folklife (now the Smithsonian Folklife Festival). The two Smithsonian representatives happened by the Ol’ Whittler sign and took a chance. By the end of their visit they had bought 149 of Harris’s carvings to sell in the festival’s gift shop; they also asked him for an option on the other pieces, should he decide to part with them.

The Harrises traveled to Washington, DC, for the festival and later were asked to be part of Expo ‘67 in Montreal. But Mrs. Harris was told she couldn’t go on these trips until she “learned to do something.” Although she was already an accomplished quilter, she picked up her daddy’s Barlow knife and began carving small hinged dolls or “poppets” which she outfitted with homemade clothing. Even Doyle, one of the Harris’ sons, picked up his parents’ penchant for carving, making the miniature rifles now in the Museum’s collection.

But Roy Harris’ carving days were coming to an end; he gave up whittling around 1970 due to his failing eyesight. After the Museum was founded in 1975 the Museum Commission approached Harris with an offer to buy his collection. As he later said, the pieces “went where I wanted them to, in Northwest Arkansas. They had no museum ‘til lately, and when it came in, it tickled me.” Today the Museum has over 200 of Harris’ tools, animals, implements, wagons, and log structures in its collection. The pieces are used just as Roy Harris wished, to enlighten future generations about the history of farming in the Ozarks.

## CREDITS

"Smithsonian Buys Local Carving Collection," uncredited newspaper clipping, circa 1967; Dorothy Mitchell, untitled manuscript, probably published as a newspaper article, 14 July 1966; E. Alan Long, "Museum Acquires Carvings," *Rogers Sunday News*, 7 March 1976; Roy Elmer Harris obituary, *Rogers Daily News*, 27 June 1977; Ruth Muse, "Vista TV Staff Responsible for Unforgettable Birthday," *Merchandizer*, 7 December 1977; Ruth Muse, "Number of Visitors to Rogers Museum Was Amazing to Us," *Benton County Democrat*, 14 December 1977.