

Nunivak Carver

Artists along the Kuskokwim and Lower Yukon Rivers are a varied group of men and women, ranging from respected elders who use the same methods and materials as their parents and grandparents, to trained contemporary artists whose works are often rooted in tradition.

One of the best-known and most respected artists is Kay Hendrickson, a traditional carver who works in wood and ivory, who has recently achieved a measure of statewide and national recognition for his Nunivak dance sticks.

Kay is almost the only carver left who still makes these dance sticks. These large wooden shafts portray a hunter in a kayak with 10 or 15 stylized sea mammals and birds arranged on several cross-pieces in front of him, all with harpoons protruding from their sides. The sticks can be as much as six feet long, and were originally suspended from the roof of a qasgiq, or community house, on Nunivak Island. A dancer held onto the main shaft and thrust it back and forth in a dance. Occasionally, Kay will pick up a new stick he has just completed, begin softly chanting to himself, and do a few motions from the dance.

One of Kay's dance sticks, owned by the Anchorage Historical and Fine Arts Museum, was selected by Joan Mondale to be exhibited in the Vice Presidential residence. Kay and his wife, Mattie, have saved an invitation

to a dinner at the White House as a result of that, and a color photograph of Mrs. Mondale standing next to the dance stick hanging in her house. They also received a Christmas card from the Mondales this year.

Another dance stick received a Juror's Award in the 1980 Alaska Native Woodworking Competition and traveled to several communities in the state.

Kay has seen a lot of change in his lifetime. He was born in a village on the south side of Nunivak Island in 1909, and was raised in the old lifestyle. He has no formal art training; he says he learned to carve as a young man by watching his uncles and experimenting himself. He has been carving ever since, still using the old hand tools and methods he learned as a youth.

The rest of his life, however, reflects the contemporary lifestyle. He and his family moved to Bethel from Mekoryuk in 1974; they now live in a new house built by the Alaska State Housing Authority. Kay has never learned English, but his wife Mattie usually accompanies him to translate. It is easy to forget that he is seventy-plus years old, as he zips around on his new three-wheel motorcycle or takes his motorboat up or down river to collect the right type of wood.

Kay is not about to retire yet. He still has too many ideas in his head that he wants to make. His next project may be, in Mattie's words, "A different kind of dance stick, one you've never seen before."