



## **Ivy Billiot**

### **Woodcarver and Blowgun Maker**

Ivy Billiot, a member of the Houma Indian tribe, was born in 1945 in Grand Caillou and was raised in Houma. He recalls that his neighborhood then was in the woods and that there was nothing back there but a cane field. His father, Cyril Billiot, made baskets of split cypress for many years, a skill Ivy's brother Easton carries on today.

Ivy Billiot is a woodcarver whose work is exceptional in its beauty and close attention to detail. For years he worked for Terrebonne Parish as a crew leader and channel finder. He was an expert chain saw operator whose work entailed cutting down trees in ditches and along bayous. Retired now, he is a full-time artist who does much of his carvings on commission. A number of private collectors collect Ivy Billiot's pieces. His regular buyers specifically request a more natural look. Much of Ivy's work is marked by its lifelike realism, complete with such painstaking details as whiskers on a crow and blue and green highlights in a trout's scales. He carves a wide variety of birds, animals, and other objects: ducks and geese, alligators, chickens, pirogues, fishing boats, and blowguns. Ivy creates wildlife carvings from the wood native to Louisiana. Billiot says that he is always experimenting and trying new things in his work.

Mr. Ivy Billiot says, "I've been doing this ever since I've been a little boy. I guess I must have started when I was about five years old, maybe six. I used to see those other boys play with little boats in the canal, you know," and so he decided to make himself one. Later, when he saw how a real boat was made, "I said, I can do this" and went home and made an accurate model. When he was perhaps thirteen or fourteen years old, he made a plywood seaplane to play with in the ditch. He also made an eight-foot-long plane and added an old washing machine motor before selling it for five dollars. He is knowledgeable about electronics, and as an adult, he once made a working satellite dish. He says, "I can do just about anything if you show me what it looks like."

Although he occasionally carved when he was working for the parish, Ivy became much more serious about woodcarving when he retired. He says, "It was kind of rough when I got started, but I caught on." Working at home, he carves his pieces by hand, but sometimes uses a chainsaw or squirrel saw to rough out pieces. He works from

observation, pictures in books, or memory. Of alligators and other creatures, he makes often he says, "I have it in my mind, it's stuck there." He is scrupulous about detail not only in carving, but also in painting his pieces.

Mr. Billiot also makes blowguns. After carefully inspecting one of Antione Billiot's blowguns, Ivy went into the woods, cut a suitable piece of elderberry, and carved a blowgun and darts. After finishing, he decided to decorate it. Plaited strips of palmetto were the traditional decoration, but since Ivy didn't know how to braid palmetto, he decided to put some feathers on it and make a design by wrapping leather strips around the blowgun. He has been making blowguns for sale ever since. Ivy has begun painting small animals on some of his blowguns, especially red crawfish, an emblem associated with the Houma tribe.

Mr. Billiot has demonstrated his skills at the Louisiana Folklife Festival, the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, at Vermillionville, and other fairs and festivals.

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