

## Owen, Blake



### Wooden Toy Maker

Mr. Blake Owen was from Alexandria, Louisiana. He was born in 1923, in Vicksburg, Mississippi. Mr. Owen was Alexandria's celebrated toy maker, and owned the Blake's Sawdust Shop where he crafts many fine toys.

A visit to Mr. Owen's workshop was like a visit to Santa's shop at the North Pole. Mr. Owen, who fashioned traditional wooden toys and whirligigs (decorative weather vanes) from unpainted wood and simple materials such as wire, string, and rubber bands, got into toy making as a hobby. Mr. Owen began making simple toys he played with as a young boy such as hooey sticks. This was a notched stick with a propeller at one end which, when stroked, causes the propeller to turn. He also made rubber band and clothespin switchblade knives, jumping jacks, spool tractors, tops, and more. Almost all of the toys that Owen constructed were patterned on colonial American toys and upon some that were made in Europe long before.

The popularity of Owen's wooden toys with children of all ages made him and his wife frequent festival participants and demonstrators. Owen felt that his toys were so appealing because they are folk toys that the adults, who particularly like the tops and the rolling ducks, remember from their childhood. Children are fascinated by their simplicity and by their ability to do something or to fool someone. A strong motivator for Owen to pursue his hobby was the desire to see people enjoying themselves. For this reason, all of his toys were placed on tables at kid-level, where they can be touched, picked up, and played with by curious kids. Many of Blake Owen toys are puzzle toys, which he would not sell without an explanation. The "idiot stick" (fishhook game), for example, challenges the player to hook a rubber band with a notched dowel. The "T" puzzle is another that keeps the player re-positioning four small pieces of wood in endless variations until they are finally correctly placed to form the letter T.

Mr. Owen, who made with his toys for the past twenty years, was a member of the Red River Arts and Crafts Guild. He demonstrated and sold his toys at a host of festivals throughout the southern United States. He had the distinction of being asked to show and demonstrate his creations at the New Orleans World's Fair. Mr. Owen was included in the Alexandria Museum of Art's publication, "Doing It Right and Passing It On," as a master craftsman and traditional folk toy maker. Folklife Guide, the official guide to folk art and folk artists in Louisiana, also cited Blake Owen as one of Louisiana's top traditional toy makers. He was inducted into the Louisiana Folklife Center, Hall of Master Folk Artists in July 2003. Mr. Owen died March 3, 2011.

