Angola Arts, Crafts Festival features variety of media

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ANGOLA — A little old wine maker has become a money maker for inmate artist Bill Ollis. His pen-and-ink drawing of an old man tending a vat of grapes is his best seller when the Louisiana State Penitentiary gates open each year for the Angola Arts and Crafts Festival.

Because he can't make prints in the small prison hobby shop, Ollis painstakingly draws copy after copy of the work until he feels he has enough to satisfy customer demand.

Ollis will be among the scores of prisoners participating in the ninth annual festival from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

Admission is free, but visitors sometimes spend a total of more than $30,000 on a festival weekend as they hunt for bargains on paintings, sketches, sculptures, leather goods, metal and wood work and arts and crafts.

"They put out some top-quality work," Ollis said of his fellow inmates. "All the media are there — you name it."

The 43-year-old Cincinnati, Ohio, native's soft-spoken demeanor belies his murder conviction for his part in the 1981 beating death of a man near Slidell, a crime that sent him to Angola in 1983 after a brief escape from a Covington jail in 1982.

Ollis started developing his latent artistic talents after Mandeville police caught him two days after he and eight other prisoners broke out of jail.

"I was on the run, and they put me in the dungeon in the parish," he recalled. In isolation, Ollis had time to think about the wrong turn he had taken.

He ordered some charcoal pencils and paper with his parents' help and began to draw.

"I didn't get off into watercolors until 1985," Ollis said. "I got a hobby box and ordered some books on watercolors. Then I just took it up by myself." "I'm just now stepping off into clay sculptures. Hopefully I'll have a piece to show at the festival."

Although he's won first- or second-place awards in the festival competition for four or five years, Ollis had a "why me?" response when reporters from two daily newspapers requested press releases.

"There's so many talented people here," he said.

"Although a guy may win a first place, the guy next to him may be just as talented."

Ollis earned enough money to hire an attorney to guide him through the clemency process, and believes he could earn a living with his paintings if the governor signs a favorable Pardon Board recommendation.

"I know what to paint based on what sells here. I'm making a living here and I'm going to do it on the street," he said.

In 1982, Ollis used a bed-sheet rope to escape from the St. Tammany Parish Jail. Today, he uses art to "escape" the monotonous life at Louisiana's maximum-security prison.

"It keeps me busy," he said.

Escaping from Angola — either physically or mentally — is a difficult proposition, however.

Walking from the hobby shop after showing his work to a reporter and still deep in conversation, Ollis inadvertently passed a checkpoint on the "walk" without getting permission from a security officer.

"Where are you going? You're still a convict," the guard gruffly reminded him.