

Museum of the Hardwood Tree Growing in Fort Smith

by Dan Maher

A new organization has been quietly taking root in Fort Smith-The Hardwood Tree Museum (HTM). While a hardwood tree museum may conjure up images of parading past examples of tree stumps, this Museum is featuring a key industry in the history of the greater Fort Smith region. Bob Worley, founder of the HTM says it was the hardwood tree that fueled the manufacturing prowess that earned Fort Smith the title "Jewel of the Southwest."

According to the Hardwood Tree Museum website (<http://hardwoodtreemuseum.org/>) Fort Smith produced commodities ranging from "split rail fences and railroad ties to agricultural implements, steamboats, barrels, brooms, caskets, tools, trunks, vehicles, furniture, army rifles, air gliders...in the early 1900's a single plant was producing 18,000 wagons a year, including army wagons used in France in World War I." It is this rich history that is being remembered and preserved by this budding museum.

Where might Bob Worley have gotten an idea for such a museum? "From the lowly silk worm," he says. Five years ago on a trip to Yokohama Japan he happened upon a silk worm museum that showed all the steps from the lifecycle of a silk worm up to a \$20,000 kimono made of its silk. "If they can do that for the silk worm," Worley thought, "surely we can do the same for the hardwood tree."

The Hardwood Tree Museum incorporated as a 501(c) 3 non-profit organization in January of 2009 has a tract of land for a future building donated by the Fort Chafee Redevelopment Authority. The land is located at the opposite end of the shared parking lot of the Janet Huckabee Arkansas River Valley Nature Center, which the HTM works closely with. Bob Worley estimates that it will take 6-7 more years to raise the funds needed to construct a facility to house the museum.

In the mean time the group of volunteer members has been preserving the hardwood tree heritage of the area in a number of ways. In addition to planting the lost or seldom seen trees on the future grounds the HTM such as oak, hickory, Osage orange, white walnut, and catalpa, the group is also capturing oral histories of individuals that were crucial to the wood manufacturing industry. These interviews will be posted on the HTM website. The Preston Swofford interview, for example, can already be read online. According to the interview Swofford "went to work for the Ward Furniture Company in the sales department" in December of 1951.

Billy Higgins, a founding member of the museum and Professor of History at UAFS, says it is a "museum without walls" at the moment. While they may not have a building it does not

stop the group from planting trees and holding educational events such as the one on November 23 and November 24 at the Janet Huckabee Nature Center located at Chaffee Crossing. The Nature Center co-operates with Hardwood Tree Museum to promote the use history and uses of hardwoods.

In addition to their website The Hardwood Tree Museum can be found on Facebook and Twitter. Their monthly meetings are open to the public and held the 2nd Thursday of each month at 4:00 p.m. at the Main Branch of the Fort Smith Public Library.



Founding members of the Hardwood Tree Museum Bob Worley and Billy Higgins stand where the Hardwood Tree Museum will one day.



Bob Worley and Billy Higgins developed the vision of the HTM over coffee at Sweet Bay.



Kropp furniture factory 1901 (Photo courtesy of the Hardwood Tree Museum).



Hays Copeland inspects the Jesup Wood Collection in Memphis as a possible acquisition for the HTM (Photo courtesy of the Hardwood Tree Museum).



Mary Brewer, of the Arkansas Valley Woodturners, works on an elm wood bowl.



Hays Copeland holds a bowl he made that consists of over 500 individual pieces of wood that have been glued together then finely finished.



Bowls and spinning tops displayed a fine degree of craftsmanship.



Grey Goodwin of Greenwood holds a wooden pen that he made with some assistance from his grandfather Joe Goodwin.

All photographs except those noted are by Dan Maher.