

## Museum To Celebrate Importance Of Hardwood To Fort Smith



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Billy Higgins, from left, Bob Worley and James Reddick talk about the establishment of a hardwood museum at the Janet Huckabee Arkansas River Valley Nature Center. Riddick is seated on a segment of petrified wood and Higgins and Worley are standing with another piece at their feet.



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A segment of petrified tree sits at the entrance to the Janet Huckabee Arkansas River Valley Nature Center.



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One area spoken about for a hardwood museum is about 100 yards down the Field and Forest Trail immediately off the Janet Huckabee Arkansas River Valley Nature Center parking lot.

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Where there is wood, there is a way.

And one local organization wants the raw material that helped fuel the Fort Smith-area economy for more than 150 years to be preserved and interpreted in a museum that pays homage to the hardwood tree.

Through the Association of the Hardwood Tree, the Hardwood Tree Museum is steps closer to becoming a reality, situated in a forest setting near the Janet Huckabee Arkansas River Valley Nature Center, according to Bob Worley, one of the committee members working on the museum since the group's incorporation in 2010.

Worley said Fort Smith is a natural fit for the location of the Hardwood Tree Museum, because Fort Smith served as the epicenter of the wood industry for many years.

"Fort Smith, being located on a navigable waterway and on the border of Indian Territory, developed by the early 20th century into the manufacturing center of the Southwest with 100 manufacturers producing a great variety of wood products, from railroad ties, brooms, barrels and caskets to furniture of every description and vehicles of many types, including steamboats," Worley said, adding that wheelbarrows, folding beds, wooden training rifles and split rail fences also were produced in the area.

By the early 1900s, a single plant in the city was producing 18,000 wagons a year, including Army wagons used in France during World War I. Stylish furniture produced in Fort Smith was exhibited at the Columbian World Exposition in Chicago in 1893. By the end of World War II, Fort Smith had become the largest furniture production center west of the Mississippi River.

Pioneers of the furniture industry in Fort Smith, namely Ed Ballman, were instrumental in the creation of the Ozark and Ouachita National Forests in 1907, according to Worley, a member of the Arkansas River Valley Hall of Fame.

While Fort Smith served as a wood manufacturing capital in the state, other Arkansas cities were secondary processors of wood, Worley said.

Baseball bats were produced in Harrison; sewing machine cabinets were made in Trumann; persimmon wood blocks for golf clubs were produced in Forrest City; and Pine Bluff was known as the world's largest producer of Ben Pearson's bows and arrows. Even small communities, like Davidson, northwest of Van Buren, rallied around family-owned businesses, like the Hopkins family's hardwood flooring and plow handle business.

Billy Higgins, history professor at the University of Arkansas at Fort Smith and Hardwood Tree association member, said the museum will not only tell the economic story of the hardwood tree, but a conservation story as well.

"We can no longer afford to take our forest for granted," Higgins said. "They were so vast, and we were so few."

James Reddick, a local architect and another Hardwood Tree Association member, said the association is looking for stories and artifacts for the museum.

"We've talked to a lot of business owners, but we want to talk with business workers," Reddick said.

The organization also hopes to find owners or former owners of sawmills or foresters, who can help tell the story of the hardwood tree from planting seedlings to cutting the trees down to sawmill processing before the wood was sent on to manufacturers.

Through its mission — to acquire, preserve, exhibit and interpret the hardwood tree and objects produced that are of historical significance and relevant to sustaining and improving quality of life — the museum will look to education and discovery in showing reverence to the hardwood tree and capturing its economic heritage in the area.

Volunteers are needed to assist with research, transcribing interviews, organizing and collecting information, planning events and planting trees; for information, call Worley at 782-4220, Higgins at 788-7588 or Reddick at 782-4085.

The Hardwood Tree Museum will work in cooperation with several entities toward the goal, including the Janet Huckabee Arkansas River Valley Nature Center, the UAFS history department, Fort Smith Historical Society, Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, Fort Smith Museum of History, Chaffee Crossing Trust and the Arkansas Museum Association.

Some of the first pieces the museum acquired were petrified tree trunks and limbs discovered in LeFlore County during coal-mining operations in the 1990s.

Worley said during strip pit-mining operations on what is known as Pine Mountain, petrified trees and other flora were found. The four larger pieces of tree trunks, ranging in size from 28 inches in diameter and 18 inches in height with an estimated weight of 350 pounds to 18 inches in diameter and a height of 9 inches with an estimated weight of 175 pounds, are on loan to, and on display, at the Janet Huckabee Arkansas River Valley Nature Center.

The Department of Geology at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville has determined from the location where the objects were discovered and the examination of the two pieces that they came from the Pennsylvanian stratigraphy of the Carboniferous Period and are approximately 300 million years old, according to Worley.

Higgins said some of the petrified pieces had indications of some type of cactus or palm and sea urchins.

A capital campaign for funds to build the museum will begin soon, with plans to build near the Nature Center so that they can share a parking lot.

“So we can avoid having to cut down any more of these trees,” Higgins said, referring to the oak forest surrounding the Nature Center on former Fort Chaffee land near Wells Lake.

Trees are one of the world’s greatest resources — simple and profound, according to Higgins.

“And worthy of a reverence that we want to build into this museum,” he added.

### **Tree Facts**

For information about the Hardwood Tree Museum or how to help, visit [hardwoodtreemuseum.org](http://hardwoodtreemuseum.org) or the Facebook page, Museum of the Hardwood Tree.

For information, contact Bob Worley at 782-4220, Billy Higgins at 788-7588 or James Reddick at 782-4085.