

# Joseph Maurice Ford

## (1925-2014)

### “Joe”

By Jerry Long  
c.2025



Joe Ford



#### **Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Monday, 7 July 2014, p.2C:**

Joseph M. "Joe" Ford, 89, of Owensboro died Thursday, July 3, 2014, at his home. He was born February 8, 1925 in Daviess County to the late Maurice and Mary Ethel (Crabtree) Ford. Joe was a Christian man and loved God. He was a member of Pleasant Grove Baptist Church. He served in the Merchant Marines from 1944-1946 and attended the University of Kentucky. He retired from the Owensboro Natural Science Museum after 21 years of service and after his retirement worked for the Daviess County Parks Dept from 1987 until 2004. In 2008 Joe was proclaimed Owensboro Official Naturalist by the city of Owensboro. In 2005, Joe was actively involved with the Joe Ford Library and in 2010, the Joe Ford Nature Center opened, where he was involved until his health failed.

He was preceded in death by his first wife, Nancy Boyle Ford, on January 13, 2000; a sister, Alice Warren; and a brother, R. Douglas Ford.

He is survived by his second wife, Grace Carter Ford; a daughter, Dianne Ford of Owensboro; three stepsons, Gary Taylor and his wife, Laura R., of Amelia Island, FL, Kenneth Taylor and his wife, Laura K., of Lexington, Ky., and Ronald Taylor of Princeton, Ky.; his loving caregiver, Brenda McDaniel of Calhoun, Ky.; and several nieces and nephews, and several step nieces and nephews.

Services will be at 11:00 a.m. on Wednesday, July 9, 2014, at the Chapel of James H. Davis Funeral Home & Crematory. Burial will follow in Elmwood Cemetery. Visitation will be from 2:00 to 8:00 p.m. on Tuesday and after 9:00 a.m. Wednesday at the funeral home. Memorial contributions may be made to the Joe Ford Nature Center Endowment Fund, 1917 Merriewood Dr., Owensboro, KY 42301 or the Humane Society, 3101 W 2nd St., Owensboro, KY 42301.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 24 July 1955, p.5D:**

**FROM SNAKES TO STARS  
Art And Natural History Museum  
Being Rejuvenated At Local Library**

By Emmett Rogers

If you are interested in anything from astronomy to zoology, then it would pay you to drop in at the next meeting of the Green River Art and Natural History Museum.

A group of persons with a wide variety of interests got together at the public library a few weeks ago to see about rejuvenating the museum, which was first chartered in 1923. Already Joe Ford, of Sorgho, one of the leaders of the group, had several offers of collections of rocks, Indian relics, and insects to be used in a projected program of periodic displays.

The group plans to stimulate interest in the museum, housed on the first floor of the library building, by reorganizing the present displays and presenting new ones in a meaningful fashion.

A committee, including Jack Keeley, Robert Reid, and Scott Holder had already been appointed to develop a floor plan and case arrangement.

At the next meeting, scheduled for 7:30 Thursday night. Ford, who has a museum of his own at home, will present a program on reptiles, and a number of 4-H boys will display their work on an insect project.

Ford, who spoke to the Rotary Club last week, on snakes, has been a collector all his life, he said.

Right now, besides his extensive collection of Indian relics, geological specimens, and insects, he has a side porch full of snakes. He has studied them carefully, even to the extent of laying them out on the kitchen table to count scales, a positive way of identifying them, but he doesn't recommend everyone try this – he knows which ones to take into the kitchen.

None of Ford's snakes are poisonous, but a few of them will chew on a finger that gets close enough.

The range of Ford's interests is breathtaking, as he talks about bird-banding, digging in 3,000 year old Indian mounds, raising moths, geological formations, and the best diet for a king snake.

It is this wide interest in natural history that drove Ford to spark a revival in the existing museum.

The original charter of the Green River Museum and Art Society, notarized in September, 1923, was signed by D. W. Griffith, Edward W. Smith, Cora Lee Webb, Mrs. John Gilmore, Mrs. Ward Pedley, and George V. Triplett.

The present group plans meetings on the last Thursday of each month. Its schedule already includes a talk by James Hauser, art professor of Kentucky Wesleyan College, "Mona Lisa or Donald Duck, It's Art To Me," in August; an exhibit by the Camera Club in October; and a contest in the spring for artists in the surrounding area.

Sigfried Weng, of the Evansville Museum, has offered to lend collections to the museum here, and to help the group along in any way he can.

A big help in reorganizing the museum would be the by-laws or any of the minutes of the organization that existed under the 1923 charter.

When the organization is a little farther along, supplementary meetings may be held to satisfy the many fields of interest indicated so far – ornithology, astronomy, archaeology, herpetology, photography, entomology, philately, art and, history.

As divergent as these interests seem, those who have worked with the group so far have found a common ground in the museum.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 18 March 1962, p.1B:**

**Joseph Ford, Collector Of Indian  
Artifacts, Has Nucleus Of Museum**

By Ed Shannon, Messenger-Inquirer

A small concrete block building on the farm of Joe Ford near Sorgho houses a fine collection of Indian artifacts, geological finds and genuine antiques that would form a firm nucleus for a fine museum.

The collection, especially the Indian artifacts, represent practically a lifetime of hunting, digging and trading with other artifact buffs. Ford is president of the Daviess County Farm Bureau.

The collector admits he has been interested in the collection of Indian relics, bones and other items since he was a young boy.

Other collections of rocks, antiques, mounted butterflies and other items just developed naturally as he enlarged his Indian collection.

The collection now is neatly aligned along the walls and in cases in the center of a building that possibly had one time been the farm machine shop. Actually, Ford doesn't have room to display all of his various collections as he would like, and many are piled up under cases and counters.

Many visitors are attracted to the exhibit each year. These visitors include Boy Scout troops, students from various schools, 4-H study groups and others. In fact, the collection has

become so popular Ford has been compelled to place a 10-cent per person charge for groups visiting the exhibit.

While the building contains many items of great interest to adults as well as children, the big attraction is an outdoor exhibit of many types of snakes, a skunk and an alligator, plus a wild flower exhibit that is termed magnificent when in full bloom.

The snake exhibit and other outdoor attractions normally open around April 1, when the snakes start becoming active.

Through Ford's interest in the collection and his activity with other archaeological societies around the country, a state society, called the Green River Archaeological Society was formed and affiliated with the Central States Archaeological Society, comprised of societies in St. Louis, Illinois, Indiana and Northwest Arkansas.

The Green River Society was founded in 1961 at a charter meeting held at Ford's home. His attractive wife, Nancy, is secretary-treasurer of the state organization. Clemens Caldwell of Danville is state president. He has one of the largest collections of Indian artifacts in the state, valued at several thousands of dollars.

Ford himself is a contributor to the quarterly magazine published by the Central States Society.

A visit to the exhibit at the Ford farm amazes the visitor with the intimate knowledge that Ford has with practically every item of the thousands in his collection, even down to the minute bone fish hooks found in the grave of some Indian long dead.

In most cases, Ford can tell you how, when and where the articles were found, and whether he had located them or traded or bought them from another collector.

Ford has to admit, however, that the responsibility for showing people through the exhibit is left up to his wife, particularly during the spring and summer when he is busy with the farm work.

Apparently there are some hilarious times at the Ford farm when Mr. Ford is out in the fields. Evidently the vivacious Mrs. Ford takes things calmly when visitors come to the house to see the exhibit, "sometimes as late as 10 p.m.," she reported.

Mrs. Ford said it was not uncommon for her to turn off the oven where she is baking a cake as much as four times in order to show the exhibit.

One of the more hilarious times she had, Mrs. Ford recalled, had nothing to do with the exhibit. She said one hot summer day, while busy ironing, she was interrupted by a screaming man who came to her front door. She described him as huge, with very wide shoulders, stripped to the waist. He was the operator of a piece of road machinery working on the road about half-mile away.

She said he came to her door screaming for her come get a snake that had crawled up onto his machine. Mrs. Ford, said while she maneuvered with a stick to get the snake off the piece of machinery, the man remained on the bank above the road in front of her house, quivering with fear.

The hobby of collecting Indian artifacts can be a hazard in the household, too, Mrs. Ford recounted. She told of the time she had to be in the hospital and a woman was hired to clean the house in her absence. The woman refused to dust a table in one room of the house. The table was the resting place for an Indian skull her husband was putting back together.

Ford hesitates to place a value on the collection. Actually, it would be difficult to attempt to place a value on a collection that has taken more than 30 years to amass.

Then too, there is the expense of travel; time consumed in locating the various items; the time involved in making "trades" for items, and the vast job of cataloguing and making displays for the huge collection.

Most of the Indian artifacts collected by Ford in recent years have been found along the Ohio and Green rivers. In most instances, they are bared to searchers after the river water has washed away banks of the river.

A favorite spot for such searches is a section of bank along the Ohio River, on the Indiana side, where in years long past, an Indian tribe buried its dead. Some parts of the Green River Valley also have revealed some fine specimen.

Many items in the Ford collection have been gifts of friends in this area. These mostly are antiques and other items not directly connected with Indian artifacts.

While Ford may be reluctant to part with some items in his collection, almost all are for sale—at a price. However, those for sale are items that he has found, traded for or bought. Items given by friends are not for sale. They are placed in the exhibit, catalogued with the name of the donor, who is given ample credit for having donated the item.

Ford is keeping these items in his exhibit, and adding to them, with one thought in mind—some day Owensboro will have a museum of its own that will be of immense benefit to both children and adults.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Tuesday, 14 April 1964, p.7A:**



INDIAN RELIC – This quartz bannerstone, shown by its owner, Joe Ford of the Sorgho community, was plowed up and found on the Andy McLean farm southwest of Owensboro in 1900. It is considered to be the finest specimen of its type ever found in the state of Kentucky.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 2 October 1966, p.1C:**

**1,000 Persons Preview  
Natural Science Museum  
Formal Opening  
Slated Saturday**

More than 1,000 school children have made the Owensboro Area Natural Science Museum a resounding success even before the official opening this Saturday at 2 p.m.

"We are succeeding beyond our expectations," Joe curator, said. "If we continue to grow as rapidly as we are now, we may have to build on to our present plant or find another building."

After taking over a building at 602 Sycamore St., which formerly housed the Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church, on June 1, the museum has been in constant use by schools the Daviess, McLean, Hancock and Ohio counties. Fifty displays are presently on loan to schools with another 42 to go out this week.

The museum, formed as a pioneering project nationally part of Title III of the aid to education bill, has spent more than \$20,000 for cases and equipment, along with receiving numerous material from local residents.

According to the federal education bill, the Title III funds must be spent on material to supplement education. Ford said other school systems have been purchasing books, films and other such items, but the establishment of a museum with the federal funds is the first project of this type in the nation. The results have pleased both Dr. Kenneth Estes, city school superintendent, and Washington, D.C. officials. The museum also has attracted before some national interest.

The museum's service to the other three counties is known as Owensboro Area Mobile Museum. Maurice Henton, director of the museum, and Ford fill requests from teachers in the county's schools for various another items.

"Sometimes we have to strip our displays here to meet their formerly requests," Ford said.

Besides Henton and Ford, other employes are Mrs. Gerald Mehrlich, secretary, Sam Griffith, truck driver, and Arnold Wilkey, nightwatchman.

The museum, after official to ribbon-cutting ceremonies Saturday, will be open from 1 to 5 p.m. seven days a week.

"We can use anything of historic value that persons may to wish to loan," Ford said. Ford, who used to have approximately 1,000 school children visit his farm yearly to see his collections of various articles, has loaned the museum most of his own collection.

William Dean of Kentucky to Wesleyan also has loaned the museum his valuable gun collection while other residents have donated items from paintings to a mastodon's tooth.

At present, 48 cases are ready for the viewing public with the newest items being a coin collection, snake cages, dress displays and a promised case of articles from Bell Telephone.

Even before official opening, however, museum officials believe because of the demand, they will have to seek a new and larger building.

"It's really been amazing," Ford said.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Monday, 20 January 1969, pp.1A & 8A:**

## Area Museum Open House Draws 3,000

The Owensboro Area Museum officially opened its doors to the public for the first time at its new location Sunday.

The museum's open house in the former Andrew Carnegie. Free Public Library building at 9th and Frederica Streets attracted some 3,000 persons of all ages.

While adults socialized and children romped through the aisles of display cases, one elderly Owensboroan said the event was "like an old-fashioned tent meeting."

Children regarded with awe the live reptiles in wire cages and displayed looks of wonderment as scale model trains raced around tracks built at eye-level. For the older patrons, volunteer museum workers in specialized fields answered questions and served refreshments, donating their time from the 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. opening.

One room was not yet ready for public view Sunday. Museum curator Joe Ford said a special room dedicated to local history will open in about two weeks.

From its humble beginnings at the former location at 602 Sycamore, the museum has grown increasingly important to the community. A "mobile museum" takes films and display cases of museum exhibits into the grade and high schools, along with volunteer lecturers who are near-experts in their fields; science programs are being video-taped in the museum for wide, distribution in schools in other counties; museum activities and new acquisitions are aired each Sunday on WOMI radio and nearly a dozen historical or educational clubs hold meetings there regularly. Two new clubs, the Owensboro Genealogical Society and the Daviess County Fish and Game Association, were added to the rolls this week.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Thursday, 9 February 1978, pp.1C & 2C:**

## Museum has expanded its window on the world

by Keith Lawrence

"In the beginning God created heaven and the earth."

Those words from Genesis, written above the entrance to the Tunnel of Origins in the new Owensboro Area Museum, form the theme of the new 13,000-squarefoot history and natural science facility on South Griffith Avenue.

Area residents will get their first look at the \$400,000 facility at 2 p.m. Sunday. Doors will swing open following a brief ribbon-cutting ceremony presided over by U. S. Sen. Wendell Ford, D-Ky., and Mayor Jack Fisher.



Inside the first Owensboro building constructed specifically for a museum, visitors find samples of things that have come along since the days when "the earth was without form and void."

From *Struthiomimus*, the dinosaur that greets you at the door, to a pair of blue jeans and a T-shirt, hanging in the fashion gallery, the displays trace the development of the earth and its people – primarily in America and Daviess County.

Between the lobby and the Tunnel of Origins, visitors can step a few decades into the past and shop in an old country store.

Outside the store entrance near a mounted bald eagle is a wooden bench, hand-carved by Billy Reid from an old hollow tree at Reid's Orchard.

The exterior of the store came from Greenwell's store in Curdsville. The interior was designed by museum volunteers as a "typical" country store.

There's an old coal stove, checker board, a rocking chair, a couple of churns and a crank telephone. On the shelves are bonnets, whiskey jugs, candy sticks and trinkets.

Inside the Tunnel of Origins are scale maps of the solar system, galaxy, state and county. The tunnel itself is dark with backlighting of displays.

Joe Ford, museum director, says knowledge of space is expanding so fast that the solar system map is already outdated even though it was built in late 1976.

Since then two more moons of Jupiter have been discovered (making a total of 14), and a space probe has found rings around Uranus like those around Saturn.

At the end of the tunnel is a rock and mineral display accented with ultraviolet lighting to make the minerals more colorful.

Emerging from the tunnel, one is confronted with a large mural of a prehistoric landscape featuring an 18-foot pink *Tyrannosaurus Rex*. The mural was painted by local artist Bill Williams.

In this section of the museum are several fossils from days when creatures like those in the mural walked the earth.

A little farther down the hall people begin to appear. The anthropological exhibit includes skeleton of a woman who lived in this area 3,000 years ago.

A few steps farther and civilization has advanced to the settling of Daviess County. Here are trousers worn by Joseph Hamilton Daveiss (for whom the county was named), a scale model of a local horse-drawn milk wagon and a large photograph of the hanging of Rainey Bethea in 1936.

There's a still that once ran with Daviess County moonshine and original warrants for members of the Hatfield and McCoy clans in eastern Kentucky.

Around another turn in the hall is the fashion gallery which begins with clothing from the 18th century and progresses to blue jeans and a T-shirt.

Among the 19 items in this display is an ante-bellum green taffetta dress with a hoop skirt. Although it isn't the oldest dress in the collection, it has been in the collection of the Owensboro Museum longer than any of the other items.

Ford says the dress came from the old Green River Museum which existed here prior to World War I.

Farther on, the model railroad exhibit from the old museum at Ninth and Frederica, which opened in 1969 and closed in 1976, has improved, enlarged and expanded.

Across the room from it are the snakes, spiders, alligators and fish. For the first time, the local museum is able to accommodate poisonous snakes.

And if you want to buy a non-poisonous snake for a pet, they're on sale here.



By now you've probably spent 30 minutes or more looking at these things and other items too numerous to mention. But before you leave, take a left at the bald eagle and visit the art gallery.

Here through March 12 more than 30 original oil paintings by local artist C.G. "Moose" Morehead are on display.

Past the gallery is the planetarium where many school children are given their first taste of astronomy. Farther down the hall is the new 18th century parlor, furnished from the collection of the late Elizabeth Maxwell Sammis.

Most of the furniture in the room dates from the mid to late 1700s. The parquet floor is a scaled-down copy of the floor in Thomas Jefferson's music room at Monticello.

Now as you pass the display of Confederate currency, you find yourself back at old Struthiomimus.

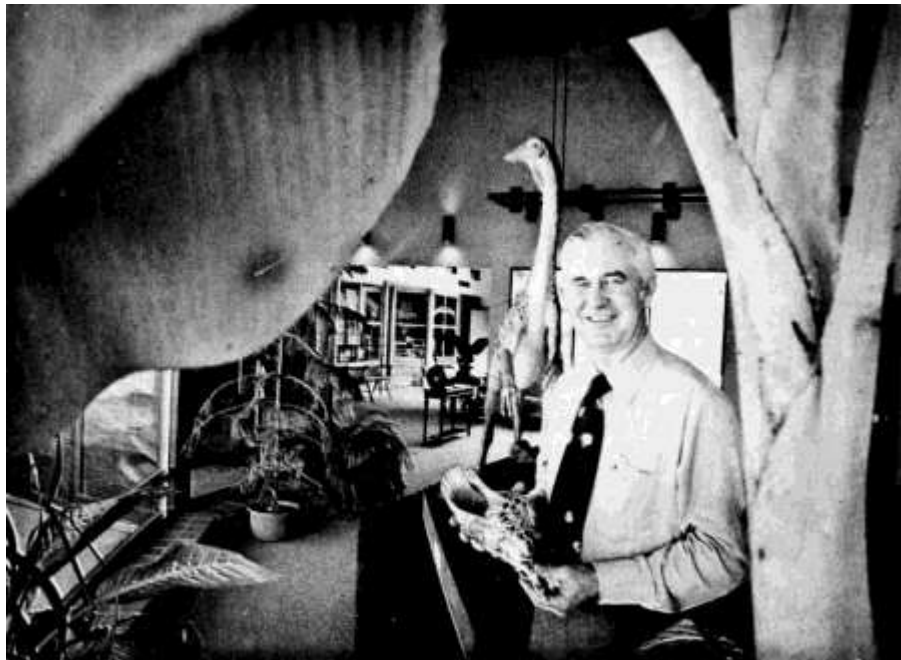
Ford says school tours of the museum are designed for 30 students at a time. Such tours last 45 minutes. Your personal browsing may have taken more or less time.

Two things you probably didn't see are the new greenhouse where plants are grown for decoration as well as for sale and the research room where students can work on term papers and other research assignments.

If you think you saw more displays at the new museum than you recall from the old museum at Ninth and Frederica, you're right. There's more than a 50 percent increase in floor space.

And, unlike the old museum, there isn't a single step to climb.

But the price is still the same – free.



Owensboro Area Museum Director Joe Ford presides over a \$400,000 facility that "I never would have dreamed of when I was a kid." Many area residents' memorabilia have found a home at the museum.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Thursday, 9 February 1978, p.2C:**

## **Museum displays stem from Ford's collections**

By Ann Whittinghill, Messenger-Inquirer

Displays at the new Owensboro Area Museum are an outgrowth of director Joe Ford's boyhood collections.

Ford the collector has operated museums since childhood. First it was a lean-to beside his sister's playhouse. Later there was the Joe Ford Museum on his farm at Sorgho.

Today, Ford presides over a modern \$400,000 facility that "I never would have dreamed of when I had the 'Green Pine Museum' as a kid," the director says.

The Sorgho museum, housed in a small concrete building, was the forerunner of the city's first natural science museum that opened in 1966. The rural site was a mecca for schoolchildren and Sunday afternoon family outings. Boy Scout troops and 4-Hers made regular pilgrimages to view the private collections that were to form the nucleus of Owensboro Area Natural Science Museum's displays at 602 Sycamore St.

Federal education funds provided for establishment of the city's first natural science museum that operated in a rented former church building. Students in Daviess, McLean, Ohio and Hancock counties benefited from the three-year funding program that initially poured \$20,000 into cases and equipment for the infant facility.

Nationally, the natural science museum was a pioneer project funded "as an educational supplement." Title III Aid to Secondary and Primary Education made available, the first such money for a museum. A newspaper account of the new project stated the natural science museum was "established primarily as an aid to the schools and organizations of four counties."

Official ribbon cutting took place on Oct. 8, 1966. The new institution was increasing its acquisitions daily. Area families' memorabilia had a "home."

The Sycamore Street site was a beehive of activity from the beginning. When formal opening ceremonies were held four months later, 50 displays already were on loan to schools and "another 42 were scheduled to be distributed that week."

Many of the museum displays were rotated regularly in the Owensboro Area Mobile Museum, a valuable aspect of the federally funded educational project. The mobile service to surrounding counties was discontinued when the funding program ended, Ford explains.

About the same time the need for expanded facilities became critical. Many of the educators, city officials and interested citizens who had helped establish the museum began searching for a larger building.

The public library's move to new quarters paved the way for the old Carnegie Library building's next resident. Owensboro Area Natural Science Museum displays soon filled the two-story structure at 901 Frederica St. that formally opened in January 1969.

In addition to the need for more space, the museum's other primary concern during that time was budget resources since federal aid had ceased. Coming to the rescue were the Owensboro and Daviess County school systems and the city of Owensboro. They pledged money to finance continuation of the educational services provided by the museum.

The Owensboro Area Museum budget of \$50,000 annually still is funded 50 percent by the city and 25 percent each by the two school systems. "The schools give us about the same amount each," Ford says, "since it (their portion) is based on a set amount for each child in the system."

Ford acknowledges that Daviess County officials do not contribute money toward operation of the museum. "We've gone to the fiscal court many times, though, and we'll still keep trying," Ford asserts.

In recent years the Junior League of Owensboro has pumped thousands of dollars into the natural science museum. This has been in the form of volunteer service, equipment and displays. Community volunteers also have demonstrated that "time is money" to foster the museum's growth.

Dreams of the new building that opens Sunday began taking shape more than three years ago. Plans to spend \$400,000 to construct the Owensboro Area Museum were part of an arrangement in which former Governor Wendell Ford committed the state to purchase the city's 300- acre Ben Hawes Park.

When the state eventually purchased the park, the city used that money to pay off old bonds, paving the way for a new bond issue. A portion of that money provided for construction of the new building on the site Kentucky Wesleyan College sold to the city for that purpose.

When the Owensboro Area Museum welcomes the public this weekend, visitors will view displays that are a tribute to modern technology. Many of the exhibits are new; older and more familiar items and artifacts are displayed to better advantage.

The snakes have a new and more visible home; the planetarium acquired in 1967 is still a much-used educational tool.

And, at the heart of the museum are its director – and the cherished artifacts he collected through the years.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Monday, 13 February 1978, p.1A:**

### **Director mans doors as museum opens**

By Sheila Garin, Messenger-Inquirer

A two-year-old burst into frightened tears at the sight of a fiercely realistic bald eagle. Owensboro Area Museum Director Joe Ford personally held the door open as hundreds of visitors charged in. and the snakes, probably alarmed at all the faces pressed against their glass case. hid under their rocks.

"It's a great day,' a well-wisher told Ford, as an estimated 1,000 persons visited the new \$400,000 museum Sunday

By 2 p.m., about 300 adults and children shivered in line, waiting for Mayor Jack Fisher and Sen. Wendell Ford, D- Ky., to cut the opening ribbon.

The mayor was delayed by traffic that jammed the area and had to walk the last block.

"Joe Ford had a dream of having a museum like this for Owensboro and Daviess County," Fisher said.

"Senator Ford helped the city to provide the dollars to build this facility and Joe Ford had the dream. On behalf of the people of Owensboro, I say thank you to the Ford boys for this fine facility," he said as the crowd laughed.

Senator Ford gave the museum the Kentucky flag flown at President Carter's inauguration and said he hoped the museum eventually can be enlarged.

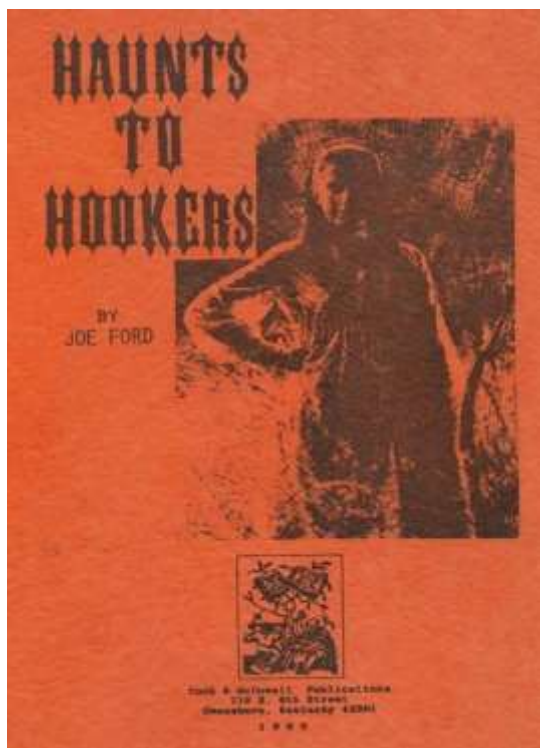
Director Ford was too busy directing people and answering questions to make speeches. He noted he received a telephone call shortly before midnight Saturday from a man wanting information on a certain kind of insect.

Children crowded around the one-cent stamp barrel in the general store, or stood motionless as miniature trains rolled by. They petted the dinosaurs and patted the wooden doll from another century.

"I use to have one like that." a kindergartener coolly told a friend while looking at a tooth from a 50-foot shark. Another youngster explained a moonshine still to his smaller sister: \*That's what the old ladies have on "The Waltons." As one man said on his way out. "Joe Ford did a hell of a job."



**Haunts To Hookers, Joe Ford (Owensboro, KY:  
Cook & McDowell Publications, 1980, 169 pages)  
copy in the Kentucky Room, Daviess County Pubic  
Library, Owensboro, KY; library call # KR 133.1 Ford:**



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In West-Central Kentucky, questions or tales concerning the unusual, the bizarre, or the supernatural usually find their way to Joe Ford, the recognized authority on such goings-on.

Joseph M. Ford, son of Maurice H. and Ethel C. Ford, was born in Sorgho, Kentucky on February 8, 1925. He attended Sorgho Grade School, Daviess County High School, and the

University of Kentucky. He married Nancy H. Boyle and they have one daughter, Dianne. He served in the Maritime Service during World War II. He was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Science from Kentucky Wesleyan College.

Joe has been Editor of the FORD TRAIL for the Evansville Courier and Press for fifteen years. He writes a weekly column for the Owensboro Messenger, McLean County News, Ohio County News, and the Hancock County Clarion. He does a weekly television series and two weekly radio shows. He is State Editor for the League of Kentucky Sportsmen. He resides at 3415 West Marycrest Drive in Owensboro, where he is the Director of the Owensboro Area Museum.



**Joe Ford also published the following books;  
copies can be found in the Kentucky Room,  
Daviess County Public Library, Owensboro, KY:**

- A History of Central Bank & Trust, 1890-1990 (Owensboro, KY, 1990, 62 pages); Library call # KR 332.1 Ford.
- In The Beginning (Utica, KY: McDowell Publications, 3 volumes, 2004); Library call # KR 976.9864 Ford.
- From Heroes to homicide (Utica, KY: McDowell Publications, 200\_, 76 pages); Library call #KR 364.1523 Ford.
- Articles From His Writings as Naturalist for Daviess County Parks and Other Selected Writings (Utica, KY: McDowell Publications, 7 volumes, 2008); Library call #KR 976.9864 Ford.
- Audio file and transcript of an interview by Chris Antonsen with Joseph Ford. Interview covers Owensboro and Daviess County history and Mr. Ford's impact on this area. Kentucky Room, Daviess County Public Library, Owensboro, KY., 1990.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Monday, 21 April 1986, pp.1A & 6A:**



By Christopher Carey, Messenger-Inquirer

The robins didn't wait for the official opening of the Joe Ford Nature Center to make themselves at home. They built a nest atop a utility meter on the outside of the brick-and-wood reception building at the 14-acre preserve.

Ford, director of the Owensboro Area Museum, showed the nest to a small group of people who braved the soggy trails at the center Sunday. He also pointed out several unusual wildflowers, such as a shooting star and a white trillium.

"The white trillium is really rare, and it's doing pretty well," Ford said.

Moments later, a group deeper in the woods flushed out a pair of green herons.

About 50 people attended the 2 p.m. dedication ceremony at the center, a reforested cornfield near the intersection of U.S. 60 west of Owensboro and the U.S. 60 bypass. They stood in a steady rain as officials made a few short speeches.

"The rain wasn't due until 2:15," Ford announced. "It speeded up on us."

But as one visitor put it, nothing was more natural than rain.

The dedication ceremony marked the end of a five-year effort to develop the center, which was financed through contributions from groups whose names are engraved individuals, businesses and civic on bricks in the reception building.

The goal of the project was to give local residents – particularly city dwellers – a chance to observe plants and animals in their native habitats.

"It affords people the opportunity to get a firsthand view of nature," said John Alvey, a former museum board chairman who directed the construction work.

The trails protect people from the unpleasant aspects of the wilds, Ford said.

"You don't have to worry about poison ivy, or chiggers or anything," he said.

Officials plan to add a hard surface to the trails to make them completely accessible to people who use wheelchairs or have other handicaps, Ford said.

"We want them to be able to go everywhere anybody else does," he said. "We want them to be able to fish in the ponds, see the birds and see the snakes."

The development of the trails and the reception building was a good start in the effort to increase public awareness and appreciation of nature, Ford said.

I hope it keeps growing," he said. "I'd like to have 100 acres somewhere."

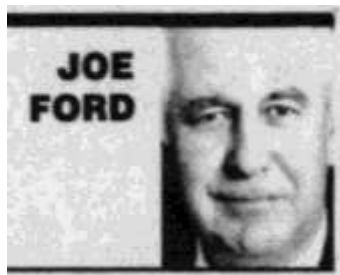
Support for future ventures must come from the private sector, Ford said.

"The deal I made with Mr. Miller (former Mayor J.R. Miller) when they gave us the land was that we wouldn't be coming back for money all the time," he said.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 30 August 1987, p.2D:**

**Community News**  
Columnist will miss  
Sunday morning visits



By Joe Ford, director of Owensboro Area Museum

Twenty-one years ago I approached Lawrence Hager Sr. to ask if the Messenger-Inquirer would consider publishing a column titled "Museum News."



For the past two decades, our column has appeared each Sunday. During that time, we have written about madstones and UFOs. We have answered questions as varied as the phases of the moon and what do you feed hummingbirds. I have learned much through writing this column and have made many friends.

The media in all of its forms have been most helpful with the museum needs and programs. Our radio time on WOMI began in 1969, and though we later transferred to WBKR, this opportunity to talk to you each Sunday reached thousands of listeners. On television our local cable Channel 2 carried the weekly museum program for many years; Channel 14 broadcast our museum program for three summers, and Channel 25 has presented many features, including one where we went into a local swamp and captured poisonous cottonmouth water moccasins.

This familiarity has made the general public feel a part of the museum and they have assisted us in every manner.

My retirement begins tomorrow. Therefore, I want to publicly thank each of you for your help and those who have helped publicize the museum. I will miss our visits each Sunday.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 20 September 1987, p.1C:**

## Schoolchildren say goodbye to Joe Ford

Questions natural part of reception

By Stewart Jennison, Messenger-Inquirer



Joe Ford, former director of the Owensboro Area Museum, shows Jacob Reid how to hold a chicken snake Saturday at the museum. The snake was brought in for identification after it bit Reid earlier in the morning.

Joe Ford paused in the midst of a cookies-and-punch reception to do what he does best – handle a chicken snake and assure the 7-year-old boy it had bitten that both of them would survive.



The youth, Jacob Reid of Livermore, found the snake Saturday morning. There was no pain or swelling after the bite, but his father, Chris, did what a lot of concerned parents have done over the years called the Owensboro Area Museum for a positive identification.

Bring it in, Ford said.

"I'm afraid to identify them over the phone," Ford told a group of children and adults assembled at the museum Saturday for the first of three receptions marking his retirement as director of the science, nature and history center.

The Reids arrived a half-hour later with the foot-long snake in a plastic sherbet carton. Ford allowed the snake to snap at his finger and eventually convinced Jacob it was safe to hold.

Jacob was still too concerned to express himself, but Ford got a pretty good idea what school kids think of him from the dozens of handmade cards and letters received this week.

"I like your snakes and spiders very much," wrote Benji Hertel, a Highland elementary student. "And I would like to remind you that you are the museum."

"I'm sorry you're retiring," a Sutton student named Sarah wrote. "You're so smart about nature. I wish I knew that much about nature."

Judging from the fan mail, Ford is equally popular for the ghost stories he told during frequent visits to schools in the Halloween season, especially a tale he created called "The Devil's Hand."

Most kids call it "the claw" because of a cloven hand Ford uses to hold their attention.

"I wish you weren't retiring, but I know you have other things to do," Ginger Depp, another Sutton student wrote.

Yes, Ford said, he looks forward to sleeping in or heading out with a fishing pole when the mood strikes him, but he will be easing ever so gently into retirement.

He said he still will be available for visits to classrooms and other groups who schedule ahead with the museum office. And on Tuesdays and Thursdays, Ford will conduct scheduled tours of Yellow Creek Nature Center, wearing his new title of official naturalist for Daviess County.

The semi-retired curator spent much of Saturday morning's reception dispensing Fordisms to youngsters and their parents who stopped by to wish him well and ask questions, such as what to do about pet turtles that don't live through winter hibernation.

Solution: Keep sleeping reptiles in the vegetable crisper.

More than 300 adult friends of Ford and the museum turned out for an invitation-only reception Saturday night, where Ford was surprised by directors with the announcement that a long-range improvement of the Indian artifacts exhibit will be undertaken and dedicated to Ford.

Friends of the museum also unveiled a large plaque bearing a likeness of Ford and recognizing him as the founder of the museum

TODAY A final reception for Joe Ford is scheduled for noon to 4 p.m. today at the Owensboro Area Museum. It is open to the public.



**Owensboro: The City on the Yellow Banks, Lee A. & Aloma W. Dew,  
Rivendell Publications, Bowling Green, KY, 1988, pp.209-210:**

... For many years some citizens of Owensboro had recognized the need for a museum. In 1923 Miss Cora Lee Webb, a teacher in the Owensboro public schools, founded an organization called the Green River Museum and Art Society. Several exhibits were displayed in the Carnegie

Library, but financial support was not forthcoming and gradually the project was abandoned except for a few cases of exhibits which remained at the library. An effort was made to resurrect the project in 1955, but it failed for lack of adequate financing.

Meanwhile another museum was evolving. Joe Ford, as a child, had a passion for collecting things, and soon his accumulation of birds' nests, eggs, fossils, Indian artifacts, insects and other objects overflowed from his bedroom into his sister's abandoned playhouse. Joe christened his establishment the "Green Pine Museum." Upon reaching adulthood Joe joined the Merchant Marine, which gave him the opportunity to visit many cities with famous museums. His sister lived in Washington, D.C., and visits to her home gave him a chance to tour the Smithsonian Institution.

After a period of time at the University of Kentucky studying geology, Joe returned to Daviess County, bought a farm near Masonville, and began collecting in earnest. The second floor of the farmhouse was used as a storeroom, and Joe dug a snake pit in the back yard to house his growing collection of reptiles. Joe married the former Nancy Boyle, and moved to the Pleasant Grove area near Sorgho. By now his collection was outgrowing their house, so Joe built a concrete-block building to hold his "treasures." Students from Sorgho school frequently would walk down to visit the displays, and soon groups from schools throughout the area were finding their way to the Ford house. Joe appeared on the Kentucky Educational Television program "Kentucky Afield," which further publicized his activities.

Joe was often invited to speak to civic groups, and he invariably stressed the theme "Owensboro needs a museum." Ford spoke to the Kiwanis Club in the summer of 1965 and Dr. Kenneth Estes was in the audience. Impressed, Estes invited Ford to stop by his office to discuss the question of a museum. Estes and Ford developed the idea of a mobile museum to serve school children directly in the classroom, and determined to apply for a federal grant under a program designed to provide funds for innovative teaching methods and programs. The government required that the director of the project hold a Master's degree, and Maurice Henton, science teacher at Foust Junior High School, was recruited to be the director of the program, with Ford holding the title of curator.

On June 1, 1966 the application was approved and a sum of \$65,000 appropriated, to be administered by the Owensboro Board of Education. A board of directors was formed which included Dr. Estes, Joe Ford, representatives of the Owensboro, Daviess County, Catholic Parochial, Ohio County, Hancock County and McLean County, Kentucky Wesleyan and Brescia Colleges, and groups such as the Daviess County Historical Society, Boy Scouts, Railway Historical Society, Kentucky Gun Collectors Club, the Green River Archaeological Society, and other interested groups and individuals. A building at 602 Sycamore Street, owned by the Catholic Diocese, was rented; and on October 8, 1966, the Owensboro Area Museum opened its doors. The following year the museum received the Pacemaker Award of the National Education Association for activities offering an inspirational and challenging educational experience for children.

The museum's stay on Sycamore Street was of short duration. The Diocese informed the directors that they needed the property for school activities, and the decision was made to move the museum into the former Carnegie Library building. A series of meetings with the library board and city officials paved the way for this move, and on January 19, 1969 the new facility was formally opened, with an estimated 2,000 people touring the refurbished building.

Federal funding for the museum expired the same year, and the city of Owensboro and the city and county schools began including funds for the museum in their budgets to partially offset the loss.

Henton returned to his teaching job on a full-time basis, while continuing to serve the museum as a volunteer. Joe Ford as curator and Margie Harreld as secretary became the only paid employees, with the museum relying on volunteers for the bulk of its manpower needs. The Junior League also became active in support of the museum with contributions of money and volunteer workers.

The popularity of the facility grew unabated however, and it soon became apparent that the old library was totally inadequate. In 1976 a new building, designed by Nathan Nunley of the Owensboro architectural firm of Collignon & Nunley, was built on a three-acre site on South Griffith Avenue leased from Kentucky Wesleyan College. The money for the construction was provided by the city through the sale of Ben Hawes Park to the state.

The museum is the only "natural science museum in Kentucky, combining living exhibit of snakes, tarantulas, fish and other creatures with displays of scientific, historical, anthropological and economic interest. The museum houses a planetarium, a railway display and operating layout, a greenhouse, and serves as the meeting-place of more than three dozen club and organizations. By the mid-1980's its budget had grown to more than \$150,000 annually, of which the city government provides nearly sixty percent. Other contributors include Davies Fiscal Court and the school districts, while additional funds are generated through contributions, museum memberships, gift shop receipts and interest on investments.



The Owensboro Area Museum is one of the most popular places in the city for young and old alike, by the late 1980's the museum was bulging at the seams, having outgrown this building, forcing many of its holdings into storage.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Thursday, 9 February 1995, p.1C:**

### Naturalist Ford honored by state

Daviess County naturalist Joe Ford was honored Wednesday with the Support Award from the Kentucky Recreational and Parks Society.

The award goes to a parks employee who has gone beyond the normal expectation of the job. In addition to his work with the county parks department, Ford has been a tour guide, speaker and writer.

Ford, who celebrated his 70th birthday on Wednesday, is considered an expert on native plants as well as area history.

Ford was named as the support award winner during the state parks society's annual conference Jan. 28-31. He formally received the award from Judge-Executive Buzz Norris during Wednesday's fiscal court meeting.

"We are indeed fortunate to have a man like you in our community," Norris said.

Prior to his work as a naturalist, Ford was director of the Owensboro Area Museum of Science and History from 1966 to 1987.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Friday, 14 January 2000, p.3C:**

**Nancy Ford dies at age 74**

Nancy H. Ford, wife of Joe Ford, well-known naturalist and consultant for Daviess County Parks and Recreation, died Thursday at Owensboro Mercy Health System.

Nancy Ford was co-owner of the Veach House Knitting Shop and the Handicraft House Needle Craft Shop. She was 74 and is also survived by a daughter, Dianne Ford of Owensboro.

Nancy Ford was active in the local genealogical society and compiled the book "Daviess County, Kentucky 1880 Census." She was a member of Pleasant Grove Baptist Church.

Shelia Heflin, director of the Kentucky Room at the Owensboro-Daviess County Public Library, said Ford's abstract of the 1880 census data is an invaluable resource at the library.

"We use that book constantly," Heflin said.

A funeral service for Ford will be at 10 a.m. Saturday at James H. Davis Funeral Home Chapel with burial in Elmwood Cemetery.

*Obituary, page 2C.*

[Note by Jerry Long – Nancy H. Boyle Ford (1925-2000), wife of Joe Ford, compiled for the West-Central Kentucky Family Research Association, of Owensboro, KY ,the books: Daviess County, Kentucky 1850 Census (1974, 161 pages) and Daviess County, Kentucky 1880 Census (1980, 614 pages).



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 8 October 2000, p.9F:**



Carter – Ford

The wedding of Grace Carter and Joe Ford took place at 10:30 a.m. Oct. 7, 2000, at the home of the Rev. and Mrs. Tom Wade in Owensboro.

She is the daughter of the late Mr. and Mrs. William Earl Carter, who had lived in Louisville, and is a counselor at McLean County High School in Calhoun.

He is the son of the late Maurice "M.H." and Mary Ethel Ford of Daviess County. Ford is retired founder and director of the Owensboro Area Museum of Science and History and is serving as naturalist for the Daviess County parks system.

Attending the couple were Dianne Ford, daughter of the groom, and Dr. Joe Rayburn of Evansville.

After a wedding trip to Sparta, N.C., on the Blue Ridge Parkway, they will live in Daviess County.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 13 February 2005, pp.1C & 8C:**

## Ford builds career out of love of nature, history

By Jessica West Bratcher, McLean County News



Naturalist Joe Ford writes down the address of a radio station in his notebook Feb. 5 during a surprise birthday party friends and family threw for Ford.

He's been called a naturalist, an expert on local plants and history and a snake charmer. At 80 years young, Joe Ford is a treasure trove of historical, archaeological and natural history information.

Born in Daviess County "out on the farm," his love of nature dates back to high school.

"I think it's because a lot of little boys my age in high school were very good athletes, but I'm not well coordinated," Ford said. "So I got out in the woods and soon made friends with the trees, birds, snakes – I caught my first snake as a freshman in high school."

Ford enrolled in college with a major in geology.

"I attended UK, but I didn't get a degree – the war interrupted," Ford said. He spent two and a half years in the Merchant Marines before earning his discharge in the mid-1940s and returning home. "I bought a farm at Masonville and made a go at it," Ford said. "It lasted one year. My crop drowned."

Ford sold the farm and moved back to the family farm in Sorgho.

The money went back to his father, who reinvested it in a McLean County farm.

"It's about 1,000 acres between Calhoun and Beech Grove. It's a woodland paradise for me," said. "I've found orchids there. There are turkeys and deer, four lakes. It suits my personality."

Ford farmed with his father, growing commercial vegetables, but he indulged his love of history and natural science and built a "little museum out of concrete block, right on the farm."

In 1966, the fledgling Owensboro Area Museum of Science and History hired Ford full time when it opened in an abandoned church on Sycamore Street.

"They got a grant of \$60,000," Ford said. "I laugh now, because then, that was a lot of money."

He became the museum director in 1969 and spent 21 years offering educational lectures and tours for the schools.

He said he really enjoys working with children.

"I'm kind of a kid myself," Ford said.

By necessity, Ford absorbed more knowledge about local history, nature and archaeology.

"It was almost required to keep the museum going," Ford said. "People would call, wanting to know how old an arrowhead is."

He retired from his work with the museum in 1987.

Ford went to work for Daviess County Parks and Recreation, spending 14 years transplanting wildflowers and taking care of natural habitats before retiring again. The Joe Ford Nature Center on U.S. 60 is named in his honor.

He was honored with the Support Award from the Kentucky Recreation and Parks Society in 1995. The award goes to a parks employee who has gone beyond the normal expectation of the job.

Since retiring for a second time, Ford has written a weekly column for the Messenger-Inquirer and the McLean County News, and he now has a TV show on Adelphia public access channel 51 with his wife of four years, Grace, who is a counselor at McLean County High School.

"The TV show is about programs I do. They've been on three to four years," Ford said. "They're not on at any particular time. We do a half-hour show and then two 15-minute segments. If they need 15 minutes somewhere, they'll pop ours in. So it's good exposure."

He also still has snakes.

"Grace puts up with a lot," Ford said. "When I married her, she didn't like snakes, now she tolerates them. We've got a 6-foot-long one caught at Myrtle Beach – it rode back in a pillow slip under her car seat," Ford said.

His knowledge about starting a museum valuable for McLean County – organizers of the McLean County History and Genealogy Museum contacted him for assistance.

"I've helped start two or three other (museums)," Ford said. "So I told them what we did. I'm real pleased with how the McLean County one is growing, and I'll help in any way I can."

Ford is also a published author. He wrote a book called "In the Beginning" and is preparing to take "In the Beginning 2: E Pluribus Unum" to the publisher.

Friends gathered at a McLean County church on Feb. 5 to celebrate Ford's 80th birthday. His wife made a display with pictures of Ford with his first wife, Nancy – they were married 50 years before her death in 2000 – as well as photos with herself.

Several people from Ford's past attended, including former Lt. Gov. Steve Henry and wife Heather French Henry.

"Miss America was there, and I got to hug her," Ford said.

Old friend Hal Wolford also attended.

"I caught cottonmouths on TV in Evansville for Hal," Ford said. "I guess you'd call it a nature show, but it was more of a thriller type."

Looking back, Ford said he understands how he came to where he is today.

"My only talent is understanding and ability in the woods," Ford said. "Other people can sing, but my voice is terrible."



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Thursday, 18 August 2005, pp.1A & 2A:**

**Brescia will host Joe Ford science library**

By Joy Campbell, Messenger-Inquirer

Owensboro naturalist Joe Ford opened his first museum when he was 6 years old. It was in his sister's former playhouse. Over the door he wrote: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and earth."

That genesis was not lost on Ford's wife, Grace Carter Ford. If all goes as planned, those words will be displayed outside the new Joe Ford Library of Science & History slated for an Oct. 9 opening in Brescia University's Science Building.

The library will contain papers and specimens Ford has amassed during his 80-year life as a nature lover.

The library is all his wife's idea, Joe Ford strongly states.

"I don't know yet how this will be received," he said.

Brescia President Sister Vivian Bowles liked the idea when Grace Carter Ford presented the library proposal.

"Our science faculty has worked with Joe for years, and we thought it would be great to host the library here," Sister Vivian said. "It will be available for all schoolchildren as well as our students."

The library will be in Room 131 of the university's Science Building.

As visitors enter the room, straight ahead they will find the botany section with reading material and specimens - primarily wildflowers. The same organization by subject will be found for "everything pertaining to nature," he said.

Grace Ford and volunteers are indexing all of the materials.

The Fords have been married since 2000. In 2001, Ford was tapped to receive a mayor's award for excellence, and Grace Ford was asked to write the biography/introduction, "since you know him better than anyone."

That likely was not true for the newlywed at that time, she said. "I had fallen in love with him and married him, but I didn't know all I needed to know to write that," she said.

Joe Ford provided many of his papers for her research.



"I was awed by his passion for nature and the perseverance and total devotion he showed in getting a museum for Daviess County," Grace Ford said.

In the early 1960s, Joe Ford had been on the speaker's circuit trying to get the community to see the need for a public museum of science and history. He singled out Dr. Kenneth Estes, superintendent of Owensboro Public Schools, who was in one of his audiences and kept making eye contact while explaining how 1,000 schoolchildren visited the museum on his farm.

"I said, with that many children interested, there seems to be a need for a public museum," the naturalist said. "He (Estes) secured a ... federal grant to get a museum. The school received an award for it."

In 1965, Joe Ford shoveled out debris and painted walls of the abandoned church on Sycamore Street that is the forerunner to the current Owensboro Area Museum of Science and History. He became the director.

Grace Ford said her husband's first wife, Nancy, deserves much credit for the legacy he is leaving since they were married 50 years.

"Until they built the garage for his museum, she had school children coming in and out of her home all the time," Grace Ford said.

When the Fords go out to dinner or to community functions, they often are approached by people who tell Joe Ford how he influenced their lives.

The library will be a community resource, Grace Ford said.

"I thought recently that there will be a time when someone will have to make decisions on what to do with his materials," she said. "I wrote a proposal to establish the library; Brescia bought it, and we couldn't ask for a better sponsor."

After his retirement in 1986, Joe Ford was hired as naturalist for the Daviess County Parks and Recreation Department and spent about 14 years in that role. The Joe Ford Nature Center on U.S. 60 is named in his honor.

All the while, Joe Ford has continued to give talks to school and civic groups. That's something he will do as long as he's in good health. The lectures may take place at the new library or at other sites. Bookings may be made by calling 926-8215 or 316-3702.

"I've already got some appointments for ghost stories," he said.

The Fords continue to get daily calls from residents who want to know things like how to get a hummingbird out of a garage or whether the horned-like insects called cicada killers found in a back yard are dangerous, Joe Ford said.

"I'll have to come here, now, to do my own research," he said Wednesday from the new library.

To attend – A grand opening ceremony and tour of the Joe Ford Library of Science & History will be held at 2:30 p.m. Oct. 9 in the Waitman Taylor Auditorium in Brescia University's Science Building. Former Sen. Wendell Ford will be the master of ceremonies, and former Lt. Gov. Steve Henry will be the guest speaker. The library is located in Room 131 of the Science Building.

[Note by Jerry Long – Joe Ford (1925-2014) and former Kentucky Governor and U.S. Senator, Wendell Hampton Ford (1924-2015), were first cousins. Joe's father, Maurice Hampton Ford (1890-1971), and Wendell's father, Ernest Milton Ford (1896-1967), were brothers.]



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 28 October 2005, Decades supplement, p.14:**

## Museum dream in sight in 1965 – Ford's vision leads to facility

By Karen Owen, Messenger-Inquirer



Joe Ford, first curator of the Owensboro Area Natural History Museum

Today, monster trucks careen over parked cars on a video screen, while the roar and rumble of motors fill the main floor of the Owensboro Area Museum of Science and History.

But in 1965, the closest thing Owensboro had to a museum was a collection of arrowheads and the vision of a few committed individuals - led by local farmer Joe Ford.

"It's really amazing how it's grown since Joe Ford's garage," said Jeff Jones, executive director of the museum that will be celebrating its 40th anniversary next year.

Ford was a Sorgho farmer when he started allowing area school groups to see his childhood arrow collections and other keepsakes in a small building on his father's farm in the early 1960s.

A thousand youngsters a year passed by his displays, Ford recalled recently. So, in 1965, he embarked on a mission to bring a museum to Owensboro.

"I was lecturing to every civic club ... that Owensboro was the largest city in Kentucky without a museum," he said. "I was trying to appeal to civic pride."

Kenneth Estes, the superintendent of city schools at the time, secured a \$60,000 federal grant to open a real museum, which became a reality in 1966.

Ford didn't have a master's degree – his college career was interrupted by World War II – so he didn't meet the grant's requirements for the director. But he was named curator of the new Owensboro Area Natural History Museum. Maurice Henton was the first director.

The museum's first home was a former Catholic church at 602 Sycamore St. When students couldn't come to the museum, staff members took portable displays to them at schools across the region.

When local Catholics needed their building again, the museum moved to the former Carnegie Library at Ninth and Frederica streets. In 1978, it moved to a new building behind Kentucky Wesleyan College.

before then, Henton had returned to teaching, and Ford had moved up to the director's office.

"I got paid to have a good time, and you can quote me," Ford said. "Every day I wanted to go to work."

He retired in 1987. Seven years later, the museum moved downtown to the former S.W. Anderson Co. store at 220 Daviess St.

The museum now has an annual budget of just over \$300,000 and four full- and four part-time employees. Workers are also provided through other programs and agencies.

Ford is now 80 and says the museum is "the love of my life," but the current emphasis on motorsports isn't his preference. "I wish they would get back to nature."

"Joe Ford created so many memories with kids," Jones said. Almost anyone around here over the age of 30 can say, "Joe put a snake around their neck," Jones said.....



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Friday, 1 October 2010, p.1C:**



Naturalist Joe Ford, 85, holds an albino king snake Monday afternoon at the new Joe Ford Nature Center at 3998 W. U.S. 60, behind GRADD. He has been coming to the center about once a week, according to his wife, Grace. There will be a grand opening at 2 p.m. Oct. 10. [From article: "Answer Man – Joe Ford settling into nature center museum", by Suzi Bartholomy, Messenger-Inquirer.]



A photo of Joe Ford dated 1945 - when he served in the Merchant Marines.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Monday, 11 October 2010, pp.1A & 2A:**

## Joe Ford Nature Center holds grand opening

By Dariush Shafa, Messenger-Inquirer



Helen Miller talks with Joe Ford outside the Joe Ford Nature Center on Sunday.

It was standing room only in the public room at the Green River Area Development District office on Sunday, with dozens upon dozens turning out for the grand opening of a new nature center and to honor its familiar local namesake.

The new center is named for Joe Ford, long considered Owensboro's nature "answer man." The center, behind the GRADD office on U.S. 60 west of Owensboro, now houses the Joe Ford Library and offers walking trails and other nature points of interest. More such opportunities, like a butterfly garden and expanded walking trails, are soon to come.

Ford, previously a director of the Owensboro Museum of Science and History and naturalist for the Daviess County Parks Department, has been involved with all things outdoors his entire life. His collected items and published books and writings, previously housed at Brescia University, now have a home of their own at the center.

Grace Ford, Joe Ford's wife, said the center has come together wonderfully, with a flood of volunteer help to make it possible.

"We think it was meant to be," Grace Ford said. "Too many wonderful things have happened. Destiny, providence, God, whatever you want to call it, had a hand in it."

And Grace Ford said the turnout, the community support and the volunteers' willingness were all a sign of a community wanting to give something back to someone who has already given of himself.

"He has given his whole life to people," Grace Ford said. "He's the one to whom people turn to get an answer."

Allen Kirtley, a board member of the Joe Ford Library, said the hope for the center and its library now is that it will take on a life of its own. Kirtley said based on how the community has responded thus far, that seems like a plausible outcome.

"We find that Owensboro is the most civic-minded town we've lived in," Kirtley said. "We're hoping it's going to grow."

Kirtley also said it's important to all involved that it be appreciated by the man whom it honors.

"For him (Joe Ford) to see this come to fruition is an incredible thing," Kirtley said.

But Joe Ford said the real credit goes to others.

"I was flattered," Joe Ford said. "I don't feel it's really justified. There's more people involved than me. I'm just a figurehead."

What truly matters though, Ford said, is that people will be learning new things about their environment.

He hopes the center will cause people to develop an interest in the world around them.

"I think anything pertinent to nature is important. Our world is made up of nature."

[Note – Joe Ford Nature Park is a special use park acquired in 1998 and located near the intersection of the Wendell Ford Expressway and Hwy 60 West, behind the Green River Area Development District (GRADD) Office. Named in honor of Joe Ford who developed the 15 acre woodland into an outdoor classroom. The park also serves as a trailhead for the Adkisson Greenbelt Park – West Owensboro Trail and has a Nature Center.]



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Friday, 4 July 2014, pp.1A &2A:**

## **Museum founder Ford, 89, dies**

By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer



Joe Ford

Joseph Maurice "Joe" Ford, museum founder, naturalist, historian and answer man, died Thursday at his home.

He was 89.

Through the years, thousands of area residents had called Ford, one of the best known people in the region, with questions about plants, birds, animals, archeology and history.

He was rarely stumped for an answer.

Ford, born Feb. 8, 1925, was a farmer in the Sorgho area until 1966, when he helped create what is now the Owensboro Museum of Science and History.

He was 41 years old at the time.

Ford's interest in history and natural science began as a child.

In 1931, when he was 6, Ford created the Green Pine Museum in a lean-to next to his sister's playhouse.

Later, he operated the Joe Ford Museum on his farm until 1966, when he and Kenneth Estes, then superintendent of Owensboro Public Schools, created the Owensboro Museum of Science and History by moving Ford's collection from his farm to a former church at 602 Sycamore St.

"I was lecturing to every civic club ... that Owensboro was the largest city in Kentucky without a museum," Ford said in an interview once. "I was trying to appeal to civic pride."

Estes was able to secure a \$60,000 federal grant to open a real museum.

But Ford didn't have a master's degree, which was required by the grant for the director. So, he was named curator.

Three years later, he became the museum's second director.

Later, the museum moved to the old Carnegie Free Public Library, which is now the Owensboro Museum of Fine Art, at Ninth and Frederica streets; then in 1978 to the Kentucky Wesleyan College campus on South Griffith Avenue.

Ford served as director of the museum until his retirement in 1987.

Seven years later, the museum moved downtown into the old Anderson's Department Store building on Daviess Street between Second and Third streets.

Retirement from the museum didn't slow Ford down.

He went to work for the Daviess County Parks & Recreation Department, spending 14 years transplanting wildflowers, taking care of natural habitats and leading nature hikes before retiring again.

The Joe Ford Nature Center, in what had been a 14-acre corn field behind the Green River Area Development District offices, is named in his honor.

After high school, Ford enrolled at the University of Kentucky as a geology major.

But World War II broke out and he spent the next 2 ½ years in the Merchant Marines.

After the war, Ford said in an interview once, "I bought a farm at Masonville and made a go at it. It lasted one year. My crop drowned."

So, he sold that farm and moved back to the family farm in Sorgho.

The money from the sale of the Masonville farm went to Ford's father, who reinvested it in a McLean County farm.

"It's about 1,000 acres between Calhoun and Beech Grove," Ford said years later. "It's a woodland paradise for me. I've found orchids there. There are turkeys and deer, four lakes.

"It suits my personality."

In later years, Ford organized the Green River Archaeological Society Branch of Central States Archaeological Society, served as president of the Daviess County Farm Bureau in 1961-62 and served on the Owensboro Arts Commission.

He did more than 100 television programs as a host or guest; had a weekly radio show and wrote a weekly column for the Messenger-Inquirer for several years.

Ford also wrote eight books that were compilations of his newspaper articles as well as other books on a variety of subjects.

Honors included the American Legion Community Service Award in 1973, the Heritage Award from the Owensboro Board of Realtors in 1975, the Liberty Bell Award in 1978, an honorary doctor of science degree from Kentucky Wesleyan College in 1978; the United Way Humanitarianism Award in 1979, the Support Award from the Kentucky Recreational and Parks Society in 1995 and the Owensboro Mayor's Award for Excellence in 2002.

In 2008, the Owensboro City Commission named Ford "Owensboro's Official Naturalist."

Ford introduced at least two generations of Daviess Countians to snakes.

"I got out in the woods (as a boy) and soon made friends with the trees, birds, snakes," he said once. "I caught my first snake as a freshman in high school."

At the museum, the county fair and other places where large numbers of people gathered, Ford brought his snakes and posed for pictures with them and children who often wore the reptiles draped around their necks – often to their parents' dismay.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Thursday, 10 July 2014, pp.1B & 3B:**

## Ford was irreplaceable

By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer

Most of us are replaceable.

When we're gone, family and friends will miss us.

But somebody else will take our place at work and in the community.

Joe Ford, who died last Thursday, was one of those rare irreplaceable people.

He was a fountain of knowledge.

Not just about one subject.

Joe knew everything from archeology to geology, hummingbirds to hookers to haunts.

People would call up to ask him how long they should leave their hummingbird feeders out in the fall.

Was there ever a statue of a man on a horse on the Courthouse lawn?

What's the story behind those palomino squirrels?

(A man who worked at General Electric in the 1960s had a pair. When he transferred away from Owensboro, he couldn't take them with him, so he turned them loose in a park. The ones you see today are their descendants.)

Are there any haunted places in Owensboro?



When did the first Indians come to Daviess County?  
 No matter what you asked Joe, he usually knew the answer.  
 I teased him that if he didn't know the answer, he could always make it up.  
 We wouldn't know the difference.  
 I met Joe about a week after I moved to Owensboro in late January 1972.  
 I was writing a story about groundhogs for Groundhog Day.  
 "Who knows about groundhogs?" I asked  
 "Call Joe Ford," somebody said.  
 Joe was the director of the museum back then.  
 And, of course, he knew.  
 I would call him through the years to ask about archeology, Mulberry Street (Owensboro's last and biggest red light district), early Owensboro history, ghosts, geese and many other things.  
 There was nothing Joe didn't know.  
 And he always told it in such an entertaining way.  
 The only thing I disagreed with him about was snakes.  
 He loved them.  
 I didn't.  
 When my son was about 5 years old, Joe draped a snake around his neck at the county fair.  
 Kris loved it.  
 I stayed as far away from him as I could.  
 These days, words like "decent," "kind" and "gentle" have fallen out of favor.  
 But Joe was all those things.  
 He was also irreplaceable.  
 And he will be missed.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Wednesday, 30 July 2014, p.2D:**

“Nature Notes” column by Grace Ford:

## Remembering Mr. Ford

As indicated in last week's column, today's column is devoted primarily to the tribute James E. Rich conveyed to me at the funeral home. I was so impressed by Jim's thoroughness and accuracy that I expressed my desire to have the tribute in writing and permission to use it in Nature Notes.

Because of Joe's vast knowledge of nature, Jim thinks our naturalist was the richest man he has ever known, being rich in spirit and in heart. He had an unreserved enthusiasm for life, a zest for living, an unquenchable thirst for knowledge, an affinity for friendship, a yearning to teach others his observations, home-spun folklore, useful homemade remedies, weather phenomena, little known facts, history and lessons learned from experience.

Joe loved everything about nature and would stand entranced, watching a hawk float effortlessly on updrafts and knew numerous plants by leaf shape or smell.

Jim recalled meeting Joe for the first time "At Sorgho Elementary School, I first met Mr. Ford when I was 11 or 12 years old," Jim stated. "And at that time, he seemed ancient to me when

actually he was only in his early 30s. It was, and still is, remarkable that even at that age he was erudite beyond his years.

"I was among the students who were escorted to his first museum, which was on the Ford Friendly Farm, where there seemed to be billions of treasures – old magazines and books old calendars, ancient or outdated farm implements and kitchen utensils, items still in use but unknown to many of the kids, a wool carding brush, and ox yoke, hand-working and often hand-made tools, sepia photographs, rock and mineral specimens and a globe.

"However, the thing that captured the attention of all the students most were the live snakes, spiders and a tarantula. The more adventurous students would actually hold the snake."

Joe would answer questions in a manner that grade-schoolers could understand and did it with patience and candor. No question was too elementary to ask. He had an instant rapport with children.

"I knew, admired, appreciated, and even loved Mr. Ford for over 55 years," Jim said. "I valued our friendship. Of course, when I addressed him out of respect as Mr. Ford, he would reply that Mr. Ford was his dad and that his name was Joe."

Jim continued stating that he never knew Joe to be angry, opinionated, chauvinistic, overbearing, self-righteous, condescending, nor superior to anyone. Joe was honest, truthful, open, friendly, loving, loyal, extremely intelligent and humble. He concluded by saying it had been his distinct pleasure and unparalleled honor to have known Mr. Ford – one in a million.

Jim's memory of Joe is a culmination of the comments of many people who knew and loved this man. I thank him much for taking the time to bring together in one writing, different parts of which individuals voiced throughout the days of visitation.

Only yesterday, one of my friends said she didn't want to get carried away but "Joe was so good he was almost holy." My summation is how can one who is completely attuned to nature not be good?



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Friday, 9 June 2017, pp.1C & 2C:**

## **Ford retiring from Joe Ford Nature Center**

In March 2013, Grace Ford laid out a five-year plan that would culminate with her retirement from the Joe Ford Nature Center on West Second Street. She's six months ahead of schedule.

Ford, 84, said then that by 2018 she would retire as the first director of the center. The center is named for her husband, Joe Ford, who established four museums in Owensboro. The couple began the center together, but a stroke before the opening in 2010 prevented Joe Ford from working there. He died in 2014 at the age of 89.

For years, Ford's late husband wrote "Nature Notes," a weekly column in the Messenger-Inquirer. After his stroke, she began writing it. Her last "Nature Notes" was published on May 31.

She said her Sunday evenings, when she would have been writing her column, are less stressful.

Ford taught for 47 years in several school systems until 2006. Recently, a long-time friend, Markley Freer, who is also a retired educator, wrote a letter to the Messenger-Inquirer regarding Ford's tenure at the Nature Center.

Freer describes Ford as a "wonderful, deserving lady... .

"I enjoyed reading her articles through the years in the Messenger-Inquirer and admired her writing skills," Freer wrote.

"Seems like everyone in Daviess County knew Joe Ford, the naturalist. When he and Grace married, she certainly complemented his love of nature.

"Joe and I were a team," Ford said. "We enjoyed working together."

They were married 14 years. From 2005-10, they made 60 presentations in area schools.

Ford said she was more than ready to relinquish her column and the daily operations of the center.

Deborah Branch, the former assistant director of the center, has been named Ford's successor. Her first "Nature" column was published on June 7.

Ford and Branch have been working together for more than a year.

"I've shed some tears about letting go of projects I started," Ford said, "But Deborah is doing a wonderful job."

The Fords were partners, Branch said. "Grace has done a remarkable job, having to go it alone."

Ford doesn't have any big plans for retirement. She said she's traveled as much as she wanted to.

"I'm not going to be out of sight, though," she said. She will continue to volunteer at Friday After 5, but she's not going to commit to anything else.

She's looking forward to some care-free days.

"I wouldn't be feeling as good as I do about leaving (the center) if we didn't have an outstanding person at the helm," she said.



Grace Ford talks about plans for her retirement from the Joe Ford Nature Center on Monday morning.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Saturday, 5 July 2025, p.6C:**

Remembering the  
legacy of Joe Ford

By Peter G. Hall  
Joe Ford Nature Center board member

Visiting the Joe Ford Nature Center and enjoying the trails may be something that most people experience in Daviess County.

Have you ever thought of how it came to be?

From the legacy of one man, Joe Ford.

Many people these days may not remember Mr. Ford, but for myself and many others he was a big part of our youth.

Not to add that he served in the Merchant Marines, but to highlight his life on touching the minds of the youth in our community with education of the wildlife and vegetation that shares our habitat. He was Owensboro's very own Naturalist.

Of course don't forget the Owensboro Natural Science Museum bullfrog and the giant goldenrod. where he served for 21 years along with contributing his time to the Joe Ford Library, co-founded by his wife sharing. Grace Ford.

He was quite the historian for our city and surrounding counties.

He had written many books and tales with the passion of sharing superstitions and ghost stories to entertain one's own imagination. Also a contributor to The League of the Kentucky Sportsman's magazine and The Happy Hunting Ground.

Speaking with some locals about their memories of Joe would always bring laughter and a smile.

Duke Smith recollects a time when Joe laid a snake around his mother's neck while she was in front of her class at West Louisville Elementary School.

Telling about how his mother was petrified of snakes, but she had learned quickly how to cope.

Joe Ford was my "role model."

Obbie Todd, who was highly influenced, says it best, "everything in nature has a rule and Joe knew the rules!"

Remembering most of my childhood on Lyddane Bridge road, Mr. Ford had stopped by to chat with my dad about some bobcats in the area and possibly a panther sighting.

Pulling out an arrowhead from his pocket to show me, he told me which field he found it in that afternoon, and about the history of Native Americans around our county and the Cherokee Indians.

When Joe Ford visited the classroom, every child, teacher, and janitor stopped to listen just to hear a story or see a critter that he may have brought with him.

It didn't matter how tough the questions that were asked, he had the answer. Fascinated by the knowledge that came from Mr. Ford with an unpretentious expression, out of the mouth of the youngster next to me, name withheld, excitedly came out, "He didn't even use the encyclopedia!"

It was true! He knew every term from the *Rana catesbeiana* to a *Solidago gigantea*! To the ones that played hooky, that was the American bullfrog and the giant goldenrod. No need to copy off of us during tomorrow's test because we weren't sharing.

There was a time that someone had been bitten by a snake and he was contacted to identify it to see if it was poisonous.

It wasn't just the animals and migrations of birds and the artifacts, he had a natural God's gift of knowledge to share with whomever was interested. To a kid, he was like Walt Disney without the drawings of cartoons.

With imagination, he gave you an image of the reason the turtle needed the shell or why the opossum played dead. There are a ton of stories to share from locals that remember him, but stories wither with time.

It's important to keep that legacy alive and pass it down to the youth to learn and share.

Being a true servant to education, his dedication and work left behind a remarkable fingerprint in Owensboro and throughout the trails and fields of Daviess County, especially in the Sorgho area.

With his passion, he was a student of nature; with his values, he was just Owensboro's very own true naturalist, Joe Ford was a modest, humble man with strong Christian values and a friend to all.

