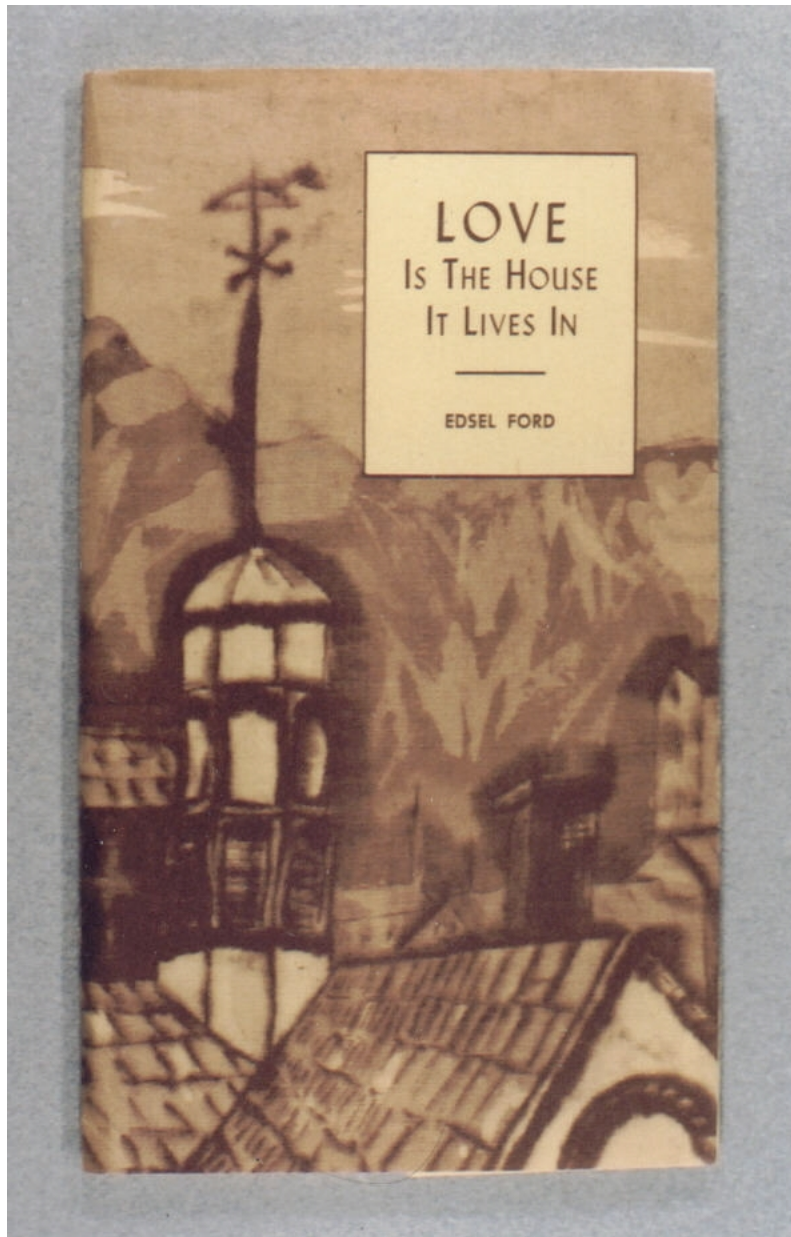


## Donation of the Month

Object: Edsel Ford Poetry Books  
Catalog #: 1993.17.8, 10, & 16  
Donor: Danny White



*Out of the spring the summer hush was born.  
Like a pleased lizard stretching in the sun, I watch the season burnishing the corn, Wilting the meadow to  
a shade of dun.*

>From *The Summer Hush*, by Edsel Ford

Most folks hearing the name confused him with the Edsel of automobile fame, but Northwest Arkansas' own Edsel Ford was not related (in fact, every time one of Ford's poems was published, the Ford Motor Company was deluged with mail and had to explain that Henry Ford's son was not a poet). Ford was often called "The Ozarks Poet" but he thought the moniker too pretentious for a chicken farmer's son. He was tagged with other names as well. Ercil F. Brown of the *North Little Rock Times* called him "the plain man's poet" while the Arkansas Poets Roundtable cited him as a "Poet of the Present" when they honored him in 1957. But a poet by any other name is still a poet.

Edsel Ford (1928-1970) was born on a cotton farm in Eva, Alabama, to James Tilden and Nora Chun Ford, who named their son after the doctor who delivered him. The family lived for a short while in New Mexico before moving to a farm along Little Sugar Creek near Avoca, Arkansas, not too far from the Civil War battlefield at Pea Ridge. When he was seven or eight Ford wrote his first poem in honor of Mother's Day. Writing soon became his life's passion.

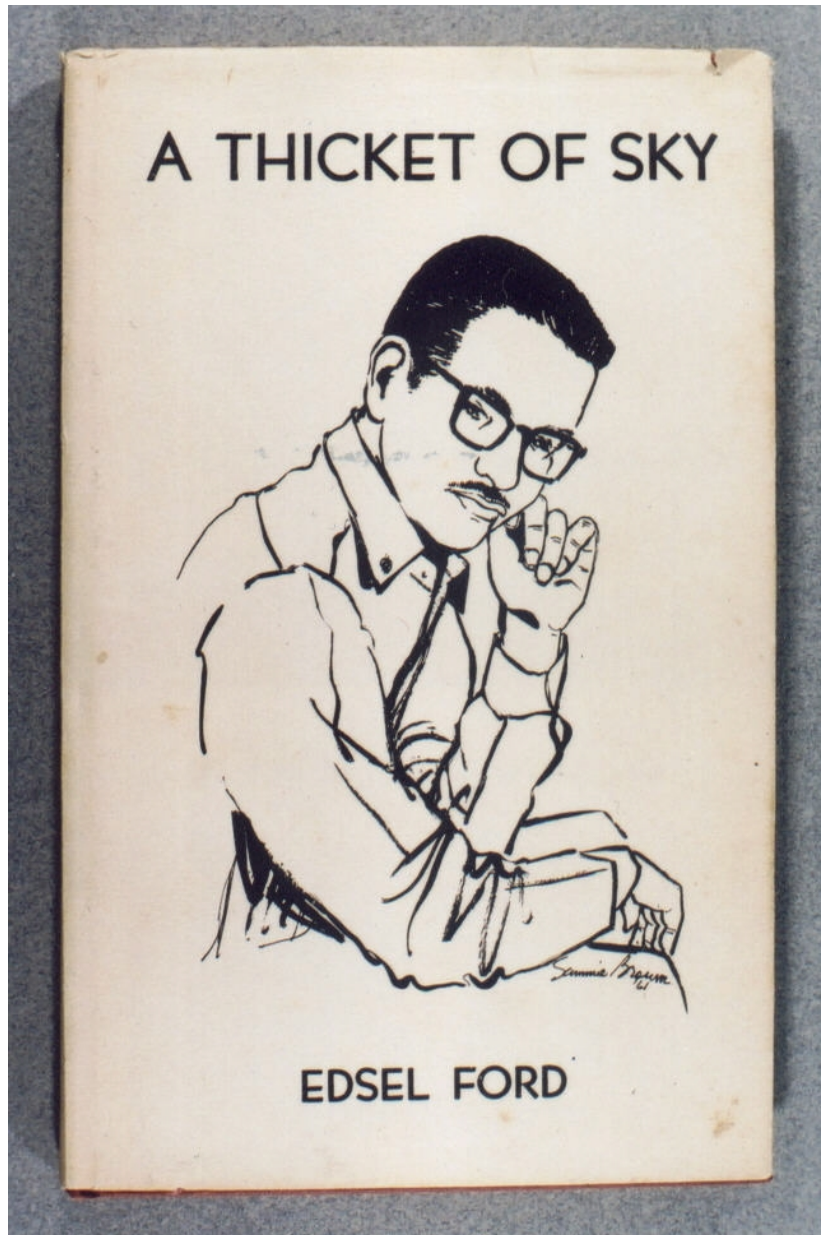
In the fourth grade he wrote detective stories about Scotland Yard; in the eighth grade he told a history teacher that he didn't want to work on a "particularly tedious assignment, but that to placate her, he had written a poem." As a young teenager working on the farm he would often stop his plow, pull out the pad of paper he carried in the bib of his overalls, and jot down some lines of verse that came to him.

Ford was first published in the *Kansas City Star* in 1943, when he was 14 years old. By his senior year at Rogers High School he was editor of the school newspaper. In a column of high school news in the October 7, 1946, edition of the *Rogers Daily News*, a short profile of Ford related that his favorite food was "anything edible but turnips," his favorite subject was speech, his pet peeve was people, his favorite movie star was Bette Davis, and his ambition was "to write a book." He was an avid reader, and cited Millay, Longfellow, and Shakespeare as his favorites.

Ford majored in journalism at the University of Arkansas but he began to focus more and more of his creativity on poetry. To him, the poet had "a great mission for humanity. He must be not only great as men today are great - in the sense of achieving fame and fortune - but great in his heart, as were the old masters." From the beginning Ford drew much of the inspiration for his poetry from the natural beauty of the Ozarks and from the rural life he knew so well. He later said, "I've never finished writing about my growing years with the land and probably never will."

After graduating from college in 1952 Ford intended to pursue a master's degree at Northwestern University, but was instead drafted into the U.S. Army. Because of his need for eyeglasses he was sent to occupied Germany instead of Korea. During his two years of service he wrote for the *Stars and Stripes* and submitted poems to the "Pup Tent Poets" column; those poems were later collected in *This Was My War*. After his tour of duty Ford moved to Texas and worked as a clerk for a few years at Phillips Petroleum. He also lived in New Mexico for a short while before returning to the family farm at Avoca.

Ford was a hard-working writer who began his day at 7:30 a.m. in the attic of his family's 100-year old farmhouse, sitting before the typewriter and drinking a cup of coffee. After a few hours of writing or revising he spent the afternoon answering letters, sending out manuscripts, or preparing lectures for presentation to university groups.



His inspiration came from a variety of sources, including walking the countryside, fishing on the White River, attending county fairs, stopping for long coffee breaks in a Rogers drugstore, and driving the area's back roads. When his creativity ebbed he traveled further afield, seeking out new sites and people and jotting down ideas on scraps of paper. He usually wrote in a traditional, formal style, and many of his poems were sonnets. Once a poem was done he left it to "cool," coming back to it later to check on its impact, rhythm, and sense of feeling.

A 1961 newspaper article noted that Ford wrote about 200 poems a year, selling around 150 of them. Some poems were instantly snapped up while others were shopped around before they found homes; one poem was rejected 53 times before it was published. Eventually over 150 publications featured his work including the *Saturday Review*, the *New York Times*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *McCall's*. In addition to poetry he wrote book reviews for the *Tulsa World*, directed writing workshops, spoke to journalism classes, gave readings of his poems, and wrote a couple of

(unpublished) novels. In 1958 he became a regular columnist for *The Ozarks Mountaineer*. His column of prose and poetry, "The Golden Country," reflected his love of the rural Ozarks.

He also produced several books of verse including: *Two Poets* (with Carl Selph, 1951); *The Stallion's Nest* (1952); *This Was My War* (1955); *The Manchild from Sunday Creek* (1956); *One Leg Short from Climbing Hills* (1959); *A Thicket of Sky* (1961); *Love Is the House It Lives In* (1965); and *Looking for Shiloh* (1968). Some of his books were better received than others. While *This Was My War* sold out quickly, Ford called *The Stallion's Nest* "a smash flop." *One Leg Short*, illustrated by his sister, Imogene "Jean" Hinesly, was a humorous book of verse and prose meant for the tourist trade. About half of his books were self-published.

But Ford had other interests as well. In the 1950s he was one of many who lobbied for the creation of the Pea Ridge National Military Park. He also promoted the War Eagle Arts and Crafts Fair. For many years he served on its board, acted as publicity director, and had a booth at the fair where he and his close friend, artist Hank Spruce, sold poetry books, Hank's batiks, and stationery that the two men produced together (Edsel wrote the verse and Hank drew the illustrations). At later fairs they had fun making jelly from wild fruits and raised a few eyebrows with their "cucumber marmalade." In 1962 Ford moved to Fort Smith where he and Hank shared a house.

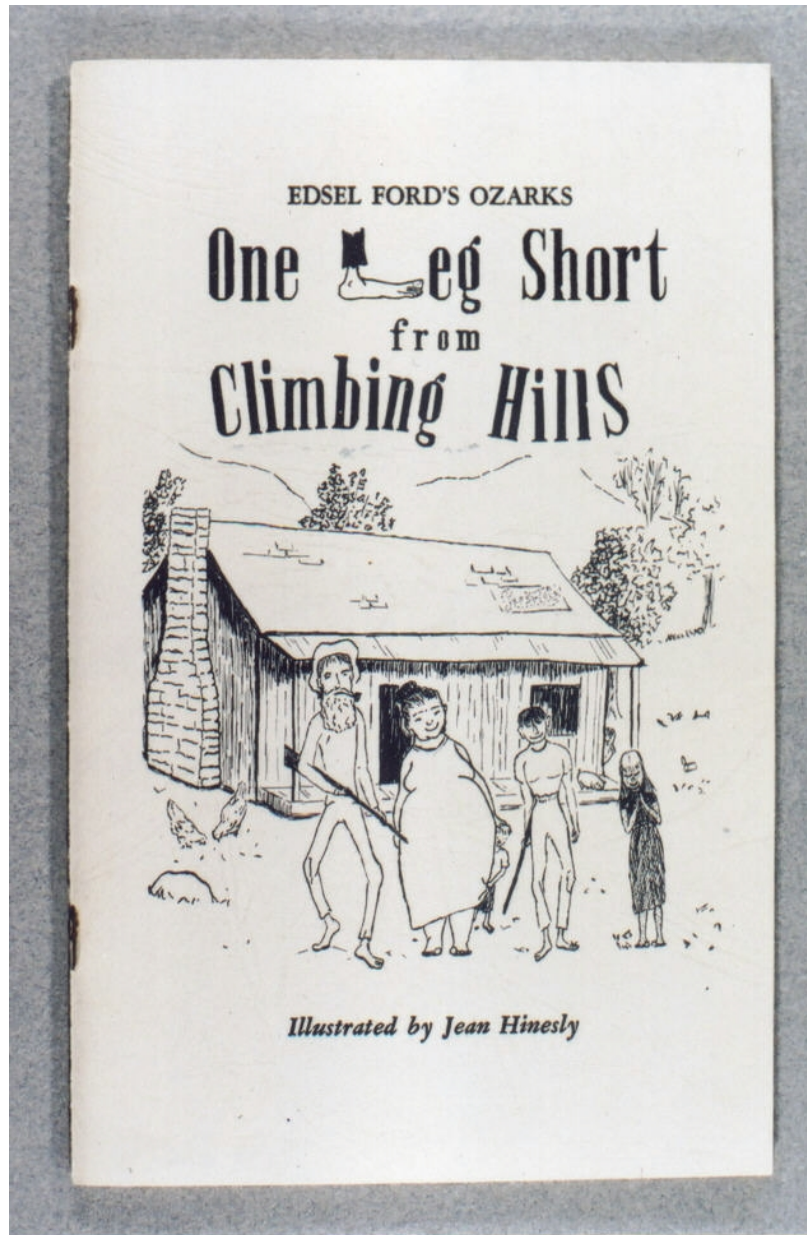
Ford began to receive national recognition for his work by the mid-1950s. In 1956 the Library of Congress invited Ford to record selections from his work; other awards and honors soon followed. He won the Poetry Society of America's top prize for a work in progress in 1966 with "A Landscape for Dante," a poem in which he took the characters from "The Inferno" and set them down in a country town in the Ozarks. His first purchase with the \$3,500 in prize money was for a \$25 roll of stamps. "You wonder from one day to the next where you'll get the money for stamps to send the stuff (poems) out," he quipped. That same year he was also awarded a University of Arkansas Distinguished Alumni Citation. In 1968 he won the Devins Memorial Award, the major prize of the Kansas City Poetry Contest. As part of the award the University of Missouri Press published his manuscript, *Looking for Shiloh*.

But Edsel Ford's rising star was soon felled by illness. After several years of suffering from blackouts and intense headaches, he died of a brain tumor at the age of 41. His love of writing helped sustain him to the end, though, and he continued to write critiques and reviews for the Poetry Society of America while he was bedridden during the final months of his life.

Ford's untimely death promoted an outpouring of regret for the lost potential of a man whose ultimate promise as a poet would remain unknown. One elderly woman, who had never met Ford, drove from Illinois to attend his funeral and "to honor him" for the beauty of his poetry. Other accolades followed. Paul Greenberg of the *Pine Bluff Commercial Appeal* wrote, "He didn't write to teach or amuse and certainly not to make money. But just because he was a poet, and poets - the kind you care to read, anyway - are like that." Ford's good friend Rosa Zagnoni Marinoni, poet laureate of Arkansas, said, *He is no longer a poet o Arkansas alone but has become a national literary figure. Edsel Ford was what I consider the greatest young poet in the United States. . . . He had the genius, and it was my privilege to encourage him in my modest way. . . . He is leaving a great deal of fine poetry, it is true, but there was still so much poetry in him; so many potentialities of what he could have done in the future.*

While not everyone agreed that Ford had a talent worthy of such acclaim, the *Kansas City Star*, which had discovered Ford early in his career, reminded readers that "a writer is never truly dead until readers stop reading him. So the best of Edsel Ford may live on for quite a while."





After Ford's death his papers went to the University of Arkansas, where a journalism scholarship had been established in his honor a few years earlier. The Museum is fortunate to have a number of Ford-related documents and memorabilia in its collections including copies of his books (seen here), copies of some of the magazines his poems were published in, an Army scrapbook with his "Pup Tent Poets" clippings, various letters to and from the poet, a couple of trophies, and several of his paintings as well as a portrait done of him. The items were generously donated to the Museum by Danny White whose mother Whillodene was Ford's sister. From another donor we have a few grade school-era poems and letters.

#### *An Old Gray Barn*

*The barn is a gray grandfather on whose knees The wind plays, like children; and his ribs Rattle with their laughter. Some of these Still stand by country roads; and old corn-cribs Lean hard upon the muscle of the air.*

*There are a few of us who can't pass by With just a glimpse, and then forget. We care Too much for what*

*we were, to let it die.*

*When all of man's resplendent glass and chrome  
Has crumpled in the dust - when all that moved His heart  
to wonder, is no longer home - Something will still be standing that he loved:  
A grandfather barn whose stables keep a star  
Above the things which were, and somehow are.*

#### **CREDITS**

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