



## Dr. John L. Creech 1920–2009



**D**r. John L. Creech, the third Director of the U. S. National Arboretum and an Honorary Director of the National Bonsai Foundation, died in Columbus, North Carolina on August 7, 2009.

In 1973 when Dr. Creech assumed the leadership of the Arboretum he had the inspired notion that this institution should have a permanent exhibit of Japanese bonsai. The probability of realizing this dream appeared unlikely. But he assessed the situation with creative thinking and took bold steps to make his idea a reality. This is what happened.

As a consequence of his work as a plant explorer in Japan for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, he had many friends in the Japanese bonsai community. He drew on his fellowship with these men and offered to them the sug-

gestion that the American Bicentennial of 1976 would be a wonderful opportunity for them to make a presentation of bonsai to the United States. He believed that a shared appreciation of nature as found in the art form of small trees in pots would be a living seal of the friendship between the two nations. The Japanese warmly embraced his idea and, after extended negotiations between representatives of the two countries, the gift of 53 trees and six viewing stones was formally installed in the new Japanese Pavilion at the Arboretum in July 1976.

So it was that Dr. John Creech brought bonsai and the U.S. National Arboretum together in a fortuitous alliance that provided the genesis for what was to become the National Bonsai & Penjing Museum. Thus it is no understatement to say that

he was the founder of the first bonsai museum in the world.

This enterprising pioneer for American bonsai was a native of Woonsocket, Rhode Island and a graduate in 1941 of the University of Rhode Island with a degree in Horticulture. A Captain in the U.S. Army during World War II, he was captured by enemy forces and sent to a Prisoner of War camp in Poland. Under these adverse conditions his innovative spirit came to the fore, as he assumed the responsibility for feeding 1,500 fellow prisoners during the final year of the war. He accomplished this nearly overwhelming task by planting a 2-1/2 acre vegetable garden and maintaining a greenhouse of 6,000 tomato plants. Although he would later

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## President's Letter



We mourn the passing of **Dr. John Creech**, who was not only the catalyst for the founding of the Museum but remained a devoted patron of the Arboretum until his death. It was my privilege and pleasure to work closely with him in 2001 as he was writing the manuscript for *The Bonsai Saga: How the Bicentennial Collection Came to America*. His last official visit to the Museum was on the occasion of the Asian Festival, which was held that year. John sat by the koi pool on the terrace outside the Administration Building autographing copy after copy of the book for the many guests and visitors. It was a proud moment for all of us.

We will also miss the engaging presence of **Dr. Bill Orsinger**. He too loved the Museum and served it ardently as a volunteer for many years. Bill cared deeply for the Museum, and did so much to make it the wonderful institution that it is today.

In October we are changing Treasurers. **César Portocarrero**, who has been an outstanding officer for over 6 years, will hand over his duties to **Jim Hughes**. We are most grateful to César for his dedicated work, and we are most fortunate to have Jim as our newest officer and member of the Executive Committee.

We also welcome **Doug Paul** and **Jane Yamashiroya** to the NBF Board of Directors. They are both outstanding additions to our governing body.

There are other developments as well: We have an outstanding new exhibit—*Autumn Arts of Nature*; the Museum has acquired an important tree given in memory of **Jean Smith** from her personal collection; and the Museum is going to be a part of a special segment of a major television show, CBS's *Sunday Morning*.

As the Museum moves on through the seasons, autumn is a good time for us to reflect on all the people who have tried to perfect it for the present and the future. Thank you for your continuing support.

Felix

## NBF Notes

- After six years as NBF Treasurer, **César Portocarrero** will retire effective October 1st and **Jim Hughes** will assume these duties. During César's tenure he streamlined and improved the management and investment of NBF's financial resources, stepped in to serve as Treasurer of the 5th World Bonsai Convention in 2005, and served as an active member of the NBF Executive Committee. He will remain on the NBF Board and will be working as a member of the NBF Finance Committee.
- There are two new members on the NBF Board of Directors:



Doug Paul.

**Doug Paul** of Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, is the owner of "The Kennett Collection," a private bonsai garden of over 800 specimen

bonsai including many historic trees. Also on the grounds of the garden are koi ponds, a Japanese Maple grove, and a large bonsai pot collection.

**Jane Yamashiroya** of Honolulu, Hawaii, is an active member in the



Jane Yamashiroya.

Hawaiian bonsai community. A former President of the Hawaii Bonsai Association, she is a bonsai instructor and an International Consultant for the World

Bonsai Friendship Federation.

- A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between NBF and the U.S. National Arboretum will soon be in place. This will allow work to move forward on the development of a design and construction plan for improving and stabilizing the Japanese Pavilion. Fundraising for the project will begin later in the Fall.

## Dr. John L. Creech

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declare that “I gardened for my life” his altruistic actions kept starvation at bay for his fellow troops and made their survival possible. For this heroic effort and for his courageous conduct in battle, Captain Creech received the Bronze and Silver Star Medals.

Upon his return to the United States he completed his academic work with a Masters Degree in Horticulture from the University of Massachusetts and a doctorate in Botany from the University of Maryland. This last location brought him close to his ultimate career destination, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). For 26 years he worked for the Agricultural Research Service, principally as a plant explorer, specializing in the wild and cultivated woody plants of Asia. His appointment as the third director of the Arboretum was described this way in the USDA press release: “On January 7, 1973, Dr. John L. Creech and the United States National Arboretum greeted each other officially and with affectionate regard.” And so it was. Spontaneous, outgoing, unassuming, accessible and kindly, he was a model Ambassador for the Arboretum and its agenda.



*John Creech outside the U.S. National Arboretum Administration Building.*

As Director, in addition to his stellar work of acquiring the bonsai collection, his contributions were many. He presided over the design and installation of the National Herb Garden, led the expansion of the Arboretum’s gardens and collections, and sponsored the effort to establish a Memorandum of Understanding with Friends of the National Arboretum. This permitted a stakeholder group to raise funds on behalf of the Arboretum, and it paved the way for the incorporation in 1983 of the National Bonsai Foundation as the support organization for the Museum.

In 1980 after his retirement as Director of the Arboretum he moved to North Carolina and worked as a volunteer, interim Director and a member of the Board of Directors of the North Carolina Arboretum. It was there that he met a young nursery technician, **Arthur Joura**. When that arboretum received a collection of bonsai trees Dr. Creech obtained an internship for Joura at the National Bonsai & Penjing Museum launching his promising career as a bonsai curator.

Dr. Creech received many horticultural tributes during his life including two prestigious awards from the

American Horticultural Society: the AHS Professional Award (1972) and the AHS Liberty Hyde Bailey Award (1989). Also in 2001, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the reception of the gift of bonsai from Japan, the National Bonsai Foundation was honored to publish *The Bonsai Saga: How the Bicentennial Collection Came to America*.<sup>\*</sup> In this small volume Dr. Creech recounted how he and his colleagues, **Colonel John Hinds** (USAF), **Sylvester “Skip” March**, Arboretum Gardens Unit Leader, **Robert Drechsler**, the first Curator of the Museum, **Janet Lanman**, the first Museum volunteer, and many others, worked together to make the great bonsai dream come true.

The legacy of John Creech to the American horticultural community will be remembered for a long time. And nowhere is this more certain than here in the National Bonsai & Penjing Museum at the U. S. National Arboretum.

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*\*Although this book is now out of print, as a continuing testament to Dr. Creech and his work on behalf of bonsai, NBF is making this historic publication available to everyone by posting it on the NBF website at <http://www.bonsai-nbf.org/site/history.html>*



*With Yuji Yoshimura.*



*Unpacking the gift of bonsai.*

## Museum Notes

- **William H. Orsinger**, a volunteer in the Museum for over 20 years, died on July 11th. He was a physician and had a colorful career first as a staff doctor at jails in Virginia and the District of Columbia followed by a Naval appointment in Naples, Italy accompanied by his wife and children. When he returned to the United States, he developed a family practice in Arlington Virginia until 1979



*Bill Orsinger in the Yee Sun-Wu Chinese Pavilion.*

and then he obtained a job on the medical staff of the Central Intelligence Agency. Bill was a wonderful raconteur and these varied positions provided ample grist for his delightful stories, some of them related in Italian! When he retired he took up bonsai and eventually had a personal collection that numbered over 150 trees. In 2007 some of his trees were displayed in the Museum as part of the exhibit: **Bonsai Invitational Exhibit**

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## Autumn Arts of Nature Exhibit

by Kathleen Emerson-Dell

It may be too early for our cultivated mums to be in bloom, but these Asian symbols of immortality are putting on quite a show via the chrysanthemum stones on view in the new exhibition *Autumn Arts of Nature* (September 26–November 29).



*Kusamono created by Young Choe.  
Ceramic by Ron Lang.*

Over the years, we have had several exhibits featuring chrysanthemum stones from China, Japan or Korea. This year is different—for the first time ever, the Museum is including rare stones collected from the only known source of chrysanthemum stones in this country: the Eel River in northern California.

The four stones display a variety of crystalline flower formations and colored stone matrices.

While we are waiting for the bonsai to join the exhibit in full autumnal foliage, the stones share space in the Special Exhibits Wing with autumn kusamono plantings designed by Museum volunteer **Young Choe**. It is through the living elements of this exhibit that we seek to evoke the human poetic response to the season—a reflection on the transient nature of earthly things and the beauty found in that impermanence.



*Loan from American Viewing  
Stone Resource Center.*



*Loan from  
Robert H. Wilson.*



*Loan from American  
Viewing Stone  
Resource Center.*



*Loan from  
Skip Chalfont.*

### Museum Notes

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**Featuring Three Local Artists.** Pictures of these can be viewed on the NBF website at: [http://www.bonsai-nbf.org/site/exh-3local\\_artists.html](http://www.bonsai-nbf.org/site/exh-3local_artists.html)

- A Jaboticaba tree (*Myrciaria cauliflora*) from the collection of the late **Jean Smith** was offered to the Museum in her memory for the North American Collection by her husband **Edward Smith**. The tree was formally accepted for the Museum by **Thomas S. Elias**, Arboretum Director, in September.
- The CBS News show *Sunday Morning* will do a segment sometime this Fall on bonsai and featuring the Museum. On September 27th correspondent **Rita Braver** spent much of the day interviewing staff and filming in the Museum. Additional filming of President **Felix B. Laughlin's** bonsai



*Jean Smith's Myrciaria cauliflora (Jaboticaba).*

collection will take place on October 23rd. The precise date of broadcast is not set so please consult the *Sunday Morning* website <http://www.cbsnews.com/sections/sunday/main3445.shtml> for the



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*Thank you for your support  
of the National Bonsai &  
Penjing Museum.*



*CBS News Sunday Morning correspondent  
Rita Braver with Curator Jack Sustic in the  
Special Exhibits Wing.*

exact date of broadcast. The contact with *Sunday Morning* was arranged by **Janice Kaplan**, the public relations consultant who was hired as part of the Marketing Alliance funded by **Barbara Hall Marshall**, NBF, and Friends of the National Arboretum (FONA).