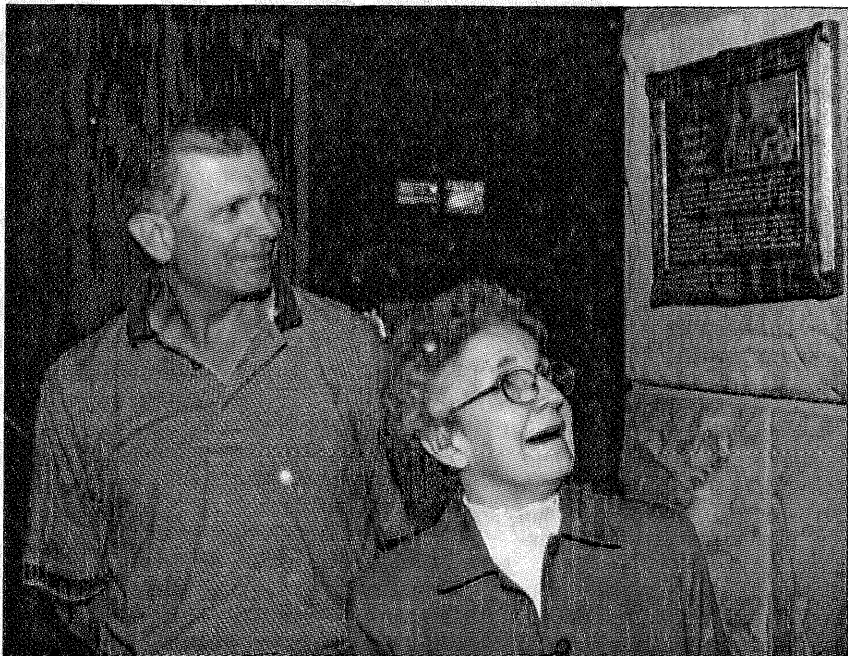


'He researched each locality to make sure the scenery was appropriate to the animal in the cage,' said Helen LaPlante, widow of Forest 'Woody' LaPlante, as she and her son, Fred, view a plaque in the Reptile House saluting the artist's work at the Toledo Zoo.



THE BLADE/DON SIMMONS

## Zoo memorializes work of Reptile House's artist

By **REBEKAH SCOTT**

BLADE STAFF WRITER

The little glass booths are perfect pads for creepy-crawlies: they're moist, snug, and sky-lighted, custom-made for reptiles and amphibians.

Humans can squeeze inside, but few would want to stay in these serpents' dens for long.

But then there was Forest "Woody" LaPlante.

"It's really hot and unpleasant in there," said Val Hornyak, a Toledo Zoo animal attendant. "He'd sit in there for hours and work, work, work, despite the conditions."

The Toledo artist first created

animal-house décor at the Toledo Zoo Reptile House back in the Great Depression when he was 19 years old, part of a Works Progress Administration team of three painters.

Mr. LaPlante, whose career in The Blade's art department spanned 37 years, came back periodically through the following six decades as wash-buckets, animal claws, and sunlight degraded the brightly colored background pictures. Sixty-five years later, he finished up the final restoration of the work he started back in the New

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Deal years. He died in 2001.

Yesterday, as monitor lizards and rattlesnakes looked on, zoo officials unveiled a Forest LaPlante historical plaque inside the Reptile House, within sight of several of his signed works.

"Woody was a great ambassador for the WPA period in Toledo in general, and what it meant to the zoo in particular," said Peter Tolson, a zoo conservation director.

"He loved working here, and we liked having him around. He had a quick wit, and such a passion for what he did. And he was a friend, one of the crew," said reptile curator Andy Odum. "That these paintings are here is really pretty miraculous, when you think about it. This is a 70-year-old building, and those are damp cages with animals

living in them. And there they are, paintings from the 1930s."

These are not great masterpieces of art history, but simple botanical backgrounds — each plant and landscape carefully researched so iguana, tortoise, or horned toad can feel right at home.

And now that the artist is gone, they're a memorial to his years of tenacity.

"He did his homework. He researched each locality to make sure the scenery was appropriate to the animal in the cage," said Helen LaPlante, the artist's widow. "It was a labor of love, for sure. He was very diligent. He held nothing back."

Mr. LaPlante and the WPA team painted more than 100 cage scenes in the zoo aviary, aquarium, science museum, and reptile house. Only some of them survive.

Generations of lizards and snakes coiled and watched while Mr. LaPlante climbed in, hunkered down with trays of

paints, photos, and magazines, and threw himself into the work of creating or restoring their custom wall treatments. Zoo workers removed the occupants first.

In a few day's time, the artist's work gave their neighbor back its forever-blue skies, palm trees, Spanish moss, cacti, or lily pads in vibrant 2-D.

"It's wonderful the zoo is remembering him this way," said his son, Fred LaPlante. "When he was really into a project, the house next door could explode and he'd never hear it. . . . And once he retired, the zoo projects gave him a lot of energy. He worked in the cages, right where people could watch. He loved kids, and he'd show them what he was doing, how he did it."

"Background murals are used very commonly in displays," Mr. Odum said, "but I can't think of any zoo that has them this old, that hasn't replaced them with new. This is original."