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Road to success started in Memphis for outdoorsman Fox

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The week before John Fox died at the age of 91 in Ocklawaha, Florida, he was doing one of the many things he loved to do – singing karaoke. He closed out the show by singing Etta James' classic, *At Last*.

It was a fitting song for a man who touched so many lives through his talents as a professional bass angler, TV personality, fishing lure inventor, member of the International Fishing Hall of Fame and whose friends included famous entertainers, athletes and anglers.

The headline on his obituary appropriately read: John Fox, The Man, The Myth, The Legend.

And, to think, his road to success started in Memphis.

"He never forgot where he came from," says Randy Fox, one of Fox's six children. "We have lots of relatives in Memphis, Jackson, Humboldt, Greenfield and that whole area of West Tennessee."

Fox's Memphis roots go way back.

In 1933, his grandfather was chief of detectives with the Memphis police department. He was, according to the Fox family, personally responsible for the capture of public enemy No. 1 Machine Gun Kelly. Fox's father owned a detective agency in Memphis and hired John after he graduated from Columbia Military Academy in Middle Tennessee in 1947.

After his father died of a heart attack at the age of 52, Fox, who was 21 at the time, spent several years as a professional race car driver where he was once ranked No. 46<sup>th</sup> nationally in NASCAR's Convertible Division.

That's right, NASCAR had a convertible division and Fox raced on the famed sand of Daytona Beach.

In the late 1950s Fox became a saltwater fishing guide in Pensacola, Florida, which eventually led to a career as a professional bass fisherman and entrepreneur that lasted until his death.

In Fox's honor, not long after his death, more than 150 attended a celebration of his life at Breezy Knoll Farm in Belleview, Fla., where his family showcased memorabilia from Fox's long, eventful and colorful career.

"An exhibit at The Metropolitan Museum could not have been more impressive," one family member says in Fox's obituary. "There were awards, plaques, trophies, monogrammed shirts and jackets, slide shows, films along with personal photos of him, his family and famous movie stars, pro athletes, TV celebrities, musicians and recording artists."

In other words, it was a big show from a big career that saw Fox hobnob with people such as NFL stars Walter Peyton and Willie Gault; entertainers Cory Wells of 3 Dog Night and Elvis Presley and bass fishing legends Roland Martin, Jimmy Houston and Bill Dance.

Dance, who lives in a Memphis suburb, talked about Fox in a phone interview while on location for one of his saltwater TV shows, saying: "He was one of a kind. I've got a lot of memories of John. I remember one time I came into a restaurant in Heber Springs, Ark., and there was John standing on a table singing, I think, *God Bless America*."

That's the way Fox's children remember him, too.

"When we were growing up, I was the only one of the six children that was passionate about the outdoors," says son Bill, who along with his brother Randy lived across the street from their dad. "He literally had to slip out of the house and not let me know that he was going hunting or fishing."

One of the family's favorite memories of their dad was when they were living in Lufkin, Texas. Their home had a pool, but it wasn't necessary a pool to swim in, according to Bill.

"I remember when Dad would go to Sam Rayburn or Toledo Bend (reservoirs in East Texas not far from their home)," Bill says. "He'd catch fish and bring them back home and put them in the pool. My backyard was one of the most popular in town. He'd put brush in the pool and stock it with all kinds of fish, like catfish, bass and bream."

That's where Fox developed many of his fishing lure ideas, Bill says, such as the first pointed slip sinker, the Mister Twister worm and the original balsam bead bait.

But it was on TV that Fox became a star.

Fox was a fishing show pioneer, first on the nationally syndicated *The American Angler* in the early 1970s, followed by the *John Fox Outdoor Adventurers* on ESPN in the mid-1980s and later on the Outdoor Channel's *Senior Outdoorsmen* in the 1990s.

Two of his most notable programs were *Take a Kid Fishing* and *Catch-and-Release*.

"The Catch-and-Release program, he did that for the next generation," says daughter Cyndee of Belleview, Fla., who started crying as she spoke about her dad. "Forgive me for crying, but he taught us a lot. He told us no matter what happens in our lives we are to love the Lord, and that's how we knew him day-to-day. He was an awesome dad."

Gone, but never forgotten.

*Larry Rea's outdoors column appears on the first Sunday of each month in The Commercial Appeal; e-mail Larry Rea at [lROUTDOORS@att.net](mailto:lROUTDOORS@att.net) or go to his web site at [lROUTDOORS.com](http://lROUTDOORS.com); listen to Larry Rea on Outdoors with Larry Rea on Saturday mornings from 6-7:30 on ESPN 790-AM and 92.9 HD FM in Memphis and 1520-AM and 95.3-FM in Brownsville, Tenn., and 6:30-8 on News/Talk 101.5 in Jackson, Tenn.*