

# Azalea curiosity blooms into 77-years-old Glencairn Garden

## We can thank the Biggers for site's rich showcase of color

Rock Hill is 153 years old this year. Glencairn Garden is 77 years old - one year past one-half of the city's age.

In 1918, Dr. David Bigger, whose ancestors were among the earliest settlers of York County, married Hazel Mott of Yreka, Calif. The couple started the garden as a hobby. At that time, azaleas were a rarity in upcountry South Carolina.

The Biggers were curious as to whether azaleas could survive the winters here. They started with a

3 x 3 sandbox and an old window sash set up inside the house.

When the plants were rooted, they were moved outside in the fall to see if they would survive the winter. The plants bloomed in April. Dr. Bigger thought they were wonderful and managed to take 400 cuttings from the original plants.

The Bigger home was built in 1919 on five acres on Charlotte Avenue which was unpaved and usually muddy. In the early 1920s, Dr. Bigger fenced his five acres and kept sheep, goats and a pair of deer in order to keep the undergrowth in control. The deer multiplied until they had 20. They decided to sell the deer. Permission was given by the city to open the back fence where it was densely wooded and there were no neigh-

bors.

The deer did not cooperate and ran in the opposite direction. In a blind panic they jumped the fence that bordered Charlotte Avenue. Several were killed immediately by cars and many were severely injured.



Louise Pettus

### NEARBY HISTORY

by honeysuckle.

In 1958, Grace Freeman, who would later be South Carolina's poet laureate, interviewed Mrs. Bigger about the early plantings. Mrs. Bigger said that in the beginning they had no plans for a formal garden. She said Dr. Bigger was arthritic and used a cane to outline where he wished the azaleas to be planted.

Then Mrs. Bigger would sketch the shape of the plot desired by Dr. Bigger and put little Xs to show where the azaleas should be planted. They employed a boy (who was only identified as Johnny) who started working for them when he was 10 years old.

Freeman wrote, "Dr. Bigger trained him so well in the ways of plants that to this day, Mrs. Bigger can say, 'Johnny, please go get me a

Pink Pearl or an Enchantress and Johnny will recognize it by its foliage no matter what season of the year it is."

Freeman thought it was Mrs. Bigger's "talent and awareness of blending colors that made the garden so beautiful."

In 1936, Alfred Landon was running for vice president as Franklin D. Roosevelt's running mate. He came to Rock Hill to campaign but spent most of the day in Glencairn with his camera.

By 1940, the azaleas, accompanied by pink and white dogwood, sasanguas, periwinkle, day lilies, tulips, camellias, crepe myrtle, wisteria, water lilies and boxwood, covered the entire five acres. That year, the gardens were opened to the public.

Dr. Bigger died in 1951. In 1958, Mrs. Bigger decided the property a

few months before her death in March 1959 to the city of Rock Hill.

The city hired a master planner, landscape architect Robert Marvin of Wakeboro. Marvin said that the natural lay of the land was wonderful. He added a new concrete patio and fountains around the pool, making the pool area the centerpiece of the garden.

In 1960, the first "Come-See-Me" week came about on April 24 and an estimated 8,500 persons visited Glencairn. From that point on, attendance has increased so that now Glencairn is favorably compared with the lowcountry's Middleton, Magnolia and Brookgreen gardens.

Louise Pettus is a retired Winthrop University history professor. Her column appears Sundays.

