

Drs. Isaac Alexander Bigger and David A. Bigger

Dr. Isaac Alexander Bigger (1893-1955) was born in York County's Bethel community, the son of Dr. Isaac A. Bigger and Mary Neal Johnston Bigger. The Bigger and the Johnston families stretched back into York County's pre-Revolutionary times.

Young Isaac, or Ike, knew from boyhood that he was to be a doctor like his father. After graduating from Rock Hill High School in 1909 he first attended Erskine College but transferred to Davidson College. After graduating from Davidson he entered the Medical College of the University of Virginia.

Except for three years teaching at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Ike Bigger was to spend the rest of his professional career at the University of Virginia Medical School.

At the age of 37 he became a full-time professor of surgery—one of the youngest surgeons to reach that level at any major medical school in the United States. Bigger and another young physician, Dr. William B. Porter, teamed up and were able to modernize, or “revolutionize,” the medical school on both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

His engaging personality and distinctive laugh endeared him to students but it was his “profound clinical ability” along with his ability to pass his knowledge along to others that commanded their respect. In 1950, 30 of the residents he had trained established the I. A. Bigger Surgical Medal to be awarded to the U. of V. Medical School's most outstanding student as voted by the senior class.

Dr. Bigger was a pioneer in the area of thoracic surgery, dealing largely with pulmonary and cardiovascular problems. A standard textbook in the field, Operative Surgery by Shelton Horsley, was expanded by Dr. Bigger into a second volume. Bigger also contributed articles to many medical journals.

One proof of the popularity and respect for Dr. Bigger was his being elected as president of 11 Medical Societies over his lifetime. This included the presidency of the American Medical Society and the American Surgical Association.

When Dr. Bigger died in 1955 the funeral was held in his home church, Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church in Richmond. The Governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia, at his own request, led the funeral procession with the flag of the Commonwealth flying from the Governor's limousine.

The newspaper columnist, James J. Kilpatrick, then editor of the Richmond Times-Dispatch wrote in an editorial the day after the funeral: "In my lifetime I have known only two men who are both great and good. Ike Bigger was one of these men."

Dr. Ike Bigger had a brother, also a medical doctor, David A. Bigger. It was David Bigger who ended up living in his father's home with its nearby 6-acre swamp on present-day Charlotte Avenue.

A friend gave David Bigger several azalea plants (this at a time that azaleas were almost non-existent in upcountry South Carolina). He and his wife, Hazel Mott Bigger, began draining the swamp and removing the 20 deer, along with some goats, that were placed there to keep down the undergrowth.

They multiplied the cuttings from 400 in 1929 to over 12,000 plants in 1937. Eventually there would be over 100,000 azalea plants according to the book, A City Without Cobwebs, authored by Mrs. Douglas Summers Brown.

The Biggers also planted rare trees and with great effort transformed the former deer park into a lovely place they called Glencairn. Glencairn was the name of the Scottish ancestral home of the Bigger family.

In 1940 the park was opened to the public. Glencairn Gardens has been the centerpiece of Rock Hill's "Come-See-Me" festival since that date.