

THE REHDER BOYS

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They were tall, lean men with drawls as thick as the sorghum once processed on the shores of the Cape Fear River in their hometown of Wilmington, North Carolina. Erect and deliberate in their strides they would bob and weave through the thickest of long leaf pine forests and complex spider webs until emerging in the bright Carolina sunlight to check on one of their favorite “honey holes” of carnivorous plants. To them these were sacred places, the indigenous home of the Venus Flytrap and other native pitcher plants. Henry and Stanley Rehder made these trips together for decades, just as their father had done before them, bending their lanky bodies over and over to record new growth in an area or to curse the developers or poachers who were destroying the remaining plants they had hoped future generations would enjoy.



Figure 1: Stanley and Henry Rehder (left to right) on Henry's front porch. Photo by Brownie Harris with permission.

Henry Rehder, the debonair commercial florist, could easily fit in the lounges of country clubs or fine European gardens as he did in the paper strewn passenger side of his younger brother's well-worn Jeep (Fig. 2.). And Stanley, the mixed plaid and striped outdoorsman who was most at ease with a fishing pole, shovel, or straight flush in his flytrap-seed stained hands, used his skill with storytelling to keep his listeners fascinated for hours. These two brothers shared parents but not childhoods due to the decade difference in age, but they found kinship and friendship out among the Carolina Bays, especially during the twilight of their lives.

Born in 1911, Henry Burbank Rehder and George Stanley Rehder, born in 1922, were local legends when it came to plants, especially carnivorous plants. For Henry, the joy centered mostly on the beauty from stem to flower, and for Stanley, it was the bare roots and soil that stirred his excitement. Flower growing was in their DNA. Their grandmother, Johanna, arrived in Wilmington, NC from Bremerhaven, Germany during the height of the Civil War to join her new husband, Henry. To remember the beauty of her homeland, she planted flower bulbs in the modest yard located steps away from the gates of Oakdale Cemetery. Passersby noted the beauty and rarity of Johanna's flowers and asked to purchase them to place on the graves of their loved ones. Recognizing an opportunity to supplement the income of her husband's dry goods shop, she established Rehder's Florist, a business that would remain a part of Wilmington culture for four generations.

Henry and Stanley's father, Will, received his floral training in New York before returning to his hometown to expand the shop and greenhouses. For decades, "Mr. Will" served Wilmington society's needs for flowers for every occasion, but he was happiest when he took his young boys to the woods to hunt for carnivorous plants. On these long trips they would also fill the truck with southern *Smilax* to ship by train to the fine hotels in the north, or maybe search for tracks of big cats that were reported to roam the Carolina woods. During WWII, Henry served as a Merchant Marine and Stanley joined the US Army. After the war, Henry took ownership of Will Rehder Florist, the retail part of the business, and Stanley applied the horticulture skills he learned at NC State College to build Rehder's Greenhouses into a large wholesale operation. Stanley grew the mums, carnations, poinsettias, and lilies and Henry knew how to make sure every Wilmington home had a beautiful Rehder floral arrangement or potted plant. Henry's son, Henry Rehder, Jr., kept the florist tradition going after "the Rehder boys" retired and he later became a media personality and author of books on Southern gardening prior to selling the business to fulfill a lifelong desire to become a Lutheran pastor.

During their long marriage, Henry Rehder, Sr., and his wife, Barbara, created one of the community's most beautiful home gardens. Full of winding pathways with lush specimens of azaleas, camellias, and flowering trees, their spacious garden was open to the public each spring and was featured in many national and statewide magazines. Their small greenhouse contained specimens of



Figure 2: Henry and Stanley Rehder about 1993.

exotic tropical plants and their picture-perfect pocket vegetable garden was a source of great pride and fresh food for their table.

In contrast, Stanley's passion was not found within his own yard but in Fun City Farms, a multi-acre tract of land that he tended with his poker and fishing buddies (Fig. 3). Stanley and his pals grew butter beans and corn, tomatoes and cukes and using his Jeep with the FLYTRAP license plate as a mobile farmer's market he would bestow his share of the crops upon clients and pretty receptionists throughout town. He was also an accomplished surf fisherman and was happiest when "the blues were runnin'" along the Carolina shores. After a hail storm and broken furnace provided the impetus to call the greenhouse business quits, Stanley Rehder became a successful commercial realtor and continued his hunt for Flytraps and pitcher plants as he scouted places for future development.



Figure 3: Stanley and his tractor at Fun City Farms. Photo by Roy Zalesky.

Their father had taught them how to recognize depressions in the soil, bogs, flower spikes, and other signs of carnivorous plant life. In later years these dedicated weekend plant detectives discovered and recorded hundreds of carnivorous plant sites. As their memory of locations began to wane (remember, this was before GPS capabilities), the two brothers would take along small irrigation flags to designate special areas to alert roadside mowers to avoid their beloved plants. Always trusting, Stanley was beyond despair when these flags would steer a poacher right to the place where the Flytraps were most vulnerable. Stanley and Henry befriended dozens of homeowners in places like Boiling Springs, NC and taught them to protect the treasures in their yards. They took carloads of visitors from across the world to see the plants in the wild. While Henry regaled garden clubs with his extraordinary knowledge of camellias, azaleas, and other flowering plants, he also enjoyed categorizing all of the varieties of *Sarracenia* plants in the area and submitted for verification an unusual hybrid of *S. rubra* and *S. minor* found at a Boy Scout Camp. The Smithsonian verified its rarity and named it *Sarracenia rehderi* in his honor.

The science was not the draw for Stanley. It was the pure uniqueness of the Venus Flytrap plant and his pride in it being indigenous only to Southeastern North Carolina that made it his obsession. He spent years trying to convince any willing legislator to stiffen penalties for poaching and to categorize the plants as an endangered species. He routinely called the newspaper to request articles on the plants and to expose poachers for their deeds. He began to experiment with collecting Flytrap and *Sarracenia* seeds and started The Flytrap Company in the 1970s as a way to supplement his income but also as a way to repopulate areas that had lost plant life. He harvested seed pods, dried them in brown paper bags in his attic, separated seeds from the pods by lightly rolling them through a screen onto a cardboard box, and measured them into vials carefully marked by hand drawn numbers on adhesive tape. He also carried a video camera with him on most outings and kept notes on his discoveries in worn composition books.

In his quest to make the area known for its unique plant life, in the 1970s and 80s he contacted national television shows to pitch his stories about the strange plant only found wild in Southeastern NC. He was successful too! National morning shows, *Good Morning America* and *The Today Show*

plus the popular prime time show of the time, *That's Incredible*, flew him to their studios to exhibit and demonstrate the traps and pitchers. The story of his interview by Barbara Walters was one of his most-told tales because he managed to startle her into a shriek when he pulled out the live Palmetto bugs he brought to feed the plants.

In the 1970s, while looking for some land for development, Stanley discovered a boggy location in the center of one of the most populated areas of town. A roadbed had been cut but abandoned when the area was named a wetland. Two natural springs fed the bog in this natural Carolina bay. Flytraps and pitcher plants were in evidence, but he saw an opportunity to create a unique Flytrap and *Sarracenia* preserve that would be a showplace for visitors and a living laboratory for the elementary school children who were schooled in close proximity. After receiving permission from the owner to create an even better garden, he and Henry gathered and sowed seeds for more than two decades, kept the area trimmed and clean and even set up a box of brochures for visitors to identify the plants and learn about their rarity. The word was out that this spot was a must see location for nature lovers.

In 2002, the owner and the North Carolina Coastal Land Trust created a conservation easement on this property that would protect it for generations to come. Henry's death in 2004 increased Stanley's love of the place they had shared together. In April 2012, the City of Wilmington joined this amazing collaboration, when the garden was officially dedicated by the City of Wilmington as the Stanley Rehder Carnivorous Plant Garden during the Flytrap Frolic an event held by the NC Coastal Land Trust to celebrate and raise awareness about the need to preserve and protect Venus Flytraps (Fig. 4). The Garden was added to the Cross City Trail and the City of Wilmington Parks Department took over the maintenance of the property, the development of signage, and completed a parking area and overlook that enhances the area. Stanley got to see his vision for this location begin but didn't get to see its completion. He died on October 1, 2012, but his handiwork is still in evidence as the plants follow a distinctive curve along the walkways he built within the garden.

Within just a few weeks after the opening of the garden, poachers entered in the dead of night and removed about 900 Venus Flytrap plants, approximately 90% of the mature plants. This horrific

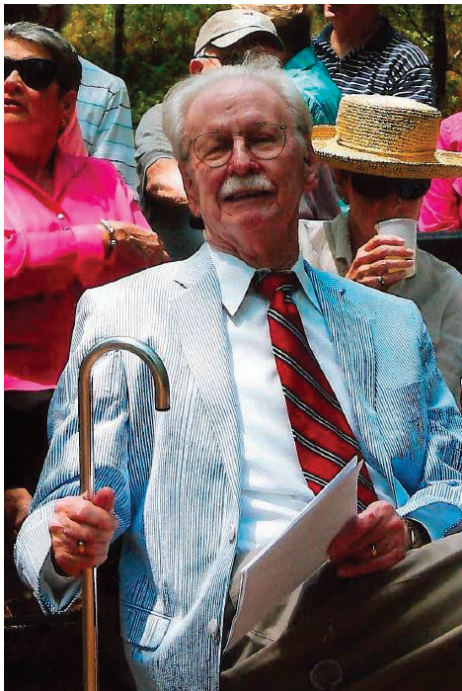



Figure 4: Stanley in his seersucker suit at the dedication of the Stanley Rehder Carnivorous Plant Garden in April 2012. Stanley died a few months later.

act has created a fury of support for greater security and scrutiny of the garden as well as cries for increased penalties for poaching and endangered status.

On September 18, 2014, North Carolina Governor Pat McCrory signed a bill making it a felony to steal Venus Flytrap plants in North Carolina. The law becomes effective on December 1, 2014.

If there is a silver lining to this tragedy it is that new leadership has emerged from Dan Sheret, a man who has the personality and passion of my father, Stanley. Since the poaching, the outpouring of support for the garden from across the world has been heartening and the garden is being rebuilt. Dan's propagation and planting, the City's stewardship, the owner's generosity, and the NC Coastal Land Trust's leadership have been critical parts of a preservation puzzle.

Today the Stanley Rehder Carnivorous Plant Garden thrives. Plan a trip to Wilmington, North Carolina, especially during the growing season, and view for yourself how a couple of brothers made their passion a community treasure.



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