

A Recollection of John Creech and Glenn Dale

John M. Keshishian, M.D.—Mc Lean, Virginia

I was saddened to learn of the passing on Dr. John Creech. But then, that's the way of life — as he well knew. I recently saw a photo of him at his retirement hidey-hole in North Carolina. He'd still been messing around with azaleas—his only true love outside of his wife. He still had that sly, roguish Irish look about him. His pipe was not in the photo.

It reminded me of my first encounter with this man who was responsible for a profound change in my life and my appreciation of nature. That made me happier, brought a smile and happy memories.

It goes like this: Many years ago (I'm now an octogenarian) I was seconded to the Glenn Dale Tuberculosis Sanitarium in Glenn Dale, Maryland. It was early spring. This was part of my specialization program under the Department of Surgery at the George Washington University School of Medicine. Glenn Dale was a hospital where tuberculars were remanded by the Health Department for treatment. Tuberculosis was considered a dangerous, contagious disease and if you had it, you had to be put away, so to speak.

As part of my training in thoracic surgery, I had to become proficient in the surgical treatment of tuberculosis and its effects on lung tissues. This involved long hours in the hospital performing bronchoscopy, lung biopsies, and removal of diseased portions of lung. It made for a long, busy day in the operating rooms and the wards. These areas stank—that's right, downright stank—of iodine, sterilizing solutions, ether, and sometimes just plain rotten air. I looked forward to the day's end when I could get outside and breathe clean, fresh air of what was then countryside.

On some occasions, the aroma of some exotic flower or plant would waft across the gardens and fields surrounding the hospital. It made me very curious. What and where could that plant be? It was not honeysuckle, but close.

I asked my colleague, Dr. Cheng, and he told me the smell came from a government place located across the way. He advised me to be careful; it was a secret establishment and if I was caught there it would go hard for me. He said this with a straight face. He was sincere.

I decided to find out for myself. I trotted over there on a back road and saw the sign: U.S. Department of Agriculture Glenn Dale Plant Introduction Center. What the hell did that mean?

I walked into the nearest building. There were no guards. The doors opened freely. No one was around. I just kept wandering around. Finally, I saw a chap working on some sprangly plant. He was transplanting it. I walked in and said "hi."

The man grunted. I introduced myself. He looked me up



▲ On May 6, 2005, Dr. John Keshishian (right) had an opportunity to revisit the Glenn Dale Plant Introduction Station where he had first met Dr. John Creech in the mid 1950's. Sue Bentz, a horticulturist with the U.S. National Arboretum, provided a brief tour of the now closed facility.

and down—I was wearing clean scrubs.

"Seaton's the name," he said, and then kept working.

"Whatcha doing?" I asked.

"Transplanting some damn hybrid that's too tender to live outdoors. It's got that tender Japanese blood in its line, it should be burned."

I was nonplussed. "Can I watch for a while?"

No answer. So I watched. After ten minutes or so he spoke again. "Whatcha doing in here? Whatcha want?"

I told him about the delicate odor, the exotic aroma that drifted to the hospital area and how my curiosity was aroused so I thought I'd see if I could locate it.

"Oh that...them's them Ghents in the back forty," he said.

What the hell was he talking about? What was a Ghent? He ignored me and kept working, mumbling and cursing at the same time about the non-sensical idea that this plant could live outside. This was some of Creech's experiments, he said. It was some cross by Morrison. He did this with a dozen small plants, and kept looking over his shoulder to see if I was still there.

"Any chance I could go to the back forty and see those Ghents?" I asked.

"You gotta ask Dr. Creech," he said. "That's secret territory."

"Okay, how do I find this guy?" I asked. He directed me to Dr. Creech's office. I knocked on the door—it was open,

but knocking seemed the right thing to do.

"Dr. Creech?"

"Yeah."

I introduced myself, explaining who and what I was and what I'd smelled. Then I asked to see those plants; those blooms.

He put down his pipe, which put off a nice tobacco aroma, and invited me in. "Sit down," he said, clearing off a chair. "Tell me about yourself."

What's to tell, I thought. So I did.

"You know what azaleas are?" he asked. I'd seen some hideous Hino reds so I hesitatingly told him that I'd seen some reds, but not much beyond that. He grinned.

"Tell you what, I'm gonna send you to watch Seaton," he said. (I think it might have been Gerald Seaton, but my memory fails me at times.) He led me to Seaton and instructed him to teach me about azaleas. After I had learned, I was to come back and he'd take me to the Ghents hideout. In the meantime, I was invited to stop by anytime I felt like it to chat. He grinned hugely and scooted away.

Seaton started by showing me everything about azaleas, starting with seeds then on to cuttings, layers, and grafts. He told me about a Dutchman who was a genius at grafting at one of the other greenhouses. I think his name was Sauerbrye. They all worked for Creech and he gave them their marching orders.

I met the squinty eyed Dutchman who pretended I didn't exist for weeks, then finally snuffled a greeting. We got along too. He could do grafts like I did surgery. He was slick and fast. I learned from him too, and he knew I was watching and learning. Seaton and the Dutchman had sort of adopted me. Creech, as I look back on it, already had, but he was always watching out of the corner of his eye. I must have passed his muster because he gave me the run of the place. I had everything except an ID card.

Oh, there was more than just azaleas there, but none of the other stuff interested me at the time. I learned the art of propagating and even the intricacies of crossing plants and then growing their seed. Heady stuff for a guy learning tuberculosis surgery.

After a decent interval with occasional visits to Creech's office, I told him I'd like to get some of those Ghents in the back forty.

"Huh?" he asked.

I explained that I'd taken a fancy to the yellow and orange varieties. He grinned and asked how would I propose doing that if I could not have the plant itself. He said this quite firmly, as I recall.

I think he was waiting to see how much I'd learned. So I told him I had no way of rooting them, and that would be tough anyway—trying to root a deciduous azalea. I'd learned that much, he knew. Then he waited patiently again. Of course I could layer one or two. That was the magic information he'd wanted.

He grinned again and said that would be a good exercise. He asked if I knew how to layer. I told him I had learned

from Seaton.

"Okay," he said. "Go to it."

As I was leaving, he tossed me a small bag.

"Here," he said. "Grow these if you can. They're Fortunei hybrids. These seeds were given to me by those folks at the Sun Yat Sen Garden in China."

I made the air layer. Several of them took a year to get good roots in that plastic bag. Then I transplanted them at my home. I raised a flock of the Fortunei hybrids from those seeds which eventually soared some eight feet high and produced the most fragrant, lingerie pink blooms—huge ones—I'd ever seen. Alas, they were too big to move when I moved on. They're still in place at my old house. I have dreams of sneaking in at night and having them dug up and moved, but those are just delusional thoughts.

I puttered around Glenn Dale for the rest of my time there—three more months. Creech showed me the crosses made by Morrison and the others, including the ones released and those to be destroyed. He warned me not to swipe any cuttings (I was getting good at that) because it would mess up collectors on the outside. I agreed, but Seaton sneaked a few to me and they may still be around.

When my term at Glenn Dale had ended, I had to move on. I'd made my goodbyes to all, and Creech said light heartedly to keep in touch.

My next contact with Creech came when he'd been made Director of the U.S. National Arboretum. I had finished my training and become a specialist, and I had kept on with my azalea fascination. I tried to contact Creech at Glenn Dale and was told he was now "Mr. Big" at the arboretum. I went down there looking for him. He was overseas, but a Sylvester March would be happy to meet with me. Thus, began a long friendship with Skip March, who was the Chief Horticulturalist. Skip told me he was an Italian from New Jersey whose family grew vegetables. I was never sure whether he was putting me on, so I didn't pursue it.

He told me Creech was in Japan, stealing plants to introduce here. They would propagate copies of them as soon as they arrived. I told him I'd been at Glenn Dale, and how I'd met Creech. He grinned, a huge toothy smile, and welcomed me to the arboretum, declaring me a collaborator at zero salary on the spot. Creech later agreed, and in fact chortled, when Skip called me a collaborator.

I continued visiting Skip and Creech; mostly social visits bringing them up to date on what I was doing, both surgically and azalea-wise. Imagine their surprise when I produced, named, and published a Mollis type azalea, a photo of which was on the cover of the *Journal of the American Rhododendron Society*, July 1973.

From that moment on, I rose to a different level of appreciation with Creech. I told him by way of passing, that he'd made me the monster I was. He could have tossed me out at Glenn Dale, but instead he encouraged me. Now look what I'd done.

There's so much more, but this is about Creech and not me. Skip and I remained friends until he left the arboretum.

I raised azaleas and still do. I show when I can. At the last show, my granddaughter and I garnered several blue ribbons (much to my surprise and many others, too).

"Where did you get those blooms?" someone asked.

"I swiped them from my neighbor's yard," I retorted.

Creech was one of the most unpretentious and kindest men I've ever known. I think he recognized a craving in me for doing something besides surgery. He knew I wanted to create things and had decided to do it with these lovely ericaceous plants. And so, like a teacher should, he encouraged it, without my being conscious of it. When friends and others ask how I, a surgeon with the IQ of an oak tree, got into this hobby, I smile and say: John Creech. I'll miss him, but a person lives on when he's remembered, and I shall never forget him.

John Keshishian is a semi-retired academic surgeon who specialized in cardiothoracic and vascular surgery. He has been a professor of surgery, chief of his division, and chief of his medical staff at the Washington Hospital Center in Washington, D.C. Over a span of fifty years, he has been involved in medical research, teaching, photography, writing, and archeology. He has served as consultant to many organizations including the National Geographic Society, NASA, the State Department, and the FDA to name a few.

In the mid 1950's, he discovered the Glenn Dale Plant Introduction Station and met John Creech, which led to a new appreciation for azaleas and rhododendrons. In 1973, he introduced 'Henry Allanson', an open pollinated mollis seedling--- a picture of which is featured on the cover of the ARS Quarterly Bulletin, Vol. 27, No. 3, July 1973.

He and his wife Nancy Lee live in Northern Virginia.

In Memory

William F. Steele, Jr.

By William C. Miller III, Bethesda, Maryland

It is my sad duty to report the passing of Bill Steele, 81, on February 21, 2010, after a valiant battle with cancer. Born on January 9, 1929, he was the son of William F. and Frances Sharpless Steele.

He began his career working at Steele's Chevrolet in Clifton Heights, just west of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He attended and completed the Dealership Program at the General Motors Institute (now Kettering University) in Flint, Michigan, and went on to become part owner of the dealership.

During the Korean War, he served as an artillery officer. A 1947 graduate of West Chester High School, he went on to receive his Bachelor of Science and Master of Science degrees from West Chester State Teachers College and

West Chester University. He began his educational career teaching mathematics at Springfield Junior-Senior High School in Delaware County, and later at Brandywine School where he established the Ski Club. Skiing was to become a lifelong activity which brought him almost as much pleasure as gardening.

Bill and his wife, "Mich," operated a small specialty nursery geared toward the azalea and lepidote collector. They joined the ASA around 1984 and affiliated with the Brookside Gardens Chapter. One of the early signs of spring for me was the arrival of Bill's annual azalea sale advertisement which listed the many (2,600+) azaleas and small-leaved rhododendrons that he had available. In a somewhat unique approach, they limited sales to three weekends a year: the last weekend of April and the first two weekends of May—although they unofficially welcomed visitors at other times. Bill's list of plants was six or seven pages in four columns. It was so extensive and current that it served as a useful quick reference.

Bill had an inquiring mind and he enjoyed taking on little research projects. As an example, in 1998, he began to hear reports of "spotting" on azalea leaves from friends and colleagues on Long Island, in northern New Jersey, the mainline area of Philadelphia, and one isolated case in central New Jersey. To make a long story short, he pursued the mystery, contacting many state and federal experts, until it was solved. The cause was the maple mealy bug, *Phenacoccus acericola*. For the complete story, see *What Are Those Spots, The Azalean*, Vol. 22, No. 1, March 2000.

Bill's many contributions to the azalea and rhododendron community did not go unappreciated or unrecognized. In 1992, he and Mich were awarded a Bronze Medal by the Valley Forge Chapter of the ARS, the highest honor a chapter can bestow. On the national level, he served as National Chairman of the Azalea Committee of the ARS. In 2000, in recognition of his many contributions to the azalea community, Bill was awarded the Frederic P. Lee Commendation by the Brookside Gardens Chapter of the ASA. See the Web page at: <http://www.azaleas.org/images/FPLeeSteele.jpg>

Memorial contributions in his name may be made to: Neighborhood Hospice, 400 East Marshall Street, West Chester, PA 19380; Jenkins Arboretum, 631 Berwyn Baptist Road, Devon, PA 19333; or Chester County Hematology Oncology Services, 440 E. Marshall Street, West Chester 19380.

Call for Articles

The Azalean needs articles about azaleas, their care, and their use in the landscape. Articles should be submitted as Microsoft Word documents. Illustrations are highly encouraged.

Submit articles to: Pam Fitch; Editor, *The Azalean*; P.O. Box 632537; Nacogdoches, TX 75963 or e-mail: theazalean@gmail.com.