

Flowertown Festival History

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In the spring of 1972, plans were under way for an 'azalea festival' in Summerville to help raise money for the YWCO's projects.

"I have a bee in my bonnet," former YWCO administrator and festival brainchild, Jean Gantt, said in a local newspaper article dated May 25, 1972. "I would love to see Summerville have an azalea festival."

"Floats could be made of azaleas, an azalea queen might be selected and other activities would be sponsored in conjunction with the festival to help raise money for the new building."

It wasn't long before local newspapers began to fill with articles about the upcoming first annual Flowertown Festival and the fun-filled activities it promised to bring.

As the first annual Flowertown Festival kicked off the weekend of April 6-8 in 1973, the rain began to pour. However, that didn't seem to discourage members of the 'Y,' who continued planning festivals.

In a 1973 article from an unknown source, the introduction read: "Rain and cool temperatures may have chilled interest in the first annual Flowertown Festival last weekend, but the ladies of the YWCO aren't about to call it quits."

Although the first festival struggled with mother nature, activities such as the arts and crafts, booths sponsored by local clubs and organizations, karate exhibitions, a tearoom, boutique, pet show, art shows and a marble shooting contest, tennis tournament, musical concerts, historical tours, a horse panorama and bicycle races were still in gear.

A founding member of the annual festival, Charlsie Vorwerk said the main reason the event launched in 1973 was to raise money for building facilities for local children.

"At the time, there was nothing in town to help keep the kids off the street," Vorwerk said.

This prompted Y members to create a founding committee designed to cover all aspects of festival preparation. Vorwerk, a local resident and world-renowned artist, was appointed to serve as the art counsel to the committee.

"Most people in town thought we were crazy," Vorwerk said. "It took about five years for it to get going, and from there it snowballed."

Although it is unknown what the festival earned for the Y in its first two years, a 1975 column by Judy Cranford in the Summerville Journal reported the festival pulled a profit of \$1,200 to help pay for construction of a swimming pool.

As the years passed and azalea festivals flourished, the local communities began reaping the rewards.

Today, it is estimated some 250,000 people attend the festival each year. With the festival proceeds raised over the years, the YMCA has been able to create various programs and sites for Summerville's younger citizens.

They have also expanded the organization more than they ever imagined. In 1976, only four years after the first festival, the Y purchased property from Westvaco to use for ball fields.

Seven years later in 1982, they had enough funds to build the swimming pool and the baseball and soccer fields they had hoped for years earlier.

In 1995, the YMCA was able to purchase the property for a new wellness center in downtown Summerville. The new facility was completed in 2002 and celebrated its grand opening on Sept. XX, 2002. The building includes new administrative offices. YMCA members now enjoy a pool, child-watch rooms, playground, exercise rooms with state-of-the-art exercise equipment, aerobic workout rooms -- and locker rooms with sauna and massage rooms.

Membership in the Summerville Family YMCA is relatively inexpensive when compared to area fitness centers and gyms. And now with the opening of the new Wellness Center, more and more area residents are joining the Y, getting into shape, taking classes, or getting the kids involved in Y sports activities.

The YMCA continues to expand its outreach to the citizens of Summerville and the surrounding area -- thanks to the Flowertown Festival and the ladies of the YWCO in 1972!