

A Historic Tourist Attraction Becomes A *Garden Paradise*

When Rock Lake Swimming Pool opened in 1942 in South Charleston, it was the largest of its kind in the U.S. Thousands of bathers soaked up the sun, swam laps in the 500-foot pool and dove into the water off a trapeze on hot summer days. Seventy-plus years later the water is gone, the pool filled in with dirt, but the property is still making a splash in the community.



Rock Lake, the pool, closed in 1985. What's sprung up from old site is the Rock Lake Community Garden. Manna Meal, a non-profit soup kitchen/food pantry in Charleston that served 150,000 meals in 2015 alone, is now using the site (owned by the Rock Lake Presbyterian Church) to grow rows and rows of fresh vegetables, herbs and fruits.

"It started out because we wanted to know more about the food we were using in our Manna Meal kitchen, what it was, where it was coming from, how it was grown. So we decided to plant our own garden," explained Jean Simpson, the executive director of Manna Meal, Inc.

Manna Meal volunteers planted their first garden in 2009 in a small plot off of Rutledge Rd. in Charleston. When the owner of that property needed it for another purpose,

Manna Meal got an offer it couldn't refuse.

"A lady gave me a call. She said, 'I've got a space! The Presbyterian Church owns it. Why don't you all come down here and garden?' I thought, 'The old Rock Lake Swimming Pool? Garden in a pool?' But it's worked out," said Simpson.

She and her Manna Meal volunteers garden Tuesday and Saturday mornings from 8 to 10:30. It's a dedicated group, a mix of young mothers and senior citizens, experienced gardeners and newcomers, working side by side. As the eggplant, tomatoes, peppers, leafy greens and herbs grow, the volunteers are there to weed, water and harvest.

Simpson also had some help from middle and high school students from here at home and from as far away as Texas and Georgia. A group called Youth Works, a Christian-based organization that pairs church youth groups with projects that assist the needy, brought in dozens of teens in June and July. Kids from Christ Church United Methodist in Charleston were also frequent volunteers.

"I just want to expose children to where their food comes from, expose them to a little hard work," stressed Simpson. "One day we had them harvesting beets. You would have thought they were digging for diamonds. For them, it was fun."

Catelyn Coleman, a 12-year-old from Alexandria, Virginia, loved the experience. "This is my first time in a garden. It feels good knowing I'm helping to feed other

people."

The volunteers also planted sunflowers and zinnias around the garden to attract pollinators. The result was a garden buzzing with healthy foods.



"I stay away from planting zucchini, squash and cucumbers mainly because that's what most people who have a home garden grow. We get a lot of that donated at Manna Meal from our home gardeners," explained Simpson. "We like to grow hardy green vegetables here in our garden. The one thing we grow lots of is leafy greens because they're so full of nutrients. They're easy to grow and easy to harvest and process once they go back into the kitchen at Manna Meal. They're something I can cook with, put in raw salads or give away to clients at the food pantry."

Volunteers harvested more than 800 lbs. of Swiss chard this summer. The goal is 3,000 lbs. of fruits and vegetables by the end of the growing season. Simpson said they can't wait to dive into the garden next spring with some new ideas and plants.

If you'd like to volunteer at Rock Lake Community Garden, contact Manna Meal at 304-345-7121 or http://mannameal.org/?page_id=2

