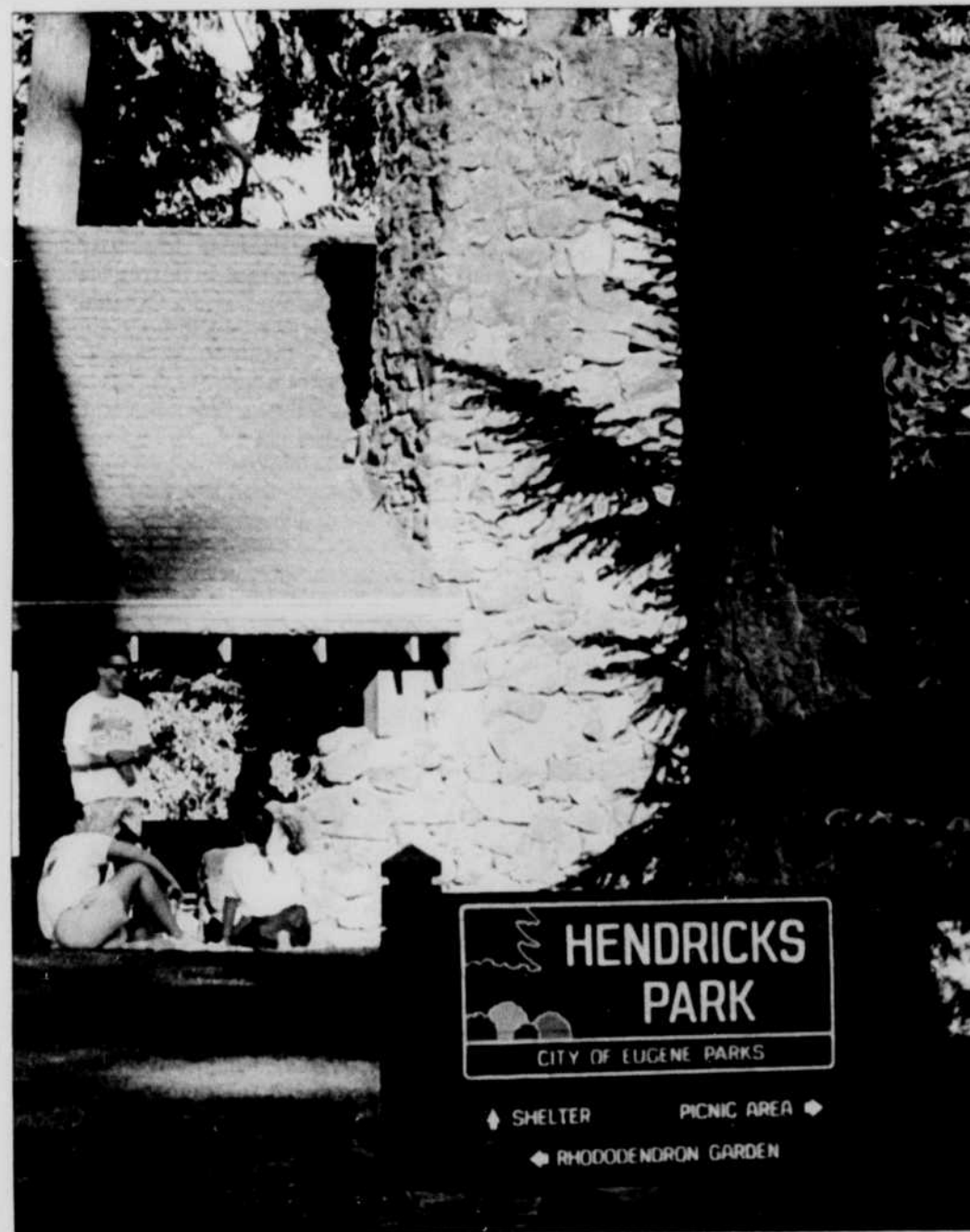




**HENDRICKS PARK**  
CITY OF EUGENE PARKS  
SHELTER PICNIC AREA  
RHODODENDRON GARDEN

# Rhododendron Heaven

At Hendricks Park, the passwords are seclusion and blossoms.

For most people, Hendricks Hill is little more than a secluded hillside. Douglas fir and Oregon white oak cover much of the southeast Eugene ridge, providing an earthy roof for some of the city's more stately homes. Roads wind through the area as well as a steady stream of joggers.

But amid the seclusion is something else: Hendricks Park.

"It's one of the city's primary amenities. A lot of the visitors who come to Eugene will go to Hendricks Park," says Carrie Matsushita, the Eugene Parks and Recreation department's public information coordinator.

"According to the survey we did last fall, Hendricks Park was the second most-used park or visited park in our park system after Skinner Butte Park," Matsushita says.

Celebrating its 80th year of existence, the park offers visitors a restful respite from the bustle and bustle of the city. There are hiking trails amid 300-year-old fir trees, views of the city and of the Willamette River, picnic areas and a large fireplace shelter built by the Works Project Administration in the 1930s.

But the primary attraction of the park is the rhododendron garden,

which in recent years has become world-renowned. With blossoms of yellow, orange, purple and red, the garden resembles a painter's palette from February to June.

Michael Robert, the head gardener at Hendricks Park since 1981, says tourists are amazed at the beauty of the park.

"People from out of town appreciate the abundance of green when they come to Eugene. But when they see the lush green up here as well as all the flowers, they're just in a stupor. They just can't get over it. People say they've never seen any place so beautiful," Robert says.

"It seems awesome as the case, but guests from out of town appreciate the park more than the local people who kind of take it for granted," he says.

According to Robert, an average of 5,000 automobiles entered the park every Sunday during the month of April. On the last Sunday of the month, when the American Rhododendron Society's National Convention was held in the city, more than 7,000 cars entered the park. Robert estimates 20,000 people were in Hendricks Park that day.

Keeping the park in shape is a year-round job for Robert and his two per-

manent employees. The parks department also hires two seasonal employees and during the summer months, six to eight youth workers.

"We spend almost six months of the year raking leaves up here. Then in the winter we do transplanting. The summers are our most routine times — weeding, raking and watering like crazy," says Robert, who has worked for the park department for 15 years.

The history of the park dates back to 1906 when Eugene pioneers Thomas and Martha Hendricks donated 47 acres of land to the city, and the city, in turn, bought an additional 47 acres. The deed to the land requested that it be turned into a park.

According to Robert, the Hendricks wanted to make sure the land was kept natural because of the logging taking place around it.

But it was a long time before the park developed. It remained what it always had been — a forested hill.

"The first development was between 1915 and 1924. And all they did was put roads through it that kind of matched the other road development that was going on in the neighborhood," Robert says.

"It was about the same time that motor vehicles were becoming popular so they said, 'Well then, let's be able to drive to it.'"

"This is also typical of the history of parks in general in this country," Robert says. "Parks in a lot of places had become motor vehicle tour sites, rather than having any better integrity."

The next stage in development came in 1922, when the Eugene Elks Club gave two elk to the park. The exhibit remained for 50 years, later including deer, but eventually became a cruel embarrassment to the city.

"Up until 1950, the deer were in what's now the garden area of the park. There is still remnants of the old fence. In 1950 when they started the rhododendron garden, they converted another area to half deer and half elk, and they put up another fence to keep them separate," he says.

Among the park's animals were an old moth-eaten elk named Bill, who had enormous antlers, and lovable Elsie, a cow elk. There also were deer from Japan.

But the deer and elk were abused in later years, Robert says. People shot arrows at them, fed them lit cigarettes and threw dogs into the pens. In 1972, the city gave the remaining animals to the Portland Zoo and the Wildlife Safari in Winston, Ore.

"The '60s were kind of a wild time up here. All kinds of hell broke loose. The deer and elk were more abused then, the garden was more abused then. The park went through growing pains as everyone else did in the '60s," Robert says, citing camping, nudity and people who were "Being-In" in the park as primary problems.

After the elk exhibit was established, the next major development in the



In 1951, local rhododendron lovers began a garden in the park with the help of the city and the parks department. The location was considered ideal because of the beautiful setting and the canopy the trees provided for the plants.

Local members of the American Rhododendron Society donated many of the original plants. In the early years, the one-acre garden was staffed by one full-time gardener. In 1960, it held only 700 plants, some of which were camellias.

But from 1960 to 1981, the garden and the park came into their own. Roads, parking lots and a formal entrance to the garden were built. And in the late '60s the park received 1,200 donated rhododendrons.

An ice storm almost wiped out the garden in December 1972. But only 200 plants were lost when the park's

head gardener at the time, Ted Trombert, stayed up all night coating the plants with water from sprinklers. The water turned to ice, providing the plants with insulation.

Today, the garden is 10 square acres and holds more than 5,000 plants. But according to Robert, the rhododendrons have proliferated to the point where there is little space for anything else.

"The park has become a lot of pathways leading through, rather than places to be in or to enjoy," he says.

The overcrowding is also due to the large number of donated plants to the park. "The plants might have been good and healthy but might not have been the variety we would have chosen. So we have a lot of unwanted plants," Robert says.

"But now that the garden has grown so much we have the ability to

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Story by Stephen Maher

Photos by Derrel Hewitt and John Giustina

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