



Tending the Landscape Of Millsaps Memories

You should have seen the campus this spring. The azaleas broadcast solid walls of color: brilliant whites, ruby reds and shades in between, all against a backdrop of lively greens.

I was standing on the sidewalk in front of Sanders the other day, drinking in the newness of it all, and Joe Lee Gibson stepped out from between the hedges with his knapsack and can grabber and started talking as if he knew I'd be there for him to say something to. Sure enough, he started talking about his retirement, a subject he has been harping on for some years now.

Joe Lee Gibson has been working on campus since 1936. He started when he was 17 years old, and this June 20 he turned 85. His daddy worked here before him, probably since the day the college was founded. Only two buildings on campus have been here longer than Joe Lee, and they aren't holding up nearly as well.

We speak of memory a great deal here in the South, and most particularly here in Mississippi. William Faulkner writes that there is no such thing as memory, that "the mind remembers only what the muscles grope for, no more, no less," and Eudora Welty speaks of memory as a "living thing."

No more muscular or living memory of Millsaps College exists than that of Joe Lee Gibson. He remembers boys and girls who didn't know their way around campus but are now steering the state and the nation; he remembers students who went hungry who are now feeding others; he remembers the ones who found injustice then sought to set things right.

Yet as surely as the azaleas bloom, Joe Lee will say that he's retiring again. And who knows? Perhaps one day he will.

— Jesse Yancy