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PAISANO: Family camping

By George Henson

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ALPINE-About 1,400 people recently returned to Paisano Baptist Encampment near Alpine for a once-in-a-lifetime experience that comes around once a year.

While the encampment also offers a youth camp, Girls in Action camp and retreats throughout the year, the annual General Encampment is the high point of the year.

This year marked the 83rd consecutive year families have gathered for a week of worship, relaxation and fellowship at the camp, located at an altitude of about 5,000 feet between Alpine and Marfa on Highway 90.

Like many other participants, camp president Levi Price, professor at Baylor University's Truett Seminary, has a long history with Paisano. He attended the first time as a boy around 1950. For the next decade and a half, a week of his summer was spent at the annual gathering, with the weeks before spent in anticipation.

"When I was a kid growing up out there in Monahans, I knew all the other kids in those other little towns out there because we spent the week together at Paisano," Price recalled.

That family-friendly atmosphere has been maintained through the years. The General Encampment, held each year during the last full week of July, has maintained its multi-generational aspect, with this year's attendees ranging from less than a year old to veteran retirees.

"It's a safe place where kids can roam free and climb on rocks and just do kids things," Price said.

Pastor Philip McCraw of First Baptist Church in Alpine, who has attended the last 12 years, said the camp will be forever special for his family.

"All three of my kids were saved there," he explained. "Even though I'm a Baptist pastor, it happened there, not here."

McCraw said his children enjoy the week of seeing friends so much that he really doesn't see them a great deal as they participate in activities geared to them and spend free time roaming the vast acreage.

The camp runs a Vacation Bible School-like program for children each morning, and youth have a program in the gym, one of the encampment's newest additions.

The Paisano tradition has its roots in the Bloys Cowboy Campmeeting, which began in 1890. The Bloys camp was sponsored by Presbyterians, Methodists and Disciples of Christ as well as Baptists as a means of spiritual enrichment for the ranchers in the area. Because the ranches were separated by vast regions of uninhabited lands, families found it impossible to worship with their distant neighbors and friends.

William Benjamin Bloys, a Presbyterian missionary, made a circuit of the ranches, but seldom was there a larger gathering. The Bloys Cowboy Campmeeting was the solution to that. Then the Baptists started their own camp meeting at Paisano in 1921 under the guidance of Pastor L.R. Millican.

"The descendents of cowboy/rancher families and the West Texas churches are still a big part of what we are at Paisano," Price said. He pointed out that a kitchen crew directed by Chris Lacy prepares all the meals. Lacy is a part of the Kokernot 06 Ranch that was an integral part of the camp's founding.

Like everything else in the encampment, the meals are free. Operating funds are provided primarily by a free-will offering taken at the conclusion of the last worship service each year.

That is another reason why so many make the camp their yearly vacation, McCraw said. "I can't afford to take my family to Glorieta. I give an offering at Paisano, but I know it doesn't cover the expense."

The camp has not built dorms, but some of the churches whose members regularly attend have built cabins, as have some families who attend every year. Other attendees either drive home or stay in hotels.

Lloyd Conner, who recently retired as camp manager but attended this year in his capacity as pastor of First Baptist Church in Marfa, said as society has become more mobile, the camp's range of attendees has widened. One woman from Anchorage, Alaska, arranges her vacation each year so she can stop by the camp and see old friends.

For her, like most others, it is more than friendships that bring her back, Conner said. "There's some real spiritual ties she's made there of commitment and recommitments."

As in the beginning, Bible teaching is the key emphasis of the camp. While children and youth have their Bible studies, adults are likewise exploring God's word each morning. All ages gather to worship together at the tabernacle each evening.

Conner said almost every member of his church participates in the camp at

some level.

The response still astounds McCraw. When he first moved to Alpine, he was taken out to the camp. “I looked around and thought, 'Nobody's going to come out here.' But for that one week each year, this place springs to life.”

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