

# Invincibles came to the rescue in isolated, rural churches

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ABILENE—They were known as the Invincibles—a name befitting a troop of superheroes. To boys and girls in rural areas across Texas from 1940 to 1983, that's exactly how they seemed.

One of the Invincibles, Winnie White of Abilene, now 85, remembers moving around the state in a bus affectionately called the *Lame Duck*.

"I don't know how many miles I pushed that thing. It was always giving out," she said with a laugh.

Invincibles went all over Texas helping conduct rural Vacation Bible Schools. Their destinations probably looked a lot like this VBS gathering in 1951 at Star Baptist Church in Star. (Photo courtesy Nancy F. Payne)

The Invincibles were college students, mostly from Baylor University, who went to vast expanses of Texas where churches were small and isolated.

"This was before anybody but the big-city churches had Vacation Bible Schools," she explained. "So, they would ship us out to these churches out in the boondocks to teach them how to do Vacation Bible School."

Two students would arrive at the churches on Saturday night, meet and train any faculty from the church on Sunday and start VBS on Monday, she said.

Alan Lefever, director of the Texas Baptist Historical Collection, said the young people provided an essential service.

"The churches were too small to maintain any kind of program themselves. A lot of times when the Invincibles went into a church, there wouldn't be any adults available to do anything," he said.

"There were some churches where adults could assist the Invincibles, but in a lot of Vacation Bible Schools they did, they were the two people who conducted everything."

When a history of the Invincibles was compiled a few years ago, Gwen Griffiths Woodard wrote about her experiences during the summers of 1948 and 1949.

"I remember visiting a small country community that had a disbanded church whose building had fallen into great disrepair. We scraped the dirt daubers' nests off the old piano, swept birds' nests and horse manure out of the auditorium, roped off a corner where the floor had caved in and rearranged the pews. Enough children and adults came that we taught one group inside and another group outside under a tree. A retired minister from Brownwood was contacted, and the group decided to start having services again beginning the Sunday after we left," Woodard recalled.

"These were young people with a lot of energy," Lefever said. "They became known as the Invincibles because there wasn't anything they would let slow them down."

Participants remember Wimpy Smith, one of the staff leaders of the group and later Texas Baptist Brotherhood secretary, telling them: "I don't want you to tell me what you couldn't do. I want you to tell me how you got it done."

"There are accounts ... of Invincibles who would conduct a Bible school in

the morning, do another one in the afternoon at another church, and a third one at another church in the evening," Lefever said.

The group started in 1940 with 20 students. The next several years, the number of students increased to 22, and they were known as the Invincible 22. Later, that number expanded to more than 100 students who stretched across the state to take Vacation Bible School to even the most remote of areas.

"They weren't that selective," Lefever said. "They were simply looking for students with a heart for missions."

"I've read through some of these accounts where they literally went and surprised churches on a Sunday morning with: 'Hey, we're here. Let us do a Vacation Bible School.'

"In one of those situations, at the end of the week, the preacher said they could come back and surprise them next year, too."

While the student revivals of the late 1940s are better known, the Invincibles predated them, Lefever noted.

"Really, the driving force for Texas Baptists at that time was college students," he said.

The legacy they left still lives today, Lefever believes.

"I think you can make the argument that the Invincibles laid the groundwork for the youth mission trip because what do they do? They go to do Vacation Bible schools. Larger churches take a group and go to smaller churches and do a Vacation Bible School—the exact concept of what the Invincibles did," he observed.

While the Invincibles are now older, the ones Lefever knows still have the drive that propelled them to serve decades ago.

"If you talk to any of the Invincibles even now, what you get is that energy—it's almost a cockiness of what they did," he said. "And I think you needed that mentality to do all they did."