

Baptists Worship in a Mountain Retreat

By EDWARD B. FISKE

(New York Times)

JULY 29, 1970

RIDGECREST, N. C.—The early morning clouds hung low over the Blue Ridge Mountains, and the only sound was the soft rustling of leaves heavy with dew. Suddenly, at 7 o'clock, the silence was broken by a carillon playing "Adestes Fideles."

It was "Christmas in July" last week at the Ridgecrest Baptist Assembly. As Sheila Hobdy, a 19-year-old staff worker from Mount Dora, Fla., explained, "We're like a family here at Ridgecrest, and since we won't be together in December we celebrate Christmas while we can."

Nestled into 2,000 acres of hills and streams 18 miles west of Asheville, Ridgecrest is a summer watering spot that annually attracts 40,000 Southern Baptists, many of whom regard it as just about the best preview mortals can have of what lies beyond the Pearly Gates.

"Somehow, you feel nearer to the Lord here than any where else," said Elmer G. Lewis, a retired insurance agent from Burlington, N. C., who brought his wife back this year for the 33d straight summer.

"It's a chance for a fresh encounter with God," said Miss Hobdy. "You can't avoid it when you see all those mountains."

Started 61 Years Ago

Founded 61 years ago, Ridgecrest is one of two summer assemblies run by the Southern Baptist Convention —the other is in Glorieta, N. M.—and one of scores of similar camps run by major Protestant denominations for laymen, pastors, families and children of all ages.

Other large assemblies include those of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. (Southern) in Montreat, N. C., and the American Baptist Convention in Green Lake, Wis.

The pilgrims come here as individuals or in busloads from local churches and take week-long courses in subjects ranging from Sunday School teaching to church bookkeeping. There are regular worship services every evening and recreational activities ranging from softball to hiking.

Most guests stay in tidy white dormitories scattered within walking distance of the administration building, dining hall and assembly halls. Others occupy cottages or bring campers and tents and do their own cooking in the hills behind the central building complex.

Ridgecrest was the creation of B. W. Spilman, a religious educator who thought of it as a "spiritual dynamo whose wires extend to the ends of the earth."

350 Permanent Residents

For 27 years the camp was a municipality of its own. Now it is part of a community with 350 permanent residents, a grocery store that also pumps gasoline and a post office that doubles its staff from two to four during the summer influx of Baptists.

Operated by the Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, Ridge crest over the years has served as a pulpit for Baptist leaders like George W. Truett and E. Y. Mullins. Billy Graham, the evangelist, who resides next door in Black Mountain, comes often and once brought along a house guest, Richard M. Nixon, to tell of his own evangelical religious upbringing.

Today, Ridgecrest has more than 300 buildings, many of them cottages, owned by individual congregations, and a yearly budget of \$2- million. Guests pay about \$8 a day for room and board.

The assembly has changed its official designation from "Southwide" to "Nation wide" and, like the 11.5-million-member Southern Baptist Convention as a whole, is beginning to feel the winds of change from a regional to a national constituency.

Drinking and smoking are still forbidden, but other traditional forms of piety are no longer observed. The staff has taken to movies and to plays, and many play cards and even dance on the premises.

A Few Negroes Attend

A few Negroes have begun to attend sessions, but the number is kept low by the fact that, as one official put it, "the courses are for leadership training, and there aren't very many blacks in leadership positions in Southern Baptist churches."

The staff consists of 20 permanent officials and 410 student volunteers who work for room, board and \$7.50 a week.

"It's not much money, but the atmosphere is great," said Tonya Rollins, a 17-year-old high school senior from Wit low Drive Baptist Church in Lake Jackson, Tex. "You talk about God here the way you talk about fashions and boys at home."

The courses reflect the most modern techniques of religious education, including drama and audio-visual materials.

Tradition is still the king at Ridgecrest, including the Baptist passion for evangelism and conversion.

Tuesday evening at the final service for one group of guests, the Rev. Ralph Langley of the Willow Meadows Baptist Church in Baton Rouge delivered a loud and impassioned sermon that included the traditional invitation to members of the congregation to make a commitment to Christ and to "full-time Christian service."

For more than 15 minutes, with the organ and piano playing and the congregation singing Gospel hymns, he pleaded with members to consider the state of their souls and to come forward.

Scores of persons, mostly teen-agers, responded.

"Make sure it is God moving your heart," Dr. Langley said, "then shove out. Burn your bridges behind you. Yes, sir, shove out. What a moment to say an everlasting yes to Christ."

