

Saturday, February 7, 2009

Small-town roots run deep

Natives of Boone, Iowa, who moved out West get together for the 95th straight year.

By MICHAEL MELLO
The Orange County Register

BUENA PARK – Boone, Iowa, is a small city of about 13,000 people just north of Des Moines. But it's a hard place to forget.

Just ask the 50 people, all part of the Boone, Iowa Society of Southern California, who gathered Saturday at the Knott's Berry Farm Resort Hotel. Every year since 1914, society members have held a luncheon, gathering together for what essentially becomes a Hawkeye family reunion, this year being their 95th.

"Isn't that something — 95 years?" mused Don "Red" Houser, 78, who grew up in Boone but is now a Tustin Ranch resident. "I started coming here in '65 when I moved out here. We really enjoy communicating, and telling tales from the past."

With this crowd, no one walked through the door without breaking into a smile. Somewhere in the small group was someone they recognized, an old neighbor from up the street, an elementary school classmate, a football team comrade.

"It's a fantastic thing to have this fellowship, visit a few old friends, and tell a few lies," said Max Moore, 81, now of Yorba Linda. "We want to make it 'Old Home Week.' That's what this is all about."

In the early part of the 20th century, Iowans began to congregate in Southern California, attracted by opportunities and a climate far different than the stinging Midwestern winters. Long Beach, where an annual picnic used to attract crowds in the tens of thousands, earned the nickname, "Iowa by the Sea." The Boone crowd branched off and held an additional annual gathering of its own.

Harry Echternach's mother, Norma Echternach, attended the annual affair from about 1953 to earlier this decade, when she died at age 102. Harry Echternach, 80, keeps up the tradition now that running his Brea flower shop doesn't take up as much of his time.

"It's friends, meeting people," he said of the reasons he comes. "It's always the same group."

The crowd that comes is hardy. One woman came from the small Bay Area city of Castro Valley, another couple from Fresno. Many more headed to Buena Park from La Mirada, Seal Beach, and other local spots.

They sang songs, including the Iowa Corn Song ("We're from I-O-way, I-O-way. That's where the tall corn grows...").

"We'd be very disloyal if we didn't sing the Corn Song," Society President Larry Moore said.

They talked about current events in Boone – the event's program sported two pages of obituaries from the past year – and much of the talk was about the fire that heavily damaged three of Boone's downtown buildings, requiring firefighters to come in from Ames, 30 miles away, to help to put it out.

"Over the years, we've had 3-, 4-, 500 people come to the event," Larry Moore said, though he said the numbers have dwindled as the crowd gets older. But they have a goal, he added: "We're trying to see if we can get to 100 straight years."

Contact the writer: 714-704-3796 or mmello@ocregister.com

Randy Davis of Hollywood leads Booneites in the Iowa Song. The Star-Spangled Banner, Auld Lang Syne, Boone High School Loyalty Song and God Bless America were also sung at the 95th Annual Boone Iowa Society Luncheon at the Knott's Berry Farm Resort Hotel on Saturday.

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Don Farley of Santa Ana, right, enjoys the nostalgic sounds of The Girls Next Door during the 95th Annual Boone Iowa Society Luncheon held at Knott's Berry Farm Resort

//ADDITIONAL INFO:

There are dozens of sons and daughters of Boone, Iowa spread out across Southern California. On Saturday, they will gather in Buena Park for the annual Boone, Iowa Society of Southern California luncheon, the 95th year in a row they have done so. More than 50 people have RSVPed, and many should have mementos suitable for photo art.

The luncheon is at the Knott's Berry Farm Resort Hotel.

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Gayla Peek of Castro Valley, left, gets a cornhead foam hat from Boone Iowa Society President Larry Moore of La Mirada for traveling the longest distance. About 50 dozens of sons and daughters of Boone, Iowa gather at the Knott's Berry Farm Hotel Resort for the 95th Annual Boone, Iowa Society of Southern California luncheon Saturday.

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Gayla Peek of Castro Valley, left, gets a cornhead prize for traveling the longest distance from Boone Iowa Society President Larry Moore of La Mirada. Her dad's family lived in Boone and she vacationed there growing up.

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Gayla Peek of Castro Valley, left, shows off her foam cornhead hat which she earned for traveling the longest distance. Iowa Society President, Larry Moore of La Mirada, hosted the for 95th annual luncheon held at Knott's Berry Farm Hotel Resort with humor.

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From left, The Girls Next Door singers Milinda Meehan, Bethanie Knieser and Heidi Fielding open with "Side By Side," during the 95th Annual Boone, Iowa Society of Southern California Luncheon on Saturday.

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All hands go up when Robin Young of Los Angeles, foreground, and other Booneites sing, "back where the tall corn grows," from the Iowa Song. The 95th Annual Boone Iowa Society Luncheon was held at Knott's Berry Farm Hotel Resort on Saturday.

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Boone Iowa Society Vice President Jerry Manriquez, center, quickly turns the video on himself as he is serenaded by The Girls Next Door singers Milinda Meehan, left, and Bethanie Knieser. They sing, "You Made Me Love You" during the 95th Annual Boone, Iowa Society of Southern California Luncheon on Saturday.

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The Girls Next Door singers Milinda Meehan, Bethanie Knieser and Heidi serenade Boone Iowa Society President Larry Moore, center, with "You Made Me Love You" during the 95th Annual Boone Iowa Society of Southern California Luncheon at the Knott's Berry Farm Resort Hotel on Saturday.

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Boone Iowa Society President, Larry Moore of La Mirada, center, greets fellow Booneite Helen Comes of Lake Forest, left and Robin Young of Los Angeles during the 95th Annual Boone Iowa Society Luncheon held at Knott's Berry Farm Hotel Resort on Saturday.

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