



International Pathfinder Camporees

Photo courtesy of Center for Youth Evangelism.

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First held in 1953, Pathfinder camporees have expanded in scope to become the International Camporees that draw scores of thousands of young people to Oshkosh, Wisconsin every five years, where they showcase and develop their skills, engage in outreach and community service, and meet their counterparts from all around the

world in an environment that cultivates spiritual growth and fellowship.

Origins

Since 1950, Pathfinder Clubs have been an official component of the Seventh-day Adventist church's youth ministry.¹ They came about through a growing recognition that the Adventist church needed a program similar to Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts but one that provided a spiritual environment for young people to learn life skills and about God.

Camporees are gatherings in which Pathfinders camp outside and participate in activities such as Bible knowledge competitions, parades, earning honors² and outreach opportunities meant to positively impact the local community.

The first Pathfinder camporee on record was held on October 9-11, 1953 by the Southern New England Conference at Camp Winnekeag in Ashburnham, Massachusetts and directed by W.E. Burns. E. W. Dunbar and Harold F. Maxson were speakers.³ The second was held on May 7-9 of 1954 at Camp Idyllwild in the Southeastern California Conference, under the direction of conference youth director Charles Martin and his associate Harry Garlick.⁴

The first camporees were held by local conferences, but as they gained popularity, union-wide camporees were held that drew larger numbers of Pathfinders, gathered from each of the conferences throughout the union. The first of these was held by the North Pacific Union on June 4-6, 1959, at Snoqualmie National Forest in Washington state with 1,000 Pathfinders attending. The Southern European Division held the first division camporee in 1961.⁵

Camp Hale NAD Camporee, 1985

The North American Division (NAD) held its first division camporee on July 31-August 6, 1985 when about 16,000 people filled a mountain valley at Camp Hale, a former U.S. Army Alpine Division site in Leadville, Colorado.⁶ Les Pitton was the camporee director, and the theme song, *We Are His Hands*, is still well known by many Pathfinder staff members.⁷

Being the first NAD Camporee, it took many hours of planning and organizing for the 1,500 volunteers to make it a reality. Water supply, sanitation, transportation and first aid were all major components of camporee that needed to be ready for the thousands of people who would attend. BMX biking, rock climbing and archery were a few of the numerous activities available to the Pathfinders at the first NAD camporee. The campground area was covered in a variety of individual signs which marked the various conference and club sites. Each club also had its name printed on their own colored shirt that set them apart from other clubs. This made for colorful daytime uniforms and also made it much easier to locate members of a club in large crowds.

Friendship NAD Camporee, 1989

Because the first North American Division camporee was considered too costly, the NAD administration voted not to offer a second large-scale division camporee. Instead the Columbia Union sponsored Friendship Camporee at Mt. Union, Pennsylvania in 1989, with Pathfinders from 509 clubs throughout the NAD in attendance. Ron Streeter, Columbia Union Youth Director, was the camporee director. More than 12,000 people came to this camporee, which featured a full-scale reproduction of Noah's Ark.⁸

Dare to Care International Camporee, 1994

In August 1994, the Dare to Care International Pathfinder Camporee was held in Morrison, Colorado. Ron Whitehead, the youth director for the Rocky Mountain Conference was director. The NAD partnered with the Center for Youth Evangelism in organizing the event, the first to take place under the designation "International Camporee." The campsite was originally set to be on a private farm. However, misinformation spread identifying Adventists with the Branch Davidians, whose tragic confrontation with federal authorities in Waco, Texas earlier that year had captured the news and this caused the property owner, just months before the camporee, to rescind his offer to allow it to take place on his property.

The only nearby camping area that would accommodate the expected crowds was the Bandimere Speedway, a commercial drag-racing track in Morrison. The owners of the race track were at first reluctant to allow the young people to use their facility because they were concerned about the supervision of the more than 12,000 young people anticipated for the event. However, when the owners of the speedway attended a conference-wide Youth Rally in Denver, they were impressed with the quality of the youth representing the Adventist church and agreed to let the camporee take place on their site.

As the grounds were prepared, 23 rattlesnakes were found on the premises. Camping and activities for 12,232 attendees from 23 countries were held at the speedway during the day, and Pathfinders were bussed each evening to the nearby Red Rocks Amphitheatre for the nighttime program. And, since it was a drag racing track, golf carts and school buses were drag raced in a quarter mile race as an entertainment activity at the camporee.⁹

With interest surging beyond the capacity of the Red Rocks, Colorado, location, organizers decided to move it to the Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA) grounds in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. "We thought maybe we could double the numbers we had at Red Rocks" explained Whitehead. Since moving to Oshkosh, the camporee has in fact more than doubled its attendance record.¹⁰

Discover the Power International Camporee, 1999

The NAD sponsored its second International Camporee on August 10-14, 1999 at the EAA grounds in Oshkosh. Camporee tickets sold out on March 1, 1999, six months before the camporee. More than 21,000 Pathfinders and leaders from 53 countries gathered to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Pathfinding. Ron Whitehead, by then serving as executive director of the Center for Youth Evangelism, as well as NAD associate youth director and Lake Union Conference youth director, again directed the camporee, as he would for several to come.

Participants sensed God's protection when a major storm split to go around the campground. More than 150 people were baptized.¹¹

Faith on Fire International Camporee, 2004

The International Camporee held in Oshkosh for the second time in 1994 was nicknamed the "Winter Camporee" for the record low temperatures on its first four days. Again tickets sold out six months in advance of the event. More than 31,000 Pathfinders from 83 countries attended, and 10,000 participated in community service outreach projects in the surrounding area.¹²

The camporee's theme was drawn from the Bible story of Joseph which was theatrically presented in five segments; one for each evening at the nighttime program.¹³

Courage to Stand International Camporee, 2009

In 2009, the EAA campgrounds in Oshkosh were filled for the third time with more than 36,000 Pathfinders on hand for the Courage to Stand International Camporee. The theme was based on the Biblical story of Esther, again dramatized each evening. Pathfinders, as in years past, offered their time to local community service projects, and 518 were baptized.

Ron Whitehead directed as staff members and volunteers worked to make the Camporee a rewarding experience that its participants would not forget. As a result, the week was filled with various activities, honors, spiritual and physical challenges, and 518 Pathfinders were baptized.¹⁴

Forever Faithful International Camporee, 2014

The approximately 50,000 Pathfinders from more than 65 countries who attended the Forever Faithful International Camporee on August 11-16, 2014, in Oshkosh increased the city's population by 70 percent.

The grounds became muddy when an unexpected wind and rain came through just after the camporee opened to Pathfinders. "It's been kind of challenging. Our kitchen tent flew away," said Terell Rhooms, 15, from the Frontiers Pathfinder Club at Hope Adventist Church in Toronto, Canada.

Attendees experienced the story of Daniel every evening through the nighttime program. Each evening, the program was staged outdoors with five large video screens, which showcased a video summary of the day, puppet acts, Pathfinder talent, worship, and keynote speaker Sam Leonor's message. More than 600 pathfinders were baptized.¹⁵

"Honestly, the atmosphere here is amazing and powerful," said Angelica Chan, a three-time International Camporee attendee and a member of the Pleasant Hill Pathfinder Club in California. "It's incredible to have so many Adventist youth gathered together to worship God together."¹⁶

Chosen International Camporee, 2019

The Chosen International Camporee, held August 12-17, 2019 in Oshkosh, drew 55,000 Pathfinders from 105 countries.¹⁷ About 1,500 came from the Caribbean and Latin America, nearly 1,000 from Africa, 400 from Europe and at least 350 from Asia and the South Pacific. International tickets sold out December 5, 2018, and North American Division tickets sold out on February 8, 2019.¹⁸

The theme *Chosen* centered around the biblical story of David. As in years past, the Bible story was theatrically performed on the large, state of the art stage every evening. On Sabbath morning of the camporee, two new world records appeared to have been set for the largest human cross as well as the largest scarf and slide (featuring a 300-foot long Master Guide scarf), according to a North American Division News report. The number of Pathfinders baptized also reached a new high, 1,320, and thousands more went home to study and prepare for baptism in the future.¹⁹ Additionally, the camporee boasted 160,000 square feet of hangar building space, 300,000 square feet of activity tent space, 600 Master Guides²⁰ invested, and 57 community service projects.²¹

What Happens at the Camporee?

The camporees regularly include a vintage car show, world record attempts, swimming, boating, blacksmithing, earning honors, basketball and soccer tournaments, drill team and drum corps competitions, a daily parade, pin trading, and flag raising, as well as the evening program with speakers and a Bible story production.

Additionally, Pathfinders, Master Guides and youth leaders are encouraged to participate in outreach opportunities in Oshkosh and the surrounding communities such as arts and crafts with children at a local public library, cleaning up the Winneconne lakeshore, pulling weeds, cleaning windows, and loading trucks at a Salvation Army community center. "As Christians, we are called to serve others," Paulo Macena, Community service/Compassion projects coordinator for the 2019 Chosen International Camporee. "When Pathfinders participate in community service projects, they learn the joy of service, civic responsibilities, and the satisfaction of a job well done."²²

Legacy

The International Pathfinder Camporee, now organized by the Center for Youth Evangelism, has become major event in Adventist life with increasing appeal and impact with each recurrence every five years. It has inspired large camporees now held in of the denomination's world divisions. These too are largely open to international guests, although their international representation is generally smaller than the 105 countries that were represented at the 2019 International Pathfinder Camporee.

Buddy Griffith IV, a student at Oakwood University explained in 2019 why this event is meaningful to him. "If anyone has been to Oshkosh, they can tell you hands-down that it's arguably one of the best weeks of their life," he said. "The friendships and the activities that you're doing and the worshipping together . . . it's more than just a co-ed Boy and Girl Scouts, it's worshipping and I would like to think that's somehow related to how we're going to be worshipping when we get into Heaven, all together and just having a great time."²³

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NOTES

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