

# sixty-four

## a vision trip to Portland

by Benson Hines, March 2009

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It's crazy that Christians don't get more excited about ministry to college students. But each year in March, a single basketball tournament serves as a highly publicized window into the magnificent campus tribes.

Imagine you're a missionary having just arrived in your country of service. The first week, eight different tribes from across the nation join for an important annual gathering, so of course you attend. It's a great chance to start exploring the culture and qualities of this highly unreachable people-group to whom you've been sent.

The focuses of this annual gathering are the great contests between tribes from throughout the country. Each region has selected champions to compete here, and

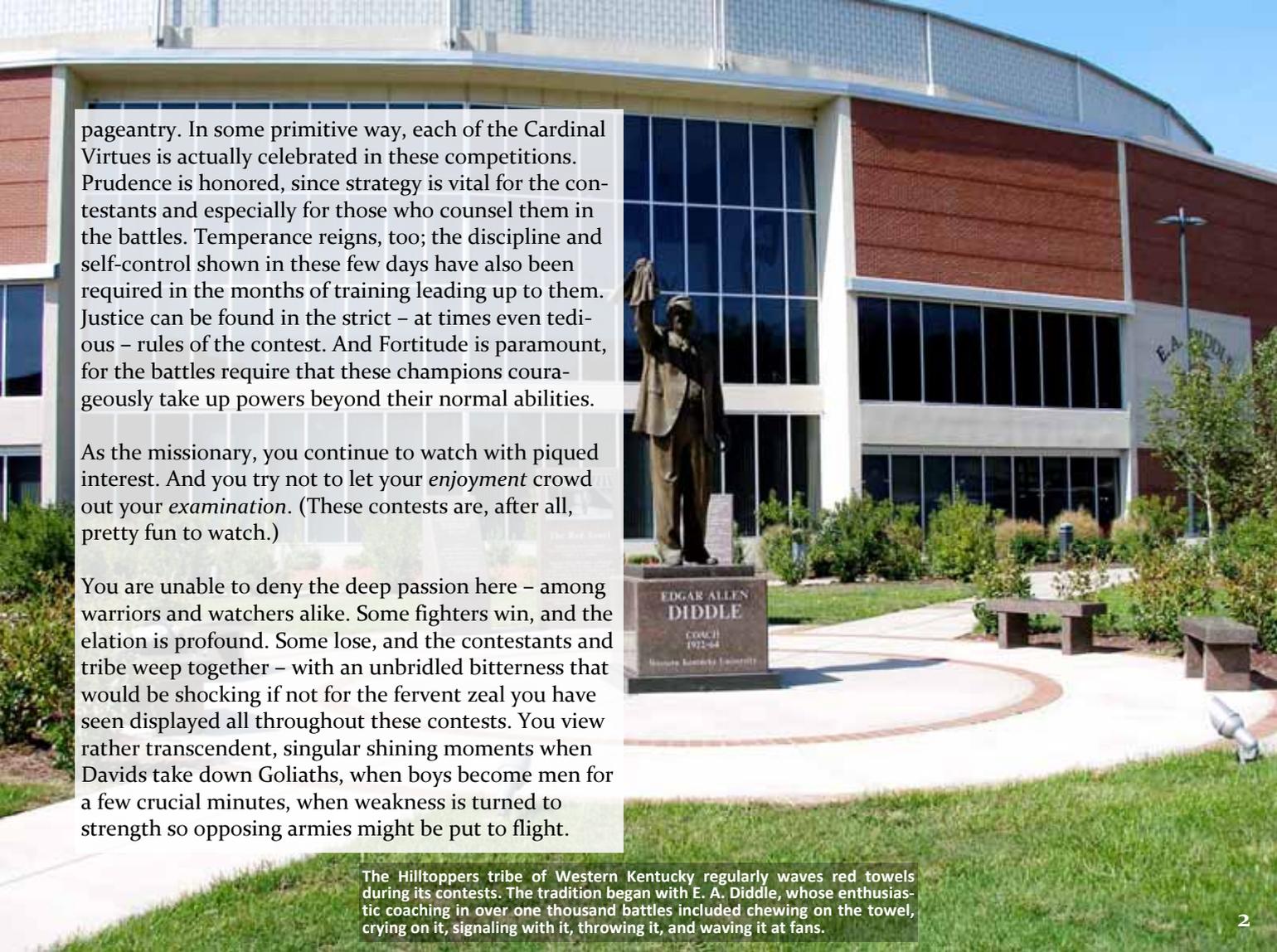
other tribes join because of their widely recognized abilities. Feats of strength, skill, and endurance will last all weekend. Thousands of other tribe members will watch these contests, which have drawn together groups that may rarely interact otherwise.

You first notice that each village promotes its own tribal identity with great fervor, and the warriors fight valiantly under these tribal banners. The variety and creativity of tribal names make it clear this is no normal mission field. Some tribes, for instance, are named after animals known for their ferocity or tenacity. Others have chosen to honor the traditions of their forefathers, naming themselves after ancient tribesmen, ancient metalworkers, and even ancient footwear! One tribe is known simply for its topography, with a name descriptive of the tribe's placement atop a large hill.

Dancers are prevalent, as are costumes, musical instruments, food, drink, wagers, merchants, and religious invocations. The chiefs of the tribes are here, often cheering right next to some of the youngest from their villages. Healers stand by, though actual bloodshed in these contests is minimal.

As you continue to watch during the weekend, you begin to notice traits beyond the extensive festivity and

This geometric fountain in the middle of campus, a campus newspaper titled *The Exponent*, and the tribe name itself all point to the engineering heritage of the Boilermaker tribe of Purdue University.



pageantry. In some primitive way, each of the Cardinal Virtues is actually celebrated in these competitions. Prudence is honored, since strategy is vital for the contestants and especially for those who counsel them in the battles. Temperance reigns, too; the discipline and self-control shown in these few days have also been required in the months of training leading up to them. Justice can be found in the strict – at times even tedious – rules of the contest. And Fortitude is paramount, for the battles require that these champions courageously take up powers beyond their normal abilities.

As the missionary, you continue to watch with piqued interest. And you try not to let your *enjoyment* crowd out your *examination*. (These contests are, after all, pretty fun to watch.)

You are unable to deny the deep passion here – among warriors and watchers alike. Some fighters win, and the elation is profound. Some lose, and the contestants and tribe weep together – with an unbridled bitterness that would be shocking if not for the fervent zeal you have seen displayed all throughout these contests. You view rather transcendent, singular shining moments when Davids take down Goliaths, when boys become men for a few crucial minutes, when weakness is turned to strength so opposing armies might be put to flight.

The Hilltoppers tribe of Western Kentucky regularly waves red towels during its contests. The tradition began with E. A. Diddle, whose enthusiastic coaching in over one thousand battles included chewing on the towel, crying on it, signaling with it, throwing it, and waving it at fans.



This is your initial exposure to the tribes in your new missionary home, and you begin to realize a few things about these people:

- ⊕ The enthusiasm in these tribes has yet to be tamed. There is a grit here, a rowdiness, a messiness, and a wild youthfulness in the warriors, the dancers, the battle-leaders, the musicians, and the crowds.
- ⊕ The bonds brought about by community “spirit” are not frivolous. The natural connections and unity within these tribes will help God’s work to spread between their members.
- ⊕ Creativity abounds within these tribes. Channeled for the Kingdom of God, this same brilliance could impact not only the natives’ nation but the entire world.
- ⊕ This people-group is not short on energy, either – another opportunity to maximize fruit for Christ. If God allows you to touch even a segment of these vibrant people, their impact on each other and beyond their own nation could be quick and profound.
- ⊕ While there will certainly be the same sorrows and hardships that come with any missionary activity, the field to which you have been called is a unique adventure and a blessing indeed.

The expansive lands enjoyed by the Huskies of the University of Washington can make a missionary forget he is still in the middle of Seattle. The tribe’s urban location, region of the country, strong Greek system, large size, and other characteristics naturally impact the efforts among this tribe.

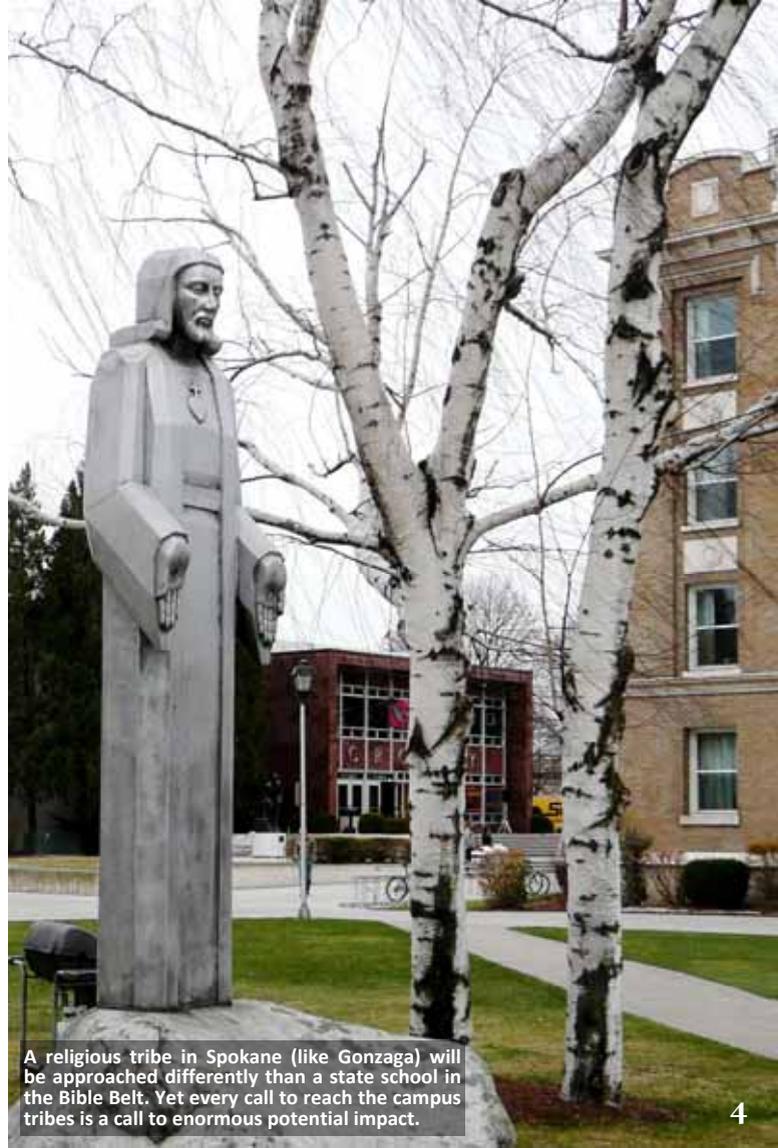
So as the weekend comes to a close, you find yourself a little humbled. This is an amazing people you do not “deserve” to spend even the next year with, let alone a longer stint. This will be no easy mission (as though any missionary activity is ever *easy*); these are distracted people at times, and the blessings they possess will stand in their way of feeling a need for Christ. Surely you will find other roadblocks, as well. Still... what grace is this, that God has called you to such an adventure?

All the “madness,” the virtue, the passion, and the valor here on the field of play reflect the nature of the tribes from which these crowds have come. This time, the tribes are Panthers, Huskies, Bulldogs, more Bulldogs, Fighting Illini, Boilermakers, Zips, and Hilltoppers. And that’s just in Portland; there are seven cities with great views of other campus tribes.

This is our beautiful mission field, and it’s far more than sixty-four.

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*Thanks for reading! This essay is in the same format as the upcoming ebook Reaching the Campus Tribes. Check out the next page for more info.*



A religious tribe in Spokane (like Gonzaga) will be approached differently than a state school in the Bible Belt. Yet every call to reach the campus tribes is a call to enormous potential impact.

coming April 2009

# Reaching the Campus Tribes (an opening inquiry)

by Benson Hines

Describing some first findings and conclusions after a yearlong road trip exploring college ministry through 44 states, on 180 campuses, and with hundreds of research activities. Pictures included!

(The first version of this “Sixty-four” essay was written during that trip in Moscow, Idaho, near campus #89 of 180. It has been updated for March 2009.)

**The *Reaching the Campus Tribes* ebook will be released in April 2009. For free.  
Look for it at [www.reachingthecampustribes.com](http://www.reachingthecampustribes.com).**

And if you're interested, Benson blogs daily about college ministry at  
[www.exploringcollegeministry.com](http://www.exploringcollegeministry.com).