

Family tradition

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ABOVE: D'Antae Simmons needed a place to take a break from the action Sunday afternoon as his mother, Geri, enjoyed some time with his father and family during the Aiken-Singleton Reunion on Hilton Head Island. **BELOW:** Family members line up for some home-cooked food during the reunion.

Hundreds gather for 7th Aiken reunion

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Under a giant oak tree, five generations of Aikens met Sunday as they have every Father's Day for the past 47 years, on the island's large plot off Marshland Road. William Aiken — who in death for 19 years remains the family patriarch — was certainly smiling down on the deeply spiritual family, they said in between prayer, song and barbecued ribs. Unlike some other native islanders, he was able to hold on to the bulk of his land, no easy task on Hilton Head Island. By maintaining it and paying the rising taxes, he preserved the property that his 11 living children were able to take over.

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REUNION

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He wanted them to always have a home here, and always come back.

The Aiken-Singleton family tree has grown considerably since the family first arrived on the island, sometime back in the mid-1800s. Its branches now extend from California and Seattle to New Jersey, and occasionally a few leaves blow over the ocean to Europe, Kuwait and Iraq.

They always return. All several hundred of them.

Only extreme illness or military service is an excuse to miss this family reunion, and even then folks ask questions. Attendance is mandatory at the giant family dinner, where Baptist worship, catching up and soul food split the bill.

"We are a very close family," said Darlene Minor, vice president of the reunion. "A lot of us go to the same churches and live next door or down the street from each other. We follow our family. That's how our grandfather brought us up."

The Aiken reunion is thought to be the longest running within the native island community, and it kicks off a season of family get-togethers for other native islanders.

It began with the family bringing covered dishes for their dad on Father's Day in 1960, a year after the death of William Aiken's wife, Maybelle.

When or how the Aikens first arrived in America is unknown, but the family's modern history began in the 1800s when James Aiken — William's grandfather — escaped from slavery with his wife, muffling the cries of their infant daughter. They settled on Pinckney Island and then made their home on Hilton Head, in a community called Brownsville, the family said.

Until William and Maybelle, the Aikens' known family tree was more like a sapling, with a small branch or two. Maybelle was an only child, and William had a brother who never had children. The couple produced 14 children, and most who made it to adulthood had between six and nine of their own.

A family that prays together stays together, the Aikens say. In that case, they'll be just fine.

There are no name tags for this close-knit family. But they do have colored T-shirts, so at a glance, it's possible to determine who descends from each of the original brothers and sisters.

Sometimes it is confusing to have such a large extended family. A teenager took a liking to a girl in school with long legs. When he mentioned her name, his father laughed. "That's your cousin," he said.

Although their compound undoubtedly becomes more valuable each year, the family prefers knowing William is smiling down on them to any monetary rewards. They're living his dream.

"Now, he's rejoicing in heaven," said Michelle Aiken over a can of grape soda. "He's saying, 'They've still got it going on.'"

"They still have the reunion and they still have the land," added her cousin Letha Stewart.

Both, along with their religion, seem to provide the roots to hold the growing Aiken family together. About 50 family members marched around the property and prayed, blessing the land for the party.

A family that prays together, stays together, the Aikens say. If that's the case, they'll be just fine. The family claims eight preachers, a number that seems to grow at each reunion.

Janie Grant is the oldest at the gathering. Like the large oak tree next to where she was born 91 years ago, the family reunion grows each year.

"I'm very happy," she said. "They're the loveliest family to me."

Behind the large metal smoker, Carl Davis has a second reason for his family's strength.

"We were raised at the dinner table with good conversation," said the Savannah grocery store manager who's been to all 47 gatherings. "That's what we're doing here today, talking about life and where we want to go as a family."