

BINGO

A big game in small

// STORY BY MARY O. PARKER

VELLA GARRETT, 80, the self-proclaimed “bingo queen” of Smithville, Texas (pop. 3,901), insists that bingo is the thing to do on a small-town Saturday night. “It’s what I look forward to all week long. And just look at all them other folks who feel like me!” she says, gesturing to the packed room in Smithville’s VFW hall.



// Players scan their bingo cards every Saturday night at the VFW hall in Smithville, Texas. The game provides community fun and fellowship, and raises money for local charitable causes.



MARY O. PARKER

// "Bingo queen" Vella Garrett has played each week for more than two decades.

towns

Sitting at a table with friends and munching on pimiento cheese sandwiches made by volunteers, Garrett studies the emerging patterns on her bingo card as caller Bill Zimmerhanel announces one letter-number combination after another.

"B-12! G-49! N-32!" Zimmerhanel calls out between sips from a water bottle as he pulls pingpong-size balls bearing the combinations from a faux-wooden box.

"I don't play real serious, not for the money," says Garrett, who has played bingo at the Veterans of Foreign Wars hall each Saturday night for more than 20 years. It's the friendship and fellowship with local townsfolk that draw her to the game.

Indeed, old-fashioned bingo is the game of both choice and chance in small towns across America, where players of all ages congregate regularly in churches, community centers, firehouses, fraternal lodges and other venues in search of lighthearted fun and social interaction—all while helping organizations raise money for local charities.

"Sure beats staying home and staring at the four walls!" says Pat Werlein, 79, another Smithville regular who sits at the same table every week with a group of friends dubbed

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// Pat Bodi, 56, teaches grandson Tylar Poulson, 10, how to play the game at the Moose Lodge in La Pine, Ore.

The Moose Lodge in La Pine also puts its bingo money back into the community. "The high school basketball team might need help buying their uniforms or an individual might need help with medical bills. We'll use the money for things like that," Lea says.

In Smithville, bingo proceeds are used to buy flags that fly in the town on patriotic holidays and school supplies for children, among other things. Volunteer Joe Sulak, 80, says charity bingo is an all-American pastime because of the way the game is used to help others. "I think that's the best part," he says, before dashing from table to table to supply players with fresh cards.

Bingo's good will goes far

beyond dollars and cents, however. "Our son's dying of cancer," confides Barbara Villegas, 73. "This lets me forget about it for awhile and be around nice people," she says as her husband, Edward, 81, nods in agreement while playing by her side.

Nearby, Melissa Borja, 43, plays from her wheelchair. "I've got RSD (reflex sympathetic dystrophy) and this helps me take my mind off the pain," she says of her neurological condition. Borja flashes a smile across the table to April Wolfe, 46, her bingo buddy who faithfully picks her up and brings her to the VFW hall each Saturday.

"As far as I'm concerned, bingo's the only game in town!" she says. ★



// "Bingo!" shouts Carbara King, 77, holding up her winning card in La Pine.



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