

JOLIET: LAND OF THE TROPICS

By **Vicki Vass. Special to the Tribune**

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✎ I would crawl over broken glass to get to this convention," John Pearse of Center Valley, Pa., said of the Hawaiian Steel Guitar Convention, held last weekend in Joliet.

Pearse typifies the devotion of convention-goers for the event as well as their instruments. "I enjoy the camaraderie here," he said. "People come here to share a common joy."

According to Lorene Ruymar, president of the Hawaiian Steel Guitar Association, the first conference was held in St. Louis in 1986. Since then, Joliet has provided the venue.

"It keeps getting bigger and bigger," said Ruymar, of Vancouver, B.C. "We're all close to family here. We're old friends who meet every year dedicated to the music and culture."

After two days of music sessions, the event culminated in a luau complete, of course, with Hawaiian music, leis and floor show. Betty and Robert Bahret of Poughkeepsie, N.Y., were first-time conventioners.

"This is absolutely wonderful. There's a real `aloha' presence," Betty Bahret said. "The people are very friendly. We feel right at home, just like we do in Hawaii."

Bob and Julia Waters of Independence, Ky., were attending their sixth convention.

"We enjoy the fellowship and the `aloha' spirit," Julia Waters said. "The steel guitar is really the star here. We're all here for the same purpose--love of the steel guitar."

Batavia resident Ann Vilchuck brought her 5-year-old daughter, Sarah, who has visited cousins in Hawaii.

"I've been listening to Hawaiian music all my life," Ann Vilchuck said. "When we walked in, Sarah said, `We should really be in Hawaii.' It's real nice to hear the music."

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