

Memories of Boy Scouting

by Jack Welty

When I was a boy - in the late 1940's and early 1950's - Boy Scouting was a rite of passage for most young men. I grew up in a middle-class family with my parents and one younger sister in Waynesboro, PA - a town of 10,000 in southeastern Pennsylvania, a few miles north of the Maryland border about 25 miles west of Gettysburg.

My Dad was a small independent businessman, owning and operating a dry cleaning shop. He had been a Boy Scout - and, as an adult, he was active on the local Boy Scout Council. I remember when Camp Sinoquipe was being built near Fort Littleton, PA, he would go on weekend work parties - and sometimes take me along. I was impressed with what I saw there and wanted to be involved. This 500-acre mountain camp, thick with forests and surrounding a ten acre lake, is in a beautiful setting in Fulton County, about 40 miles northwest of Waynesboro.



From grade school, I went through the ranks of Cub Scouts (that's me third from the right in the photo). My mother was our Den Mother - and we did the crafts and other activities that keep a young boy off the streets and out of trouble for awhile. I remember we would have den meetings in our basement, so we had a flag hanging on the wall and a variety of craft materials always available.

By the summer of 1950, I was 12 years old. Within a few months of becoming a Boy Scout, I attended the National Jamboree at Valley Forge. This was a wonderful encampment of scouts from around the country, and some from foreign lands. Our Jamboree troop was pre-selected to participate in one of the nightly pageants, so Mother and a few other moms made Revolutionary Soldier costumes for the Jamboree troop and sent them with us. It was pretty amazing to be a 'bit player' in a pageant before tens of thousands in the audience. One highlight of the Jamboree was a visit and speech by President Truman.



My Boy Scout troop at home was Troop 29, meeting in and sponsored by the church our family attended, Waynesboro Methodist Church. We were a part of what was then called Washington County Council - headquartered across the state line in Hagerstown, MD. The council is now more appropriately called Mason-Dixon Council, as it includes scout troops from both sides of that famous political demarcation. At our weekly troop meetings, we would work on merit badges - and, like all boys, take some time to horse around. For example, we met in the church basement and soon learned that by crossing those two little wires along the ceiling joists we could ring the doorbell of the pastor's manse, which was attached to the church. The clump, clump of footprints overhead and the sound of the opening and quickly closing door was our reward.



In summers as a scout, I attended Camp Sinoquipe. My first year was as a camper, then for two or three years as a counselor. Great fun in the outdoors, learning to paddle a canoe, shoot a bow and arrow, and even sneak a couple miles into town - Fort Littleton - to the small movie theater after taps. This little theater had one movie showing at night. The same guy sold the tickets, made the popcorn and ran the projector. A very small theater in a very small town ... and a very alert and very peeved camp director, who soon put a stop to this!

The summer of 1953 was a life-changing experience. Age 15, I was a Life Scout and had the privilege of being one of more than 47,000 scouts attending the National Jamboree in Irvine, California. This was a big deal for a 15-year-old, small-town Pennsylvania boy! We boarded buses at Waynesboro's Center Square and, along with stops for other scouts in neighboring communities, were taken to Harrisburg, where we boarded one of several special trains.

I was a model railroader at the time and had never been aboard a real train, so this was 'heaven' for me! Our special Scout train consisted of a number of chair cars, with seat backs that were removable and laid out on 2x2 boards between the seat cushions at night, making a very long continuous bed down both sides of each train car. Sleeping head to toe with others on an uneven bed was a new experience - but we were used to camping and 'roughing' it, so we took it in stride.

The special scout train included a U.S. Army Kitchen Car, a converted boxcar where the food was prepared and cooked on wooden or charcoal stoves and ovens. At designated meal times we all lined up with metal trays and filed into the Kitchen Car, where the food was spooned or ladeled onto each of our trays. We'd then return to our seats to eat. I remember that the food was pretty good. Another new experience!

Heading west from Harrisburg over the then-famous Horseshoe Curve outside Altoona, our train progressed and changed locomotives each time we progressed to another Railroad Company. We made several stops on the way to and from the Jamboree. These included such exotic places as the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, the Grand Canyon, Santa Fe, and a bus side trip up Rocky Mountain National Park after an overnight at a camp in Estes Park, CO. Of course, we stopped at the Continental Divide to have a snowball fight at that high altitude in July! And we were amazed to arrive at Needles, CA at 7 a.m. on the final day westbound - the train was serviced there, and we were able to get out and stretch, amazed by the 100 degree temperature that early in the morning!

The train trip was about a week each way (with stops for side trips) and the Jamboree lasted about a week, for a total of 21 days. I had earned the required \$200 doing odd mowing jobs in the neighborhood, working at my dad's dry cleaning store, and washing cars at Floyd Eyer's Gas Station a few blocks from our house.

One fun thing about a Boy Scout Jamboree is meeting people from all over the country, and even scouts from other nations. Each troop worked together to bring items representing their home territory which would then be exchanged with scouts from other places in one of several 'Swap Tents.' Of course, we were from Civil War territory, so we got some lead and a bullet mold and made some 'real' Civil War bullets. Well, they were found within 25 or so miles of major battlefields - Gettysburg and Antietam - and with some mud ground into them, they looked like they were dug up and authentic. We may have forgotten to tell people that they weren't really the genuine article. I guess I should feel guilty about the deception, but I'm also not sure that vial of 'Missouri Mud' that I traded for was really from the riverbank where the USS Missouri had run aground about a month before and was a major news item at the time.



I was able to swap for a horned toad from one of the Texas scouts. As I recall, this new pet lived all the way home in a hand-carried shoebox with holes punched in the lid - eating the few bugs, flies and other great delectasies that we could find.

One day at the Jamboree we boarded a huge parade of school buses for a short trip to the beach - probably Newport or Huntington - for a one-hour swim in the Pacific. This was a BIG deal for this

small town Pennsylvania boy! My family had vacationed at the New Jersey 'shore' ... but being in the Pacific was a whole continent away! And there were other optional side trips while we were at the Jamboree. One that I enjoyed took us by bus across the border to Tijuana, stopping near San Diego on the way back to let us stay overnight at the Hotel Del Coronado. In the Hotel, we were in giant rooms with triple bunks on the top floor, an area that had been used to house military officers (this was toward to end of the Korean War, and the San Diego area was an active Navy town). We had great fun running around the hotel, being glared at by well-heeled paying guests whose reverie was being disturbed by foottraces in the halls.

The Jamboree featured several nightly sessions where all of the scouts were seated on a hillside in view of a stage set up at the bottom. There were pageants, rodeo and other presentations. One night we had an address by President Eisenhower. Probably my favorite was a flight demonstration one day by the U.S. Navy's Blue Angels, flying F9F Cougars, the first jets I had ever seen.

The trip to California was a wonderful experience. This small-town boy got to see our beautiful country through awed eyes. And as a Patrol Leader for our Jamboree troop, I was learning a bit of responsibility, which made it even more fun.

On the train on the way home, we learned that the war in Korea had ended, or at least was at a truce so that they weren't shooting at each other anymore. As I later thought about it, the Korean War began when we were at the Valley Forge Jamboree in 1950, and ended during this Jamboree trip three years later.

I fondly remember my experiences as a Boy Scout, but they were not to continue for much longer. Age 16 was approaching, and with it a driver's license, recognition that there were girls, lots of other High School distractions - and my first car, a 1940 Plymouth, which was an adventure all its own. Sad to say, I never did persevere and finish my Eagle Scout requirements, stopping only a couple of merit badges short of the goal. That is something I regret to this day.

Looking back on my time as a Boy Scout, I am thankful for what the scouting experiences taught me about life. Scouting helped to mould my character as I prepared for manhood. For an important season in my growing years, scouting provided a very positive influence, and for this I am grateful.

But what about the future? While scouting is a pleasant memory for me, I am saddened to see today's national Boy Scout program apparently impacted by the pressures of 'political correctness' and gender confusion. As that trend progresses, I fear that it may distract the basic character-building aspects that have been a great strength of scouting. Of course, scouting needs to stay relevant, but hopefully will maintain the high principles on which it was founded. What will happen to scouting when the tenants of the Scout Law and Scout Oath are eroded away? Will scouting continue to develop young men of character? At age 79, I won't get to see far into the future. But I appreciate the influence of scouting in my life and the lives of many of my friends - and I pray that the national leadership will cling to the principles that have made scouting a powerful influence, developing a strong moral character for young men in their formative years.

These are my memories and my story. I wish scouting well in its mission of developing not only life skills, but also strength of character in the young men of the future.