BOY SCOUT MEMORIES

Three important factors in my younger days laid the foundation which helped make me the man I am today: a rigorous Catholic education, a voracious use of the South Shore public library, and my enriching involvement with the Boy Scouts. What follows is my memories of this third factor.

Legend has it that in 1909, an American newspaper man and entrepreneur named W.D. Boyce had stopped in London on his way to joining a safari in British East Africa. Because this was his first visit to the enormous city, he soon became lost -- both in a thick fog, and in the maze of London's twisting streets. Fortunately, Boyce was a approached by a helpful boy dressed in a smart khaki uniform.

"May I assist you, sir?" the lad offered.

After explaining his predicament and giving the address of exactly where he wanted to go, the boy promptly led the newspaper man to his desired destination. But when a grateful Boyce tried to give the lad a modest monetary reward for his trouble, the boy politely declined, explaining: "Thank you, sir, but I am a Boy Scout, and I am simply doing my daily good deed. Good-bye." That being said, the Scout crisply saluted Boyce, and seemed to vanish as he slipped away back into the fog. And to this day, the name of this legendary lad is still unknown.

Intrigued, W.D. Boyce soon investigated further as to what this 'Boy Scouting' concept was all about. He was directed to see General Robert Baden-Powell, who had recently founded the Boy Scouts in England. After the two later met, Boyce was so impressed with Baden-Powell's idea that he began the Boy Scouts of America organization after returning home, four months later, the following year in 1910.

"Do a Good Deed Daily."

"Be Prepared"

"A Scout is: Trustworthy; Loyal; Helpful; Friendly; Courteous; Kind; Obedient; Cheerful; Thrifty; Brave; Clean; and Reverent."

These fine ideals would be my lodestones as I grew up.

I began my Scouting career at age seven. Through various activities in the coming years, I progressed up through 'Webelos' and the ranks of Wolf, Bear, and Lion as a Cub Scout. We had blue uniforms with a matching blue duckbill cap and a neckerchief. Our troop met in the basement of a Lutheran Church across the northern corner of 80th and Escanaba on the south side of Chicago. Volunteer 'den mothers' offered leadership to the boys during this early Scouting phase, but the women were replaced by all male leaders as we grew older and transitioned into the classic, khaki-uniformed Boy Scouts.

Our Troop was #716. Our Scoutmaster was P.J. Foley. He had three sons, each involved in Scouting. Our Assistant Scoutmaster was Lester Busse, and another uniformed adult volunteer was Emil Dombrowski, whose son was also in our troop.

The Boy Scouts also had its own official monthly magazine -- "Boy's Life" -- which I subscribed to. It was fun getting it regularly in the mail. My favorite part of that publication were the true Boy Scout adventures of rescue or survival. Always thrilling and inspirational! Although I have no saved copies today, I still have my original Boy Scout handbook from the 1960s.

Our troop was divided into two 'Patrols'. Mine was called the Flaming Arrows. Our members included: Don Kropp (my best friend), Mike Skibinski, Mike Bojanowski, Bob Jacobson, Tom Alderson, Danny Saulters (whose father was also a uniformed adult volunteer), Don White, and Clarence Miller.

We went on many weekend hiking and camping trips (the latter called a 'Camporee'), mostly in Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin. Here are some that I still have uniform patches and/or medals from: the Fort Wayne-Kekionga Trail; the Wyandotte Trail; the Morton Arboretum Trail; the Chief Chicagou Trail; the Keepataw Trail; the Amaquonsippi Trail; and the Bluegrass Trail in Kentucky. I especially remember the last one, because it was the first time we had to hike twenty-five miles, on our way to visit Mammoth Cave National Park. It was a hot and humid day, and our legs were exhausted. We were warned to elevate our legs during a few blessed rest stops, and advised not to remove our hiking boots, because our swollen feet would then not be able to fit back inside our shoes! We were also told to pick up a clean smooth pebble and put it in our mouth and suck on it, to help slake our thirst -- but were cautioned not to accidentally swallow it!

Another outing I recall was the Ninth Annual U.S. Grant Pilgrimage in Galena, Illinois. This was on April 27, 1963 -- a Civil War-era Centennial, commemorating Abraham Lincoln's famous Gettysburg Address. We got to visit former American President and Union Army General U.S. Grant's historic home, which was (and still is) preserved as a museum.

These Boy Scout field trips for hiking and camping -- away from the crowded, dirty city and our badgering families -- was just what we growing boys needed: vigorous exercise; healthy food; the strengthening of team spirit; the building of self-confidence; and having a true appreciation of nature and American history while learning cooperation and outdoor skills, were just some of the many benefits.

Meanwhile, I progressed in rank from novice Tenderfoot to Second Class, and finally to First Class Scout. (I was working on the next level -- Star Scout -- when I exited the Scouting program to attend high school in September, 1965.) I also earned a Boy Scout medal related to religious studies -- 'Ad Altare Dei' -- through supervised activities at nearby St. Michael the Archangel Church, since that particular program was not offered at my home parish of St. Brides.

Every year, Troop 716 held an 'all-you-could eat' Spaghetti Dinner fundraiser in the basement of the afore- mentioned Lutheran Church where we held most of our Scout meetings. As a group, we boys helped set up the tables and chairs, boil the pasta and serve the sauce, make the salad and the garlic bread and the dessert, pour the beverages, clear the remains, wash the dishes, and perform the final clean up. It was a huge job, feeding more than two hundred people at one event!

Another fun Boy Scout tradition was the annual Pinewood Derby. You got a block of soft pinewood in a designated kit and carved it down into the shape of a streamlined car. You carefully sanded it smooth and painted it, then attached its four black plastic wheels on thin metal axles. The car could not exceed 7" in length and 2.75" in width. Its weight could not be more than 5 ounces, and was carefully weighed before being allowed to race. A large and long wooden multi-lane track was introduced to race the cars, with gradual elimination runs, until final prizes went to the fastest cars. The competitions were exciting!

The heyday of my Scouting career, however, was probably the years 1963 and 1964. Coincidently, these years yielded the only three photographs of myself in the Boy Scouts: a summer camp large group photo of Troop 716 in 1963, along with a smaller but faded, recently discovered (by fellow Scout Mike Bojanowski) photo of me in some kind of line during that same year; and another large summer camp group photo from 1964. Comparing the two big photos is remarkable -- a boyish, crew-cut lad almost age twelve, transformed into a striking young man with longer hair and angular facial features, almost age thirteen!

The Boy Scout summer camp I attended both years was at Camp Stuart in Owasippe, Michigan, off Wolverine Lake. My experiences there during both summers was remarkable and unforgettable!

First, I earned my 'Totin' Chip' card, which entitled me to safely carry and use a knife, hatchet or ax. Next, I earned two merit badges -- camping and canoeing. I went on to learn: Morse Code; plant and tree identification; outdoor cooking; fire-building; first aid; knot tying; swimming; diving; rowing; map and compass orienteering; .22 rifle shooting; archery; woodcarving; and more. All the while, I made good friends, learned leadership skills, and grew steadily in self-esteem.

I remember one rather odd craft activity station we had called Horn and Hoof. It was a boiling vat of animal hooves and horns, which, when rendered and scraped clean, were then carved and finally polished into finished neckerchief holders, paperweights, or ink wells.

A big highlight for me one summer was completing the Mile Swim. You had to swim a half-mile out to a floating raft in the middle of Lake Wolverine and back! You were led by two senior scouts in a rowboat. You would follow the boat about a yard's distance behind, and could stop swimming for a moment if you got tired, but you could only tread water and never touch the rowboat or you would be disqualified. It was tough, but I did it...with ongoing encouragement from my two rowing pals!

Fortunately, meals and snacks were plentiful at Scout summer camp. You can imagine that we ate like hogs, seeing as all our activities and expended energies worked up rather enormous appetites!

Night time at camp was always suspenseful, with a huge bonfire and dramatic stories told, or entertaining skits and songs performed. Night was also when the mysterious Order of the Arrow ceremony was enacted -- a high honor for the best senior Scouts, who were awakened in the middle of the night in surprise by outfitted 'Indian Chiefs' in feathered headdresses with painted faces. They were then escorted by torchlight to a secret wooded area for a special initiation and induction!

Although I needed to exit Scouting once I went off the high school, I now wish I had continued, and had stayed to work my way to the top rank of Eagle Scout -- like astronauts Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong; U.S. Presidents Gerald R. Ford and George W. Bush; journalist and newscaster Walter Cronkite; Microsoft founder Bill Gates; Wal-Mart founder Sam Walton; actors John Wayne, Andy Griffith, Harrison Ford, and Jimmy Stewart; film maker Steven Spielberg; athletes Hank Aaron, Mark Spitz, and Nolan Ryan; and Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. It also would have been interesting to then proceed onto the Scouting level of Explorers.

Another missed opportunity was our troop not getting to go to the Philmont Scout Ranch near Cimarron, New Mexico, for its annual National Jamboree. But I did get to drive there during a road trip out West, and see it for myself as an adult, a few decades ago. Hundreds of tents were set up, representing troops and Scouts from across the country!

I did, however, continue my love of summer camps by working as a junior camp counselor at Camp Henry Horner, in Round Lake, Illinois, for eight weeks during the summer of 1967, along with my good friend, Jim Musinski. This camp was run by the Young Men's Jewish Counsel from the neighborhood of South Shore, not that far from my house in Chicago. (I confess that I fibbed on my CHH employment application, being two months short of my sixteenth birthday, which was the minimum age. But my long Boy Scout resume probably helped me win the day regardless, and land me the job!) I was responsible at CHH's lakeside for teaching swimming, life-saving, diving, rowing, canoeing, and sailing, as well as being an eight-boy cabin counselor.

Boy Scouting returned to my life in 1976, the American Bi-Centennial year. I was now a college grad and a teacher at Glen Crest Junior High School, so I was offered a summer-long job as the Nature and Ecology Director at Camp Northwoods/Freeland Leslie. This summer camp was located off Emerick Lake in Oxford, Wisconsin, and I worked under the leadership of Al Hesslebart from the DuPage Area Council. I was just shy of turning twenty-five years old, and was living at the time in suburban Glen Ellyn, IL. Naturally, my old Boy Scout uniform didn't fit, so I bought a new set of summer khaki duds! But I proudly wore some of my (now vintage!) neckerchiefs. My much younger fellow camp counselors, I could tell, got a kick out of my many amusing tales of Scouting from a decade earlier.

I was naturally pleased when our darling daughter, Jennifer, entered the world of Girl Scouting at age seven. She progressed over the years from Daisies to Brownies to Girl Scouts and finally to Senior Girl Scouts, until age fifteen -- lastly earning the coveted Bronze Award for community service. Under our outstanding troop leader, Sherrill Honeychurch -- with me largely serving as her top volunteer adult assistant, given my hefty Scouting and teaching experiences -- we enjoyed many adventures throughout California, exploring and hiking, and camping on weekends or during school holidays. We did lots of arts & crafts projects and local presentations too. Of course, we also sold hundreds of boxes of those famous GS cookies every year too! Jennifer also attended Girl Scout Camp Menzies in the Sierra Nevada foothills during the summer of 2002. The highlight for our troop was probably visiting all of Washington, D.C. for a week, with a guided educational tour company, in 2005.

Scouting is currently found in 170 countries around the world. It is remarkable that its noble ideals have spread so far and well since 1909.

But regretfully, Owasippe -- with its Boy Scout summer camps of Stuart, Beard, and West -- was sold to private developers several years ago, and is no more. Although other changes -- some favorable and necessary, but some not so much (politically-trending demands, harassment lawsuits, organizational bankruptcy, etc.) -- have occurred over the years since I was a boy, the basic tenets of Scouting have remained strong: Service to your community. Humility before God. Bodily fitness. Continual mental development. World fellowship. Respect towards others. Care for the environment. Self-reliance, determination, and trying one's best in all endeavors.

May such admirable goals continue to lead us onward, for there are many worthwhile traditions in our country -- and around the world -- that should be preserved, and Scouting is surely one of them...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

February 18, 2023