

History of Scouting in the Finger Lakes Council

We are all familiar with the story of an unknown English scout who helped William D. Boyce in 1909, giving him the idea for the Boy Scouts of America. When Boyce returned from England he spread the word of the Scouting movement in the fertile ground of turn-of-the-century America, a land already sprouting Sons of Daniel Boone and Woodcraft Indians.

The mass market "dime novels" also spread the word of Scouting sometimes with fantastic scenarios. In later years the BSA itself hired a novelist to neutralize some of the more fantastic tales. Thus were spawned Tom Slade and Pee Wee Harris.

Scouting came to the Finger Lakes Area as early as 1912. Evidence points to a troop that early in the Penn Yan area. A troop, later numbered 51, was also founded in Waterloo in 1912. The Baptist Church in Geneva founded a troop in 1914. By 1916 several troops were chartered in the Finger Lakes area, some of which exist to this day. Prior to 1920 all troops dealt directly with the Boy Scouts of America National Headquarters in New York City. In that year, however, the Ontario County Council was formed. That first council became the nucleus of Finger Lakes Council in 1924.

There were many men in the forefront of the Scouting movement in the Finger Lakes area. The preeminent moving force behind the early development of the Council, however, was Judge Robert Thomson of Phelps. Judge Thomson, whose wife was a founder of Girl Scouting, held many Courts of Honor in his own court in Canandaigua, organized jamborees, encouraged leaders and for decades did all manner of good turns for young people. An oak tree outside his former chambers was planted in his honor. When Judge Thomson died in 1937 he requested that all his pall bearers be Eagle Scouts. Troop 39 of Manchester planted the oak tree and placed a plaque on the Court House Lawn in Canandaigua.

By the 1930's thousands of boys had already enjoyed scouting in the Finger lakes. It is safe to say that tens of thousands have had the Scouting experience. Exactly what is it that has attracted and held so many people young and not so young? Mostly it is the timeless elements of Scouting. The things that change, yet somehow, stay the same.

One of the changing basics is the membership card carried by all registered members of the Boy Scouts of America. It is less elaborate now, though just as important.

Another important part of Scouting has always been the uniform. The first uniforms looked like Army uniforms and were hot and uncomfortable. By the late 1920's the

uniform had loosened up a bit but was still pretty military and rather formal. In the 1930's the large "full square" neckerchief was common and the uniform began to resemble those of today. The uniform traditional to Scouts of today underwent one more radical change in the late 1960's. What a difference in 40 years! In 1980 the present uniform, designed by Oscar de la Renta, made its appearance.

A highlight of any Scout's career is the Court of Honor. Early on many courts of honor were held in court rooms or at Camp Tarion. According to a council bulletin dated February 1, 1931 "all Tenderfoot badges (are) awarded in the troop by (the) Scoutmaster and Troop Committeemen." "All Eagle badges (are) awarded at the Council meetings or at special occasions such as Rallies, Jamborees and Camp Courts. All other badges (are) awarded at District Courts held on the third Tuesday of every odd numbered month..." An important part of the Scouting program has always been the award system. While awards have come and gone, there is a thread of continuity 78 years long. The shoulder ribbons once worn looked much like the Webelos ribbons now in use.

In the era before television, a simpler time for youth, entering and leaving the BSA was looked upon as an experience perhaps more emotional than it is today. Those who were "discharged" in the 1920's and early 1930's received a special certificate with their service record on the back. It has no equal today.

Community service has always been important to the Boy Scouts. During World War I \$335 million worth of war bonds were sold by Scouts. Scouts who sold 10 Liberty Bonds received a special BSA Treasury Department Medal. The award for each bond drive was slightly different. The Liberty Bond medallions are, today, some of the most treasured Scout mementos.

During the Second World War Scouts did even more national good turns. The collection of scrap metal, fruit pits, milkweed pods, and scrap paper are just a few of the projects. Many Scouts received the Eisenhower award for collecting 1000 pounds of scrap paper in 1945. The National Victory Garden Institute made a MacArthur award available through the Scout organization. It was given to Scouts contributing to America's food resources by growing a garden of at least 400 square feet.

From the 1920's, Finger Lakes area Scouts played a major role in reforestation. Tens of thousands of trees were planted on hundreds of acres of land around our beautiful lakes. Most of the trees planted by Scouts, like many between Canandaigua and Naples, still stand; monuments to the efforts of generations of Boy Scouts.

Scouts today travel far and wide "keeping the outing in Scouting." As early as the 1920's several troops in this area had their own permanent camps, travel not being as easy then.

Unique opportunities for national good turns came with the World's Fairs in 1939 and 1964. Both times Finger Lakes Council contingents went to New York to escort the handicapped, welcome dignitaries, and man the BSA pavilions.

The 1950's gave us the Cold War. Scouts responded as they had since 1910 by being prepared. Council training of troops who were ready for any emergency became a priority.

The jamboree experience has always been a part of Scouting too. Prior to 1935 all US Jamborees were council events. Most later council jamborees were held in Geneva at Hobart College, some were held in Phelps, Penn Yan, and at Cayuga Lake State Park.

In 1935, the first US National Jamboree was scheduled. A delegation from the Finger Lakes Council was scheduled to go. At the last minute a polio epidemic broke out in Washington and the Jamboree was canceled. Two years later, in 1937, a second jamboree took place. By the standards of later National Jamborees, the 1937 event was small. It was very exciting for the local boys who attended, however. Leadership for the local boys was provided by Scoutmaster Ainswirth Bennett (Manchester), and Assistant Scoutmasters Roger Killian (Naples) and Arnold H. Barben (Seneca Falls).

Today Scouting has a program called High Adventure. As you might have guessed by now it is not really new. In 1934 the Finger Lakes Council began Adirondack wilderness camping. Boys of at least 14 were taken "up in some isolated spot" where they were "trained for Troop and camp leadership." The boys had to "make bough beds, pitch their own tents, do their own cooking, build trails, climb mountains, take canoe trips, and learn about the woods under expert leadership." From the 1920's on a few individual troops camped privately in the mountains; some even owned their own camps.

The first permanent council camp in the Finger Lakes belonged to Otetiana Council, then called the Rochester Boy Scout Council. Their boys camped at the YMCA camp at Tichenor Point in 1912, moving to Rattlesnake Point (now Otetiana Point) in 1917. The point today, seen from Canandaigua Lake, bears little resemblance to its days as a Boy Scout Camp. Otetiana, by the way, means "ever ready" (be prepared) in the Seneca Indian tongue.

Formal Scout camps in the 1920's were much more rustic than today. Army surplus was the order of the day and "home made" the rule more than the exception.

Although it included 286 acres of wooded hillside and a mile of waterfront, the Finger Lakes Council's Camp Tarion didn't look like much by modern standards until 1928. Located in Yates County along the southeast shore of Canandaigua Lake, there were no roads in, the power source was literally driven over the ice, and headquarters was a tent. Nevertheless, the Council was justly proud of its first camp. When Scouts first went to camp, they arrived as individuals, not troops. This was changed in 1934. After that year, Scoutmasters escorted their troops for one week periods although more time was allowed. Those who chose to provide their own equipment, provide their own leadership and cook their own food paid \$1 per boy per week in the mid-1930's. A troop of eight or more boys could go for a flat fee of \$5 in 1936.

In 1929 a new lodge was opened. That 60 foot by 30 foot building had a general assembly room with an eight foot fireplace, a dispensary, a canteen, offices, cooks quarters and work room. The 10 foot by 60 foot porch was often crowded. The trading post/canteen was, of course, much smaller than modern boys would expect. Old time campers relate that the coin of the realm was scrip. Accommodations for the boys were the traditional military style squad tents, erected on platforms in later years. Campers with at least a year's experience were allowed to occupy "lone point" down by the lake. A mess hall, with room for 100 people, was erected on the lake shore. It is the only original structure on the old Camp Tarion site.

From the start the Council Camp staff had been comprised of individuals, professionals and volunteer Scouters with varying expertise. A regular feature of early Scout camping was "skinny dipping" in the morning. That practice was an important factor in the closing of Camp Otetiana, but seems to have been common in the 1920's and 1930's. For obvious reasons waterfront activities were important at Camp Tarion. The bottom dropped off quickly in the lake there and diving close to shore was common though dangerous. The old steam engine, originally used for power, was pushed into the lake when it was no longer needed and boys often tried to dive far enough down to touch it.

A 25 foot motor launch was obtained by the council to complement six rowboats and a motor canoe. In 1936 the Geneva Rotary Club donated a 32 foot launch to the Council. Dr. Stephen Eaton, noted Hobart College naturalist and author, conducted classes on both land and water. Many Scouts found themselves plying the waters of nearby West River as a part of camp activities, and there were the inevitable encounters with nature which make a camping experience memorable.

Duty to country was also an important part of camp life from the beginning. Early Council literature reveals that merit badges were awarded only after passing a board of review and providing "definite affidavits to prove that he has been living up to his Scout Oath and Law the best he can."

There were problems with Camp Tarion, however, most notable was the small size of the usable land surface. There always seemed to be only two directions: up and down. In the days when a 14 mile hike was required for First Class, and each camp had a Hikemaster, the steep wooded slope had some advantages. The only way into camp, short of a long hike, was by boat. No road came near camp. All food came by boat from Vine Valley or Woodville. Like the site of Camp Otetiana, camp Tarion is visible today almost opposite Woodville on Bush Point. Privately owned, Tarion still looks much like it did when the last Scouts left it in 1938.

In 1939 a new and better camp was opened at Gilbert Station on the East shore of Seneca Lake in Seneca County. It was the generous gift of two men who, like Robert Thomson, Nathan Lapham, Joseph Robson and others were vitally interested in the welfare of youth. Birton Babcock and Harry Hovey donated this new Scout Camp which bears their names. The dedication of Camp Babcock-Hovey, and later dedication of Hovey lodge, were occasions of great ceremony and celebration.

Since the earliest days of Scouting dedicated leaders and concerned supporters have helped the young people of Finger Lakes Council prepare for camp and lifelong success. As it was in 1910, the Scouting program is still a means for boys to learn by doing and experience the warmth of good fellowship while mastering useful knowledge. Still essentially an outdoor program, Scouting retains most of the character given to it by Baden Powell, Dan Beard and Earnest Thomson Seaton.

There are many, probably more, dedicated leaders in Scouting today than there were seven decades ago. Unfortunately, like most modern heroes their names are momentarily forgotten. Their deeds, like those of the movement's founders, however, live in the minds of the young people they touch. Scouting has changed over the years. Its basic spirit and values have remained constant, however.

Today the Finger Lakes Council, Boy Scouts of America serves the youth of Ontario, Seneca, Wayne and Yates Counties and has an enrollment of more than 4000 Tiger Cubs, Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts, and Explorers.

Our headquarters facilities have always been located in the Geneva Area. For years, we were housed in the Geneva Women's Club building. We then moved to a building of our own on South Main Street in Geneva. In 1982 a friend of Scouting, Howard Sprague donated money to get us started with a new Service Center located at the end of East Castle Street in Geneva with a beautiful view of Seneca lake. This facility was sold, after only 2.5 years of occupancy, to the City of Geneva to make way for the Lakefront Project. We then built a similar facility on Pre-Emption Road in the Town of Geneva, where we are presently located.

Our corporate body consists of an Executive Board of 50 individuals selected from across the Council area. These individuals represent a cross-section of the general population and are comprised of business and corporate individuals, journey men volunteers and others who contribute their time, efforts and finances to further the Scouting program in the Finger Lakes.

At present we have four full-time professional Scouters, three full-time office staff and a camp ranger who oversees the facilities at Camp Babcock-Hovey.

Update: In 2007 a Science and Technology Building was erected and dedicated. It replaced the old lodge. Then in 2008 there was a change to the number of districts contained in the Council. We were originally Arrowhead, Kanadesaga, and Iroquois Districts. We are now Seneca and Mohawk. At the end of 2006, the Finger Lakes Council serves 3388 youth in 136 units.

Update: June 15th, 2009. The Otetiana and Finger Lakes councils of the Boy Scouts of America voted last night to merge, with the new council overseeing the five-county region of Monroe, Ontario, Seneca, Wayne, and Yates. The new council will maintain its current offices in both Rochester and Geneva.

The author of this article is unknown. It was taken from an old version of the Finger Lakes Council web site and preserved by Troop 61, Victor, NY.

Troop 61 Website: <http://bsatroop61.net/FLC.aspx>

The old Finger Lakes Council Website was located at the following site:

<http://www2.grady.com/bsafingerlakes/>

If you know who the author is, please contact the Seneca Waterways Council Scouting Historical Society so proper credit can be given.