

Historically Speaking

The Boy Scouts of America at 100

February 10 marks the 100th anniversary of the Boy Scouts of America (BSA). In a century of service, the Boy Scouts have contributed immeasurably to the character, citizenship and self-reliance of the more than 100 million American youths who have been members, and to the welfare of the communities in which they reside. Given certain mutual interests, the paths of the U.S. Army and the Boy Scouts of America often intersect. Both have aspired to “make” raw boys into worthy men. Both emphasize such values as loyalty, integrity and selfless service. Each has provided important assistance to the other. Their differences have been important, too: From the beginning, the Boy Scouts have taken great pains not to be viewed as paramilitary, nor as an extension of government. Let us briefly examine the shared history of these two organizations.

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In legend, the story of the Boy Scouts of America begins with the famous “unknown Scout,” who assisted disoriented

Chicago publisher W.D. Boyce through the streets of London on a foggy night. Upon reaching their destination, the young man refused a tip, commenting that he was a Boy Scout doing a good deed for the day. (Scouting had begun in Britain in 1907.) Boyce was so impressed he called upon British General Robert Baden-Powell, founder of the Boy Scout Association in the United Kingdom, to find out more about his organization. Returning to the United States, Boyce incorporated the Boy Scouts of America in February 1910.

The timing was right, and the movement caught on. Industry had displaced agriculture as America’s dominant economic endeavor, and within a decade more Americans would live within cities than outside them. The Progressive movement was in full swing, and its adherents feared for the virtue and self-reliance of American youth in the absence of a character-building lifestyle on the farm or frontier. Boyce and his colleagues franchised Boy Scouting at the local level through networks of local commissions, councils and troops. Like-minded precursor organizations were readily absorbed, and within a year more than 2,500 people had applied to be leaders and 150,000 to be Scouts.

Although given to uniforms, badges of accomplishment and discipline, the Boy Scouts of America were careful not to appear too militaristic. They emphasized good citizenship and the peaceful resolution of disputes, and downplayed any appearance of being junior soldiers. In this they set themselves apart from a rival organization of the time, the American Boy Scouts. Consciously paramilitary, the American Boy Scouts even went so far as to endorse the Remington rifle for marksmanship, a practice much encouraged by the National Rifle Association. The American Boy Scouts experienced considerable embarrassment when one of their boys shot another in the course of a dispute in 1912, and the organization fizzled within a decade.

Scouting initially focused on ages 11 through 17, and soon even younger boys were drawn to its activities. In due course, the Cub Scouts of America evolved to accommodate boys as young as eight, who graduated to become Boy Scouts as preteens and teenagers. Direct supervision of the younger boys came to be the purview of adult women, mostly mothers of Scouts, and the older boys were supervised by adult men, often fathers of Scouts. Neither the mothers nor the fathers were eager to envision their boys as soldiers at such a young age. The BSA’s emphasis was upon character and education, to which the criteria for achieving rank and merit badges attested.

Despite cautiousness about appearing too military, the Boy Scouts intersected with the Army in at least three im-



Library of Congress

During World War I, Boy Scouts raised more than \$450 million in war bonds and savings bonds. During World War II, they contributed further by collecting scrap metal and recyclables.



President Harry S Truman welcomes a delegation of Eagle Scouts in the Oval Office, February 6, 1951. The Scouts reported to the President on the accomplishments of the Boy Scouts of America.

portant ways by mid-century. Eager to be good citizens during World War I, Scouts raised more than \$352 million in war bonds and \$101 million in savings bonds. They also served as message runners and coast watchers, and in other miscellaneous security roles. They similarly served the war effort in World War II, adding the collection of scrap metal and recyclables to their duties. Between the wars, cooperation between the Boy Scouts and the Army was even more direct, as both Scout leaders and Army officers provided cadre to Civilian Conservation Corps camps. Here, Scouting's experience with youth development and the Army's capacity for logistics and organization were a potent combination. Soldiers and Scouts were also increasingly likely to rub shoulders at official events. Beginning with President Woodrow Wilson's Inauguration in 1913, Scouts were present at major ceremonies intended to evoke patriotism and good citizenship. Soldiers were generally invited as well, for similar reasons, and the Army was often a—if not *the*—lead agency organizing events.

Following World War II, the relationship between the Boy Scouts and the Army met at least three hurdles. First, the egregious example of the Hitler Youth and its Soviet counterparts in propagandizing and militarizing youth had a chilling effect on public perception of youth movements. Second, an emerging and rebellious youth counterculture

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the children of soldiers, now members of an enlarged standing Army around the world. The BSA's Transatlantic Council and Far East Council, for example, consisted largely of military dependents living in dozens of nations overseas.

Ultimately, the most important relationship between the Boy Scouts of America and the Army has not been direct or organizational, but instead rests on a common interest in the caliber of American youth. Scouting aspires to develop good citizens. Good citizens serve their country as circumstances require. Our current Secretary of Defense is an Eagle Scout. Eleven of the 12 Americans who have walked on the moon were Scouts. In the mid-1990s, the Army's four-star generals met to formally define the values the Army held most dear: loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity and personal courage. Taking into account their definitions of each value, their list was a close match to the tenets of the Scout Law: trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent. This was no accident; the men deliberating around the table had been Scouts in their youth. If the only connection between Scouting and national defense were young men and women who instinctively upheld the Army Values, this indeed would be contribution enough. ★

Recommended Reading:

Peterson, Robert W., *The Boy Scouts: An American Adventure* (New York: American Heritage Press, 1984)

The Boy Scout Handbook (New York: Boy Scouts of America, 1998)

Townley, Alvin, *Legacy of Honor: The Values and Influence of America's Eagle Scouts* (New York: St. Martin's, 2009)