

WAY BACK WHEN

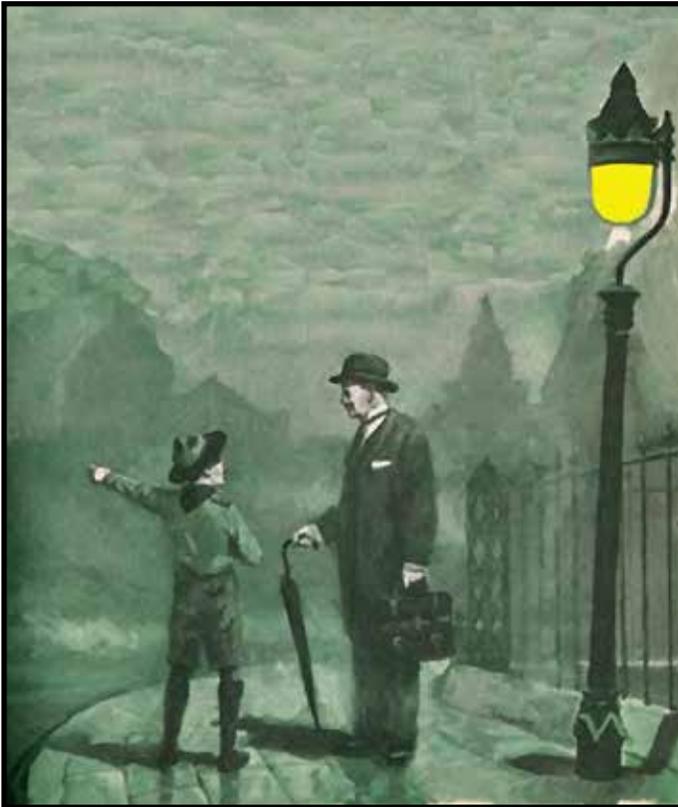
Is the Boy Scouts of America Really Founded Upon a Myth? Part 2: The Deconstruction of W.D. Boyce's Fog Story



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Since publishing my book in 2010 on the origins of the Boy Scouts of America entitled, *The Scouting Party*, the most frequent question I have been asked is whether or not the so-called Story of the Unknown Scout, aka. The Fog Story, aka. The Story of the First Good Turn, is true. The reason for the question is obvious: the tale sounds just too apocryphal to be real. Now, after analyzing the intriguing dossier of facts surrounding "The Story" over a century later, I reveal the most plausible and factually defensible answer regarding the legend's legitimacy or repudiation.

The Story of the Unknown Scout



Sometime in 1909 (depending on the source), Chicago publisher William D. Boyce was on his way to an appointment in central London. Leaving his posh lodgings at the Savoy Hotel, Boyce recalled he had a foggy encounter with an English Boy Scout.

The following statement is the first published account of Boyce's experience. It is printed on the front page of the *Chicago Inter-Ocean* dated February 28, 1910—a mere three weeks after he had incorporated the organization known as "Boy Scouts of America" in Washington, DC:

"One day in London I noticed a boy wearing a Scout hat helping persons across the street in a fog. He

guided me across, and I started to hand him a penny tip. He declined it. I became interested, and he told me that he belonged to the Boy Scouts and that he was merely obeying one of their precepts to do a kind service every day. Afterwards, I saw hundreds of these boys, and at last I met General Baden-Powell and learned the story. It struck me that those boys were getting a training that American boys ought to have also, and I resolved to do what I could to get the movement started here."

Let's deconstruct this account.

The glaring problem is the missing date reference. At the time of the first published accounts, the actual date appears to be an extraneous detail. In other retellings (mostly by Boyce), the date varies between July, August, and even December 1909. But in order to prove or disprove this story, we must know, definitively, when it happened.

Sounds impossible? Not necessarily.

To determine the actual date, we have several excellent documents from which to glean critical information. First, there is a detailed secondary account by the daughter of Boyce's African Balloonograph Expedition secretary, Charles Hughes. Second, there are the official records of the Royal Meteorological Society (RMS) in Reading, England, that reveal whether fog was observable or not around a set of possible dates. Third, the National Scouting Museum in Irving, Texas, holds records that confirm the days that Robert Baden-Powell was present in London. And fourth, we have Boyce's own published account(s) of the incident nearest the event's occurrence.

Just the Facts, Ma'am

In her very detailed April 1975 article for *American Heritage* magazine, journalist Harriet Hughes Crowley definitively states that The Story occurred after Boyce had returned to London from Africa in December 1909. However, she does not state is the actual day in December. As Crowley had full access to her father, Charles', Expedition notes and papers, this is a very convincing source. She also mentions a foggy morning at the time. But was there an actual fog event? To prove the veracity of that detail, this author obtained the official weather archives for that area.

A close examination of the RMS's daily 3-hour interval weather recordings taken in every section of London at the time reveals an interesting finding, especially after knowing Boyce's local whereabouts (as confirmed by London newspaper reports) in August and December 1909 (as he was not there in July). [Of note: As the RMS records do not distinguish between man-made smog (the result of the burning of coal in home stoves) and fog (a ground level cloud), the observable, year round event of smog always is dutifully recorded as fog.]

To dispel any possible dates prior to December, the official RMS records from July through November 1909 were examined and

confirmed to contain no observable incidence of fog/smog in the vicinity of the Strand or the Savoy Hotel at any time. Of course, this makes logical sense as heating coal was used less during the late summer/fall months. However, in December, there is a singular recording of fog/smog in the required area of the Strand being observed on December 21 between 9 am and noon. (All other recordings during the prior 5 months are definitively negative for observable fog/smog except on the eastern coast of the country along the English Channel.)

Interestingly, we know that Boyce was in the specific Strand area at that time, as factually triangulated by news reports of his return to London from Africa (in mid-December), his confirmed Atlantic departure time and date (noon on December 22, 1909), the crossing duration and precise route the steamship would take (8 days on the vessel City of New York from Southampton), and his documented and certified date of arrival in New York Harbor per Ellis Island historical records (December 30).

Elsewhere in The Story, Boyce makes reference to a meeting with Scouting's founder, Gen. Robert Baden-Powell. We know from the great man's own personal diaries located in the National Scouting Museum in Irving, Texas, that Baden-Powell was, in fact, in London on December 21 of that week. Interestingly, on the day before he was in Ascot and in the days after he traveled to Newcastle and North Yorkshire. Furthermore, he only was available to meet with a drop-in visitor like Boyce in the afternoon as he had morning commitments (including a meeting with the Scout Association's General Committee at 11:15 am) at the Scout office. And if one looks through multiple years of his diary, rarely, if ever, does he note a "drop-in" meeting—only scheduled commitments, which makes it more of an "appointment diary" unless he is travelling and records memorable items from his day.

Although these facts help provide delightful clarity for a reasonable answer, there is one more piece of evidence needed: Boyce's own account. As a decades-long Scouting history researcher, I have learned that the most accurate portrayal of facts typically are recalled nearest the time of the event's occurrence. With that understanding, I add the following piece of evidence to the statement previously referenced at the beginning of this article: this one comes from Page 4 of the Washington Herald dated April 21, 1910, effectively locking down the true date of The Story and confirming the most likely answer.

"I never heard of the Boy Scouts until last December," Boyce recalls. "I was trying to find my way across a London street in a fog."

He continues, "A little lad of twelve noticed my futile efforts, and led me with a lantern in the right direction. I thanked him and offered him a penny. But he said: 'Thank you, sir, but I am a Boy Scout, and we never take tips for doing kind acts.'"

CONCLUSION

As there is a noticeable lack of substantive evidence that can be examined to the contrary, and after examining the independent Crowley account from firsthand documentary evidence, and after reviewing the official RMS daily weather logs along with Baden-Powell's own appointment diary entries, and after evaluating Boyce's personal recollections published in newspapers via wire services 8 weeks later (along with a bonus fact I will reveal shortly that was mentioned in a rare Boyce letter dated February 27, 1928, stating who Boyce was going to meet on that fateful day in London): the chance of the Story of the Unknown Scout actually happening and being true is (believe it or not): Very Plausible.

That being the case, the resulting Good Turn by the Unknown Scout that potentially initiated the founding of the Boy Scouts of

America occurred on the morning of December 21, 1909, and was followed that afternoon with a meeting with Baden-Powell—just like BSA managers have published for decades (and have greatly embellished over the years since).

Skepticism Remains for Good Reason

For some reason during the next 5 years (1910 - 1915), newswire accounts of actual fog being present in The Story modulate between its inclusion and its omission. Furthermore, in nearly every retelling, there is no specific date reference. Even BSA's Chief Scout Executive James E. West fails to note the fog nor its month of occurrence in a 1913 official statement documenting BSA's founding. However, in 1915, the fog and date reappear in a significant way.

In an article scribed for his Chicago Leger entitled "The Reason Why" (which advertised the founding of the publisher's fledgling Lone Scout organization for rural boys that year), Boyce begins BSA's founding story with a new time period—the incorrect one that generally has been accepted as fact for the past century (as it probably conflates his experiences five years prior due to the passage of time, a bad memory, and not having a personal diary entry to reference). Boyce states:

"In July 1909 when I was on my way to British East Africa in charge of an expedition...it was necessary for me to go to London, England, in order to get certain permits and make arrangements with the British government."

He continues in authoritative fashion, "While in London, we had one of the worst fogs for which England is noted that I have ever experienced on land or sea. It is said that a real London fog is one in which you cannot see your hand when your arm is held out at full length."

"I was anxious to cross the Strand and hardly knew where I was. A boy about 10 years of age [new age] touched my hand and said, 'Mister, want to cross the street?'" And the story concludes in the usual fashion with regard to Boyce bringing the Scouting program to the United States.

From then on, fog is mentioned frequently in The Story in most official renditions regarding BSA's founding.

And yet, since the facts within The Story have changed over time, skepticism as to its legitimacy remains. An interesting letter in BSA's National Archives acknowledges those factual variances but dismisses them as a "side issue."

Dated August 31, 1926, American Bison Association founder Edmund Seymour writes Boyce regarding the authenticity of The Story. In the last paragraph he notes, "It was a great pleasure to meet you and to get this story straight. There is only one thing about the story that is not quite clear. It seems to me I remember your saying you had heard about this Boy Scout movement when you were hunting in Africa, so that when the boy spoke to you in London, you appreciated the opportunity."

"I don't know that it is necessary to bring this out but it is an interesting side issue of the matter," concludes Seymour. "If you never do another thing in this world, what you did in organizing the Boy Scouts of America ought to make you immortal."

The Story of the Unknown Scout now had risen to the level of legend.

The Founding Story's Timeline

The following account is the reconstructed timeline of the Story of the Unknown Scout using factual data assembled from numerous published and private sources and documents.

In August 1909, newspaper publisher William D. Boyce most likely knew of the English Scouting movement as gleaned from the prominent London news stories reprinted in Chicago papers that advertised the impending massive gathering of 11,000 Scouts (the Crystal Palace Rally) to be held in the city in a large local park a couple of weeks after his departure for Africa. While on expedition (and still able to receive wired news reports in the bush via native African runner), he had time to reflect upon that highly successful public event without the burden of having any personal endgame in mind. (Perhaps he even believed Scouting wasn't a big deal at the time.)

Returning to England in mid-December and booked into the Savoy Hotel in central London, the publisher was on his way to meet with John Lambert, an American newspaper correspondent stationed in the city, when Boyce experienced the Unknown Scout's Good Turn in the fog on the morning on December 21. With both men wanting to know more about the program after their meeting, they set off for Scouting offices escorted by the Unknown Scout.

The lad took them to the Boy Scout Headquarters offices at 116 Victoria Street in Westminster to meet with Baden-Powell that afternoon. After gathering much needed information and literature, and starting the first iterations of an organizational plan, Boyce and Lambert returned to the Savoy to further discuss the possibilities of exporting Scouting to the United States. Boyce quickly wired his media team (currently aboard steamer and returning from Africa) and asked them to start thinking about how best to publicize this story in America. Boyce left the city the following day.

According to the American Line's passenger records, at noon on Wednesday, December 22, Boyce and his personal valet, Mr. William B. Wescott, departed from Southampton, England, for America on the steamship City of New York. On Thursday the vessel stopped in Queensland, Ireland, to pick up additional passengers and subsequently set sail across the Atlantic. Arriving in New York Harbor on December 30, the ship was put into mandatory quarantine for a few hours until it had been inspected and cleared for entry by local health inspectors. Boyce disembarked and headed to his lodgings at the Waldorf Astoria in the city.

On January 2, 1910, he boarded a train bound for Chicago, where he arrived the following day. For the next week, his whereabouts are unknown but it is presumed he stayed at home to prepare for the arrival of distinguished guests at his mansion the following week. (This is the most likely time he would have begun to assemble the group of financial backers he needed to help fund his new Scouting business.)



Steamship City of New York

On January 13, North Dakota Attorney General Robert Nelson Stevens and wife arrived for a 10-day visit. Presumably, they discussed Boyce's recent trip to Africa as well as other issues, such as Scouting's potential domestic application. The Stevens'

departed for home on January 24, whereupon Boyce probably finished up his preparatory plans for his new organization—most likely without an impending sense of urgency. But if that was true, his lethargy changed later in the week.

On January 30, the Chicago Inter-Ocean published a news item featuring Britain's famed Boer War Commander of Her Majesty's Forces in Africa, Lord Roberts, who had just endorsed Baden-Powell's English Scouting program.

Also running across the wires that week was a Page 2 news story out of London titled, "Boy Scout Corps is World Wide: Baden-Powell Gives Up Position of Lieutenant General to Head Movement." That was major international news due to his lingering hero-like stature stemming from his heroic defense at Mafeking during the Boer War a decade earlier.

The article was printed boldly in the Sunday, February 6 issue of the Chicago Daily Times, one of Boyce's largest competitors. And as a large consumer of news, it is highly likely that Boyce would have seen it on his own papers' news wires prior to it being published elsewhere.

Also running that same day was a Chicago Tribune story that stated Baden-Powell soon would be visiting Canada to start Scouting in that country as well. Now, Boyce urgently had to secure the rights to the American Scouting franchise or potentially lose the property forever.

The publisher departed Chicago immediately bound for Washington, DC, to lay claim to the "company" of Scouting and to seek legislative protection through a proposed federal incorporation charter. He arrived in the nation's capital by early Monday, February 7.

In all likelihood, Boyce had wired ahead to the office of his DC attorney, J. Woodland Gates, who had the incorporation documents drawn up and ready for his signature. (Gates also would serve as Boyce's chief counsel during the federal incorporation hearings to be held in front of the US Congressional Committee on Education several weeks later). The papers were signed by Boyce, his nephew (Edward S. Stewart) who lived in DC, and a young lawyer in Gates' office (Stanley D. Willis).

Understanding that funding would be an issue, Gates introduced the publisher to the noted Washington banker, Colin H. Livingstone. The two met for afternoon tea at the Willard Hotel on Pennsylvania Avenue, a block east of the White House, and presumably had a discussion about the advancement of Boyce's proposed Scouting corporation.

The next morning, Tuesday, February 8, 1910, at precisely 11:03 am, Boyce filed the official paperwork for the incorporation of the Boy Scouts of America with governmental authorities.

It was a very simple document that stated:

We the undersigned, being citizens of the United States, and a majority being citizens of the District of Columbia, do hereby make and organize ourselves into a body corporate, under and by virtue of Sub-Chapter Three, Chapter entitled Corporation of the Code of Law for the District of Columbia, as follows:

One: The name or title by which wuch [sic] Society shall be known is BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA.

Two: The terms for which it is organized shall be perpetual.

Three: The particular business and objects of the Society are to organize the boys of the District

of Columbia and elsewhere in the United States, into units, and to teach them, or cause them to be taught, through duly designated leaders, discipline, patriotism, courage, habits of observation and self control [sic] and ability to care for themselves in all exigencies of life.

Fourth: The managers for the first year of their existence shall be 11 in number.

Witness out hands and seals this 8th day of February, A.D. 1910,

[signed]

W.D. Boyce

Edward S. Stewart

Stanley D. Willis

The following weeks were spent in Washington enticing further investing elites to advance him the remainder of the \$50,000 he desired to initially fund his new “boy-building” company.

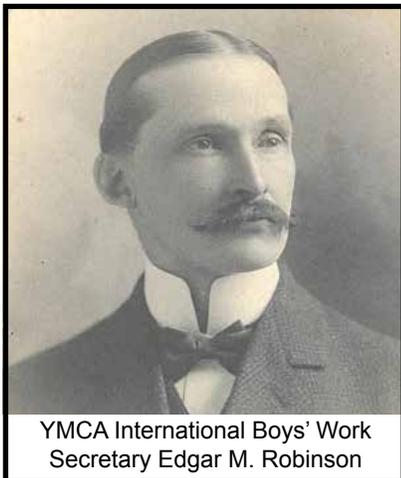
Boyce assembled a successful financial consortium of ten investors plus himself and on February 28, the organization’s first national announcement was published by the Inter-Ocean (et. al. via the wire service) regarding its initial purpose of providing boys “with exercises for their idle time.” A short time later, he departed for Chicago and initiated attempts at starting local Chicago-based units (which failed quickly) with his investment partners.

After reading one of Boyce’s wire service announcements in a Midwestern paper in late April, Michigan State YMCA Boys’ Work Secretary in Kalamazoo, John A. Van Dis, informed YMCA International Boys’ Work Secretary Edgar M. Robinson located in New York about Boyce’s unique Scouting property.

Robinson and another YMCA executive quickly made their way to Boyce in Chicago on May 3 and expressed their sincere desire to take over the program and grow it (as the YMCA already had twenty years of experience in their “camping ministry” and currently were applying Baden-Powell’s activities at their summer programs at Camps Beckett and Durrell in New England in 1909.)

And lucky for them, by mid-month, Boyce, now having made two failed attempts at trying to achieve a federal charter, was ready to give it up.

According to a 6-page letter dated November 7, 1917, to BSA Chief Scout Executive James E. West, Robinson recounts leaving Chicago on May 4 via the train Twentieth Century Limited bound for New York City. He had to return quickly due to the impending arrival of two English dignitaries: Charles E. Heald, the national secretary of the Boy Scouts of England, and W.B. Wakefield, a member of the YMCA Council of England. Clearly, this admission shows Robinson’s clear intent on incorporating the English Scouting program into his American youth development activities independently under the YMCA’s banner. However, now after leaving Chicago, he had procured the blessing and financial backing of the legal owner of the American Scouting franchise, which made it a much easier proposition to execute.

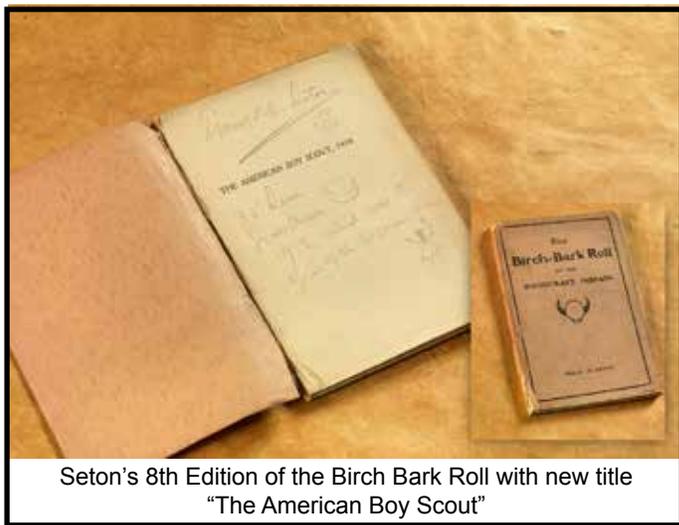


YMCA International Boys' Work Secretary Edgar M. Robinson

[Note: As the result of uncovering previously unknown information from the minutes of the YMCA’s International Committee meeting

held in New York City on June 9, 1910, we now know that, at the time, Boyce was much farther along in his organization’s development than historians previously had given him credit for. In fact, eventual BSA co-founder Ernest Thompson Seton already was creating the true first version of BSA’s Handbook by April for his own purposes, but he made it available for Boyce’s utilization.

In the process he saw a usefulness in teaming up with Boyce and combining their properties under the program title of “Boy Scouts.” Seton took his 7th edition Woodcraft Indian handbook, The Birch-Bark Roll, modified it a bit, and assigned the new title, The American Boy Scout, making it into the 8th edition. For the



Seton’s 8th Edition of the Birch Bark Roll with new title “The American Boy Scout”

YMCA, after their assumption of the BSA brand, he created the so-called Original Edition Handbook with content from Baden-Powell’s own Scouting handbook, and assigned a subsequent copyright iteration, ‘9th Edition, Combined with Scouting for Boys’, which was published on July 9, 1910.

Further stated in this remarkable YMCA document (located within the Association’s Archives in Springfield, Massachusetts), “This book is intended to Americanize the English Boy Scouts movement”—clearly pre-dating BSA’s own announcement of the same goal issued some months later. The American Boy Scout was at press during the time that the YMCA took control of Boyce’s BSA on June 1, 1910. Only three copies are known to exist today—one is in the Library of Congress, one is supposedly in the collection of the estate of the late Joe Price, and a signed copy is in this author’s personal collection.]

In the acquisition agreement between Robinson and the publisher, Boyce pledged to provide Robinson with operational funds totaling of \$1,000/month for the first six months beginning in May 1910 (and which he failed to make good on and pay in full). Nonetheless, Scouting became an official youth program under the banner of the YMCA that was overseen by Robinson, who opened its first headquarters at 124 E. 28th Street in a two-room YMCA office suite in Manhattan, New York.

And the rest of the story, as they say, is history.

Copyright 2016 by David C. Scott, who is the author of the nationally bestselling and award-winning books: My Fellow Americans (WindRush Publishers, 2014), The Scouting Party (Red Honor Press, 2010), We Are Americans, We Are Scouts (Red Honor Press, 2008), and the landmark centennial history of Dallas’ Circle Ten Council titled, Where Character is Caught (PenlandScott, 2013). He can be contacted at d.scott@scottsales.com.