

WAY BACK WHEN



By
David C. Scott
ISCA #5425L
d.scott@scottsales.com

“We’re Number 1” Unraveling the Mystery behind the Boy Scouts of America’s First Troop(s)

For longer than there has been a Boy Scouts of America (BSA), a handful of units across this great land have claimed to be BSA’s “First Troop.” But, if we were to ask BSA’s management, they’ll not commit to it.

To quote from an archival letter dated June 13, 1957, scribed by BSA executive Lex R. Lucas to a Rebel Robertson, “The fact is that the Boy Scouts of America started in 1910 and in that year a considerable number of troops were organized. No service before that time is counted.”

But what about all those troops that formed before BSA was founded on February 8, 1910? How about in the months after February 8? Or does he refer to June 1, 1910, the date that the first national office opened and the official corporate record began?

This author believes that the answer comes from how one defines the basic question asked—all of which originates from one’s perspective. For example, I submit this case in point: To the British, the sinking of the Titanic was a tragedy. However, to the lobsters in the kitchen, its sinking was a miracle.

To properly determine “Who was BSA’s first troop,” the official date to use is June 1, 1910, since that marks the beginning of BSA’s official record. However, starting there does not make for an interesting series of articles. So, let’s examine the roots of some well known, pre-BSA troops and firmly establish what they can legitimately lay claim to based upon the facts—not hearsay or myths broadcasted on websites.

Please Note: The following conclusions are based upon documents assembled from various repositories, with the primary sources being the YMCA Archives in Springfield, Massachusetts, BSA’s National Archives in Cimarron, New Mexico, the [British] Scout Association’s archives at Gilwell Park, England, and hundreds of local and worldwide newspaper articles. Where appropriate, I cite the article or source.

So let’s get into it.

+++++

Worldwide Scouting founder Robert Baden-Powell began the Brownsea Island Experimental Scout Camp in Poole Harbour, England, with three short blasts on his African kudu horn on August 1, 1907. Present at the 8-day camp were 22 British boys of varying economic backgrounds that essentially were put into a Scouting “test lab” to see if his proposed program would work. It did. Declaring it as a success, Baden-Powell set to work on the first Scouting handbook, *Scouting for Boys*, on Wimbledon

Common outside London upon his return to the mainland.

The news of that landmark August camping event was spotty at best inside England. In fact, the first report I found was not in the dailies like *The Times of London*, but actually in the *Ottawa (Canada) Journal* dated September 14, 1907, under the title “Boys as Army Scouts.” [Of course, as we know today, Scouting does not have a military bent—no matter how much Baden-Powell denied it publically at the time. That was its perception.]

The *Ottawa Journal* article states, “No boy who has reveled in the romances of [author James] Fennimore Cooper and tales of Red Indians in the Wild West can fail to be enraptured with the great idea as outlined by ‘B[aden]-P[owell].”

Since Scouting had not yet been invented prior to August 1, 1907, no Scout troops existed prior to that time. Let’s take the next logical step forward. There was no Scouting after the close of the Brownsea Island Camp either because even after the encampment, there still was no official Scouting yet. What do I mean?

The problem is that Brownsea was an experimental scout camp with experimental scouts (little “s”). It was not, as some suggest, in any way the first Scout camp because you cannot have a Scout camp without any Scouts. And by definition, you can only have Scouts when you have a Scout Oath and Scout Law with principles to pledge oneself to. At that time, there was no Scout Oath or Scout Law yet created. Logically, without them, those were just 1907 boys playing in the woods. However, that changed upon the publishing of the first fortnightly installment of Baden-Powell’s handbook, *Scouting for Boys*, on January 15, 1908—the true birthday of the international Scouting movement. (Note: The latter five installments would be published every two weeks thereafter through March.)

Included in that first installment is the first iteration of the Scout Oath and Scout Law, with the latter containing its compliment of nine points (the tenth and final point for the British program was added in 1910). Therefore, there were no Scouting units prior to mid-January 1908—certainly not in the United States—because Scouting had not yet been invented and certainly had not made it “across the pond.” But big news does travel fast...even back then.

On February 13, 1908, the *Fort Wayne (IN) Sentinel* (et. al. wire services) published a large photo essay on British Scouting on page 2. It is titled, “Famous Hero of the Boer War is Teaching English Youngsters How to Become Scouts.” Featured are images of six of the activities held on Brownsea Island the previous August. The caption reads, “The General [Baden-Powell] has recently published a little book giving minute details [on Scouting]. This opens with a chapter on scouts craft [sic] and scout law [sic].”

Clearly, Scouting was beginning to garner international attention. His "little book" had become a huge best seller among British youth, as each installment sold out within hours of hitting the news racks each day of publication.

Eventually, The Times of London caught up with a large column published on March 17, just after the release of the fifth installment of Scouting for Boys under the heading, "Scouting as a Sport."

"There is every reason to believe that the attempt to popularize Scouting as sport will be equally successful—perhaps more so—on this side of the Atlantic," suggests the column's author. Assumed within these words is the presumption that Scouting would be adopted worldwide, eventually. In fact, it already had made its jump to the United States.

+++++

In spring 1908, Myra Greeno Bass was a local artist, naturalist, and devoted world traveler currently living in the town of Burnside, Kentucky. Tucked neatly away within a Pulaski County bend of the Cumberland River, her community sat about 87 miles south of Lexington.

She and husband William "Billy" Bass, a manager at the Excelsior Mill Company and the former head football coach at the University of Kentucky, had just returned from a holiday trip to England. Stowed away neatly in her baggage was a copy of Baden-Powell's Scouting for Boys that she had picked up at a London newsstand. Intrigued with its contents and potential application within her community, she decided to give it a try back home.

In March, Myra Bass put out the call for boys to join her in this new activity based upon Baden-Powell's program. Fifteen young men met the challenge and assembled at her home, thus forming Eagle Troop (more like a patrol in today's vernacular). Much time was spent in the field, especially around a cave in the palisades that overlooked the Cumberland River, where they gathered, played, and cooked camp meals, such as "stewed chicken in an iron kettle."

Another favorite spot was on Bunker Hill, the island site fortified by Gen. Ambrose Burnside during the War Between the States that eventually became under the ownership of the State of Kentucky.

As reported, their meetings always started by repeating the "Scout pledge," but with the omission of the part about "serving the king of England." It was suggested that the president of the United States be substituted for His Majesty but the boys rejected that idea as they came from Democratic households and their president, Theodore Roosevelt, was a Republican.

At the time, only some of the boys had uniforms that had been acquired from English suppliers. However, all displayed unity by wearing a red bandana that indicated their Eagle Troop affiliation to the community.

The fun lasted until 1913 when Eagle Troop disbanded because the boys became more interested in a new game sweeping the nation—something involving a ball and a hoop. So, they raided their troop treasury and used its \$5 booty to purchase a communal basketball "and abandoned the joys of Scouting."

Although Eagle Troop was not BSA's first unit (based upon BSA not having been founded yet), it certainly is the earliest unit currently known to have existed in the United States—that being March 1908.

Let's examine another unit that famously claims to be the nation's first unit—Troop 1 of Pawhuska, Oklahoma.

+++++

Pawhuska is a small town of about 3,600 citizens located in Osage County, Oklahoma. Displayed prominently in front of the Osage County Museum is a bronze statue of a saluting Boy Scout in early uniform on a small pedestal. It was cast by local sculptor Bill Sowell. Another statue located nearby (this one created by Pawhuska native, Jim Hamilton) consists of two Scouts and their leader cooking over an open campfire. Both profess the community's claim to being the home of America's first Boy Scout troop. But as noted in the previous biopic, they were second to Eagle Troop by a year. So, what can Pawhuska Troop 1 legitimately lay claim to?

As noted in many articles available on the Internet, current Troop 1 (now Troop 33) leadership states they are the true first Boy Scout troop in America because they were the first to be officially chartered by the British Scout Association in 1909—obviously pre-dating the founding of BSA in February 1910. They stake their entire primacy upon that English document.

Let's examine that claim.

According to the February 10, 1941, issue of the Pampa (Texas) Daily News, Pawhuska Boy Scout Troop 1 was formed "on an April evening in 1909," where "the British national anthem of 'God Save the King' floated out on the breeze from the old Episcopal church." Its leader was the new rector of the St. Thomas Episcopal Church, the Rev. John F. Mitchell, newly arrived in town from the Anglican Church's ancestral home of England.

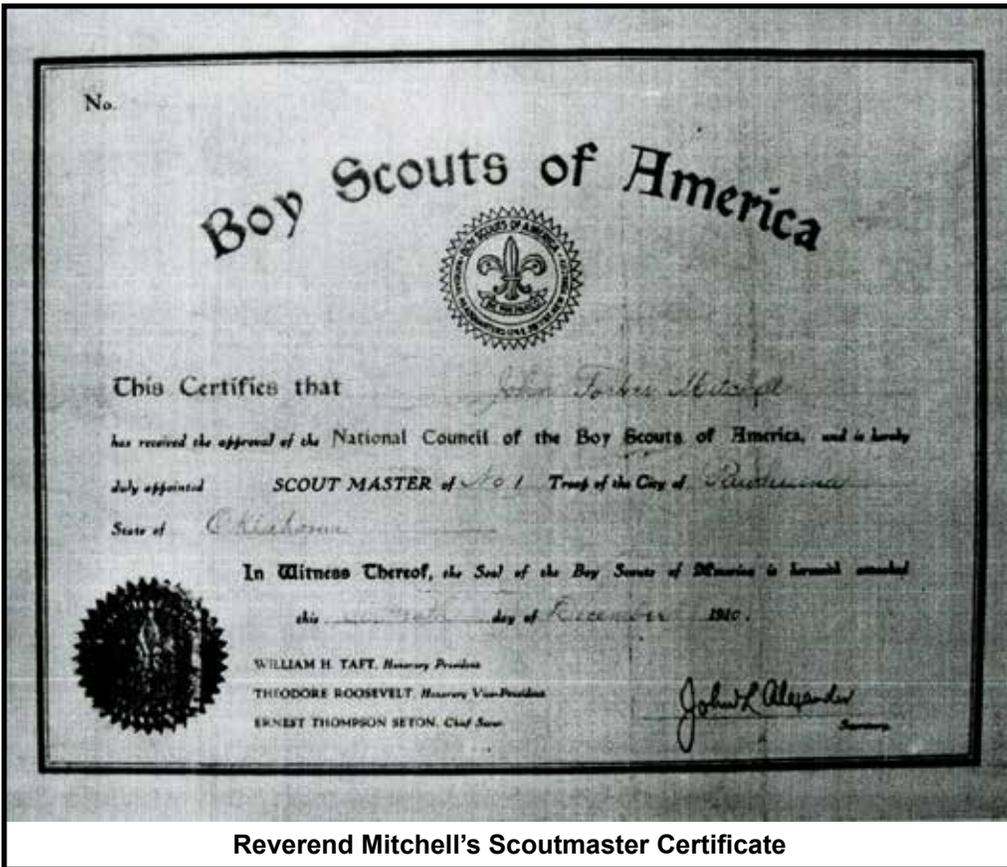
It is said that Rev. Mitchell, a 29-year-old Scotsman by birth, had been an associate of Robert Baden-Powell, and who had witnessed British Scouts in action. Upon his assignment to Oklahoma, Mitchell had brought with him the British Scouting Handbook. And within a very short time of being in that community, he had formed Troop 1.

According to printed sources, their uniforms had been purchased and imported from England by the owner of the local newspaper, Ed Tinker. Tinker's son, Alex, was one of the unit's nineteen founding youth members. Although Mitchell left Oklahoma for New York City in 1911, the unit still exists today as Pawhuska Troop 33 in the Cherokee Area Council.

As stated previously, Troop 1 was organized a year after Eagle Troop had been formed. So, calling itself the first troop in America is incorrect on the most basic level. But what about that alleged British charter that would verify their claim as being the first official Scouting unit in America?

To properly examine that question, I went to two sources: first the Osage County Museum itself, and second, the official membership and registration records held at the British Scout Association's archive in Gilwell Park, England.

In summary, after several years of my requests, the Osage County Museum could not produce, or even finding a record of



Reverend Mitchell's Scoutmaster Certificate

ever having a British charter. (They did, however, dig up a singular BSA charter from the 1950s.) And neither could the British Scout Association's archivist, Peter Ford. Ford even went so far as to declare, "there is no evidence that [Pawhuska Troop 1] ever did receive an official [British] charter." However, Ford did provide me with a scan of the Pawhuska troop's official BSA charter dated December 8, 1910, earning it the ranking of number 1,413 in BSA's official troop list.

In fairness, the Osage Museum archivist did admit that a lot of the "Boy Scout stuff" is still in unpacked boxes. So, perhaps at a future date, they could remove all doubt to their claim by producing, once and for all, their alleged British charter. But until then, their claim of being America's first troop (or even its first chartered troop) is pure speculation. However, they can currently lay claim to being the second American troop founded or the oldest continuously running Scout troop in America (provided that there is not a BSA registration break between Troop 1 and Troop 33 in the last century).

+++++

Into the summer of 1909, a number of U.S. newspapers were running stories about the overseas sensation of "Scouting" that had been started a year earlier by Baden-Powell, which were occurring over our northern border into Canada.

"The members of Canadian cadet corps will be presented each with a copy of Gen. Baden-Powell's book, *Scouting for Boys*," states the Ottawa (Canada) Journal in mid-June 1909. Closer to home, a widely distributed newswire of a half page article from August 28, replete with a half dozen images and drawings, was circulating throughout the country.

"Boys and Girls of England in Fever of Militarism; Learning Essentials of Soldier's or Nurse's Life," screams the headline featuring a sketch of a stave-holding and uniformed Baden-

Powell. "Gen. Baden-Powell has Caught the Young Briton's Fancy," reads a subhead.

In fact, the crux of the text suggests that its purpose was a militaristic one, along with the creation of self-reliant and loyal young boys and girls. With regard to the latter gender, a second subhead states, "Scout Fever Spreads to Girls."

Also in wide U.S. release were overseas reports of the impending British Boy Scout rally that would take place at Crystal Palace in London. In September 1909, about 11,000 young boys gathered southeast of the city and demonstrated Scouting skills for Baden-Powell and the ruling King Edward of England. This made international news. Also contributing to Scouting's notoriety was the upcoming October news item that Baden-Powell had been knighted—not only due to his military fame but also for the character-building impact and values of his budding international Scouting Movement.

+++++

Back in the United States in late October 1909, William Foster Milne, a 23-year-old Scottish stonemason living in Barre, Vermont, met with a group of boys at James Grearson's First Baptist Church Sunday school class and formed the "Boy Scouts Club," eventually to become known as the town's Troop 1.

Milne, a recent emigrant from Scotland, had arrived in New York Harbor just a few weeks prior on October 7 aboard the ship *Megantic* from Liverpool, England. However, according to several reputable sources (including *Scouting* magazine in its October 2003 issue), they pinpoint Milne's arrival in the United States as having occurred sometime in early 1908. Furthermore, the magazine's story states that he first formed a militaristic Boys Brigade unit and then switched it to the Scouting program in 1909. However, this information is incorrect as Milne did not arrive in America until October 1909 according to official U.S. immigration records (as the *Megantic* docked in Quebec and he entered the country through Canada).

As a young man, Milne had been a member of the Boy Scout movement back home in Scotland and wanted to spread it across the ocean. Yet once his Boy Scout Club had been set up, frustration set in as there was no access to Scouting literature yet available in the States. So, he sent word to family back in bonnie 'ole Scotland to forward him a care package that contained multiple copies of *Scouting for Boys*.

As one of the earliest troops in America, there is confusion as to its placement in BSA's official history as several documents incorrectly state his unit as being the country's original. Why? For starters, there was an article in the local Barre Daily Times dated January 12, 1910, that cites Boy Scouts Club member Harry

Kent as having won a local contest that had begun on October 29, 1909, for which he was “materially aided by his associates in the club.”

Second and more significantly, there was a document sent to Milne from Bryon N. Clark, state secretary of the Vermont State Committee of the YMCA, dated October 22, 1910, that requests an image of Milne and his Scouts, “inasmuch as they are the first



William Foster Milne

troop organized in America. I wanted to use the picture and then other men may also want to use it. Trusting that I may hear from you soon regarding it.”

Third and most significantly, in early 1912, Milne wrote to the grand Scoutmaster of the British Division of World Scouts in London, Sir Francis Vane, to offer his services in promoting the international Scouting program within America. As Vane’s response is quite flattering, it suggests that Milne had baited Vane’s impending compliment by suggesting the Scotsman’s own American Scoutmastership primacy. In the February 11, 1912, missive, Vane writes:

“It was a great pleasure that your letter was handed to me and I welcome the support and assistance of the first Scoutmaster in America in a work that is a broader and a nobler one than Boy Scouting simply.”

Unfortunately, this fascinating letter was transferred into in the possession of Milne’s widow after his premature death from the Spanish Flu on February 29, 1920, which preceded her move back to Ballater, Scotland, that November via the steamship Saturnia. By 1939, this important document had been completely lost to time. And now, only contemporary news articles quoting its contents remain.

+++++

Also occurring in October 1909, upon his return from a trip overseas to Antwerp, Belgium (which had Scouting troops operating by late 1909), British clergyman, the Rev. Ernest Christopher Murphy of the First Baptist Church in Ridgefield Park, New Jersey, met with 15 boys in a member’s home, thus forming Troop 1.

Murphy, having arrived in New York Harbor as an immigrant on



Troop 1 Ridgefield Park, NJ.

February 8, 1897, aboard the steamship City of New York that originated from Southampton, England, he made his residence in Bergen, New Jersey, and took a wife. By 1909, they were settled well into their life, whereupon Murphy decided to apply the activities of this new British Scouting program to his young communicants.

After several months of significant growth, he moved the troop’s meeting place into a local barn “that was lighted and heated only by oil.” Troop 1 held their first summer camp outing in 1910 and continued camping regularly thereafter. In 1913, the church allowed the troop to begin meeting at their own facilities, which lasted at least for another quarter century according to national BSA records.

+++++

The following month in November 1909, the Woman’s Home Companion magazine, one of the nation’s largest with a massive circulation of 2 million monthly readers (as the total US population at the time numbered about 95 million people), began to alter the format of the popular “For Younger Readers” page. Previously, it had featured a column by Boy Pioneers founder (and future BSA co-founder) Daniel Carter Beard. Only recently, Beard had severed his relationship with the magazine causing them to scramble for a temporary replacement column. Magazine managers solved their dilemma by contracting Robert Baden-Powell to serialize topics from his now world famous Scouting for Boys.

This serialization was a huge success and immediately brought national attention to the international Scouting program—still largely missing from American society. Four more columns appeared in its pages throughout 1910 with two very impactful ones being published early in January and February, which coincided with the dramatic increase of interest in American Scouting from intrigued localized YMCA managers and other interested parties.

+++++

One of those interested parties was another Scottish immigrant by the name of Capt. Francis John Romaines, who had settled in Salina, Kansas. Romaines arrived in the country in late September 1909 aboard the ship Laurentic via the port of Quebec, Canada, and crossed over our northern border, headed for Kansas.

Hired as an administrator and teacher at the St. John's Military School in Salina, Romaines found it an accommodating place but sought to invoke British Scouting's principles. On January 3, 1910, Capt. Romaines placed an advertisement in the local paper and asked for boys who wanted to form a Salina Boy Scout troop, along with a second one in nearby Minneapolis, Kansas:

Editor, Salina Evening Journal,

Sir,

May I make it known through your column that a patrol or troop of Boy Scouts is being raised in Minneapolis and Salina? A patrol consists of seven boys and a troop of three or four patrols. Any boy who wishes further information about this movement with a view of joining it should write to me at the address given before the remaining vacancies are filled up.

Yours truly,
F.J. Romaines

Interest was brisk and by February Romaines had met his recruitment objective. However, both units were in Salina under one troop and he was its Scoutmaster. Hosted by the St. John's Military School were the Raven and Wolf Patrols.

Over time, Romaines went on to become a well-known regional Scouting proponent and traveled to various places like Colorado Springs, CO, to lecture on the program and recruit boys. Eventually he moved to Philadelphia, PA, and became the Scoutmaster of Troop 87. In 1913, his unit heroically served as aides-de-camp for the aging warriors at the 50th Gettysburg Reunion—one of the landmark service project events that helped make BSA a revered national treasure.

+++++

And this takes us up to the incorporation of BSA on February 8, 1910. We will examine more early BSA troops after that date in the next installment.

Copyright 2017 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.

Central States Museum (Continued)

I had a great time looking at all the displays and chatting with Charles Sherman. Several times Charles seemed to apologize that the new museum was not as good as the old museum. Charles and his many volunteers (many from the local community) should be very proud of the rebuilt museum. They literally took it from ashes (only about 5% of the old collection was saved) and built a very interesting museum well worth the visit. Larned is a little off the beaten path but if you are heading to Philmont it is just a small detour. It was worth the trip from Illinois just to get to know Charles. He is a retired Professional Scouter (started in late 1950s) and he has been passionately working with the museum for the last 25 years.

For those of you who are history buffs, the Fort Larned National Historical site is just outside of town and we spent a couple of worthwhile hours touring the site.

Facts on new Location

Location: 215 W. 14th Street, Larned, KS

Mailing Address: P.O. Box 392, Larned, KS 67550

Phone: 620-804-0509

Curator: Charles Sherman

Hours: Open daily 1PM – 4PM or by appointment

Admission Fee: Adults \$5, 15 and under \$3

Note: An area is available for overnight stays for youth groups (40 person capacity) \$10 per group.

