

## WAY BACK WHEN

# Ignored and Erased

## Ernest Thompson Seton & the Eagle Scout Award



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

Several times a year, I have the pleasure of spending time with Dr. Julie Seton in Texas. As many of you know, she is the granddaughter of the Boy Scouts of America's (BSA) co-founder, Ernest Thompson

In short, first, they reveal previously unknown facts behind what Scouting historians and enthusiasts have for years only speculated about regarding the origins of the term (and rank) of "Eagle Scout." And second, they provide new and fascinating clarity into various (also previously unknown) details surrounding the first Eagle Scout board of review and why August is not the correct month for the anniversary of the first Eagle Scout award.

Seton. When the good doctor visits, she usually heads into the Boy Scouts of America's national archive in Irving (soon to be moved to the Philmont Scout Ranch) to go on the hunt for "all things Seton." The last encounter occurred in August 2016, when Julie attended the National Scouting Museum's Eagle Scout Heritage Week festivities.

On my schedule that weekend was an Eagle Scout court of honor being held for one of my former Scouts (I now am with a different troop). Since Julie's grandfather had played an integral part in the conferring of the first Eagle Scout award upon Arthur Rose Eldred 104 years prior, I thought it would be a nice touch if she attended as my guest following her Museum commitment.

After arriving at the church, I met Julie in the hallway where she whipped out her iPhone and exclaimed, "Guess what I found!" Admitting I had no idea, she said, "Look at this!" and quickly texted me the photo of a document she had uncovered in the archives the previous day. And for the next few minutes, we bantered our analysis back and forth as to its significance, along with basking in the joy of the new historical enlightenment it provided. Naturally, after the Eagle ceremony, I hurried back to my 10,000 page, personal, research archive and dove into a frenzied session of document hunting.

The resulting discoveries made that day are new and revealing, and are what I publish in these pages now.

So, what's the big deal?



### Work Begins

On June 1, 1910, BSA's new managing secretary, John L. Alexander, and a lone stenographer set to work in their YMCA-sponsored two-room office suite within the work quarters of Edgar M. Robinson, the YMCA's International Boys' Work Secretary, at 124 E. 28<sup>th</sup> Street in downtown Manhattan.

Progress was slow but steady. However, within a couple of weeks, the voluminous unanswered correspondence that had poured in from all parts of the nation now was "piled up in the corners like cordwood," according to Robinson. Although a herculean effort was being made to answer the incoming letters and telegrams, the gravity of the Movement's booming popularity was becoming painfully obvious. To get much-needed help, Alexander and Robinson authorized an official "formation meeting" for BSA on June 24 to indoctrinate the movers and shakers of other similar local and national youth development organizations into BSA. The goal was to earn

each one's endorsement and to convince them all to roll their organization into BSA—and then go after significant philanthropic funding with a singular voice and purpose.

Two of the main participants that day were the founders of similar, yet different, boy-development organizations: Daniel Carter Beard of the Boy Pioneers and Ernest Thompson Seton of the Woodcraft Indians. Both were to become critical visionaries in the formation of BSA with each taking a senior leadership role.

Beard started out as a BSA vice-president, followed quickly with his appointment as one of the three original National Scout Commissioners. Seton, on the other hand, received the title of Chief Scout, chaired BSA's Committee on Organization formed at that June 24 meeting, and authored (or rather compiled) the Original Edition of the Boy Scouts of America's Handbook that was published on July 9, 1910. [Of note: Beard claims to have been asked to author the Original Edition Handbook but declined as he deemed it too large of an unpaid "thank you" job. However, this appears to be somewhat questionable as Seton already had published his American Boy Scout version of the Handbook in early June and now was in the process of combining it in part with Baden-Powell's handbook at the request of early BSA managers.]

To create the Original Edition Handbook, Seton combined 2/3 of his Woodcraft Indian handbook with 1/3 of worldwide Scouting founder, Robert Baden-Powell's handbook, Scouting for Boys. Critical to BSA's first program iteration was its advancement and award opportunities. Seton combined the best of his own "Honors and High Honors" system along with Baden-Powell's "badges of proficiency" or "badges of merit" along with the "gotta demonstrate these basic skills" ranks of Tenderfoot, Second Class, and First Class. Their requirements were spelled out alongside those first 14 badges of merit that merely were included as bonus achievements for First Class Scouts and Scoutmasters to earn. (At the time, Scoutmasters could earn the same awards and ranks as the boys.)

Any Scout who qualified for six badges of merit earned a "shoulder line" for uniform wear. Any Scout who qualified for all fourteen was presented with the organization's highest award—the Silver Wolf. (None ever were presented.)

The Honorary Silver Wolf was to be presented "in exceptional cases to individuals rendering specially valuable services to the Boy Scouts Movement."

By the end of 1910, BSA managers boasted membership of about 60,000 Scouts with no end of its growing popularity in sight. Fortunately, that success had been predicted and prepared for with funds having been raised for the employment of new national executives, who would professionally manage the organization's growth.

On January 2, 1911, newly hired Executive Secretary James E. West (the original title for chief Scout executive) took the reins of BSA and its local staff of ten employees. They worked within the confines of their freshly acquired headquarters at 200 Fifth Avenue in downtown Manhattan. Immediately, West began legally locking down BSA's intellectual property and applying for patents. One of the first he secured was the BSA emblem of today (the First Class badge) featuring the eagle and shield superimposed over the fleur-de-lis with the "Be Prepared" scroll beneath. In addition, he initiated the formation of four commissions that would develop the properties, program, and far-sighted growth plan for BSA to become a long-term and legitimate organization. The commissions were: "Standardization of the Scout Oath, Scout Law, Tenderfoot, Second Class, and First Class Requirements," "Finance," "Permanent Organization and Field Supervision," and "Badges, Awards, and Equipment."

#### **The Commission on Badges, Awards, and Equipment**

The Badges, Awards, and Equipment (BAE) commission was chaired by Cornell University's professor of economics,

Dr. Jeremiah Jenks. Assisting him were Dr. George J. Fisher (president of the International YMCA's Physical Directors Society), the Rev. Richard Earle Locke of the First Presbyterian Church in New Jersey, Frank Fellows Gray (founder of one of the earliest Scouting troops in Montclair, NJ), Charles A. Worden (future Scout executive of Queens, NY), W.W. Brundage (future Scout executive of Newark, NJ), Carl F. Northrup (future Scout executive of New Haven, CT), Alfred W. Dater, the president of the Stamford (CT) Gas & Electric Company, and Baptist pastor Dr. Franklin D. Elmer of Poughkeepsie, NY. Noticeably absent from this list was BSA's Chief Scout Seton, the man who actually had formalized the original advancement structure for the organization.

West and his executive board, now fresh off their first presentation of BSA's Annual Report to sitting U.S. President William Howard Taft in Washington, DC, focused their attention toward each committee's progress toward completing the "Proof" version of BSA's first edition of its forthcoming Handbook for Boys.

Within 10 days, the editorial committee, operating under the leadership of now former Managing Secretary John Alexander, reported dramatic progress—a number of chapters were well on their way to being completed. Of premier importance was the first chapter that explained the structure of BSA's official program and its overarching social purpose.

"Chapter 1 is finished with the exception of the section on organization, Scout Law and Badges," writes Alexander. "These questions the National Council and Executive Board have not yet passed on, and until this is done, the chapter cannot be completed."

Within six weeks, all lacking material was ready for final approval.

On April 1, Alexander advises, "The material of Chapter 1 and 6 has been finally approved by the Editorial Board." West responded enthusiastically and informed the committee that Chief Scout Seton was reviewing the book's entire draft.

Seton, now having returned from a six-week trip to England that had ended in late March 1911, took on his additional role as an "ex-officio member" of the editorial board. Pouring over the draft manuscript, he quickly returned with valuable comment chapter-by-chapter.

Within 5 days, Seton issued his first critique of the handbook to the editorial board. With regard to the ever-important Chapter 1, he suggested a reorder be done of the topics as it "seems to me to a more logical presentation." It became as follows:

- What Scouting Means
- Scout Law
- Boy Scouts of America
- Organization
- The Motto
- How to Become a Scout
- Classes of Scouts
- Salute and Signs
- Scout Uniform
- Patrol Signs
- Merit Badges

[Interesting Note: It is in this letter that Seton proposes for the first time that the Scout Oath “should not be designated as an oath but rather as a promise.” This is why we refer to it today as the Scout Oath or Promise.]

In a sly manner, Seton noted that the BAE commission had been, in his opinion, lazy and too quick to copy and paste the detailed program and “organization of the facts” straight out of Baden-Powell’s Scouting or Boys, rather than to rely more heavily on his own structure as published in his 1910 Original Edition Handbook. Seton suggested that BSA’s version reeked of “foreign-born ideals.”

“There is a wide difference between the boys that are English and the boys that are American,” he writes. “The distance between the top and the bottom of Society is not as great in this country as it is in England.”

Seton also made comment that the new handbook’s writing style seemed “loosely and carelessly constructed,” as it truly was a compendium of knowledge from several authors, all of whom had been tasked with scribing separate sections within each chapter.

However, the commission did keep Seton’s concept of the “super Scout” designation being the Silver Wolf or “Wolf Scout.” (To earn it, now a Scout had to earn a total of 21 merit badges from a list of 57 possible topics.) However, it would be stated within the first paragraph of his next missive that would contain the true seed for the rank of Eagle Scout.

### **The Eagle Scout Award is Born**

In his letter scribed to the editorial board on April 12, 1911, Seton issues a suggestion that is astute but (probably due to his unpopular status within the organization) is soundly ignored at the time. After all, Seton was, an Englishman (Scotsman) by birth. And because of that foreign birth, he constantly was on the receiving end of vitriolic mutterings made by some of BSA’s most hyperactive, pro-American managers. And in the end, Seton’s alien status would be blamed by BSA elites (instead of his non-public resignation letter tendered in late January 1915) for his much-publicized “official” announcement of his separation from the organization in late February of that year. [Note: However, in mid-1911, Seton did make a solid attempt at Americanism that fell on deaf ears, and it involved the ‘Eagle’ award. It wasn’t until two months later when ‘American citizens’ voiced the same suggestion that the birth of the Eagle became a reality. And then Seton earned a rare ‘I told you so’ moment with BSA executives. Since that time, however, whether intentional or not, the rabidly, pro-American Dan Beard is improperly credited with conceiving the rank of Eagle Scout.]

In Seton’s important letter buried deep inside BSA’s national archive, he suggests that five changes be made to the proposed merit badge program at the time:

*Gentlemen,*

*It seems to me that it will be necessary to institute five new badges of Honor or Merit. First, the badge for Eagle Scouts, this is to replace Baden-Powell’s Royalty (King’s) Scout. Second, the Hunter. Third, Camper. Fourth, Traveller. Fifth, the Athlete. I enclose designs suggest for each of these.*

Remarkable.

This letter not only tells us that Seton conceived the rank, but also that he designed the first Eagle Scout badge. Was it the drawing published in the 1911 Handbook for Boys? We can only presume what the sketches looked like as that page appears to be lost within the archives.

Adopted, however, were Camper and Athlete. Eagle Scout, on the other hand, was rejected and kept as Wolf Scout in the Proof Edition of the Handbook for Boys published on June 1, 1911. (The editorial board had plenty of time to change it, however, but they chose not to.)

In late April, Seton issued a follow up letter to the editorial board on various additional Handbook topics before leaving for Europe at the end of the month.

On May 6, Alexander reports in a letter to the executive board that “the work on the Official Manual is practically complete, everything being in hand with the exception of three short sections, the work of several Government Experts. This material will likely be in hand before this reaches you.”

### **The Handbook for Boys was going to press.**

On June 1, 1911, the Proof copy of the Handbook for Boys was released and announced with great fanfare over the news wires. About 4,600 copies were printed and sent out to various men involved in boys’ work across the nation along with a request for their suggestions and improvements to be sent back to headquarters in time for the final version’s release on August 31.

Although some recipients chose to send their criticisms back to BSA offices in the form of a marked-up book, most simply wrote letters and kept their prize. The following is a sample of the many suggestions sent back:

*In the scanning review of the Manual, which I have just [been] given, I only noticed one thing that might be an incongruity and that was the medal for the Wolf Scout. You may have some good reason for using the wolf but it seems to us [that] the highest award should be something of more elevating character, and I would suggest for the symbol of the All Round Scout [being] either the American Eagle or the lion, both of which are representative of strength and bravery.*

*R.W. Lamb  
June 9, 1911*

### **Seton’s intuition was correct.**

And within a few short, frantic weeks, the highest award in Scouting was rebranded as Eagle Scout and Seton’s critically important contribution to the award’s creation was erased from history—until now.

In the Next Issue—Mystery Solved: Arthur Eldred & the First Eagle Scout Award

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](mailto:d.scott@scottsales.com).