

Reflections on the past half-century of Boy Scout Troop 47, and my part in the early years of that history.

Jim Johnson – Past Scoutmaster of Troop 47

Oh boy, it's been a while. Then again, some parts seem to be quite recent...

- Back about 1958, I had been working with the young members of our little DePauw Methodist Church, but the then-minister and I had a significant difference of opinion regarding young people and their activities. He asked that I surrender my leadership role, and I did. It seems that it was during the following week that Cyrus (Cydie) Barnes visited (word sure got around Elizabeth in a hurry in those days) and asked if I would take over the leaderless Boy Scout troop in Elizabeth: Troop 47. (As I recall, Cydie and his brother Jim were holding the troop together in the interim.) I had never had the opportunity to be a Boy Scout while I was growing up (apparently, our Kentucky farm was even more remote than those of Elizabeth), but that didn't seem to dissuade Cydie from offering the position. After a very brief (measured in minutes) period of consideration, I accepted.

I had never really worked with 20-some eager, anxious, and rambunctious young teen-age boys (indeed, several were still pre-teen), but Scouting seemed to have anticipated that situation and had implemented 'Patrols'; all I really had to do was make the patrol system work. Giving patrol leaders bona-fide responsibilities for planning, implementing, and training actually worked, and very well. That allowed me to focus on keeping the patrol leaders at least one-step ahead of their patrol, which seemed to incent them to get even more involved.

I was fortunate to have 80 acres of timber and hill sides, with a lot of Southern Indiana's 'woody weeds', the sassafras. This would allow the boys to hack and whack to their hearts' content. Many a 4" sassafras fell to become part of a signal tower or part of a rope bridge (with Cydie and Jim running "the" general store in town, access to neat material such as 3/8" sisal for lashing was not a problem).

Early on, the question about axes and knives came up, and I told the boys—and their parents—that I encouraged the possession and use of both, until an individual demonstrated that he was not willing to assume responsibility for the safe and proper use, maintenance, and storage of such a tool. At such a time,

the tool would be taken by me and held for 3 months, after which if the Scout thought he was now ready to resume use and possession of the tool, the tool would be returned. But, there was to be no second chance: a second violation of this policy would result in the tool being given to the Scout's parents, and was to never be in his possession again. That policy was never challenged, nor was it ever necessary to implement it.

As we were discussing the principles of Scouting, and its Oath, Motto, and Law, it seemed appropriate to frame my approach to discipline in the terms of the Scout Law. Again, I told Scouts and parents that my policy was that we were to conduct ourselves in accordance with the Scout Law, and any Scout who could not behave or was a threat or serious distraction would be told to leave that meeting and not come back for two weeks. If, at the end of that two weeks, the Scout thought he could abide by the Scout Law, we were pleased to have him back; otherwise, no, he wasn't welcome. Again, there were no second chances. As with most young men, there must be a test to determine if the limits will actually be enforced, and one Scout was dismissed for 2 weeks, after which he returned and stayed with us. No one else ever was asked to leave. It was most impressive to see how self-governing the boys became.

- Early on, in an effort to both introduce a 'carrot', and to provide an opportunity to evaluate the Scouts' mastery of subjects practiced in troop meetings, I implemented the 'one outdoor activity every month' policy. That might be a day of cutting and lashing poles, a weekend camping trip at Timberlost (our 160 acre wooded residence), or a council-organized Camp-o-Ree.

One particularly memorable outing was a weekend on our farm. The weather was pleasant but getting down to freezing at night. We arrived just before sunset on Friday evening, got camp set up, fires built, meals prepared and eaten, then off to bed. The next morning, I took the patrol leaders to a spring at the bottom of a steep valley, but that was still on top of a 20' water fall. I had cautioned against going to the top of the water fall (about 50' down-stream from the water fall) because there was some ice at the top of the fall, where that water ran rather shallow and exposed.

Nonetheless, one of the Green (Greene?) boys was bent on looking over the edge of the falls and, sure enough, his feet slid on the ice, and he went over the falls. There was an immediate ruckus from the other boys, and I hurried to see what was wrong. On looking down at him, I imagined the result as being a great deal worse than it really was. Certainly, laying in a pile of rubble, with one arm twisted in an un-natural angle behind you, is not the norm. I immediately sent a Scout to my house to have my wife contact the parents (there really were no emergency services in that part of the county at that time), and Mr. Green met

us at my home as we got his son up the steep hillside and across a quarter mile path to the house. I had imagined parental wrath and threats of law-suits, but Mr. Green's reaction was simply that "that's a part of growing' up". He took his son to the doctor, had the broken arm set and placed in a cast...it was a couple of weeks before we saw the Green boy again, but he did come back, anxious for more 'opportunities'.

- Another camping trip, again to our wooded acreage, served to let the Scouts practice what we had discussed and practiced, regarding the sharpening and usage of hand axes and 3/4-length (Scout) axes. I had asked the Scouts to apply this practice of safely sharpening their axes to ensure they were sharp before this trip. I also strongly solicited for another adult male to accompany us (probably sensitized to the fact that I simply could not be in all places at all times, as evidenced by the Green boy experience.) Indeed, that Friday afternoon as we gathered Scouts and equipment, there was a Dad, but I was so busy I didn't really get an opportunity to spend any time with him, even to ensure which boy he was with.

All went well as tents went up, but as we were preparing fires for cooking, one scout seemed to be furiously trying to beat a stick of wood, rather than cut it. On inspection, I found that the area of the axe head 1/2" from the edge was bright from being worked with a file, but the edge had the radius of a BB—there was no way that axe was going to *cut* anything. As I rather sternly reminded the scout that he was to bring only a sharp axe, he explained that he had tried, but didn't really know how. When I then suggested that maybe he should have enlisted the help of his father, the voice of that other 'adult male' responded "But, I don't know how, either". We had an impromptu axe-sharpening class then and there, just for the two of them. I don't think that particular axe was capable of being hand-sharpened without some serious grinding before hand, but that scout did always have a sharp axe on subsequent trips...

- Not surprisingly, the Scouts seemed quite eager to master, and then demonstrate, skills related to axe and knife work. Pre-teens quite often don't have the physical strength to master the use of a 3/4-length axe, so use a hand axe. But, most boys don't have the eye-hand coordination required to effectively, and efficiently, use any kind of axe. I was able to demonstrate to the Scouts that a 3" diameter green sassafras log could be cut in two with as few as 6 strokes, but more commonly with 7 or 8 strokes. Most of their efforts resulted in a dozen or more inconsistently placed gashes along the log, usually stopping in frustration before completing the task. So, the challenge was to find a way to

get them to focus on a single small point, and incent them to develop the control that would allow them to become good wood-choppers.

The device and set up was very simple: I would find a good stump or large-diameter log standing on end, clear way anything combustible, and drive an axe-blow into the end-grain, opening a small, tapered slit. Then I would whittle the stem of a kitchen match and place the match into the slit. The objective became one of both vertically splitting the match *and* causing the head to ignite. I'm sure it was the lighting of the match that served as the motivator, but boys certainly spent a lot of time (and matches) in that pursuit.

- With lots of sassafras and locust, the Troop was able to acquire the essential raw materials for some pretty impressive construction projects. We spent one weekend just hewing and peeling 4" X 10' logs, then weeks in meetings practicing knots and lashings, followed by another weekend actually erecting a tower and a bridge. The Scouts began to appreciate the reason for lashing, and why it needed to be so tight. That weekend's projects were acceptable, but not grand. But, when we went to Camp-o-Ree the following month...well, it had been a long time since other troops had seen a tower or rope bridge, and they were impressed with these!
- Timberlost's 160 acres of trees covered just about the whole spectrum of species indigenous to Southern Indiana and, so, was an excellent laboratory for tree identification. Using the Boy Scout Field Book, Scouts were able to get 'up close and personal' with just about every tree specify they might reasonably encounter. Red Oak, Black Oak, White Oak, Shag-Bark Hickory, Black Walnut, Butternut, Dogwood, Red Bud, Black Locust, Honey Locust, Tulip Poplar, Sassafras—all became readily recognizable. When we would compete against other troops at Cam-o-Rees, Troop 47 would generally 'wipe 'em out'.
- During the February Boy Scout Week, most troops would try to have some kind of 'presence'. One year, Troop 47 spent Friday night of that week camped out on an open field, right in the middle of town, alongside Hiway 11. We knew it might get cold, so were well prepared; kept a good fire going all day and night, had a good stew on the fire at all times, and generally kept a neat camp for all to see. Indeed, we had about 4" of snow, and the temperature got down to 4 degrees F, but there were no problems; all survived and then bragged about their endurance.
- In May of one year (Derby Weekend), the council sponsored a Camp-o-Ree at Harrison County Forest, with a great deal of woodsman-oriented competition. A good time was had by all, until about midnight when the skies simply opened up. We received 4" or rain in about 8 hours. Many Scouts (other than Troop 47)

learned that pitching a tent in a shallow swale or a low spot is not a good idea. Those who had attempted to ditch around their tents found that like-as-not, the ditch directed water into the tent. Most everyone, Scouts and staff, were soaked, as were their sleeping bags, their change of clothing, firewood, even food. Since so many were disadvantaged, the Camp-o-Ree was terminated, and all went home. But, with the weather unusually warm, no one even developed a case of the sniffles.

- Throughout my involvement with Troop 47, Cydie Barnes was Troop Chairman. Being the butcher for the general store, it was rare that Cydie was able to get out on an overnighiter during the day Saturday, but he would often come to our campsite Saturday evening after closing the store, and would generally bring a very fine piece of beef, which the adults would prepare and devour, the boys having already gone to sleep. That was some good eatin'.
- On one of these trips on which Cydie visited late on Saturday night, there was a young minister that had come along on the overnighiter, to see what the boys were up to and to better understand Scouting. This was in the early days of instant coffee, and he had never had any before. Since you didn't need a percolator, nor the mess of cleaning it up afterward, instant coffee had become popular for camping trips. But on this particular evening, with the Scouts settled in for the night, Cydie, the minister, and I were preparing our late-evening meal. I had a pot of water boiling for coffee, and Cydie was cooking the meat('sides' and salads hardly ever were a part of these meals). As the meat was ready, I prepared the instant coffee. However, the minister Seemed to think that it should be stronger, so asked for the jar. He then unscrewed the top, tilted the jar, poured 3 or 4 tablespoonfuls into his cup, and took a big slug. It seemed to take an awful lot of water to restore his sense of taste...and we never saw him again after that evening.
- During JFK's tenure as President, he introduced a personal fitness program and the BSA endorsed the program. All troops were encouraged to implement elements of the program. Troop 47 spent several weeks reviewing the purpose and actually getting involved in the exercises. One evening, all the Scouts seemed to be in better shape than usual, and we decided to see just how well some of the boys could endure. Using pushups, we quickly eliminated the majority (after all, they had already been working out that evening), and after several more minutes, eliminated all but one—one of the McCrae boys. Though he was the 'winner' he really wanted to see just how far he could go. Over these years, I've forgotten what his final number was, but it was certainly impressive. That would have been the end of it except he was a starter on the school's

basketball team, and was so sore the next day, he couldn't play...his coach was not at all pleased with me.

- A successful program seems to attract people, with no overt effort required. Indeed, the membership of Troop 47 had grown to where I simply could not effectively perform my duties as Scoutmaster. Of course, that's when a dad bring young son and asks if his son can join the troop. I explained that we would love to have the boy, but I simply needed help before I accepted any more boys into the troop. With that as a condition of acceptance, Carl Hertle agreed to become my Assistant Scoutmaster and his son, Randy, joined the troop. Eventually, Carl's younger son also joined the troop.
- With Carl as an Assistant Scoutmaster, we could now tackle some other venues and activities, such as exploring the Squire Boone cave, long before it was commercialized. (I had spent many hours in the cave, years before, and was quite familiar with the hazards, and the beautiful sights to be shared.)

About this time, we had a Scout (the only Scout I ever asked to leave for two weeks) that had built a very tough reputation with the public school, a military school, and just about anyone who managed to get in his path. He seemed to consider everyone as dirt until a person gave him reason to respect them. But, on a July weekend, Carl and I took Troop 47 to the Red River Gorge in central Kentucky. We started our adventure in the gorge by wading the Red River (about 3" deep, at that time of year) for a half mile, then climbing the recumbent hillside leading to a massive rock-roofed shelter. This shelter had a sand floor, so even sleeping was good. I had led the troop up the trail consisting of steps hand cut (by native Indians, years and years earlier) into the sloped rock wall, so was not focusing on Carl and our tough Scout. Apparently, the boy had an extreme case of acrophobia, was not about to let anybody become aware of it, and was trying to find some way to avoid the climb. Eventually, Carl sensed what was really the problem and had a long talk with the boy who then agreed to let Carl follow him up the steps. That was good enough for that afternoon, but then the boy had nightmares all night long, literally shaking in his sleeping bag. Again, Carl assumed responsibility and, with an announcement that he and the boy were going down ahead of us for some now-forgotten reason, they did descend, and the other boys in the troop were never aware of his phobia.

- When IBM invited me to seek career growth in Chicago, Carl had been involved with the troop for almost 2 years, and had two boys in the troop. What a natural: just look at the Eagles that came out of his tenure...as a Scout Executive, I've presented Eagles, but as a Scoutmaster, I was never able to 'grow' one.