

The Boy Scouts in America

By Ernest Thompson Seton

EVERY American boy a hundred years ago lived either on a farm or in such close touch with farm life that he reaped its benefits. He had all the practical knowledge that comes from country surroundings: that is, he could ride, shoot, skate, run, swim; he was handy with tools; he could manage domestic animals; he knew the woods; he was physically strong, self-reliant, resourceful, well developed in body and brain. In addition to this, he had a good moral training at home. He was respectful to his superiors, obedient to his parents, and altogether the best material of which a nation could be made.

We have lived to see an unfortunate change. Partly through the growth of immense cities, with the consequent specialization of industry, so that each individual has been required to do one small specialty and shut his eyes to everything else, with the resultant perpetual narrowing of the mental horizon; partly through the decay of small farming, which would have offset this condition, for each mixed farm was a college of handicraft; and partly through the established forms of religion losing their hold, we see a very different type of youth in the country to-day. It is not the rule now for boys to be respectful to superiors and obedient to parents. It is exceptional when we see a boy who is handy with tools, and capable of taking care of himself under all circumstances. It is the rare exception when we see a boy whose life is absolutely governed by the safe old moral standards.

The personal interest in athletics has been largely superseded by an interest in spectacular games, which unfortunately tend to divide the Nation into two groups: the few overworked champions in the arena, and the great crowd, content to do nothing but sit on the benches and look on, while indulging their tastes for tobacco and alcohol.

It is this last that is turning so many thoughtful ones against baseball, football,

etc. This, it will be seen, is a reproduction of the condition that ended in the fall of Rome. In her days of growth every man was a soldier; in the end a few great gladiators were in the arena, to be watched and applauded by the millions who personally knew nothing at all of fighting or heroism.

Degeneracy is the word.

To combat the system that has turned such a large proportion of our robust, manly, self-reliant boyhood into a lot of flat-chested cigarette-smokers, with shaky nerves and doubtful vitality, I began the Woodcraft movement in America. Without saying so, it was aimed to counteract the evils of the arena style of baseball, football, and racing by substituting the cleaner, saner pursuits of woodcraft and scouting.

After a year or two of planning, I began work in 1898, and in 1901 had several clubs formed. I soon discovered that an ideal figure was necessary. For it is a matter of history that no philosophy, however beautiful, has been established without a current example. I needed an ideal outdoor man who was heroic, clean, manly, brave, picturesque, master of woodcraft and scouting, and already well known. At first my thought turned to Robin Hood, but I found him neither ideal nor well known. Rollo, the Sea King, would have been nearly perfect if he were well known, but to the ordinary American he was as strange as Plato or Siddhartha.

King Arthur was suggested, but he was not specially an outdoor man, and the pursuits for which he stood were not of practical application to-day. Besides, he is unknown to the vast majority.

Thus I was at last forced to take for my model the ideal Indian of Fenimore Cooper and Longfellow. I would have preferred a white ideal, but the Indian alone seemed to meet all the requisites, including the fact that he was already much established and well known to all. And I find the plan justified in the fact

that every camp of boys has sooner or later adopted a plan of leading boy, older fellows, some grown man, and a flag-pole—that is, chief, council, medicine-man, and totem-pole—the only difference being that I gave the Indian names. And in all camps, no matter what the form, the Indian pursuits have been adopted.

While several tribes or clubs were formed in 1901 and 1902, the first considerable success dated from 1903, when we formed the Wildcat Band, under circumstances that were particularly fitted for a demonstration.¹

My friend John Moale was a retired manufacturer of ample means. He had bought several hundred acres of abandoned farm lands not a thousand miles from Boston, in the year 1900. Here he proposed to gratify his tastes for outdoor life and pursuits in a little kingdom of his own. He put a twelve-foot fence around his domains, and removed all inner walls, etc., so that it was one big park, with all manner of delightful landscape features. His prospects of peace and happiness were excellent. But the neighbors resented his coming. He had fenced in a lot of open ground that had been the common cow-pasture of the adjoining village. He had debarred the boys from their nutting-ground, had shut off the supply of stolen firewood, and forbidden the usual summer picnics. He was an outsider, a rich man despoiling the very poor, and they set about making it unpleasant for him. They destroyed his fences; they stoned his notice-boards till they fell, covered with wounds and bruises. They painted shocking pictures on his gate, and contrived to keep his domestics in a state of terror by a succession of highly satisfactory ghost incidents. Moale might have laughed at this, but his servants did not; they resigned. Each month saw a fresh retinue installed, only to be driven away again by the ghosts. Moale is a plodder, unimaginative, pertinacious, and fearless, yet a peace-lover. He repaired the fence, restored the notice-boards, took no steps against the enemy, hoping to disarm them. But the natives were a manufacturing community, and they had lost that broad humanity that belongs to agricul-

ture; they were vicious, and, mistaking his leniency for weakness, continued their attacks; at least the boys did; the grown-ups were too hard-worked for a living to indulge in many freaks at night.

All summer this had been going on; so I learned on visiting Moale in September. On the morning after my arrival I walked down to the park entrance with my host. He had been telling me of the trouble, so I was not much surprised to see the great gates desecrated with an array of most indecent pictures, with inscriptions deepened to give them unpleasant and personal point.

"For example," said he, and waved his hand towards the gate.

We set about repainting the gate at once. As we did so a band of village boys went by. Their faces showed interest in our proceedings. Moale turned to them and said:

"See here, boys, I don't know who has painted my gate, and I don't want to know; but if you know, I wish you would ask him to stop it. I simply have to paint the gate over again, and the gate has had as many coats now as will do it any good."

To this very conciliatory speech the boys made no reply. They merely looked sheepish and went on. Next morning not only the gates but the posts and adjoining trees were brilliant with the most shockingly improper pictures, all showing the same object, the same modes of thought, and the same master hand. Moale was in despair now. I had been thinking very hard over his troubles, and, inquiring, to understand the bottom of the matter, I was glad to find that it was the boys, not the grown-ups, that were active. I knew something of boys; in fact, I'm a bit of a boy myself. A boy is a small savage till he is sixteen or seventeen. I remembered how the British in India and the Romans everywhere had successfully controlled their savage neighbors *through their own chiefs*.

I said to Moale: "Let me try my hand on these boys. If you will help me with the necessary equipment, I will undertake to stop all these annoyances." He was ready for anything, and gave me a free hand. I bought two military tents and three old Indian teepees that had been

¹ For many reasons I have not given the real names.

left at the Sportsmen's Show. I got two canoes. There were already two boats on the lake in Park Moale. I got some bows and arrows and a target.

Then I got a gang of men to work preparing an ideal camp-ground by the lake on my friend's grounds. On this I set up the tents and teepees in the form of an Indian village. Some of the boys managed to get in during the final operation, using various pretexts—"They were sent on messages," etc. But no unfriendly notice was taken of them.

When the village was made, the teepees and tents, too, gorgeous with pictures of warriors and buffaloes, the canoes drawn up on the beach, and every civilized feature suppressed, I paid one or two of the worst of the village boys to carry a letter to the Moale foreman at our Indian village. His report on their behavior was satisfactory. "They looked kind of mesmerized, didn't want to go away."

Now I went to the local school-house and got permission to talk to the boys for five minutes. I asked all the boys of ten years old and upwards to stand. There were twelve.

"Now, boys," I said, "Mr. Moale invites all of you to come to the Indian Village on his land next Friday, after school, to camp with him there till Monday morning. We will have all the grub you can eat, all the boats and canoes necessary, and everything to have a jolly time in camp. You need bring nothing with you but two blankets each; and also it is forbidden to bring firearms, matches, tobacco, or whisky. Now, will you come?"

I paused for a reply, but there was none. The dozen boys standing up looked variously stolid, sulky, or suspicious.

I repeated the proposal and said, "Now, don't you want to come for a good time camping out?"

Still I got no sign in reply.

This was decidedly disconcerting. I could not comprehend their attitude. So at length I turned to a tall, bright-eyed boy near, and said, "Don't you want to come out into the woods for a camping-trip, with canoes and as much fishing as you like?"

His only reply was an energetic nodding. The next boy made the same response,

and the next, so I accepted this as the sense of the meeting, and added, as I left them, "Remember, now, next Friday, after school, the Indian Village in Mr. Moale's Park."

Moale's foreman was instructed to act as cook and general provider. We stocked up with provisions enough to last not merely the twelve boys I had talked to, but half as many more, and all was ready at Friday, 4 P.M.

But no boys came.

We three waited five minutes, ten, fifteen, but nothing happened. I began to feel uneasy. The old rhyme kept running through my mind: "Mr. Smarty gave a party, and nobody came." Moale remembered how he had distrusted the plan at the outset, and the foreman gave a sigh of relief. The next ten minutes in silence made me unhappy, but at 4:30 there was a loud shout, a hubbub in the near drive, and the boys arrived all together—not twelve or fifteen, as expected, not the eighteen provided for, *but forty-two*. Every boy at school, every boy that had been to school, or had a sister or brother at school, invited himself to come; an ideal party—twelve invitations and forty-two acceptances.

Being Yankee boys, the bashfulness lasted less than ten minutes. They soon showed that they came there for fun.

"Say, Mister, kin we holler?"

"Yes, all you want to."

"Kin we take our clothes off?"

As the weather was warm, I said, "Yes, every stitch, if you like." And soon they were a mob of naked, howling savages, tearing through the woods, jumping into the lake, pelting each other with mud, or cowering over the fire.

Moale was appalled. He thought I had imported and turned loose a Frankenstein, but naked boys cannot set the woods afire or smash property to any great extent. I reassured him: "It is only part of a process. I want the animal energy worked off first."

By six it was getting dark. The boys were tired and hungry. A blazing camp-fire was going. The cook called in the savages with a loud cry of "Grub! Grub!"

The boys came trooping into camp, dressed, and went at the provisions. Oh,

how they did eat! Such a chance was not to be neglected. The quality was better than the home stuff, and they gorged themselves like forty-two boa-constrictors, clearing up that night all the food provided to last till Monday. Fortunately next day was Saturday, and Moale is no niggard. The camp stuffed itself from six to seven, then, tired, gorged, and happy, they lay around the fire in the firelight, ready for some new and quieter amusement. I know something of savages—of boys, I mean; it is precisely the same—and said, "Now, shall I tell you a story?" Their reply had more of force than politeness, but was obviously sincere.

"You bet; go ahead."

I told them of Indians and Plains life, gauging my stories in a steady crescendo, till I had renewed the Fenimore Cooper glamour of romance and heightened it to a blaze of glory about the red man. Meanwhile I was watching my material. I wanted them all interested and subdued, but not sleepy. Near eight o'clock the bickerings and rude practical jokes of the farthest boys had ceased. The group had tightened up about me. The eyes of those about me I could see had that tense, magnetized look when I told the dramatic story of the spy in the enemy's camp, and how he covered himself with glory by his exploits. As I finished the tale I could feel the thrill of intense interest; I could feel that they sympathized with the thought of glory, their regret that the noble red men were gone before their day. Their resentment of me—a stranger—was gone. In my judgment, the right psychological moment had come. After the proper pause that follows a good climax, I said, reflectively: "Say, fellows, how are we going to do this camping out—just tumble around any way, or shall we do it in the *real Indian fashion*?"

There was, of course, only one reply—"Oh, Injun; you bet your life we're Injuns."

"Good; that will suit me," I said. "Now, remember, we are the tribe. Each warrior has one vote. First, we must elect a Head War Chief."

"Well, I reckon we'll take you," was the quick response, born, no doubt, of the recently established bond of sympathy.

"No, you won't," I replied; "I am not a Chief, neither is Mr. Moale. We are Medicine-Men. For Chief I want one of yourselves."

Now there were forty-two claimants for the job, and each had the most convincing reasons why he should be Chief. The wrangle grew into a riot, till I said: "Hold on, we can soon settle this; what boy here can lick all the others?"

"Oh, that ain't fair!" came an aggrieved chorus. "Hank Martin can. He's older and bigger and stronger nor any of us."

Oh, how my heart sank at the mention of Hank Martin, a square-shouldered, square-jawed, gray-eyed boy of fifteen, strong as a young bull, energetic, self-reliant, and fearless, but the worst boy in "the county." Into every kind of mischief, and always leading; his exploits were already past being merely funny boyish pranks; they were developing into crime. Hank was surely pointing toward the penitentiary and leading a score of boys behind him. His father kept cows, and Hank's morning job was to go round with the milk. This gave him many opportunities for mischief, which he failed not to utilize. I knew quite well that Hank was the artist of the gate. I was afraid of Hank Martin. Still, he was unquestionably the leader of the gang, and in strict pursuance of my policy I must win him.

"Good," I said. "Now is there any fellow here thinks he can lick Hank Martin?"

And there was. Another stripling lad, but of different cut, offered his services; he was evidently willing to risk it in view of the possible honor.

"Very good," I said; "I am glad to know it. We won't try just now, but may have to do so some other time."

Now I put these two up for popular election. Martin got it quite easily, and his leadership was beyond question.

It generally happens that bad boys are simply over-energetic or misdirected good boys profoundly disguised, and if you can get hold of them you can probably persuade them to drop their mask.

Hoping it might be so, I took Hank aside, and said:

"See here, Hank, the fellows have elected you Head Chief of the Tribe, and,

remember, it isn't simply for to-day or to-morrow and the next day. We are going to keep this up the year round, indoors and outdoors, in a sort of club, as long as the fellows take any interest in it. Remember, then, you are going to lead all these little boys. I hope you will not lead them into anything that you will be ashamed of."

I could not tell how it was going to strike, but the great fundamental fact was that his nature was good. The responsibility of power is another form of the love of glory, quite the strongest passion of all in savages—and in boys. There is nothing they will not try to do under pressure of that magic influence; there is nothing they will not shun under its converse, the fear of ridicule. Hank faced his new responsibilities like a man.

This, however, was later. We were meanwhile busy with our election. An extraordinarily fat boy now caught my eye. He was evidently about fourteen, but weighed about two hundred and twenty pounds. I turned to the boy next me and asked, "Who is that?" He replied, "That's Tom Sewit." I thought, "That is a name I shall remember, with such a shape behind it." Now I called for nominations for Second War Chief. At once there were loud cries of "Tom Sewit, Tom Sewit!" We certainly did not want the fat boy. We needed an athlete, so I took no notice till a feeble voice near said, "Tom Barney." Tom Barney wasn't much, but he was better than the fat boy; "any port in a storm."

I said: "Now you are talking. Tom Barney is the fellow for the post. Now all in favor of Tom Barney, hands up." Five hands went up. "All in favor of Tom Sewit"—thirty-eight hands appeared—a perfect forest. I counted them in some perplexity. Then I discovered one boy holding up two hands. "Here," I said; "you are cheating—stuffing the ballot-box. You have queered this whole election. Now we must try over."

I now made a strong speech for Tom Barney, giving all the reasons I could think of, or invent, for his election, but of course could not denounce the enemy as he sat there. I then put my own candidate first, to catch the independents. "Now," I said, "fair voting. All in favor

of Tom Barney for Second War Chief, hands up." To my amazement, only two hands (Barney's and his brother's) went up. "All in favor of Tom Sewit." Forty hands appeared now. Not the least doubt of it. Very unwillingly I announced that Sewit was elected. "Tom Sewit, come forward and take the oath of office as Second War Chief of the Wildcats." Tom stepped out. To my amazement, it was not the fat boy at all. That was an error that I fell into by chance. Sewit was the sturdy young chap who was willing to lick the Head Chief, if need be, and just the right one for the post. We now elected a Third Chief and a Council of Twelve. Among them we selected one for Chief of the Council Fire, who alone kindles a fire; a Chief of the Tally (a Secretary); and a Chief of the Wampum (Treasurer). Finally, I got myself and Mr. Moale in as Medicine-Men.

The rest, of course, were mere braves. With the organization complete, I gave them an impromptu code and constitution, prepared previously with the help of an expert lawyer. In this I provided for all things not covered by the law of the land. The laws forbade: Rebellion against the council, firearms in camp, wildfire, smoking, whisky, destruction of song-birds or squirrels, breach of game laws, pointing of weapons at any one; and made chivalry, kindness, courage, and honor the cardinal virtues.

And now we set out on what was destined to be an epoch-making outing for the village boys, for Moale and myself, and for thousands of other boys.

Our motto was, "The best things of the best Indians." Whatever is picturesque, good, and safe in Indian life, that we used. The boys wanted to wear feathers. I said, "Certainly, but remember, after the manner of the Indians. The good old Indian did not wear just any feathers he could steal and stick in his hair; each feather was conferred by the council, as the decoration for an exploit. I will give you a hundred exploits, each of which will entitle the doer to a feather."

It was essential that my standards should be *national* and *absolute*, not competitive. So, taking the interscholastic

athletic for the standard, I allowed a feather for all who were obviously in the highest class, thus: All who could walk four miles in an hour, or run 100 yards in eleven seconds, were entitled to the decoration. The only cheap one was for swimming. All who could swim 100 yards, no matter how slowly, got the swimming feather. This for athletes. In a second department, called Camper Craft, I allowed honors to all who could light a camp-fire with rubbing-sticks, could measure the width of a river without crossing it, etc. The third department was nature study, and honors were allowed to all who could name correctly twenty-five trees, fifty flowers, fifty birds, etc.

I had already invented a game called Deer-Hunting, in which a dummy was pursued by its tracks of paper (or corn) or, later, with a steel tracking-iron on the turf, and shot with arrows; a Hostile Spy Hunt, a Bear Hunt, a Rabbit Hunt, a Man Hunt, Spearing the Big Beaver, Trials of Quicksight and Farsight, were all prepared and lying in wait with their insidious appeal to the primitive nature of these very primitive young persons. There was sanity in every part of the scheme; because it had *picturesqueness*; it made the boys *govern themselves*, and it gave them definite *things to do*; but, above all, it never failed to play on the master power of the savage—the love of glory that was always kept in mind. It was used as the lure, the lash, and the motive power to get these boys into different ways of life and thought.

There was no harm done to boats, teepees, or outfit other than fair wear and tear during that camping, and before it was over Moale, instead of having a gang of bandits to combat the year round, had now a guard of stanch friends, ready to fight his battles and look out for his interests when he was away.

That was the beginning of it. Moale writes me regularly, to report progress. Every boy in the village is now in the tribe, and three other bands have been formed in the neighborhood. The fence and gate are now thoroughly respected. One day a painted warrior brought to Moale a wild rabbit he had caught when

visiting his distant relative, saying: "Say, Medicine-Man, I killed one of your rabbits last summer with a catapult, and I bring this one to take its place."

It was a turning-point for the Head Chief. He had never before been treated as a person of importance, and he loved the taste of it so well that he *tried to live so that it might continue*.

Other workers became interested, and the scheme has spread since then, till now there are several thousand bands—a hundred thousand boys. I tried to call them Woodcraft Indians, but the boys have voted me down, and each band, though it has a local name of Indian origin, considers itself a branch of the Nation of Seton Indians.

I had always objected to their being called Seton Indians. It seemed like pushing myself forward unduly, but the public did not take at all to the name "Woodcraft Indians." Next I discovered that the word Indian was a serious handicap. Many people considered the Indian a loathsome tramp and as far as possible from being a safe ideal for boys. Thus I was looking about for another possible name, when an unexpected suggestion was made.

In 1904 I took the movement to England, giving public and private addresses on Woodcraft and Scouting for boys, and distributed the little Red Book, as the Birch-Bark Roll was then called. In 1906 I got the help of General Baden-Powell, then the Chief Scout of the British Army. He worked with me for two years, and in 1908 gave the movement a great popular boom by changing the name from Woodcraft Indians to Boy Scouts, and still further enlarging the field by adding several purely civic departments, including a savings bank law for the encouragement of thrift.

Divested of the incubus of unacceptable names, and pushed by a man of world-wide fame as a scout and a war hero, the movement has spread far and wide. We have adopted the name of Boy Scouts in America, and have now an organization that is expected to become a National movement in the widening service for the development of manly character in the rising generation.



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