

It's Your History – Campfire Yarn 5 – James Edward West – The Captain of the Ship

By Bill Nelson

Many of us believe the BSA has become one of the finest youth programs the world has ever known. There was primarily one man responsible for that, and that man wasn't an outdoorsman or a soldier or a national hero. That man was orphaned at age six and afflicted with tuberculosis as a child. That man was James E. West. He didn't learn Scoutcraft at the feet of Native Americans or cowboys. In fact, James E. West never had much of a childhood. West had to fight for permission to attend school outside of his orphanage. He won that privilege only if he did his extensive orphanage chores before and after school. But West was smart. He finished high school in two years, graduating with honors in 1895. By 1901, he'd worked his way through law school and was practicing law in Washington, D.C.



While going through law school, West worked in the YMCA, advancing to the position of "acting" general secretary during the Spanish American War.

In the early 1900s, he was the finance chairman for the Boys Brigade and the secretary of the Washington Playground Association, later the Playground Association of America.

When a young boy stole his car, he declined to press charges, offering instead to represent the boy in court (he got him off on a technicality). That incident led West to lobby successfully for the creation of a juvenile court.

Meanwhile the Boy Scouts of America was incorporated on February 8, 1910, under the laws of the District of Columbia, by W. D. Boyce. Then on June 21, 1910, 34 national representatives of boys' work agencies met to establish the Boy Scouts of America. Edgar Robinson was named managing secretary. It was through his efforts that most of the many "boy scout" organizations within the United States merged with the Boy Scouts of America. The notable exception were the American Boy Scout (ABS) formed by William Randolph Hearst. The ABS claimed to be a military organization, which was in contrast to the non-military BSA. The ABS performed military style drills with rifles and there are many photographs of ABS members walking around New York City with rifles. More will be told about that organization further in this article.

Edgar Robinson agreed to run the BSA for one year. When that year was up he asked to return to his full time position at the YMCA. That left the BSA without a head. James West's reputation as an organizer and advocate for young men made him a prime candidate for the post. After much persuasion by a number of people, West finally accepted the position temporarily for six months, and moved to New York City. That six month commitment turned into 32 years, from 1911 until his retirement in 1943.

Unlike Baden-Powell, West didn't have a winning personality. Unlike Beard, and Seton, West didn't have a love for the outdoors. Unlike Boyce, he didn't have deep pockets.

What he did have, though, was a commitment to children and a vision of what the BSA should be. With that vision and his never ending drive, West took the helm of the American Scouting ship and didn't let go for thirty years.

West was a natural at the job. The major problem with many of the other boys' organizations in the United States, including Beard's and Seton's was they were not well organized. Beard had no real central organizational structure to the Son's of Daniel Boon, and Seton's "organization" was primarily himself and one trusted assistant. West was a natural organizer and created the organizational structure that would hold the BSA together through the tumult of two world wars, the 1960s and the electronic age.



The first Scoutmaster Handbook, published in 1913, lays out the organization of the Boy Scouts of America in detail. The structure of the BSA that Robinson started and West enhanced was one of a National Council working through an Executive Board that would have administrative control of the organization. The National Council is comprised of representatives from local councils throughout the country. The officers of the National Council were the President, an honorary President

(often the President of the US, originally President Taft), two honorary vice-presidents (often the Vice President of the US and someone else; Teddy Roosevelt was one of the first honorary VPs) and a Treasurer. There was also a National Commissioner (originally Beard) and a Chief Scout (originally Seaton) who are honorary members of all standing committees. There was a Chief Scout Citizen position that was also held by Teddy Roosevelt. Gifford Pinchot, the first Chief of the United States Forest Service, was Chief Scout Woodsman.

The infant organization shared offices with the YMCA. Beginning January 1, 1911, permanent headquarters were secured in the Fifth Avenue Building in New York, NY. The first meeting of the National Council was held February 14th and 15th at Washington, D.C. The members assembled in the East Room of the White House and were addressed by President Taft. In connection with the meeting there was a conference of Scout Masters and Scout Commissioners.

This national organization would then charter local councils, made up of distinguished citizens of the local community, with the authority to charter troops. The boundaries of local councils were normally local communities (cities or towns). Sometimes the national council would charter a local council to a county, if that county was lightly populated. Councils larger than a county in size were to be temporary in nature.

When local councils were chartered, they agreed to follow the policies and procedures of the BSA. Just as they do today. That kept the program uniformed throughout the country while keeping Scouting local in nature.

This local council concept was the secret to keeping Scouting local in nature. Troops didn't have to report to some single person in far away New York city to resolve issues or obtain information. There was a local entity that could be appealed to.

West was also instrumental in making some fundamental changes to Baden-Powell's original scheme that made the BSA a premier young men's organization. How West modified the Scout Law is one example:

B-P's original Scout Law was written in *Scouting for Boys* in 1908. It has 9 laws:

1. Scout's honour is to be trusted
2. A Scout is Loyal to the King and to his officers, and to his country, and to his employers.
3. A Scout's duty is to be useful and to help others.
4. A Scout is a friend to all and a brother to every other Scout, no matter to what social class the other belongs.
5. A Scout is Courteous.
6. A Scout is a friend to animals.
7. A Scout obeys orders of his patrol leader or scout master without question.
8. A Scout smiles and whistles under all circumstances.
9. A Scout is thrifty.

This is also how it appears on page 31 of Seton's first BSA handbook published in 1910.

In late 1910 West added 3 laws to B-P's original laws. Those are: Brave, Clean and Reverent. You can see them in the 1911 version of the *Boy Scout Handbook* (pg 31)

He also changed the Scout Oath by adding:

"To help other people at all times; to keep myself physically strong, mentally awake and morally straight."

West negotiated the purchase of *Boys' Life* in 1912, making it the official magazine of the BSA. It was West who brought William "Green Bar Bill" Hillcourt's column into *Boy's Life* and eventually as an editor to emphasize outdoor adventure in the magazine.

One of the first controversies that James West had to contend with was the impression by many that the BSA was a paramilitary organization. This perception is understandable; after all, the original BSA uniform was a military uniform with the epaulettes taken off. West emphasized in the first *Scoutmaster Handbook* that the organization was non-military and seeks to promote Peace Scouting and to develop educational character-building for good citizenship and that it was wholly non-partisan.

This controversy reached a crisis point when In March 1912, a scout in the non-aligned organization called the American Boy Scout (ABS), also known as the United States Boy Scout (no 's'), association while in uniform accidentally shot and killed a boy with a rifle after a scout function. The resulting negative publicity caused the ABS to practically dissolve by 1913.

To distance the BSA from the controversy, West removed all advertising by gun maker Remington from BSA publications and deemphasized the marksmanship merit badge. West's reaction was so extreme that in 1914, Colonel Leonard Wood resigned from the board after a pacifistic article was published in *Boys' Life* that he considered being

"almost treasonable". Teddy Roosevelt convinced West to calm down the rhetoric and the NRA promised to teach gun safety classes. Eventually the marksmanship merit badge was reintroduced.

Competition from the ABS caused West to seek a federal charter for the BSA, granted on June 15, 1916 (US Code Title 36, Chapter 309). "The purposes of the corporation are to promote, through organization, and cooperation with other agencies, the ability of boys to do things for themselves and others, to train them in scoutcraft, and to teach them patriotism, courage, self-reliance, and kindred virtues, using the methods that were in common use by boy scouts on June 15, 1916."

Military drill would make a brief appearance in BSA literature after World War I when many doughboys returned and became Scoutmasters. Jeff Snowden in his excellent history on the Boy Scout Handbook notes that: the early printings of the 1923 handbook "are the only Handbooks ever to discuss and recommend military drill for Scouts (the Handbook for Scoutmasters of this era devotes an entire chapter to it and recommends drill according to the US Army Infantry Drill Regulations for "five or ten minutes ... each meeting ... to keep up the morale of the troop"). Scouts of this period were supposed to learn 17 individual commands and 25 patrol and troop movements, all of which were deemed essential to good order, not only during meetings and in parades, but even on hikes. Ironically, Baden-Powell, Scouting's founder and a retired army General, strongly recommended against military drill for Scouts." West preferred to emphasize what he called "Scout Drill;" mostly for flag ceremonies.



West dealt with those who protested against the inclusion of African Americans into Scouting. West held that they should be included as they were in local community school systems and should follow the same policies that they followed there. Much of the American south as well as many major northern communities had segregated programs with "colored troops" until the late 1940s. Some councils were not fully desegregated until 1974.

The BSA was established initially with strong ties to the YMCA. West's experience was with that organization. Because of this fact, the BSA has, from the beginning, had very strong ties with Protestant churches. Throughout West's career with Scouting he fostered those ties.

Scouting, with its spiritual background and cultural ideals, appealed to LDS Church leaders as an excellent program for boys. The Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association (YMMIA) thoroughly investigated Scouting in 1911, and, on motion of President Anthony W. Ivins of the YMMIA general superintendency, the MIA Scouts were officially organized. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints formally affiliated with the Scouting movement in the United States in May of 1913 as its first institutional sponsor, and today sponsors more Scouts and Scouting units in the United States than any other organization. Hundreds of thousands

of young men are enrolled as Scouts in groups or units sponsored by the Church. The Church adopted Scouting as part of the activity program for Aaronic Priesthood quorums and later for Primary boys ages 8 and older. By providing opportunities for boys and young men to put into practice the gospel lessons they learn in the home and at Church, Scouting programs have supported the priesthood.

Since the BSA had early and enduring ties with the YMCA, a firmly Protestant organization at the time, the Roman Catholic Church forbade their boys to Scouts. Eventually, West successfully argued that Scouting was a non-sectarian organization. Brother Barnabas and Victor F. Ridder, with the cooperation of James West, received the approval of John Cardinal Farley, of the Archdiocese of New York, for setting up troops in 1912. The first troop was chartered by St. Patrick's Cathedral Parish in New York under specific guidelines established by the Cardinal. In 1913 the Catholic Church officially embraced Scouting and a "National Scout Commissioner for Scout Work in the Catholic Churches", was assigned by the BSA. His position was to promote Catholic units. Today, Catholic youth are not required to be members of Catholic chartered unit and non-Catholics are able to join Catholic units. Therefore the number of Scouts who are Catholic is impossible to statistically determine. It is notable that just about 100% of the youth who attend the National Jamboree attend religious services and 25% of the youth who attend services at Jamboree attended Catholic mass. It shows the strong support of Scouting by Catholics, thanks in no small part by James West's untiring efforts to bring Catholics into Scouting.

Scouting programs have been a part of Jewish institutions since 1916. From early inception Jewish leaders helped guide the development of the Scouting movement in the United States. Leaders such as Dr. Cyrus Adler contributed to the establishment of the National Jewish Council on Scouting in 1926.

For many years West resisted the creation of a Cub Scouting program for younger boys, feeling that they would take focus away from the main program, Boy Scouts. However, the popularity of pilot programs in America similar to Wolf Cubs in England and Canada was such that he was eventually won and introduced Cub Scouting in 1930.

Everything from adding "A Scout is Brave, Clean and Reverent" to the Scout Law to deciding who would write and when the handbooks would be written was decided by West. In his three decades as Chief Scout Executive, West oversaw the creation of a number of different programs including Sea Scouting and Cub Scouting, the development of local councils, and the involvement of Scouts on the home front in two world wars. As President Harry Truman wrote in a telegram to West's widow, "Boy Scouts of all ages and all Americans who believe in the future of the American boy bow in reverence to his memory."

As Dr. Rowan states in his biography of West, "When West took over the BSA in 1911 there were 61,000 members, and when he retired thirty-two years later the organization had grown to over one and one-half million members and over ten million boys had been in the program. He brought order out of chaos and mediated among the powerful personalities who, if left to their own devices, would have destroyed the fledgling organization. He was the right man for the job."

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