

The First Boy Scouts of Denton

by Jim Morriss

This week marks a momentous occasion in U.S. history because it is the 100th anniversary of the founding of the **Boy Scouts of America**. Scouting was obviously an “idea whose time has come” a century ago. Sir Robert Baden-Powell founded the English Boy Scouts in 1907. It was a huge success from the start and resulted in several groups copying their program here in America. By far, the most successful was the BSA which was founded by W. D. Boyce, a wealthy publisher from Chicago, on February 8, 1910. That was the date when a charter was filed under the laws of the District of Columbia to create the Boy Scouts of America.

The BSA did not seem to do much that first year and several competing groups such as the “**American Boy Scouts**” and the “**National Boy Scouts**” seemed to be gaining an early lead in popularity over the infant BSA. However, Boyce wisely spent a lot of time and energy planning an organization with a solid foundation. He enlisted the help of a very impressive list of famous American businessmen and politicians. President William Taft was the first Honorary President and Colonel Theodore Roosevelt was the Honorary Vice President. In the summer of 1911 the BSA published “The Official Handbook for Boys” and in 1913 the “Handbook for Scoutmasters” was released. The books were clearly written and the well defined rules and goals of the program made the BSA different from the other scouting groups. Handbooks, merit badges, rank insignia and uniforms could be sent to the Scoutmaster’s mailbox from the BSA Headquarters in New York in as little as one week. These organizational advantages gave the Boy Scouts of America the impetus to soon become the foremost scouting group in the country.

It is a long way from New York City to North Central Texas and it must have seemed even further a hundred years ago. Even so, it took very little time for news of the Boy Scout Movement to arrive here. On page 3 of the July 27, 1910 *Denton Record Chronicle* a picture was printed of a group of young men on a hike. The picture’s caption explained that the Boy

Scout Movement was sweeping the country and would soon be spreading to every state in the Union. The leaders expected to have an “Army of 250,000 members” within one year. This was a blatant example of a big problem that the BSA had to contend with from its very beginning. In 1910 Americans, especially American mothers, did not want their children to be recruited into an “Army.” It was obvious that England, France and Germany were heading for a big war but we wanted no part of it. The country was by no means a pacifist nation, but we were isolationist. We did not want our young men to go fight for either a King or a Kaiser. Like the English Boy Scouts, many of the new scout organizations in the U.S. placed a great emphasis on military training. But not the Boy Scouts of America, the BSA made it clear to all that they were not military. The BSA did not have Privates, Corporals or Sergeants. Status in the BSA was distinctly different from Army Rank. The Boy Scouts of America was a community enterprise. It called for close co-operation between city, church and school leaders.

In Denton, we had a county seat, two colleges and a brickyard. Jobs were available and many farm families were moving here to try to find a better life than they might expect on the farm. Kids growing up in Denton a hundred years ago had far fewer chores to do than their counterparts outside of the city. School aged boys also had many more friends than farm kids did. The unprecedented idle time gave young boys opportunities to get into mischief and it had to be a major concern for parents just as it was for community leaders. In addition to several churches, Denton had some social clubs many of which were working toward creating special groups to accommodate younger members. The Woodmen of the World was one of these groups and for a while they sponsored “The Boys of Woodcraft” which was very similar to the Boy Scouts. There was also an outdoor club called the “Owsley Rifles” that started to attract younger members. The namesake of the rifle club was Henry Owsley, a Civil War hero and Physician who moved to Denton in the 1870’s. His son, Alvin C. Owsley was a prominent lawyer who helped guide the

club. They had an obvious interest in hunting and also performed marching drills in parades.

In Denton, one hundred years ago, a greatly anticipated event each summer was a week-long experience called the Chautauqua. It was like a combination of a self-improvement seminar, music show, circus, and tent revival. The Chautauqua that made an annual stop in Denton was run by a company called Redpath-Horner. Dr. Welch was an advance man for the Redpath-Horner Chautauqua. He traveled all over the country and was also a strong promoter of the Boy Scouts of America. In the spring of 1914 Dr. Welch came to Denton as a part of his job. While he was here he consulted with several of the city's leaders about the Boy Scouts. He took note of the strong interest that was here among several of the town's ministers. He was given reports of the Boys of Woodcraft and the Owsley Rifles. Dr. Welch was also told of a Denton scout troop that had been in operation for over a year. It was sponsored by J.E. Parks, principal of the Robert E. Lee School with L.F. Rowlett, a veteran from the Spanish American War, working as the scoutmaster. Dr. Welch stressed the importance of following the BSA program and the guidelines laid out in "The Official Handbook for Boys" and the "Handbook for Scoutmasters." George M. Roark, the head of the Denton Chamber of Commerce called a meeting for June 11, 1914. It was attended by several community leaders and Dr. Welch invited the BSA state organizer, G.M. Richmond, to come up from Houston to attend.

The organization meeting in 1914 marked the official start of the presence of the Boy Scouts of America in Denton, Texas. Leaders from the city's schools were especially eager to participate. William A. Combest, who was the principal of the North Ward School, volunteered to be the Scoutmaster. He was immediately met with an enthusiastic group of boys ready to sign up. Combest received willing help from Ray Bishop, Dr. Frank Piner and George Roark as Assistant Scoutmasters. The boys that we know of in that first BSA troop were:

Arkie Baker	Willie Burge
Hugh Cameron	Noel Carbaugh
William Chenoweth	Charlie Davis

Neal Edwards	Sidney Erwin
Charley Ferguson	Ulrich Fox
Floyd Graham	Fred McKelvey
Freeman Rowett	Ballard Steenberger
James Storrie	P.C. Storrie Jr.
Ben Sullivan	Champ Taliaferro
Frank Tomlinson	King Wheeler
Tom Whitehead	Isaiah Wilson
Bates Witt	Edly Young

Membership in Troop 1 was initially limited to only the boys who attended the North Ward School. It has been estimated that there would have been about 36 scout-aged boys attending that school in the 1914/15 school year. That would indicate that the initial membership of Mr. Combest's Troop contained about $\frac{2}{3}$ of all of the boys who were eligible to join it. J.E. Parks and Maude Fiero, principals of the other schools in Denton, made plans to get their boys into Boy Scout uniforms also. This effort was joined by Rev. Hudson of the 1st Baptist Church, Rev. Hagemeyer of the 1st Christian Church, and Rev. R.G. Mood of the 1st Methodist Church. Alvin Owsley and his son, who was a recent graduate of VMI, also joined in. But, this was met by some concern from the other leaders. The Owsleys were very respected and influential in Denton, but they so strongly emphasized military training that the other volunteers were concerned that the wrong image would be projected. The ministers and school leaders wisely and emphatically stressed that the BSA was NOT military.

Scouting had clearly established a beach head in Denton, just as in the rest of the country. More boys were asking to join and on April 12, 1915 Scoutmaster Combest announced that he was opening membership in his troop to boys who did not go to his school. Soon new patrols, Crow, Bear, and Fox were created. Other adult leaders volunteered to be assistant scoutmasters. The younger Alvin Owsley, who was starting his own law practice, also joined in but was careful to insistently declare that the Boy Scouts of America was not a military training club. Much of the activity of Troop 1 involved hikes to various sites outside of the city; frequently overnight camping was involved. The Boy Scouts would never have succeeded had it not been a lot of fun and the BSA was succeeding

very well in Denton, Texas. The only obstacle to even greater membership was the persistent rumor that the Boy Scout movement was just a recruiting tool for the U.S. Army.

However, attitudes gradually were changing. Political unrest in Mexico resulted in a revolutionary outlaw named Pancho Villa making several raids into our country. American citizens were killed, some executed in cold blood. The U.S. Army was sent to hunt Villa and his followers. While most Texans were neutral in their attitude toward the war in Europe, events were causing a measured change in how we viewed that conflict. Both Germany and Britain were welcome to buy Texas cotton and wheat but the British Navy controlled the sea. It was obvious that the lion's share of our produce would be going to the Allies. In January of 1917, the German Navy announced that all vessels en-route to Allied ports would be attacked. German submarines sank several American ships with loss of American lives. By April of 1917, when the United States declared war on Germany, the viewpoints of the people in Denton had shifted radically. People no longer worried that the BSA was too preoccupied with military influence. In fact many here were starting to believe that our boys should have more early military training.

In addition to the hiking and camping activities that were the mainstay of scouting, Denton's Troop 1 started engaging in activities that were in direct support of the U.S. military. In 1917 there was an increased emphasis on first aid training and on semaphore and Morse code signaling. The scouts had a successful campaign to collect used magazines and books for the soldiers in basic training. They also supported the war by selling over \$40,000 worth of "Liberty Bonds." Residual resistance, that parents may have had to the Boy Scouts, melted away as all of Texas got behind the war effort. Many more boys sought membership in the troop. In December of 1917 Troop 2 was split off from Mr. Combest's group. They were sponsored by the Young Men's Business League and Stanley Musgrave was the scoutmaster. Troop 3 was formed in March of

1918. It met in the First Methodist Church and Wardo Fouts was the scoutmaster. Later in 1918, a fourth troop was formed and it also met in the Methodist Church. Rupert F. Suffling was its scoutmaster.

There seemed to always be more boys applying for membership than there were openings for new scouts. The limiting factor that prevented the creation of even more troops was the shortage of adult men who were able and willing to make the commitment to become scoutmasters or assistants. The scout leaders formed rules that all of the troops in Denton agreed to follow. When new members were desired, a vote was taken by the scouts to determine which applicants would be selected. The new boys then had one month to pass the Tenderfoot requirements; if they did not, they would be dropped from the roll and new applicants would be voted in. It would seem that the BSA had established much more than a beach head in the City of Denton. It was a vigorous and growing institution.

At the conclusion of the Great War, several people in Denton probably expected the Boy Scouts to fade away because the conflict that gave the BSA its rapid growth was at last over. The Owsley Rifles, the Boys of Woodcraft, and the yearly Chautauqua meetings did fade away, but not the scouts. The four BSA troops in Denton continued to steadily grow. New adult leaders included R.P. Lomax, Clifton Richey, C.L. Oliver and T.N. Musgrove. There was also the help of young adults such as Arthur Jones, Taylor Cash, Robert Scott and Roger Ramey who had recently themselves been Boy Scouts. In 1920 all of the scouts in the county were unified into a council of the Boy Scouts of America. F.L. Myers was the first Commissioner and J.S. Crawford was the first Denton Council President. There were other changes in the city as well. More automobiles and fewer horses were seen. More and more of the citizens became convinced that having an organization of youth, who were seeking ways to do a good deed every day, was a really good thing and worthy of unqualified support. A century later, that is still true.



The first BSA Troop in Denton Texas appeared on page six of the November 13, 1915, *Denton Record Chronicle*. On the front row are: Bates Witt, Fred McKelvey, Sidney Erwin, Charley Ferguson, James Storrie, and Ulric Fox. On the middle row are: Freeman Rowett, Neal Edwards, Noel Carbaugh, Charlie Davis, P.C. Storrie Jr., Floyd Graham, Champ Taliaferro, William Chenoweth, and Willie Burge; and on the back row are: King Wheeler, Ballard Steenberger, Arkie Baker, W.A. Combest, Frank Tomlinson, Tom Whitehead, and Isaiah Wilson. Not shown are: Hugh Cameron, Ben Sullivan and Edly Young