

This Week in Saratoga County History - Birth of the Boy Scouts in Saratoga County

Submitted by Gene Phillips - October 8, 2020

Gene Phillips joined the Boy Scouts as a Charter youth member of Pack 24 Wilton in 1955, continuing in the Boy Scout and Explorer programs. Gene has served as Cub Scout Committee Chair, Scoutmaster, Sea Scout Skipper, Training Chair and Advancement Chair for the Saratoga District of the Twin Rivers Council. A passion for the History of Scouting in Saratoga County developed over his 40+ years in scouting. Gene is currently completing a book on that history which includes a pictorial of all known memorabilia (patches, Neckerchiefs etc.) issued by Saratoga County Council (District). Gene is an Eagle Scout (Troop 24 Wilton) as is his son Keith (Troop 24) and grandson Ethan (Troop 2 Ballston Spa). Gene can be reached at phillassoc@aol.com.



Camp Saratoga Parade Field – 1930's

Organized Boy Scouting celebrates 110 years in Saratoga County this month of October 2020. The origins of Boy Scouts in the U.S.A. help us understand the birth of Boy Scouts in Saratoga County. Many are familiar with the 1909 encounter between wealthy Chicago publisher W.D. Boyce and a lone scout on a foggy London street. Refusing compensation for providing directions, citing it was his "Good Turn" as a Scout, moved Mr. Boyce. Returning to the U.S.A. Mr. Boyce chartered the name "Boy Scouts of America" in February 1910. Mr. Boyce never organized a unit (Patrol or Troop) nor had any youth enrolled under his charter.

Edgar M. Robinson - Boys Work Secretary of the International Committee of the YMCA - was observing the formation, competition and often faltering of numerous youth organizations across the country in their attempt to fill the newly found spare time of youth (boys) as families, seeking to improve family income, left rural America's way of life (farming, logging etc.) to industrial villages and cities. Mr. Robinson oversaw all YMCA youth programs in the U.S.A. and Canada. 15,000 boys attending 400 YMCA summer camps in 1910 was part of his enormous responsibilities.

Learning of Mr. Boyce's charter Mr. Robinson with two associates travelled to Chicago to meet with Mr. Boyce in May 1910. Learning Mr. Boyce had not formed a single unit under his charter Mr. Robinson convinced Mr. Boyce to allow the YMCA to serve as the organizational arm of the Boy Scouts of America. Mr. Robinson was a quiet charming man, not particularly charismatic, but a man of vision with substantial organizational skills. Returning to New York City he set up a meeting with the heads of most youth movements throughout the United States. He convinced nearly all to join forces as the Boy Scouts of America. The national office opened in NYC on June 1, 1910. Mr. Robinson arranged the first Boy Scout summer camp at the YMCA's Silver Bay on Lake George. The YMCA was a Protestant organization. Thus many early units (Patrols not Troops) were formed at local YMCA's or Protestant churches.

September 1910 saw the Saratoga Spa YMCA hire young J.C. Smith as the "Boys Work Secretary" in charge of youth programs. Mr. Smith had been following the formation of the Boy Scout movement. He travelled to NYC on September 23, 1910 to attend a meeting the next day at the Waldorf Astoria. Mr. Smith heard presentations by General Baden Powell, Dan Beard and others explaining the purpose and organization of local Boy Scout units. J.C. Smith received his appointment as a Scoutmaster at the meeting. Returning to Saratoga he was intent on organizing a "Patrol" of Scouts.

Mr. Smith announced the first 9 youth members of the Patrol on Oct. 12, 1910. Carl Robbins, Frank Kelley and Edward Lewis were sworn in by Scoutmaster Smith on Oct. 21, 1910, having passed their Tenderfoot examination. They became the first 3 Boy Scouts in Saratoga County. 11 Tenderfoot members were enrolled by the end of November 1910. Mr. Smith continued as SM until his resignation from the Saratoga YMCA in July of 1911. The "Patrol" continued until at least 1912. The Patrol may have transferred to the Methodist Church at some point or simply folded with Scouts transferring to other local units.

Early "Patrols" were formed in Mechanicville (sponsored by First Presbyterian Church), Dec. 17, 1910; Schuylerville, July 13, 1911; Corinth, Oct. 18, 1911; and Saratoga Springs (First Baptist Church) Oct. 24, 1911. The early days saw each City, village operate as its own Council. The "Saratoga County Council" was not founded until 1924. Troop 1 Ballston Spa currently is the longest continuously operating Troop in Saratoga County having formed in 1913 and is sponsored the Ballston Spa United Methodist Church.