

BOY SCOUTS IN CATSKILLS

By SIDNEY K. CLAPP.

MORE than fourteen years ago, when the great undertaking of the City of New York was well under way in the vicinity of Ashokan building dams and other structures to provide a suitable water supply for the great city, it was noted by the writer that there were a great many boys running wild, so to speak, in the community. These boys were in the habit of congregating in the vicinity of the railroad station, stores and Post Offices. They were in the habit also of associating with older boys, whose morals were not of the best, and who found great pleasure in telling rough, coarse stories, together with the playing of games of chance and smoking, and even drinking, and so wasted their time aimlessly. This was evidently not the best influence for young, growing boys.

There was also a group of boys who found it exciting to play around the freight yards, running around and climbing over the freight cars at the imminent risk of their lives. These same boys were ready also for any sort of mischief that might arise that had the least spark of excitement in it. They were full of life and spirit, bubbling over with enthusiasm, needing only a word or deed to direct them in channels of good or bad.

Noting this general trend of affairs and having three boys of his own growing up to manhood, the writer began an effort to gather all these boys into some sort of an organization whereby they could be more or less controlled, or at least guided.

This took the form of a boys' club, which met regularly in an abandoned bowling alley. The nucleus of this club was instructed in the simplest procedures as obtained from Cushing's Manual. They made their own by-laws and rules, elected their own officers and in other ways found out how to govern themselves.

Keen Rivalry.

It was not long before the greater part of the boys were attracted to the club, which numbered about twenty at this time. Many games were played, both in doors and out, and a keen rivalry existed among the groups of members; in fact, many of the older boys became extremely anxious to join the younger boys, who at this time averaged about 14 years. Many picnics, later called hikes, were taken to the interesting points within reach, and all-night hikes were very popular, especially when tents and lean-tos were resorted to.

This work had been going on very satisfactorily when the late Charles N. Chadwick, Commissioner of the Board of Water Supply, who always took an active interest in the general welfare of boys, offered the free use of a building for the club. Later the use of a large hall was added to this, giving a fine chance for expansion. This was the beginning of real activities. But it was apparent that some more definite organization would soon become necessary to hold the loose ends together; some more definite objectives and a clearer outline of purpose.

At this time J. S. Langthorn, an engineer on the work, became associated with the Boy Scout work in New York, which then was in its incipient stage. Knowing of the work we were doing, and also realizing the difficulties we were under, he suggested that we join

as a body the Boy Scout movement, which, as stated, was just in its infancy. The matter was put before the boys, and they unanimously decided to join, as it filled a long-felt want.

A considerable number of leading and representative citizens of West Shokan, the most active centre and the most accessible point, were asked to come together to form an organization later known as the Local Council of the Boy Scouts of America. They elected their own officers, and the writer was made Scout Commissioner. It was also his pleasure to act for many years as Scoutmaster, ably assisted by some of the older boys who volunteered their services.

The number of boys enrolled had now increased to more than thirty, and the troop was becoming quite unwieldy as a whole, so it was decided to break it into smaller units called patrols, each with its own name and special leader. The active rivalry became keen, and it was soon apparent that examinations would be in order for further advancement.

Eagle Scout Honors.

An Honor Committee was formed consisting of the representative business men of Ulster County. That the troop was active may be judged by the remarkable showing made. It was required that a Scout obtain at least twenty-one merits (badges of honor) to become an Eagle Scout. Five members qualified as follows: J. S. Langthorn Jr., Bertram Van Vliet, Robert T. Pleasants, Leon Van Vliet and the writer, who were duly presented with Eagle Scout badges. At this time there were only three other Eagle Scouts in the entire organization in this country, so that it was truly an honor.

It was the duty of the Honor Committee to decide whether a Scout was duly qualified after strict examination to receive a "merit" in some particular line, meaning real proficiency in some certain branch of woodcraft or study. These subjects covered a wide and varied field from tracking, hiking, woodcraft, swimming, to gardening, forestry, &c. The writer as Scoutmaster had been fortunate in having a wide experience in many lines of outside work which had prepared him especially for this kind of teaching. Assistance was also obtained from other Scoutmasters and persons interested in the movement.

At the headquarters they had a circulating library contributed by the boys and their friends. Many interesting collections, including specimens of wood from trees, leaves, flowers, grasses, butterflies, insects, minerals and fossils, were gathered from the woods and fields, and exhibited by the Scouts at their meetings. In this manner they were all becoming familiar with the interesting things in nature about them.

Practically all of the older Scouts were active in the late World War, and every one expressed his appreciation of the training received in the Scout troop. Those who were on the ships in the navy found that the signaling, rope tying and map drawing were a great help. Several of the boys saw active service in the Aviation Corps, others in the infantry or artillery; some did not get across but spent their time in the training camps; several did their bit in the munition factories, and, last but not least, some raised wheat and food for the boys across and invested in Liberty bonds to their utmost to carry on the good work.