

6

Learning from the Past, Facing the Future The Boy Scouts, USA

*Where is there a boy to whom the call of the wild
and the open road does not appeal?*

~ **Robert Baden-Powell**

*A man's usefulness depends upon his living up to his ideals
insofar as he can. It is hard to fail but it is worse never to have tried
to succeed. All daring and courage, all iron endurance of misfortune make for a
finer, nobler type of manhood.*

~ **Theodore Roosevelt**

Mention the phrase “character-forming institution” to an American male of a certain generation, and chances are high he will invoke the Boy Scouts. The most popular youth movement in American history, the Scouts became the preeminent virtue-building organization of the twentieth century, influencing a web of other civic institutions. More than 105 million boys have participated in the program, including disproportionate numbers of leaders. To this day, the Boy Scouts remain an icon of the sort of citizen that once made America exceptional and proud.

But times have changed, for better and for worse. As this is written, the Boy Scouts of America is considering filing for bankruptcy. The organization has been tossed about by cultural waves, the most recent relating to changing norms around gender and sexuality. The brand carries baggage. Functionally, Scouting has been damaged by declines in volunteering and community activity, the shifting structure of modern families, conflicting messages around basic notions of masculinity, and pervasive cultural swells toward self-advancement, away from character and community.

So this historic organization finds itself in a moment of transition: Can it find some fresh pathways to providing the moral clarity, civic pride, and shared ethos that its millions of alumni cherish? As philanthropists consider the context for character in our time, what lessons can the successes and struggles of BSA teach that might help us create new institutions?

Some history

Contrary to popular belief, the Boy Scouts were founded not as an organic outgrowth of traditional mores, but as a deliberate response to a society in the throes of deep change. Industrialization had drawn a massive influx of rural people to the cities, immigrants were flocking in unprecedented numbers, and the hardscrabble, patriotic ethos that had governed the tail end of the nineteenth century seemed to be unraveling. Boys once raised on farms were now reared in alleyways, conventional forms of religion had become unfashionable, and older generations looked askance at the rising generation of “flat-chested” men, defined more by idle gratuity than “usefulness.”

There was William James’s famous speech at Stanford University in 1906, “The Moral Equivalent of War,” in which he questioned whether there could be any substitute for war in uniting the country and inculcating civic virtue. In 1910, the *New York Times* published an editorial entitled

“Making Good Soldiers Out of Schoolboys,” which suggested that a youth movement might be needed to maintain national unity and global strength. “Our martial spirit is gone,” lamented General William Verbeck in March of 1911. “What can we expect from our female school teachers? They have no military spirit. Our suffragettes have no military spirit. Our socialists have no military spirit.... We have the germ of a military spirit in Wall Street. There is grit there. In some of our business circles we have the spirit, ‘Don’t tread on me.’ That is the military spirit. That we must develop.” With a world war careening around the bend, it was a time of anxiousness about national purpose, male spine, and the nature of American greatness.

Meanwhile, over in the United Kingdom, a man named Robert Baden-Powell was testing answers to the question: “How do you make citizens and manufacture moral fiber?” Britain was in a crisis mood around the turn of the century. Its global economic and military dominance was collapsing, and its spiritual strength was all but gone. Baden-Powell wanted to create an efficient source of recruits for the defense of empire, a “character factory” whose human products might remedy Britain’s moral, physical, and military weakness. He wanted to resurrect the “stout yeomen of yesteryear.”

He found that a manual he had written while in South Africa to train soldiers in military reconnaissance, called *Aids to Scouting*, had been adopted by boys and youth groups looking for outdoor adventures, and even educators like Charlotte Mason (guiding spirit behind The Oaks Academy), becoming a surprise bestseller. Baden-Powell scanned the bloom of Boys’ Brigades, Woodcraft Indians, Epworth Leagues, Sunday Schools, and YMCAs popping up across Britain and America and realized there was a hunger for groups that would test, discipline, and stretch young men. He rewrote his military manual for early adolescents and published it as *Scouting for Boys* in 1908. It took off, soon institutionalizing into the Scouts.

From the beginning, Baden-Powell’s Scouts depended upon a coherent ideology. “Stressing unquestioning obedience to properly structured authority, happy acceptance of one’s social and economic position in life, and an unwavering, uncritical patriotism, for which one would be willing, if necessary, to die, he saw the Scouts as the key both to social utility and personal fulfillment,” wrote Michael Rosenthal in his 1984 history *The Character Factory*.

As legend has it, in 1909 an American philanthropist named William Boyce found himself lost on a foggy street in London. An unknown

Scout came to his aid, guiding him to his destination. When the Scout refused his offer of a tip and Boyce asked why, the boy explained that he was a Boy Scout and was merely doing his daily good turn. Boyce was intrigued, consulted with Baden-Powell, and took his inspiration across the Atlantic, establishing the Boy Scouts of America in 1910.

From seeds to success: The genius of a movement

The Scouts took off in the States, quickly and unreservedly. Newspapers were almost breathless with excitement: “We hail the new age of chivalry which Young America ushers in,” trumpeted a *New York Times* editorial in 1910. “The work takes in the entire range of moral and physical development perhaps as no other system yet devised has done. It gives something for every kind of boy.”

In the early years, it was all about recovering the beau ideal of the daring man. Combining “ancient knowledge of nature” with modern knowledge and organization, the movement claimed to “put back some of the wild man into the city boys.” Thrift was the “grit” of its day. Chivalry would be taught alongside opportunities for courage and self-sacrifice. There would be a chance for iron to sharpen iron, for wildness to be checked by civility, for bravery to be checked by chivalry.

Key to achieving this sort of balanced citizenship was the Scout merit system, which gave boys a clear pathway to prove themselves and advance in rank. The belief was that everyone could become great in character, resourcefulness, and self-reliance. Boys just needed a structure, a team, and a different kind of education, one that would be highly physical—man versus wild.

“We don’t say, ‘Come and be good boys,’” Baden-Powell told the *New York Times* during a North American visit in 1910. “That has wrecked other movements. We say: ‘Come and be Indians,’ and this appeals to their undeveloped minds. After attracting them we teach them until they come to know the value of handicraft. They pass into useful work, such as forming fire brigades, life-saving corps, and other useful branches that go to the making of good government.”

Part of the genius of Scouting was its sheer appeal to boys. “Adventure!” reads the opening sentence of the longtime *Boy Scout Handbook*. “That’s what Scouting is. You are standing at the door-way to the most exciting adventures you can imagine.” Action was everything. Boy Scouts were given tools—outside the family context—to save another’s life, to survive in the woods, to solve problems with others, and to rise

to leadership when the occasion called. “At age 11 and 12,” notes Chris Trepky, a modern-day Eagle Scout who is now 32, “you exist in a world where you don’t have a lot of agency. The Scouts grant agency. It’s a safe place for young men to fail.”

Even today’s *Boy Scout Handbook* reveals an education process that is less about schooling and more about facing a sequence of challenges in order to rise to a set of natural conclusions. It’s an education in practical wisdom, with frequent opportunities to lead, not just follow a teacher. There are lessons in outdoor adventures, in what it means to grow from a boy to a man, in one’s responsibilities as a Scout and as an American, and clear demands on the path to Eagle rank, the highest honor.

“Scouting gives you a chance to experience the world in a more real and meaningful way,” says Trepky, “because otherwise you’re living a life where everyone is telling you how things work. When you’re in the BSA, you get to go find out for yourself. They’re all about kindling a fire, not filling a vessel.”

“At school,” Trepky says, he got to “go on field trips and stuff like that. But I got to *do* stuff with the Boy Scouts. I got to learn more at my own pace. It was very self-directed, especially as I got older. It was a completely different delivery method than I got in public school. The BSA creates an environment where you can pursue your own goals. Men learn to find self-motivation.”

The extraordinary levels of trust granted at an early age, combined with clear training in practical know-how, give Scouts a level-headedness that can define their moral responses throughout life. The Scouting ethic also imbues habits of mind that are acutely tuned to others, often instilling a sense of moral responsibility to help one’s fellow citizens that lasts a lifetime.

“Rank advancement and the merit badges provided a codified system for proving competence,” says Trepky. “We trusted in it, and as a result we were able to extend that trust into real life activities. The Boy Scouts gave me both the ability and the confidence to save someone’s life. And that’s powerful. Learning first aid...I realized I had the tools to be able to preserve someone’s life on earth. I started to see myself as someone who could do that and would do that, given the opportunity.”

The Scouts’ other great insight has always been to keep power at the local level. To this day, local chartering organizations set their own standards with BSA troops. “A Boy Scout troop is only as sorted as the community that it comes from,” says Trepky. “Most decisions get made at

the unit level. And while troops may look very different from each other, the ethos is the same.”

Scouts are visible, Trepky says, “and we lead the way in community service. I would not be surprised if the mayor of my town called the scoutmaster in times of crisis. That’s certainly the first person I’d get to know if I were mayor, because the Scouts are a reserve I can tap any time, day or night.”

Proud as it was of its distinctive mission, the BSA from its very beginning chose cooperation over territoriality. The organization’s first public meeting was held in the auditorium of the YMCA, and Jacob Riis, photographer of *How the Other Half Lives*, keynoted. The Boy Scouts joined Jane Addams’s Settlement House movement to celebrate the birthday of George Washington. In 1913, the LDS Church started using the Boy Scouts as its youth group for boys. Leaders of other youth movements were enlisted to spread the word on its offerings, along with public figures like former President Theodore Roosevelt.



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Its partnerships and openness helped the BSA grow quickly. The group soon became a key thread of the institutional re-weave that was going on socially and morally in America. People came to trust those associated with the Boy Scouts. Its brand was one of reliability, good citizenship, and high leadership. It was an everyman’s movement for building America’s mushrooming middle class. And it flourished as such for nearly a century.

Character fruits

In positions of leadership today, whether in the military, politics, business, philanthropy, or elsewhere, there is an inordinate amount of Boy Scout experience. Of America’s first 312 astronauts, 180 were scouts, including 11 of the 12 men who walked on the moon. Other Scout alums include President Gerald Ford, novelist Wallace Stegner, businessmen and

philanthropists Sam Walton, Stephen Bechtel, and David Weekley, and many others. It's impressive. But more impressive is the ethos that Scouting imparted that to this day guides millions of American men, making a quiet difference on a daily basis in communities and organizations across our land.

In 2012 the John Templeton Foundation funded a Baylor University study of Eagle Scouts. The results were notable. The study found that throughout their adult lives those who had attained the rank of Eagle Scout tended to show a significantly greater connectedness to siblings, neighbors, religious community, friends, and coworkers. They were more active in formal and informal groups. They felt a spiritual presence in nature and acknowledged higher duties to God. These former Eagles participated in health and recreational activities at elevated rates, and were protective of the natural environment. They were more likely to be involved in community service, and in leadership positions. They were above average in planning and preparedness, and more likely than others to practice professional ethics, morality, tolerance, and respect for diversity.

"If I see that there's a medical emergency in front of me," reports Trepky, "I personally feel that I have a moral obligation to help, because I know how.... If you're walking in circles on the street and you look like you're not there, you look like you're having a hard time, I'm going to ask you what's happening. I'm at least going to reach out to you: 'Hey, you all right?' I want to see your eyes, I want to see if you're there. If I think you're not, I'm going to follow you for a second and I'm going to try to see, are you with it? Are you okay? I'm interested in that. Because I don't want you walking around on the street and getting hit, endangering somebody else or yourself. This is my city, this is where I live, I'm responsible for this."

Historically, many communities have relied upon the renaissance bag of skills that the BSA cultivates. It's still relatively easy for a troop to find sponsorship in a given community, especially in small towns or suburbs, in part because many of the local business owners will have Scout badges of their own.

"When I was starting my Eagle project," recalls Trepky, "I needed some lumber, and I walked in a lumber yard and said, 'Hi, I'm a Boy Scout and I'm trying to do a project, and I'm looking for somebody that I can talk to.' A ten-minute conversation later the guy was like, 'Well, what do you need?' And I gave him a list.... He said, 'You look

very organized, I'd be happy to get you this stuff. You can have it free of charge, don't worry about it.'"

Others describe the Boy Scouts as providing a coming-of-age pathway when other routes weren't open. David Weekley co-founded the country's largest private homebuilding company and is a respected philanthropist based in Houston. He has been involved in Scouts since he was a kid, most recently serving on some of the organization's highest boards.

"I was a little chubby, fat kid, never the smartest or best-looking," Weekley recalls. "But for me, I could go in and I could work hard and get badges, and be somebody. The Boy Scouts were a place where you could work and get affirmation, work and take responsibility, because somebody outside your family was paying attention and pushing you." Stan Swim of the Bill of Rights Institute is a longtime Scout who later became a Scoutmaster in Salt Lake City. He understands the Scouts as providing a place for boys to confront real challenges in a culture that wants to rip that experience away.

"Our group helps boys learn to accomplish genuinely difficult things. In an urban or even suburban environment, it often seems like the most challenging things boys do are in the context of athletics. And that's fine; there's some real value for athletics in character formation, especially when it comes to teams. But they don't teach you how to solve problems in solitude, particularly when the impediments are your own limitations, which you need to break through on your own. And there's a lot of praise and adulation that accompanies the athletic experience today. That seems to dilute its value and cause the boys to become too transactional and superficial in the pursuit of achievement. In Scouts, there's nobody to dish out attaboys."

The BSA also provides a needed counterweight to technological distractions. "Are we raising a generation of young men who will be led to believe that their life is complete with what you can learn from a screen?" asks Swim. "That would be a tremendous tragedy. It would bode poorly for that person, and also for the society. Scouts does not allow you to treat the outdoors as some tourist destination where you go out and take a few pretty pictures. Rather, it's 'How do you grapple with nature on its own? Where do you fit in that whole process? How do you go through a survival experience?'"

He also sees the Scouts as one of the last organizations to be teaching American history properly. "We don't have a good replacement for passing along our American heritage now. I don't think the public schools

are on the case there. I think they have deliberately quit that field. With all this nation's imperfections, its story is still an essential part of what kids need to know. And it's not being taught outside the Scouts."

Challenges today

Despite these many successes, the Boy Scouts have encountered serious challenges in recent years. This is reflected in enrollment decline. Today, 2.3 million boys are involved in Scouting. The historic peak was around 4 million.

BSA's struggles to navigate deep shifts in American society are the same ones that confront many other efforts to promote robust character formation today. There is the pressure to choose between tradition and pluralism. There are changing notions of gender, now at a fundamental level. There is a privatization and specialization of leisure and recreational activity. Family time pressures and the pressures of performance have squeezed the average childhood of simple play and fun, relationship building, and renaissance breadth. There are general declines in volunteerism, and a loss of available fathers to help lead troops. There is the erosion of the middle class, historically the bastion of Scouting. With changing U.S. demography there is a need to attract minority troop leaders and better serve minority youth.

Board members of BSA are aware of these challenges, and are trying hard to address them. "The Boy Scouts started at a moment in history that was very community-based," Weekley points out. "People lived in the same place for a long time. They knew their neighbors. Parents have less time today." The rise of homes with two working parents means there is less connection. For single moms, there's almost no ability to drop off a kid, let alone volunteer.

"In my small Midwestern town," reflects Trepky, "if your parents weren't available to drop you off on a Friday and pick you up on a Sunday, someone else in the town would volunteer to do it. We took care of one another. But I'm not sure that's true in most places today. It's a big lift for a single parent."

"I think the whole volunteerism culture has changed," says Weekley. "The amount of time that people have has changed. The competitiveness of society has changed."

On the other side of the coin, the rise of the helicopter parent has also hurt the BSA. The organization preaches hardiness, making mistakes on your own and responding with mental toughness and thrift. Parents

may say they want their kids to be gritty, but as soon as they hear what the troop is serving for breakfast, they go nuts. “Mom will come up to the troop leader and say, ‘Well, Jimmy’s got to have his protein bar in the morning,’” Weekley sighs. “So we now have a parental obstacle to building the self-reliance that’s always been our hallmark.”

Parental coddling frustrates many BSA goals. “There are more folks worried about triggering unhappiness, and anxious to encourage self-expression today,” says Weekley. “Our therapeutic culture seems to block the normal Scout, tough-love way of doing things. Moms are ripping their kids out of troops that they find too disciplined, even if the troop is just emphasizing fundamental character traits.”

There is a loss of generational links. Trepky’s dad helped lead his troop. “I loved the Scouts because I watched my dad do it. I wanted to be just like him.” The Weekley family was also part of that common experience. “For a long time, guys like me who loved the Scouts, were shaped by the Scouts, we would just send our sons and keep enrollment levels steady,” says Weekley.



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But demographic changes are leaving fewer longtime fans to feed the rolls. And BSA’s cultural expansion hasn’t kept pace. Current predictions see 2050 as the year when the U.S. becomes a majority nonwhite nation. The Scouts are not naïve to this, and have tried to reach out to various ethnic communities with sensitivity and an eagerness to stretch their style of delivery to woo new boys.

But the results have been modest. “It’s not that we haven’t tried,” says Weekley. “We’ve spent time and money, we’ve been working with Latino leaders, we’ve started specifically Latino initiatives, we hired the best Latino marketing guys in the country to help us. We’ve now got Spanish speakers involved in almost every region, but there just doesn’t seem to be a culture of sending boys off on independent, organized adventures.”

And if today's parents didn't do it themselves, or aren't familiar with it, they're a lot harder to persuade; it sounds like just one more thing they have to do for their kids. "Scouting has succeeded historically in part because we had plenty of available and willing volunteers," says Weekley. "We've somehow not been able to make the Scouts visible to the institutional volunteering of a black or Hispanic community."

And then there's the culture war. The last decade saw a highly publicized outcry over the BSA's refusal to allow gay Scout leaders. In 2015, BSA shifted and began allowing local troops to accept gay adult leaders, and, more recently, girls and transgender boys. The first decision sparked some exodus, but the latest moves have caused a real furor, especially because the decisions were made at the national level of the organization, seemingly disempowering local troops. The organization also changed its name to Scouts BSA. The Mormon church, Scouting's largest faith-based partner, accounting for nearly 20 percent of Boy Scouts, announced it would sever its ties with BSA. Evangelical families also started exiting, forming their own similar organization called Trail Life USA, which now has 30,000 members.

"I fear the most recent decisions may accelerate declining membership," says Weekley. "As the Scouts were continuing to stay strong in what their belief system was, they kept losing members. And so then they capitulated and now I'm afraid they're going to lose more members because their core feels disenfranchised."

Trepky, a millennial, hopes the engrained localism of Boy Scout management will allow the group to weather this storm.

"Everything in the BSA happens at the troop level," he says, "including the trans thing, including the leadership thing. BSA made it clear when it released the new rules that this was a decision that would be made at the troop level and negotiated with your chartering organization—which many times is a church."

He argues that "BSA has never been about the national organization. It's always been about the troop. There's a respect for 'you do you'—a genuine localism. The BSA doesn't believe it should dictate what's best for a particular community. It doesn't have that hubris. That's how it's stayed relevant all these years. If it had these edicts coming down from up high, it'd be just as divided as the rest of the country, and we wouldn't be efficient at doing anything."

Swim is less optimistic. "There are things that boys need Scouting to uniquely do for them. What worries me, as we enter what I call the

age of uniformity, is that we don't like to tolerate the idea that an organization would not like to serve everybody. As any parent can tell you, there's an enormous difference between your son and your daughter. The pendulum has swung too far toward uniformity, in the noble name of equality. We have a punishing cultural attitude now that says, 'If you can't do it for everyone, there must be something wrong with it.' That concerns me."

"I don't think the BSA is irreplaceable," warns Swim. "I think that leaders of any organization that do this kind of reactive stuff lose their organization. You only matter if you are really serving the boys that you set out to serve. I feel really bad when these national issues get distracting, and when the focus starts to be about things other than the boys."

Trepky remains hopeful. "I think the Boy Scouts will be around for as long as the United States," he says. It's an interesting comment, one which may actually put more onus on the country than the Scouts. Will divisive social issues squeeze the Scouts' effectiveness and allure? Is the current discouragement simply a product of an older generation lamenting changing times? Or has society changed so fundamentally that the BSA formula has lost its magic? That remains to be seen.

One thing, though, is clear: Losing an organization that has proven it can chisel young men in the ways of virtue and responsibility, self-sacrifice and teamwork, by offering them personal demands and brotherhood and the irreplaceable challenges of the outdoors, so that they can believe in something beyond their tribe and beyond themselves—this would be a civic loss.

"There's a lot of places you can get a good character, cultural, religious, civic education," says Trepky. "But there are very few places where you can get them all at once. The Boy Scouts are a social environment all its own." In a nation that needs citizens who carry a sense of cooperative responsibility and individual competence, we should wish for more such places, not fewer.