



“On my honor I will do my best...”

Scouting, Takoma Park style

On the first Sunday in the May, Birch Avenue is transformed into a racetrack for the boys of Scout Troop 33. The sloping asphalt creates the perfect testing ground for their hand-crafted racecars. The Soapbox Derby is a new tradition, but Troop 33 traces its history back more than 85 years.

In 1920 the Boy Scout movement was still new to America. Maj. Frank M. Moorman, on the US Army General Staff at Walter Reed, admired how the Scouts emphasized nature and camping. He organized Troop 33 in Takoma Park. Merit badges in those days also included “poultry keeping” and “dairying,” but modern-day boys would recognize many of the outdoor skills taught.

For the entire history of the troop their regular meetings have been held in the Takoma Park Presbyterian Church, for much of that time on Saturday evenings. The Scouts are so identified with the church that the Scout emblem is stamped into the concrete doorframe of the Maple Avenue entrance.

Troops 33 took the “do a good turn” motto to heart. In 1921, a local newspaper account relates how a Scout showed “a lady” to the streetcar stop. When the “lady” turned out to be the sister of Theodore Roosevelt, Troop 33 ended up with a letter of commendation from the President himself.

In the 1920s, joining Troop 33 required a commitment from both a prospective Scout and his parents. In addition to paying one dollar a month in dues, parents had to volunteer at least one afternoon or evening per month. Parents remain an active component of the Troop 33 experience today, attending weekly meetings, driving on monthly field trips and helping oversee projects.

Many of the earliest parents were from the Department of Agriculture and were eager to share their knowledge of birds, trees, and nature. One of them was Waldo LaSalle Schmitt, who spent 32 years as curator of various departments at what is now the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History. As Dave Lanar, current scoutmaster and Schmitt biographer put it, “Can you imagine the Head of the Smithsonian Natural History Museum helping you identify plants and animals!” Schmitt so impressed President Franklin Roosevelt on an excursion to the Galapagos that Roosevelt joked about renaming the Smithsonian the “Schmittsonian.”

By coincidence, Schmitt as a 15-year-old had joined Ernest Thompson Seton’s



PHOTO COURTESY OF TROOP 33

Chartered in 1920, Boy Scout Troop 33 gathered on the front porch of the Takoma Park Presbyterian Church in 1927 for this group photo. The boys are wearing jodhpurs. Scoutmaster Col. Frank Moorman is in the second row from the top, third from the right. Special aide to Gen Pershing in World War I, he was responsible for organizing Troop 33. To his right is John Cofman, owner and publisher of the Takoma Journal, which covered the local scene from the 1920s through the 1960s.

Woodcraft Indians, exploring Rock Creek Park, learning native lore and how to make the tools and weapons natives used to survive. Lord Baden Powell drew on these ideas to create his Boy Scouts, and in 1910 Seton became First Chief of the Boy Scouts of America, making Schmitt “a boy scout even before there were Boy Scouts.”

Although never scoutmaster, Schmitt was closely affiliated with Troop 33 and his son Waldo Earnest Schmitt earned his Eagle ranking in 1939. He died of battle wounds in a German prison hospital in 1941, one of eight from Troop 33 to die in World War II. Grief-stricken, the elder Schmitt donated \$1,200 toward the purchase of land for a troop campground as a memorial, specifying it be “no less than ten acres and no more than 30 minutes from the church.”

Before the war, camping had been easy. Favorite spots were up Colesville Road, just north of Four Corners or over on “Riggs Estate” in Langley Park, long since covered by shopping centers, and, of course, hiking along Sligo Creek. But Takoma and the surrounding area were now rapidly developing.

Finding suitable property proved difficult. Finally in 1959 a search turned up 43 acres of woodland at the price of \$1,439 in Romney, West Virginia, 112

the land was cleared for a lodge and two storage cabins, and “Troll Pond” was dredged out.

Camping has not been the only activity for Troop 33. Each change of scoutmaster introduced new challenges. During the Great Depression, the Scouts formed a polo team (boys acting both as horses and riders) and won the District 4 polo championship in 1931. The banner is one of the troop’s most treasured possessions. Rock-climbing, canoeing, whitewater rafting and even rifle competitions were also added. In the 1960s, the Scout families began a tradition of summer trips, ranging from the Smokies to Cape Hatteras to Maine.

To raise extra funds there were the traditional pancake suppers and spaghetti dinners. From 1959 to 1976 the troop sold azaleas at \$1 each, and from 1981 to 1994 Sammie Abbott hired the boys to deliver the city newsletter.

The scoutmaster during most of that time was Donald Patti. Though he took over in 1972 with “no experience in scouting or even camping” he quickly proved a gifted leader. This musician-turned-middle-school-industrial-arts-teacher was a master at organizing. The summer trips expanded to upwards of 40 boys and parents. Mr. Patti thought nothing of stopping along the roadside and shocking an ice cream vendor with a request for “49 cones.” And his

miles away. Despite the distance, a deal was made for Camp Waldo E. Schmitt (named for the son, not the father). Part of



PHOTO COURTESY OF TROOP 33

Waldo LaSalle Schmitt, who played a significant role in the development of Troop 33, is shown here as a young zoologist on expedition to the Galapagos. He donated the funds used to purchase land in West Virginia for the troop campground.

ghost stories were legendary. Then tragically during the night of August 17, 1994, while in the midst of the troops' summer trip to Acadia National Park in Maine, he died of a heart attack. Nonetheless, the boys and parents pulled together, and the troop went on.

Dave Lanar took over two years ago and has consciously added a sense of history to the training of today's Scouts. He is especially proud of the three seniors who earned Eagle rankings this year, bringing the troop's total of Eagle Scouts to an amazing 63. And, yes, he organized the Soapbox Derby. If you miss the derby, look for the Scouts running children's games at the Takoma Park Folk Festival in September.

Saturday night meetings have given way to Thursday nights, but service, adventure, discipline and leadership remain the primary goals for Troop 33.

Thanks to Dave Lanar, Cathie Mack and Nancy Weil for their help preparing this article. To learn more about Troop 33, go to www.bsa-troop33.net

Diana Kohn is Education Chair of Historic Takoma, Inc., a volunteer organization dedicated to preserving the heritage of Takoma Park MD and DC. Learn more at www.historictakoma.com. Previous history columns can be found at www.takoma.com (Select "Features" and look for "Takoma Archives.")

CHECK OUT THESE EVENTS:



Sunday, May 7

Boy Scout Troop 33 Soapbox Derby. Nine teams compete in time trials on Cedar Avenue between Birch & Dogwood, beginning at 11 a.m.

plus

Takoma Park House and Garden Tour. More than a dozen homes and gardens are open from 1-5 p.m. celebrating "The Art of Living." Tickets are \$20 and go on sale at 12:30 p.m. at the Farmers Market, Laurel Avenue at Carroll. All sites are within close range of each other, making for comfortable walking on this self-guided tour.



Sunday, May 21

Walking Tour of Old Takoma. Explore the residential and commercial origins of Gilbert's Victorian suburb. 1 p.m. leaving from the Takoma Metro. \$10. Info: 301-270-8187.

Saturday, June 3

Celebration for Lee Jordan. Honors his induction into the County Civil Rights Hall of Fame. 2-4 pm. Takoma Park Community Center.

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