



Boy Scouts of America

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Robert Baden-Powell,
the father of scouting.

The Boy Scouts of America traces its origins to Britain in 1907, when war hero Robert Baden-Powell led a group of 19 boys from a range of social classes on a camping trip on Brownsea Island in Poole Harbor. There he spent two weeks instructing the boys in skills that have come to identify the Scouting movement--camping, tracking, nature lore, first aid, and citizenship.

Given the success of this excursion, Baden-Powell published the first Boy Scout handbook, *Scouting for Boys*, in 1908, after which troops in Britain, the United States, and other countries began to form. The Boy Scouting movement had begun.

Michael Rosenthal argues that the Boy Scouts was born in a moment of imperial crisis for the British Empire. He writes, "Scouting was from the very beginning conceived as a remedy to Britain's moral, physical, and military weakness--conditions that . . . were threatening the empire."

This imperial crisis was deeply rooted in an intense preoccupation with the health of boys and young men's bodies. Baden-Powell and his associates saw British manhood in decline, and their concern for the scrawny physiques of British boys--widely reflected in numerous articles on the subject in the early years of the twentieth century--reveals a widespread crisis of British masculinity that created an opportunity in which the Boy Scout movement would flourish.

It is perhaps ironic that in spite of his eventual marriage to Olave Soames in 1912, many biographers have described Baden-Powell as a repressed homosexual. For the first 55 years of his life, he lived the life of a confirmed bachelor, and most biographers agree that he had little romantic or emotional interest in women during the first part of his life.

Moreover, the most intense relationship of Baden-Powell's life was with another man, Kenneth McLaren, an officer whom Baden-Powell had grown fond of when they first served together in India. Referring to McLaren affectionately as "The Boy," Baden-Powell remained close to him throughout his life. They served with each other in the Boer War, and McLaren followed Baden-Powell into the Boy Scouts after he left the military.

Scouting in America

Two years after the first British Boy Scouts activities, troops in the United States began to form and pursue activities similar to those that Baden-Powell led on Brownsea Island and wrote about in his handbook.

The official Boy Scouts of America movement began in London in 1909, when American publisher William D. Boyce was lost in the dense London fog. According to Scouting legend, a young Scout appeared and offered to help Boyce find his way. When Boyce tried to tip him for his service, the boy refused, saying that as a Scout, he could not accept money for doing a good turn. This incident so impressed Boyce that he spent the next months learning more about the Boy Scouts, and on February 8, 1910, William Boyce officially

incorporated the Boy Scouts of America in Washington, D. C.

The British anxieties about masculinity that shaped Scouting were no less pronounced in the United States. In *On My Honor*, Jay Mechling argues that there was a "similar 'crisis' of masculinity for that generation of middle- and upper-middle class Americans." Early leaders of the U. S. movement, such as Ernest Thompson Seton, Daniel Carter Beard, and James E. West, clearly expressed concerns about the future of American manhood in their work. Their use of Native American lore, nature education, and physical development all were "dedicated to making boys into model men."

The Threat of Homosexuality

The sexual tensions inherent in revitalizing American masculinity in an all male setting have proven difficult for the BSA throughout its history. Mechling writes of stories from the 1920s in which Scout leaders grew concerned about why some of the men volunteered with the organization. As one Scout executive coyly phrased it, "Some men just wanted to be around the boys."

Other incidents have more clearly given the Scouting leadership reasons to fear homosexuality, even as they conflate it with pedophilia. Scoutmasters have been accused of everything from molesting boys in their troops to running their troops as prostitution rings.

Without dismissing the intense trauma such incidents inflict on individuals, it is important to see how an institution formed to rehabilitate masculinity in the early twentieth century has never ceased to see itself as under attack or at least challenged by homosexuality or effeminacy. Ironically, as much as the organization tries to distance itself from alternative sexualities or gender norms, it cannot escape a defining and overly determined relationship to them.

The Boy Scouts in Court

Such tensions within the Boy Scouts have proven terribly difficult for self-identified gay men. As gay men and lesbians have gained considerable ground in politics in the past thirty years, they have challenged the Boy Scouts' exclusionary definitions of masculinity. Gay Boy Scouts and leaders have forced the organization to confront its own fears about pedophilia and have tried to show the organization the difference between homosexuals and child-abusers.

More specifically, they have argued that the Boy Scout Oath--"On my honor I promise I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country, and to obey the scout law, to help other people at all times, to keep myself physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight."--should not be interpreted to exclude homosexuals. It is perfectly possible, they argue, for gay people to be "morally straight."

These attempts to promote greater tolerance in the Boy Scouts have turned into lengthy court battles. Two major court cases have shaped the contours of the legal debate surrounding whether or not the Boy Scouts of America can legally bar gay men and boys from its membership.

In 1981, Timothy Curran challenged the Boy Scouts gay ban. An Eagle Scout with an exemplary record, he came out to his scoutmaster and his troop without difficulty. But when the national leadership discovered he was gay and wanted to become an adult leader in the group, they expelled him from the organization. Curran sued the Boy Scouts in 1981.

Curran's lawyers argued that the Boy Scouts' refusal to admit homosexuals, atheists, and agnostics violated the State of California's Unruh Civil Rights Act, which stipulates that businesses that operate in the state cannot discriminate on the basis of religious belief or sexual orientation. The Boy Scouts countered that, notwithstanding its charter by the United States Congress and the sponsorship of many of its troops by tax-supported institutions such as police or fire departments, it was a private organization entitled to

determine its own membership.

Ultimately, in 1998 the California Supreme Court sided with the Boy Scouts and ruled that it was not a business and therefore exempt from the Unruh Civil Rights Act. In California, at least, the Boy Scouts of America was allowed to maintain its ban on homosexual members.

Another Eagle Scout and former assistant scoutmaster, James Dale, sued the Boy Scouts when they dismissed him in 1990. He had been active in a New Jersey troop during the 1980s, but the Monmouth Council of the BSA forced him out when they read about his membership in a gay student group at Rutgers University in a newspaper article.

Ruling against Dale, New Jersey superior court judge Patrick McGann accused Dale of "moral depravity" and used material from the Bible to support his siding with the Boy Scouts' policy. Dale and his lawyers appealed the case, and the state appellate court ruled that the Boy Scouts was a "public accommodation" and did indeed have to obey the state's anti-discrimination law.

The Boy Scouts appealed the case to the United States Supreme Court. In June 2000, a bitterly divided Court ruled 5-4 that the New Jersey law banning discrimination against homosexuals did not apply to the Boy Scouts. Citing the organization's First Amendment right of freedom of association, the U.S. Supreme Court supported the organization's policy of banning gay members and leaders.

The Struggle Continues

Even though the Supreme Court decision has allowed the Boy Scouts to discriminate against homosexuals, in reality, the issue has by no means been resolved. As Jay Mechling argues, in spite of the attempts by the BSA's national leadership in Irving, Texas to impose uniform policies, the "Boy Scout experience" is as diverse as its membership, and the issue of homosexuality is by no means treated consistently in every troop.

He writes, "The dynamic, interactive nature of the Boy Scout experience means that the organization does not create a single sort of boy or man. Despite the national organization's wishes (maybe fantasies), having a uniform program does not guarantee that the troops crank out a uniform product--the God-fearing, highly moral, heterosexual adult male of Boy Scout rhetoric."

As a result of its discriminatory policies, many former supporters of the BSA have withheld funds. Perhaps chief of these are United Way and Community Chest charities that are committed to their own non-discrimination policies. Other public agencies and some religious organizations, most notably the Universalist Unitarians, have also withdrawn sponsorship of the Boy Scouts as a result of their policies.

However, in most cases, when agencies such as the United Way withhold funds from BSA chapters, the money is diverted into other programs sponsored by the BSA, such as the "Learning for Life" program, which generally adopts the policies of sponsoring organizations, such as churches or schools. Hence, the BSA has been able to depict itself as beleaguered by "politically correct" civic organizations bowing to pressure from homosexuals, which has led to increased contributions from its conservative base, while not actually losing very much funding from the mainstream.

Scouting For All

The work of Eagle Scout Steven Cozza is a highly visible example of how individual Boy Scouts and their families have defied the organization's homophobia. In 1998, at the age of 12 Cozza began to fight the Boy Scouts' ban on gay members and leaders and started Scouting For All, an organization that promotes tolerance of homosexuality in the Boy Scouts. Cozza and his father have worked tirelessly to promote their message, appearing everywhere from community grocery stores to gay pride rallies.

Not surprisingly, the BSA has not welcomed such activism, and at times has retaliated by expelling Boy Scout leaders who support Cozza. An elderly former Scoutmaster, Dave Rice, originally struggled with accepting homosexuality when Timothy Curran came out to him in 1981. But after years of reflection and discovering Scouting For All, he concluded it did not matter and began to appear with Steven Cozza at events. The Boy Scouts revoked his membership after Rice publicly supported the fledgling movement.

In spite of such retaliatory actions, local troops and councils continue to resist the national organization's prohibition on gay members and leaders. In August 2001, the Massachusetts Minutemen Council announced that it "will not inquire into a person's sexual history, and that person will not expose their sexual orientation one way or the other." Adopting a "don't ask, don't tell" approach to homosexuality, spokesperson Brock Bigsby argued that "[d]iscussions about sexual orientation do not have a place in Scouts."

Most recently, in May 2003, the largest Boy Scouts Council in the Philadelphia area, under pressure to adopt a nondiscriminatory policy in order to continue receiving funding from the United Way, announced it had approved a resolution not to discriminate against homosexuals.

Despite the announcement, however, the Council, in response to the national organization's threat to withdraw its charter, dismissed an 18-year-old camp counselor when he came out a few days later. As a result, the Pew Charitable Trust announced it was rescinding a major gift to the Council.

It is unclear how effective the challenges from within the organization will be. What is clear is that the crisis of masculinity that characterized the origins of the movement continues to shape it today.

It should also be noted that the current crisis in scouting is distinctly American: the scouting organizations in Canada, Britain, Europe, Australia, and other countries that trace their origins to Baden-Powell's movement do not have policies banning the participation of homosexuals.

The crisis is also distinctly masculine: whereas the Boy Scouts of America openly discriminates against homosexuals, the Girl Scouts of America has been a leader in adopting non-discrimination policies on the basis of sexual orientation.

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