

Even if they don't know why scouting is growing, scout execs are pleased

By GREG RYAN
(Of the Local News Staff)

As never before Chester County is probably experiencing more good turns being done daily.

Perhaps signaling the beginning of a return of today's youth to traditional values, scouting membership and activity is "on the move in Chester County," according to Council Executive Richard Bennett.

Indeed, in the last three years, according to Chester County Council records, total membership in the council's cubbing, scouting and exploring programs has grown from 6,185 in 1981; 6,462 in 1982 and this year's end projection stands at 6,700.

BUT THE INTEREST OF COUNTY YOUTH doesn't end apparently with simply becoming a scout. According to Bennett more young men between the ages of 11 and 18 are attending summer camp than ever before in the council's history. In 1981 approximately 2,000 scouts attended summer camp at one of the council's two camps, Horseshoe or Jubilee. "That was our all-time high," said Bennett. But that record too has fallen. In 1982 approximately 2,360 scouts attended camp and by this summer's end that record appears as if it will also be surpassed.

"Just about every council in America gained (membership) last year," Bennett said.

But why? What is the phenomenon, if any, which is stimulating America's youth to join and remain in scouting?

"I think people are going back to traditional values," said Bennett. A person would be hard pressed to argue scouting doesn't rank up there with such traditional heavyweights as mother, pie and the flag. Superman's "truth, justice and the American Way," can't hold a candle to scouting's oath and law.

SCOUTING'S PRINCIPLES OF CHARACTER, citizenship and physical as well as mental fitness have remained unchanged since the days of the movement's founding under Robert Baden-Powell in Great Britain in 1908. But depending on the decade, scouting's numbers have swollen or evaporated under the prevailing mood of the country. Scouting professionals and volunteers admit the late '60s and early '70s were disastrous for the program.

"I quit my troop because my scoutmaster was going to have me thrown out of the troop because I wore a black armband in protest of the war in Vietnam," said a former Life scout who grew up in New Jersey. Now an adult, he is not bitter toward scouting, but rather the scoutmaster who wouldn't tolerate his opinion. "Scouting doesn't say my country right or wrong ... scouting teaches you to be patriotic," he explained.

BUT TIMES HAVE CHANGED, and included with the feeling that a more conservative political mood is again taking root in America, changes in the country's economy and family lifestyle also have aided to the resurgence in

scouting's numbers.

While he states emphatically he has no scientific research to back up his statements, Bennett believes that people tend to be moving less. That means families stay in one place longer. From his experience Bennett contends the longer a family stays in one locale the more likely they are to become involved in community activities. Bennett believes the tough economy has also forced families to look for activities closer to home and has begun to bring the family unit closer together in terms of shared activity.

What makes scouting's increase in membership perhaps even more significant is that it is happening at a time when the number of boys eligible for scouting has decreased since the baby boom crash. Coupled with the decreasing numbers of young teenagers is the competition between a variety of youth organizations for their time.

SO WHY IS SCOUTING ATTRACTIVE TO SO MANY BOYS?

"The program," testified Bennett.

Chock full of camping, hiking, fishing, canoeing, sailing, swimming, and generally communing with nature many boys are first attracted to scouting by the perennial lure of the outdoors. "That's why I joined," said John Orr, 16, a member West Chester's United Methodist Troop 14. And, in part, that's why he stays in.

Troop 14 is not an overly large troop. In fact they have approximately 16 boys who are active, but of the 16 most of the troop is between the ages of 13 and 16 which is older than the entry level scouting age of 11. For a troop to keep their older boys is an accomplishment.

Troop 14, however, runs an active outdoor program which helps keep the interest of its older scouts. They camp on weekends at least once a month and schedule longer trips whenever they can fit them in and the pocketbook allows.

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Scouting's growing, but no one's sure why

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THERE IS PERHAPS NO BETTER PLACE to find out why scouts join and continue their membership in the worldwide organization than away from the confines of home at summer camp.

Located on the Mason-Dixon Line near Rising Sun, Md., reveille and taps snap the beginning and end of every scout's day at Camp Horseshoe. Included among the 16 troop flags paraded on poles at the camp's assembly area is Troop 14's.

Steve Leslie, 16, Glenn Runyon, 15, Carl McIntyre, 14, and Dave Wilson, 14, and Orr, all have had different tenures in scouting. Some were cub scouts. Some became scouts when they were 11 and some joined later. Regardless of the time they've spent in the B.S.A. they all agreed they'd gotten more out of scouting than camping trips.

Runyon, a star scout, contends he has learned the meaning of achievement through hard work. Upon reflection Runyon said his achievement has made him proud to be a scout. "I know what it takes and how hard it is to get to where I am," he said. Leadership and communication skills were invaluable lessons the others said they learned which if it hadn't been for scouting.

FOR MORE THAN 18½ YEARS Tom Hurst, 46, of West Chester, has been the adult backbone of Troop 14. "I don't think there's a greater fraternity in the world," said Hurst of the overall scouting program.

"Leadership and decision making," Hurst espoused as the two most important lessons scouts in his troop learn. Subsequently learning how to put priority on items in life and not quitting were results of his scout's experiences. "Sometimes you get an 11-year-old kid and you don't think he can do anything, but after they've been around awhile you see 'em come around and take charge."

According to Hurst the scouting program with its patrol method brings out leadership qualities in young boys that they might never otherwise receive.

HARVEY RETTEW OF GREENHILL ROAD in West Chester is 70 years old. He is the scoutmaster of Troop 43 of the First Presbyterian Church of West Chester and retired industrial arts teacher. He's been in the Boy Scout program for 50 years, but he's been a scout all his life.

"It's very simple," explained Rettew. "In our era we came from a rural community and were a family of limited means. There was no electricity, no plumbing. My dad died when I was 13 and I was the oldest in a family of six."

"I had to cut and supply the firewood so I had to know my woods and tools. Because I came from a farm community I got to know my plants and the different fish in the stream. My family baked its own bread and pastries and so I learned how to bake. So scouting I did everyday of my life."

Though many of his lessons were drawn from hardship, Rettew believes today's youth want to learn those lessons if provided the proper opportunity by today's adult.

Scouting, Rettew believes, provides the backdrop for that opportunity. And now, like in Rettew's earlier days, the "ideals" scouting teaches are in demand and are recognized by boys in the program as being necessary to succeed in the country's changing society.

"THE HONEYMOON OF THE BIG TIME JOBS is past. It's survival of the fittest — for those who really want to achieve. Scouting has something to offer every boy, but his set has to be tuned into it," Rettew said.

Bob Matje, 16, of Malvern is a life scout and chief of Octoraro Lodge 22, Order of the Arrow, an honor group of scout campers. Matje is also a varsity soccer player for Great Valley High School and a veteran camp staff member.

Matje joined scouting because for the usual reasons: His dad was a scout, his mom thought it would help him into college, and he enjoyed the outdoors. After five years with Willistown VFW Troop 78, Matje who plans to attain the rank of Eagle this year, can't picture where his life would be today if he wasn't in scouting. "You can't get this experience anywhere else. It's the idea of doing it yourself," said Matje.

IN JUNE, MATJE WAS REponsible for organizing a weekend in which hundreds of scouts and scouters, all members of scouting's honor group of campers, from eastern Pennsylvania gathered together for a conclave of fellowship. He oversees the operation of a more than 1,000 member organization in his lodge.

"It all boils down to the program and what it has to offer," said Earnest Heegard the camp director for Horseshoe and scoutmaster for the last 20 years. In his free time he teaches industrial arts at Haverford High School.

"No other program does what we've been doing with kids," said Heegard. In backing up Heegard's claim, Chester County Council also runs specialized camps. The council runs a week long scout computer camp, an ecology-conservation camp, an aquatic camp, science and energy camp and cub scout day camp.

Heegard also added that he sees more and more adults also becoming involved in the program.

IN THE EARLY 70s ... "Parents were busy doing their thing and dropping their kids off. That's changed. More and more dads want to go on camping trips with their sons," said Heegard which bears out what scouting officials have been saying about the growing trend of more parental involvement with scouting as an aid in sustaining membership.

"It's boys leading boys. They're given a chance in scouting that nobody's given them. I've been a teacher for 28 years and I've seen scouts who have tremendous poise in public speaking, better than most graduating seniors and even college students."

Scouting membership is up and Heegard senses a change in how scouting is seen by boys in junior high school. "For some reason it's more okay to be a scout today."