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You Can Tell
A Scout From Texas

by Rebecca Matthews
People have many different images of Boy Scouts—a boy in a funny looking hat and knickers helping a little old lady across the street, youngsters in sharp uniforms marching in a parade, or perhaps a group of scruffy guys telling ghost stories around the campfire. Though scouting still encourages outdoor skills, patriotism, and service to others, the ghost stories have gone the way of knickers and helpless little old ladies, while campfires are traditional, ceremonial occasions with songs and skits. Scouting has grown during its seventy-nine years in America. The Cub Scouts program is now open to boys in grades one through five, while the Boy Scouts program is for those between the ages of eleven and eighteen. Their uniforms and activities have changed to keep pace with the times, yet many of their traditions echo those of the fathers and grandfathers of today’s scouts.

For any scout gathering, a flag ceremony is the traditional opening and closing. The flagpole also provides a good place for songs and cheers. Throughout Texas, in Boy Scout camps and Cub Scout Day camps alike, singing “Squirrel” to recover items turned in to “Lost and Found” is a tradition. “Squirrel” is an action song. To begin, the singer holds his hands curled at chest level and bends his knees to imitate a squirrel as

The opening flag ceremony in Lubbock, Texas.
he sings: “Squirreley, squirreley.” He then turns his back to the audience and adds: “Shake your little tail [providing the appropriate action.] Squirreley, squirreley, shake your little tail. Put your finger on your nose. Put your finger on your toes. Squirreley, squirreley, shake your little tail.” Now if that’s not enough to encourage a boy to keep up with his things, nothing is.

Scouts seem to have an appropriate song for every occasion. For any group left waiting in line, “Birds in the Wilderness” comes in handy (sung to the tune of “The Old Gray Mare”): “Here we sit like birds in the wilderness, birds in the wilderness, birds in the wilderness. Here we sit like birds in the wilderness, waiting on . . .” People who are not from Texas may wait for someone or something; we from Texas wait on a person or event. Another useful song is “Announcements, announcements, announcements. A terrible death to die, a terrible death to die, a terrible death to be talked to death, a terrible death to die. We sold our cow. We sold our cow. We have no use for your bull now.”

At campfires and troop or pack meetings, action songs are popular. One favorite is “Singing in the Rain.” In the Scout version of the song, people sing the traditional chorus, then pause and follow the directions of the song leader (who will, for example, say “Thumbs up”). They then wiggle their hips back and forth as they sing: “Chee-chee-cha, chee-chee-cha, chee-chee-cha-cha” [repeat once]. The “Singing in the Rain” chorus is repeated with additional directions added at the end each time. By the completion of the song, everyone must sing “chee-chee-cha” with thumbs up, elbows back, knees bent, toes together, buns out, head to the side, and tongue out.

Of course, not all songs are action songs. A hint of the Texas mystique is found in “Scout From Texas” (sung to the tune of “Yellow Rose of Texas”):

You can tell a scout from Texas,
You can tell it by his talk.
You can tell a scout from Texas,
You can tell it by his walk.
You can tell it by his manners,
By his appetite and such.
You can tell a scout from Texas,
But you cannot tell him much.

The younger boys also enjoyed songs that are slightly risqué. For instance, “Oh, I wish I was a little bar of soap [repeat]. I’d go slippy, slippy, slimey over everybody’s hiney. Oh, I wish I was a little bar of soap.”

Now, Scout summer camps are not dedicated entirely to singing. Standard merit badge programs are offered at most camps, with special programs included as locations permit. Horseback expeditions into the hills are a big event at El Rancho Cima near Wimberley, Texas, while a backpacking trip into the Pecos Wilderness is offered at Tres Ritos, New Mexico. Theme camps offer an interesting variety of activities, as well. Many Texas scouts are treated to Cowboy Camps. At Camp C. W. Post south of Lubbock, boys can visit a Plainsman Camp and an Indian Village, while Tres Ritos offers a Mountain Man Camp. In these special areas, boys learn about the past by eating foods indigenous to the era and participating in activities such as roping or firing a black powder rifle.

Local historical legends often offer a unique focal point at the camps. A reproduction of Adobe Walls can be found at Camp Don Harrington near Amarillo. On special occasions, it is manned by costumed historians who explain that Adobe Walls was originally built by the Bent brothers as a Comanche trading post and later became the site of a famous battle between Indians and buffalo hunters. Camp Don also has a buffalo cliff on its grounds, a place where Indians in pre-horse days stampeded buffalo over a cliff in order to gather the meat. If the campers are lucky, the ranger may even include the story of an Indian lover’s leap in his campfire tales.

Camp Post contains its own bits of history. The first road up the Caprock in that area is on the grounds, as is the first well and
the grave of the first recorded death in Garza County. Campers have an opportunity to learn something about these “firsts” as members of the Sunrise Club. In this program, they hike up the Cap, camp overnight on top, and hear a short history of the area, which includes such items as cereal magnate C. W. Post’s colonizing efforts and his “rain wars.”

The highlight of any camp is usually the campfire conducted on the final evening. While parents watch, awards are handed out and entertainment is provided. In some instances, the lighting of the fire is a ceremonial occasion in itself. The announcer may display a jar of white ashes collected at a national jamboree, taken from the very hottest part of the fire. He explains that if the people around him have enough Scout spirit, the logs will burst into flames when he dumps the ashes on them. He empties the jar and leads the audience in a chorus of “I’ve Got That Scouting Spirit Down in My Heart.” Sure enough, with a poof and a great deal of smoke, the logs burst into flame. The ceremony serves the dual purpose of creating an impressive display and getting rid of all the mosquitoes in the area in one fell swoop.

Once the fire is lit, the entertainment begins. Scouts usually rely on songs, jokes and skits for entertainment, with skits dominating the event. Boy Scout skits are fairly short and simple, requiring few or no props, and they take little preparation or planning. The skits seen at summer camp will filter their way back to the hometowns and show up again at troop meetings, courts of honor, and campfires later in the year. They may even metamorphize into jokes told on campouts or field trips. Some skits are merely short “run-on’s.” For example, a boy may walk by dragging a rope behind him. Someone will ask, “Why are you pulling that rope?” The boy replies, “Have you ever tried pushing one?”

Most skits have unknown origins, but their motifs are ageless. One such skit is “The Ugliest Man.” In this one, a person stands in front of the audience with a coat or sack over his head. The announcer claims that he has the world’s ugliest man here. He asks for volunteers to come forward and look at the ugliest man. The
first two or three “volunteers” have been coached. They lift the coat or sack, peek at the man’s face, then scream and run off. Finally, a real volunteer comes forward. When he lifts the coat—the ugliest man screams and runs away.

Another skit that is as common as mesquite across the state is “The Candy Store.” To begin this one, a scout comes forward and announces that he has a candy store, but he needs some volunteers to help him out by being props. People from the audience are called forward to act as the doors, counter, cash register, and shelves for the candy store. Once these people are in place, other scouts walk through the doors and ask for different candies. The shop-keeper searches through the shelves but announces that he is out of that type of candy. Finally, a scout asks, “What kind of candy do you have?” The shop-keeper replies, “I don’t have any candy.” He waves his hands toward the volunteer props. “But just look at all these suckers.”

Camp entertainment is supposed to be clean. One director warned his staff, “Don’t do a skit unless you’d be willing to do it in front of your mother and your preacher.” Yet, sometimes questionable skits slip through, much to the delight of campers. One example is an elaborate skit called “A Fairy Tale.” This one is longer than most, requiring a script and mass audience participation. The viewers are divided into sections, and each section must respond with a phrase when they hear a certain word. For example, the word “king” elicits the response, “I am the king;” the king’s “pretty daughter” is greeted with “Oo-la-la,” while the “ugly daughter” hears “Oo-oo-icky-pooh. What a dog!” when her name is called. The script tells a common fairy tale with a knight saving the kingdom by slaying a dragon. After his brave deed, the knight stands before the king and is offered a reward. The king (“I am the king”) asks whether the knight (“Bum-da-da-dum”) prefers the hand of his pretty daughter (“Oo-la-la”) or that of his ugly daughter (“Oo-oo-icky-pooh. What a dog!”). The knight responds, “Neither, my king. I want you.” When the king asks why, the knight says, “Because this is a fairy tale.”
The skit survived Boy Scout Camp with only mild complaints, but when someone tried to present it before Cub Scouts, the staff responded with a “blunder bust.” They all walked into the council ring, making noise and creating confusion, until the skit’s announcer was escorted offstage.

The audience is expected to respond to skits and award ceremonies with cheers or applauses. These are especially popular with Cub Scouts, and no one at a Cub activity would dream of simply clapping his hands. Instead, they may give someone a big hand (hold hand up, palm out) or a round of applause (clap, moving hands in a circle around the head). The most popular cheer is the “Watermelon.” People pretend to hold a watermelon slice in both hands, eat it with a loud slurp and then spit out the seeds. An appropriate cheer for the aforementioned “Fairy Tale” might be the “Oil Cheer” (“Crude, crude, crude”). An unpopular announcement might meet with the “Cookie Cheer” (“Crumby, crumby, crumby”) or the “Cactus Cheer” (“Yucca, yucca, yucca”). There are myriad cheers, and their ranks seem to increase daily, but these are the most universally known and best loved of them.

After the awards and entertainment at summer camps, the campfires are usually concluded with an “Order of the Arrow” (OA) tap-out. This is a solemn, long awaited occasion since OA membership is considered a high honor. New members are chosen by their home troops in yearly elections, but their identities are a closely guarded secret until the night of the tap-out.

On those nights, when the sky is black so that the campfire provides the only illumination, four OA members wearing Indian garb and war paint step into the circle of light. They ask that everyone remain totally silent and that no photographs be taken during the ceremony. Though there is room for improvisation, the ceremonies follow general guidelines. One Indian announces that the Great Spirit of Scouting will speak to him and tell him who in the group is worthy of OA membership. After a few moments of silence, he declares that he has found none; he must appeal to the Great Spirit again. Finally, the identities of the new members are
revealed. In times past, the other OA Indians would circle the group and tap new members on the shoulder. Some say that a person was not properly tapped out unless his knees buckled under the impact. In the last few years, tap-outs have been banned by new laws against hazing, so boys are now called out. A voice from the darkness calls their names, and they move into the circle of light. The new candidates take a vow of silence and cannot speak until released from that vow the next morning. Other members of the audience are asked to return to the parking lot without speaking.

Those outside scouting circles may wonder where one learns these songs, skits, and cheers. Boy Scouts of America publishes reams of printed material, some of which probably includes every song, skit, and cheer imaginable—I’ve discussed only a small sampling. But very few people actually pick up ideas from these sources. Instead, in the best of folk traditions, they learn by observation and word-of-mouth. They exchange ideas at training sessions, camps, and other council-wide activities. Traditions travel as people move or visit, and they are recycled when ex-Boy Scouts become adult scout leaders. One suspects that the skits and songs existed long before they were frozen in printed texts. As one middle-aged Scoutmaster says, “They stay the same with only small variations for years. At least that’s been my experience because the same ones I was doing when I was a scout are still being done now.”

The author’s sons, Joel, Jeremiah, and Josh as scouts in 1989.