



The First Camp - Brownsea 1907

A Story for Campfires and Special Occasions

The first camp in Scouting has become a legend -- as it should. From it arose the largest voluntary youth movement in history, today encompassing over 200 countries and having representatives across the world. Scouts of today and yesterday number in the many millions. Some years back, someone reckoned that in the USA alone over 100,000,000 people had been in Scouting at some part of their lives. And it all started with 22 boys on an island in Dorsetshire, England in the summer of 1907.

In that long-ago summer, General Robert S. S. Baden-Powell [pronounced like "role"], an officer in the British army, and one of the most imaginative men to ever wear the Imperial uniform, gathered together twenty boys invited from boarding schools and Boys' Brigade units to try out a new idea -- a campout with boys under boy leaders.

Add an older brother of one boy and B-P's 9-3/4-year-old nephew Donald, an old friend from Scotland, Kenneth MacLaren, a cook and assorted visiting instructors, and you have Brownsea Camp. Twelve days of activity that became Scouting.

They joined B-P because he was a national hero. In a frustrating war in South Africa, his activity in defending a city with not enough troops but more than enough cleverness and improvisation made him known across the Empire. Boys read about the dummy cannons and the attack lanterns without an attack and admired how he defended Mafeking. Particularly they liked the Mafeking Cadets on their bicycles riding through the shellbursts. Those were boys to remember.

That was in 1900. When he got back to England years later, B-P found thousands of boys -- and some girls -- all across the country hiking, cooking and camping with home-made equipment -- activities he had described in his writings. He had not intended to be a leader of the youth of England -- but he was.

And so we come to Brownsea. A little island in Poole Harbour near Bournemouth, England. They called it an "experimental" camp because no-one, including B-P himself, knew how it would come out, but it is taken as the first "Scout" camp by most people. The idea was there even if the uniforms were not.

There were a lot of activities. Some we still do, some not. Scouts still build fires, tie knots, cook, hike cross-country and manage boats. Scouts are renowned for their study of animals and wildlife, plants and the wilderness. They still learn the stars and no-one is surprised to hear when they save lives and develop many of the safety procedures used by others.

Scouts play games and learn skills as they did then and the Chivalry and Honour they learnt at Brownsea in 1907 is just called the Promise and Law today. A century has not changed these things.

Some things are gone. There is little call today for the lessons in Colonial Geography or the knowledge of the differences in the campaign medals from Africa. But the important things remain.

Particularly that item for Day Five -- it was called The Good Turn.

They had a good time at Brownsea in 1907. Good enough that when the boys went home Scouting spread with almost unbelievable speed and a few years later B-P welcomed Scouts from across the world at the first World Jamboree. Of course by then he was Sir Robert Baden-Powell and on his way to a greater career than he ever had in the army -- CHIEF SCOUT OF THE WORLD.