



Trail Scouts

To Some, the Trail Means More than a Badge

BY CINDY ROSS

My prejudices against the Boy Scouts began when I was a teenager. I was camping at Windsor Furnace Shelter in Pennsylvania one weekend, which I happened to share with a large troop of Scouts. It rained heavily that night but the leaders were snug inside the shelter. The Scouts, however, were out in the elements, wrapped in sheets of plastic like cocoons, with openings at their heads and feet. They were lying in puddles and were soaked. The Scoutmasters didn't invest in tents but they did have Class A uniforms, complete with kerchiefs and knee socks. I didn't understand why adequate equipment and preventing their boys from getting hypothermia wasn't more important. I quickly decided that a troop is only as good as the leaders and the Scouts' knowledge only runs as deep as the Scoutmasters'.

This particular section of Trail is in close proximity to many metropolitan areas and scout troops. The guidebook writers also claim it has the best views in



the state from the Pinnacle. So it was not uncommon to see multiple troops of over 20 in each troop on any given weekend when the weather was nice. Didn't they know about impact? All we seemed to do was step aside for yet another long line of 50-miler award seekers. (The 50-Mile award is earned by taking a wilderness trip on foot or boat, covering 50 consecutive

miles over at least 5 consecutive days.) It greatly disturbed my sense of peace.

Before I could poison my young children with my prejudices, I convinced my 6-year-old daughter, Sierra, that a Brownie Troop would be just the thing to get her involved in a group activity. It was a renegade troop, however, for I only allowed the number of girls that could fit into my two-seater truck (to keep the troop size manageable). My husband Todd, had to be my assistant leader (so I didn't have to deal with parents), and every meeting was a hike.

After our family hiked the 3,100-mile Continen-

Vince and Ray keep the focus at a stream crossing. Right, Josh, still smiling on the hike down Chairback Gap.

PHOTOS BY TIM MINNICH

Above, Carly in full gear.

PHOTO BY BARRY NOSS



tal Divide Trail, *Scouting Magazine* contracted me to write a story about our experience. I found myself writing for an organization that I always strove to avoid. This was a true blessing, however, for I have become one of the scouting organization's biggest fans.

I reached my epiphany this past year as I traveled the country covering high-adventure stories for *Scouting Magazine*. The first was a caving trip in Kentucky, in the hills where the Hatfield and McCoy families are still very much alive. This particular troop had only been in existence for a year and their leaders, a husband-wife team, were completely new to scouting, for they had never been Scouts themselves. As we day-hiked, the leaders shared an account of their first and only hike with the boys—a 25-miler which turned into a virtual death march.

“What possessed you to do that many miles?” I asked.

“We didn't know any better and we got lost. We are so green ourselves. We have to learn *everything*.”

They explained that they saw a real need for *something* positive in the boys' lives. Some of their parents were in jail, grandparents were raising others, some spent time in detention homes, and some had emotional problems. But you couldn't tell by looking at them. They looked just like “regular” boys.

After they spent three days caving, progressing from guided commercial caving to wild caving on their own, the personal growth and confidence they exuded was startling. The Scoutmaster and his wife were doing far more beneficial work for these kids

than simply turning them on to high-adventure. They were healing them. They were acting as psychologists, counselors, disciplinarians, and most importantly, loving them. They were doing the jobs most of the Scouts' parents didn't or couldn't do at home. Their job was huge and their hearts were even bigger and I felt proud to be a part of such a giving organization.

I came home from Kentucky, singing the praises of the scouting organization but my 14-year-old son, Bryce, turned a deaf ear. I had created a monster. I could say nothing to convince him that joining a local troop would be a valuable asset to his life. “No way” he vehemently protested, and I feared I had failed as a mother.

The next level of my epiphany came later that summer in Oklahoma where I attended the American Indian Scouting Association's Conference. I was not aware that the Boy Scouts of America had an offshoot organization that specifically dealt with Native American boys and girls and it was 50 years old. Close to 150 different tribes are involved, forming troops on reservations across the country. Many of these kids need the support of such a caring organization.

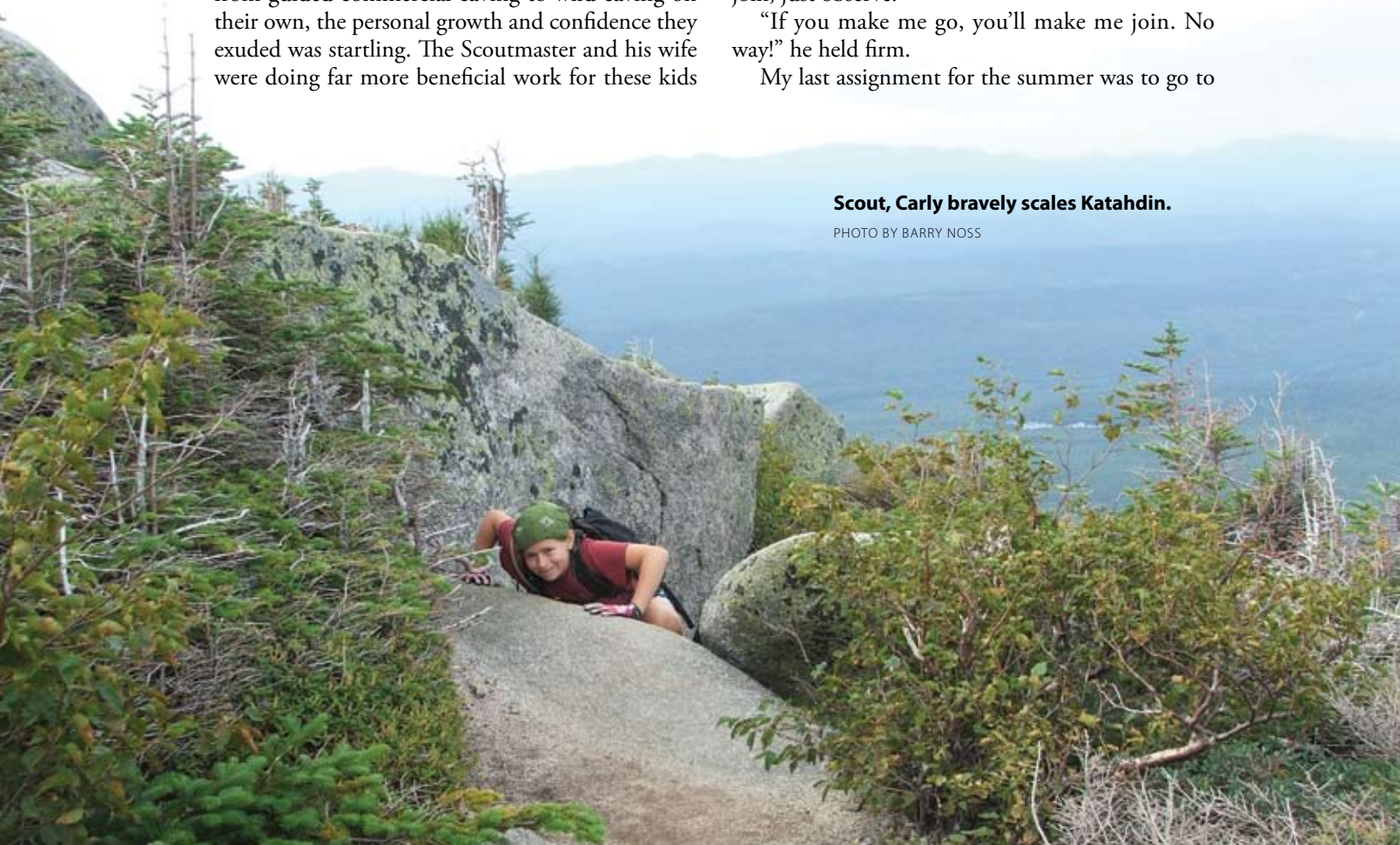
Again, I returned home from my assignment, begging my son to reconsider. “We could just attend one of the local troop's meetings. You don't have to join, just observe.”

“If you make me go, you'll make me join. No way!” he held firm.

My last assignment for the summer was to go to

Scout, Carly bravely scales Katahdin.

PHOTO BY BARRY NOSS



Relaxing at a stream crossing.

PHOTO BY TIM MINNICH



Maine to meet up with a scouting Venture Crew that was just finishing the 100-Mile Wilderness and would then climb Mount Katahdin as a grand finale. Since my children are fond of the mountain, they asked to come along.

We fast found out they were not what we thought of as “normal” Scouts. First, this was a Venture Crew, teenage boys and girls, whose focus is on ultimate adventures relating to the outdoors. It is an offshoot of the Boy Scouts of America but with separate goals and rules. All this was suddenly very attractive.

Hiking 100 miles also impressed my children from the get-go, as they personally love long-distance hiking. These were pretty tough kids. They had been training and learning about long distance hiking for two and a half years prior to this adventure. That’s dedication. And the kids were so nice. They seemed “normal,” not the monster geeks my kids had created in their minds resulting from their mother’s previous prejudices. My kids loved this crew, the kids and the leaders, who treated them like extended family. My kids barely spoke to me the rest of the trip and they didn’t hike one single step with me.

I came upon them on a break with the entire crew gathered around, discussing all the outdoor adventures they had been on and all those they were dreaming of in the future, like paddling Maine’s Allagash. A few crew members even planned to hike the entire Appalachian Trail when they graduated, and that resounded loud and clear to my kids’ dreams.

“We want to join,” they announced that night in

the tent. Since the crew is located less than an hour from our home in Pennsylvania, it was doable. “You’re kidding? You want to be a Scout?” I laughingly teased my son.

“It’s Venture Crew, it’s not the same. And this crew is so cool. We really like being with them. Even the leaders are great. They have the best adventures.”

“I’m not interested in being a leader,” I informed them. “I already have too much on my plate.”

“We don’t want you to be in it, Mom,” they broke the news to me. “We want to do something without you and Dad. We want to do something as a group with our friends on our own.”

“I always wanted to canoe the Allagash. Can’t I come as an advisor or a helper on just that trip?”

They both smiled sheepishly. They truly didn’t want their dear ol’ mom, who had carted them all over the world on adventures, to come along. Fine. This is what growing up is all about. I could hardly believe that my two children had fallen in love with the scouting program. I felt like I had maybe done a good job after all.

The amount of hours the leaders give up is more than many parents give to their own offspring. And the love of the outdoors and the Trail that many leaders instill in these kids is one of the most positive attributes that the entire hiking and environmental community benefits from.

They’re out there, giving up their time, doing something completely unselfish for somebody else; the highest form of human love. And we all benefit from it in the long run.