Early Girl Scouting in the East District

Jean Harlow

Shortly after Juliette Gordon Low brought Girl Scouting/Guiding to this country in 1912, a Philadelphia girl spotted a promotional article in the Philadelphia Public Ledger, Sunday, August 10, 1913, entitled “Now the Girls are Learning to be Scouts.” This article was shared with the girls and director at her recreation center, and yielded the decision to become Scouts. In the late fall, Juliette Low came and invested the girls and their captain into the very first troop in our region.

In March of 1916, Juliette Low gave a talk to Bryn Mawr College students, and twelve days later she held a “drawing room” meeting with a group of prominent women. The result of this meeting was the establishment of the Philadelphia Girl Scout Council, with Ellen Mary Cassatt of Philadelphia and “Kelso” in Berwyn (and niece of artist Mary Cassatt) as its first Commissioner (president). To establish an office for the fledging organization, Ellen Mary provided a typewriter and telephone. Mrs. Alexander Brown Coxe of Philadelphia and “Nawbeek,” in Paoli, paid the rent of $15 a month for the first year and beyond.

As girls learned of the opportunity to be Girl Scouts, the number of troops increased, reaching out of the city to include Wayne in 1917. This troop had a drum and bugle corps that marched in parades during World War I, and, like their sister Scouts, won honors for selling Liberty Bonds.

Marching, khaki, and bugle calls did not leave the Great Valley when the Marines closed their camp in Paoli, since the Girl Scouts came there to camp in 1919 and 1920 at the rate of about one hundred a week during the summer. Each Scout paid $3.25 for board for the week, and 44 cents for the train ride to Paoli Station. There, a wagon or truck took the luggage, and the girls walked through the woods for about a mile to “Camp Odakotah,” so named as the winning entry in a contest held the first year. In her luggage, each Scout was instructed to pack the following among her things: two warm blankets, middies for the week, bloomers or a dark skirt and a Scout skirt, high shoes and cotton or wool stockings, an Annette Kellerman-style bathing suit or a substitute. A spring-fed lake provided swimming, rowboat, and canoe experiences. Tents with army cots were positioned uphill to give an excellent view of the valley, which Scouts could enjoy, along with their studies in zoology, botany, Scout lore, and hiking.
In 1920, Ellen Mary Cassatt and Juliette Low attended the First International Conference in England. There they taught the leaders of twelve nations and seven colonies to sing Taps with the well-known words “Day is done, gone the sun . . .” which had been printed in the council publication The Girl Scout Messenger, Vol. II, No. 1, October 1918. British historian Rose Kerr wrote that these Americans were “indirectly responsible for the innumerable Guides who sing it at the close of every meeting regardless as to whether ‘the day is done’ or not.”

Locally, the earliest known troop was founded by Lillian Breuninger in Malvern in 1922. Her time as Captain was limited by illness, and she was succeeded by Jane Gordon Coxe. The Malvern girls camped at Camp Tall Trees, Media, and in Paoli at the school house at “Nawbeek” on South Valley Road. They also participated in the opening pageant at the “Girl Scout Little House” at the Sesquicentennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. During these years, a troop was started in Berwyn by Helen Sherman, and one in Green Tree by Mrs. Martha Kautz. The Malvern and Berwyn troops were part of the Philadelphia Council at first, with assigned numbers of 104 for Malvern and 116 for Berwyn, later to be Malvern 3 and Berwyn 16. The Green Tree troop was probably registered through the Recreation Department of the Health and Welfare Association of Chester County.

Other troops in the county were organized through the Health and Welfare Association. As they worked, played, and camped, many hoped for a closer relationship among all the Scout groups. Once again, the Health and Welfare organization helped out with a meeting on November 19, 1927, that included representatives from the Delaware County Girl Scouts, the Boy Scouts, the Philadelphia Girl Scouts, the Commissioner and President of the Leaders’ Association, the county Recreation Superintendent, and two others, along with Scouts and friends from ten towns, including Devon, Green Tree, Malvern, and Paoli. The discussion centered on a County Association or a County Council. This meeting preceded the historic event at Martha Thomas’ home “Whitford,” with the guest of honor being Lou Henry Hoover (Mrs. Herbert). The only woman to be twice National President of the Girl Scouts urged those present to form a council. As a result, the Chester County Girl Scout Council was chartered on January 1, 1929.

Within two years, this new council, aided by a member of the national staff, united Tredyffrin, Easttown, Willistown, and Malvern into a Girl Scout district. At first called the Main Line District, it soon became known as the East District. Mrs. Ronald J. McCarthy was the chairman.
Brownie Pack 1 was first in the district and first in Chester County. Started by Margo Wheelock (Mrs. Ward) and Edith J. Croll (Mrs. Warren A.) in 1929, the pack met for its first three years on the third floor of the Wheelock home. Somewhat later, Leopard School became the meeting place, and this group of brown-uniformed girls became known as Leopard 1. These Brownies planned an Easter food basket for a poor family, made bird boxes for wrens, entertained 24 needy tots at a Christmas “Give not Get” party, and ate S’mores on their outings.

The Devon fireworks explosion may be the most remembered event of 1930. As people flocked to assist in various ways, Helen Shoemaker organized three local troops - Berwyn 16, 18, and 19 – to serve at the disaster relief site. For the immediately following Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, 22 girls were messengers, cooked stew, and made sandwiches, which they served as they assisted the nurses. Troop 18, whose Italian-American girls had language difficulties in school, were outstanding by providing much-needed interpreters for the Red Cross. The girls all returned on Monday to do the cleanup needed to make the Red Cross room in good order for the regular Baby Clinic.

A Cassatt neighbor, Ethel Jennings Newton (Mrs. E. Swift) of “Oak Knoll,” Daylesford, became the fourth commissioner in Philadelphia in 1932. A new camp had been purchased, which only added to an extremely difficult financial situation. Girls baked and sold cookies in 1933, but this was rather small scale. So, in 1934, Newton convinced John Huber III, President of the Keebler-Wyl Baking Company, to produce a vanilla cookie shaped like the Girl Scout emblem, which girls would sell throughout the Council area. The success of this venture was marked by a sizeable profit. Furthermore, two years later, the National Girl Scouts started licensing other companies to produce Girl Scout Cookies for sale in various parts of the country. Thus, Ethel Jennings Newton became the Founding Mother of the nationwide annual cookie sale.

In its years, the East District was home to many varied and remarkable Girl Scout activities and persons, including Betty Ann Brownlow, who achieved the Golden Eaglet, the highest award.

This photo, dated May 17, 1933, shows local Brownie members Barbara Branchley, Jane Mathers, Ann McCarthy, Lois Milton, and Jane Morris, although the order of the names is uncertain. At the time, their Brownie level was called the Golden Hand, a designation no longer used by the Girl Scouts of the USA. They are displaying their Brownie Wings, to indicate they are “flying up” to Girl Scouts. From the Archives, Girl Scouts of Eastern Pennsylvania.

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available to Girl Scouts through 1939, and several Chester County Commissioners/Presidents: Mrs. Humbert
B. Powell (five years); Jane Gordon Coxe Fletcher (Mrs. William Meade), twice; Emily Nassau (Mrs. Wil-
liam); and Louise Wilson (Mrs. Jackson A.).

TEHS member Jean Harlow serves on the History Committee of the Girl Scouts of Eastern Pennsylvania.

REFERENCES

Archives, Girls Scouts of Eastern Pennsylvania
National Historic Preservation Center, Girl Scouts of the USA, New York City, NY
Daily Local News, West Chester, PA
The Suburban and Wayne Times, Wayne, PA

Camp Odakotah

The map at right uses standard Girl Scout mapping symbols to depict the path followed by Scouts as they hiked from the Paoli Train Station, at lower right, to Camp Odakotah, at upper left.

The arrows show the path from the station down North Valley Rd. to West Central Ave, across the tracks at Woodbine Ave. near the Dewees & Bracken coal, feed, and lumber yard, then through the woods (the present Airdrie Forest Preserve) to the camp, located adjacent to the Pennsylvania Railroad’s Trenton Cut-Off at Cedar Hollow Rd. A small lake was the focal point of the camp, bordered by tents erected on platforms, as shown in the photo on page 80. The area is now single-family homes in the Jacqueline Drive neighborhood of Paoli.

East of the camp was Airdrie Farm, home of the Moncure Robinson family, who donated their woodlands to create the Airdrie preserve in 1940.

The symbols shown between the Chester Valley Railroad and the Trenton Cutoff indicate that an orchard once stood where the PECO power lines now run. No trace of the camp exists today.