

Milchidika with Marty: *I Loved the Boy Scouts Until I Discovered Girls*

Note: This article originally appeared in the April 2021 issue of the CAS Newsletter. At the time, this was Marty Stransky's 62nd consecutive monthly newsletter article. Since that April, we have reprinted many of those articles. We thank Marty for his many funny, often irreverent, always interesting, writings.

As many of you may know, I am an avid enthusiastic gardener, with a garden which is just a little too big for me to manage. So, I am out there on most days, weeding and dead heading and trying to get ahead. It is not a chore, I love it. Now at the end of the season, when I bring in the cucumbers and tomatoes that I personally grew, I feel so proud of myself “the farmer.”

My gardening routine is to work for an hour and then sit down on a lounge chair that is on our deck, under a tree; sip some iced tea and maybe even take a snooze. One day while lying there, looking up at the tree's branches and the blue sky; I thought to myself, “This tree is a pin oak tree.”

I began to think, “How do I know that?” and realized that I had learned to identify different trees while at “Nature Study” in Boy Scout camp. That was when I was 12 years old and my first time away from home.

I remembered the Boy Scouts so fondly and being so impressed with their teachings of the Scout oath of duty, helpfulness, and being morally straight. Pretty heavy stuff for a 12-year-old. I asked some of my old boyhood friends who were in the scout troop with me, “What do they remember?” And they all replied what a positive effect it had on them.

So, I decided that I would go on-line and see if I could find a Boy Scout Handbook from the 1940's and maybe find out what impressed me so much at that time of my life.

I found a handbook in perfect condition, on whose cover was an idealized picture by Norman Rockwell of three scouts in their scout uniforms: a cub scout, a boy scout and an older sea scout. The “Handbook for Boys” cost 50 cents at that time, which also happened to be the hourly rate for a baby-sitter.

It was so interesting to read through it, as it represented an era which in my mind no longer exists. There was the “Scout Oath” which every young boy had to memorize and be able to repeat to the Scout Master. “On my honor I will do my best, to do my duty to God and my country, and to obey the Scout Law; to help other people at all times; to keep myself physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight.

I was not too sure at that time, being only 12 years old; how do you do all those things? But I would try.

There was also this “Scout Law” which also had to be memorized and repeated back to the Scout Master. A scout is loyal, trustworthy, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent. That is serious stuff when you are 12. I wondered, do I have to do all those things every single day or was it all right if I missed a few?

But best of all was going to boy scout camp for eight weeks in the summer. My parents really could not afford to pay the entire fee, and our boy scout troop helped with some extra monies.

A month or two before camp started, my mom would be busy sewing name tags onto my shirts, pants, underwear, socks: a nightly affair that would take a few days to accomplish. Finally, the big day was approaching and the night before departure, everything was thrown into a duffle bag, along with a lot of parental advice.

Since we lived in an apartment building, the thought of spending eight weeks sleeping in a tent, using an outdoor latrine, being with the boys; being on my own was, was going to be an adventure.

We boarded a bus in the local school yard, waved “good-bye” to our parents who were either slightly nervous as to how could we possibly manage on our own; or were glad to finally have the apartment to themselves. Off we went to the camp which was located near the Delaware river in upstate New York.

I loved camp. Eating with the boys in the mess hall, not bathing too often, learning all about the wonders of nature, learning to paddle a canoe and going on hikes.

“Visitor's Day” was a Sunday in mid-season when parents could come and visit their sonny boys. I remember telling my mother when she would first see me in camp, “Please don't kiss or hug me in front of the other fellows, as I was now a grown-up man.” I think I hurt my mother's feelings.

And finally, the camping season was over and time to get on the bus to go back home. I was so sad at the thought of being back in an apartment building and not outdoors in a tent.

I still remember the drive from the greenery of the country with the trees gradually disappearing as we approached the George Washington Bridge and crossed over to the Bronx. All the apartment buildings seemed to be so drab and so close together. I did not want to be home.

A few years later I discovered a girl who wore white “bobby sox,” “penny loafers,” and a plaid skirt. That ended my scouting career.