



SO FAR, SO GOOD!
A NEW SCOUTMASTER'S STORY

CLARKE GREEN

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Clarke Green

First Printing January, 2015

Cover design, text, and illustrations:

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Ordering Information:

Special discounts are available on quantity purchases by corporations, associations, and others. For details, contact the publisher, Clarke Green, at www.scoutmastercg.com

This book is not an official publication of, nor is it endorsed by, the Boy Scouts of America or any other organization.

ISBN-13: 9781505790603

ISBN-10: 1505790603

Dedication

This book is for all the volunteers who care enough to make the promise of Scouting real in their communities.

Scouting is alive in every corner of the world because people of goodwill volunteer their time and resources to make it happen.

We all encounter the same challenges, setbacks, triumphs, and rewards. We are never alone.

We share the joy of serving Scouting's most important volunteers: the Scouts themselves.

Acknowledgements

None of this would be possible without the Scouts and Scouters who have so generously allowed me to be a part of their lives.

I am fortunate to have a sister, Deborah Green, who is also a supportive, dedicated, and talented editor. My deepest gratitude and love to Debbie.

I am doubly fortunate to have an understanding, supportive wife. Thank you and love to Teddi.

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INTRODUCTION

If I Knew then What I know Now

Scouting is not an abstruse or difficult science: rather it is a jolly game if you take it in the right light.

Robert Baden-Powell, Aids to Scoutmastership

Now that I've retired my Scoutmaster badge I'm able to write what I would have appreciated reading when I first took on the job thirty years ago.

Like any new Scouter I was, at first, concerned with the obvious, what we did at meetings, where we were going camping, how we would get there, and what we would do once we arrived.

With a young man's audacity and overconfidence I tried to imitate the slickness and regimentation I envied in some troops. I imagined myself leading an orderly column of Scouts on parade, and having folks tell each other what a great guy I was.

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I was anxious to look the part. I bought a campaign hat and a red jacket, and admired the patches and decorations other Scouters wore.

None of those things made me a better Scouter, and some of the attitudes I adopted made me insufferably self-important.

Eventually I became much more interested in doing actual good rather than just looking the part. I wanted to be useful rather than simply chasing the appearance of success. I began to ask myself how, exactly, this game played in the outdoors benefitted young people. What could I do to make the most of my opportunity as a Scouter?

Some of the answers came from older, more experienced Scouters, some from the Scouts themselves, some from working through my many mistakes and missteps; but the real revelation was stumbling on the writings of Scouting's founder, Robert Baden-Powell.

B-P had a knack for getting at the heart of things. His brief, but meaningful "Aids to Scoutmastership" is required reading for any Scouter.

Ten years ago, I started writing a blog at ScoutmasterCG.com. I gained a small readership, and started fielding questions. I struggled to write clearly and offer useful advice. I finally hit on the idea of telling a story to illustrate what I have come to understand about over the past three decades.

What would I do if I had the chance to start all over again? What if I knew then what I know now?

Most of our training courses and official literature present an idealized, sanitized, and artificial picture of Scouting. We'd all like to think Scouting is like the images we see in Norman Rockwell paintings; but being a Scoutmaster means working with real people.

Real people argue, Scouts misbehave, parents overreact, Scouters get discouraged, and little goes as smoothly as those idealized images would have you believe.

After some years, I stopped trying to imitate an idealized picture and started helping Scouts discover authentic Scouting for themselves. We all stand on the shoulders of just over a century of Scouting's combined experience. There are no new problems; we all encounter the same challenges, and all of us muddle through as best we can.

If you are expecting a book full of systematic instructions or closely defined policy statements, you are going to be disappointed. You'll find that getting the policies and procedures right isn't all that difficult. Scouting is not quite like anything else young people do; catching the spirit of our work is a bigger challenge. Once you have a handle on why we do what we do as Scouters, the policies and procedures begin to make sense; they become nearly intuitive.

I lay no claim that what you'll read is the only authentic way of doing things, or even that I am close to having everything right. Troops are like families, they have

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different ways of functioning, their own quirks and traditions. So long as Scouters do no harm, I think any child can get a lot out of being a Scout.

This narrative loosely follows my own experiences, but the new Scoutmaster in the story begins knowing things that took me many years to understand. All the names are altered, but there are enough clues here and there that some of my old Scouts and fellow Scouters may recognize themselves.

What I have written does not bear the endorsement of any Scouting organization. I wrote it with the hope you'll find it useful, and inspire you to discover something more about the spirit of your work as a Scouter.

CHAPTER ONE

No Turning Back!

Do not be appalled by any imaginary magnitude of the task. It will disappear when once you see the aim.

B-P, Aids to Scoutmastership

If I had a nickel for every time I thought, said or heard the phrase “so far so good” over the past few months I’d be a rich man. I’d served as an assistant Scoutmaster for a few years when our Scoutmaster announced a job relocation that required his family to move.

Mark Hacker, our committee chair, took me aside one evening and asked me if I would consider being the new Scoutmaster.

I was stunned.

I love Scouting, it’s great fun. But, really?

I told Mark I would have to think about it.

I watched our old Scoutmaster do it all for the past few years, and I admired his dedication; but could *I* actually take this on?

My son was a Scout, and he got a lot out of our troop. He graduated high school this spring, and enters college in the fall.

My wife Anne and I discussed the commitments involved, the time away camping and attending meetings. Anne appreciated what Scouts did for our son and believes in the program. She agreed I ought to give it a try (no doubt, she'd also miss the one weekend a month she's grown used to having to herself over the past few years!)

After we talked it through, I called Mark and told him I would take the job in the fall. I had three months to prepare, so I started reading everything I could find about Scouting. Before long I concluded our old Scoutmaster probably did too much.

He and the other adults planned all the meetings and outings, appointed the senior patrol leader, decided which Scouts should be in what patrol, and chose their patrol leaders. Our assistant Scoutmasters did all the instructing, and shadowed the youth leadership to the extent the Scouts were leaders in name only.

Several years ago I took a training course that laid things out much differently than the way our troop did things. I was curious about why our troop didn't follow what they told me in training, so I asked.

"I'll tell you what the last Scoutmaster told me:" our Scoutmaster answered emphatically, "He said 'what they tell you in training and what *actually works* are two different things.' He showed me how he ran things, and

what he did worked for twelve years, so that's what we do."

At the time it made sense. Who was I to say different? I was just the "new guy." It was our practice to have assistant Scoutmasters take turns planning and running meetings and a camping trip every month.

The first time I was in charge I understood what the Scoutmaster said! I couldn't imagine our boys planning or presiding over an orderly troop meeting, much less planning and carrying out a camping trip.

The more I studied the Scoutmaster's job, though, the more sure I became that we'd better serve our Scouts if we made some changes. When I sat down with Mark, our committee chair, to lay out these ideas he was skeptical; what I suggested would be considerably different.

After several discussions, we agreed that we would back each other up and make the changes I suggested. Mark asked our committee to agree to this arrangement, they did, and we were off and running.

A couple of weeks before I was to take over I sat down with our four assistant Scoutmasters. I mapped out the changes I discussed with Mark.

Dave Stanley, who had been around longer than any of us, was the first to reply, saying: "I think we owe Chuck at least the benefit of the doubt; after all, none of us took the job, did we?"

"I appreciate that, Dave," I replied, "all I am asking is that you guys follow my lead. The changes we've discussed are significant and I expect some skepticism: but I need your support."

“It all kind of makes sense to me,” said George Hudson, “I am willing to work with you.”

“Me too,” Wayne Murray chimed in, “I think the Scouts can do at least some of what you’ve said.”

“I didn’t want the job,” said Rob Borgatti, “As long as nobody interferes I’ll be happy to keep doing what I do with the gear.”

I left the meeting with a strange combination of excitement and dread. It was like stepping off the edge and jumping into a volcano; no turning back now!

CHAPTER TWO

First Troop Meeting

The Scoutmaster guides the boy in the spirit of an older brother.

B-P, Aids to Scoutmastership

“Before we go any further,” I said, “I am interested in how you would answer some questions, because what you have to say is important.” I invited five Scouts to speak with me at my first meeting as their new Scoutmaster. They were our oldest Scouts and, although adults had been doing nearly everything for them, I saw some leadership potential in each.

“So my first question is: how should we decide who is going to be our next senior patrol leader?”

The Scouts looked at each other, the floor, the ceiling, and the table.

Utter silence.

Jake Hendricks finally said, "You pick them, right?"

"That's how we've done it in the past," I answered, "are you guys happy with doing things that way?"

They stared at me as if I had lost my mind.

Well, I thought, at least I had their attention.

"How else would it work?" Zach asked.

"You tell me Zach," I handed him my opened Scoutmaster Handbook (I had put many bookmarks in my copy over the past couple of months), "read the first couple of sentences on that page."

"The youth leader with the most responsibility in a troop is the senior patrol leader. He is elected by all members of the troop," Zach read, he looked up, "huh, interesting."

Several conversations started spontaneously as the Scouts discussed the pluses and minuses of electing a senior patrol leader.

"Mr. Grant, are we allowed to do it like that?" Jake asked.

"Before I answer that question, how many of you have played basketball?" I asked.

The Scouts exchanged more confused looks, but they all raised their hands.

"Bob," I said, "why is a basketball hoop ten feet high?"

Bob jumped a little, "I guess there's a rule?" he replied.

"I think you're right," I said, "is a Scout troop kind of like a basketball team?" I asked no one in particular.

"We have uniforms," Zach offered, "and we play games, but not always basketball."

"Anything else?" I asked.

"I guess we have rules?" said Jake.

"Where are the rules, then?" I asked Jake, helpfully tapping on my Scoutmaster handbook.

"Oh, I get it now," Jake turned to the other Scouts, "this is kind of like a rule book," he said pointing to the Scoutmaster's handbook.

"So let me ask my first question again," I said, "how do we decide who is going to be our next senior patrol leader?"

"He is elected by all the members of the troop," Zach replied, "because that's in the rules."

We discussed how the election should happen, who would run, and within five or ten minutes, the Scouts had come up with a plan.

"So Jake and Bob are your candidates," I started reviewing their decisions, "are we sure nobody else is interested?"

The Scouts shook their heads.

I continued, "Zach, Alex, and Hunter are going to hand out the ballots and pencils, and hand them to me when you are all done, right?"

The Scouts nodded yes.

“I’ll say a couple of things first,” I went on, “then Jake and Zach will each have a minute or two to say why they want to be senior patrol leader, then you’ll have your election.”

With that, we walked out into the meeting room where the rest of the Scouts were watching Dave Stanley show them how to sharpen a pocketknife.

“Ready Mr. G?” he asked when he saw us enter the room.

“Thanks Mr. S,” I replied, and stepped to the front of the room. I told the Scouts they would be electing a fellow Scout to lead them for the next few months as their senior patrol leader. I described how important the decision was, and introduced their candidates. After each spoke, I stepped to the back of the room as the Scouts received their ballots and prepared to vote.

George and Wayne, two more assistant Scoutmasters, were lying in wait.

“How did it go?” George asked.

“They got the idea pretty quickly,” I answered, “they’re a sharp bunch.”

“Hunter didn't want to run?” Wayne asked with an edge of disappointment.

“I asked them all,” I said, “he never spoke up, and I asked everyone a second time just to be sure, but he said no.”

“Well, there’s always next time around I guess,” Wayne sighed.

“Listen, dad, he’ll be fine,” I said patting Wayne on the back, “give him a little time.”

“Here are the ballots Mr. G,” said Alex, holding out a rumpled pile of paper.

“Thanks Alex,” I said taking them, “Dave, you and I don’t have dogs in this fight, would you give me a hand for a moment?” (Dave’s boy was two years ahead of my son in college.)

I turned to George and Wayne, “keep them busy for a moment, this won’t take long.”

Dave and I stepped into the next room, counted the votes, and returned.

When it was time to close the meeting I stepped to the front of the room, and a few seconds later we had a new senior patrol leader.

One change made, only a couple hundred more to go!

CHAPTER THREE

Second Troop Meeting

*Scouting is a game for boys, under the leadership
of boys*

B-P, Aids to Scoutmastership

The Scouts elected Jake Hendricks as their senior patrol leader; I think they made a great choice. At 14, Jake isn't the oldest Scout, but he showed a lot of potential.

I asked Jake and the four older Scouts I spoke with last week to meet with me thirty minutes before the next troop meeting.

"I had another question for you," I began, "where are we going camping next month?"

"You were going to tell us tonight, right?" Jake replied.

"Did anyone ever ask you where you wanted to go or what you wanted to do?" I asked.

They thought about that one for a moment.

"We talk about stuff," Jake said, "but usually the Scoutmasters tell us."

"Jake," I asked, "If you could take the troop anywhere, or do anything you wanted to do, what would that be?"

He didn't have to think about it, "Mountain climbing! Mr. Callas [our previous Scoutmaster] always said it was too dangerous."

"Okay," I said, "let's go mountain climbing!"

"Really, that would be awesome!" Hunter said, "Are we really allowed to do that?"

"Where do you think we could find the answer to your question Hunter?" I asked.

"The rule book?" Hunter answered.

"Let's look in the Scout Handbook this time," I said, "anybody have one?"

Bob held up his copy.

"Great, thanks Bob," I said, "read the introduction in the very beginning for us."

Bob read the first few paragraphs aloud.

"Sounds like Scouts go camping and do adventurous things," I said, "I think mountain climbing fits that description."

"Can we get a badge for it?" Zach asked.

"There is a climbing merit badge; I'd imagine you could at least get started on that," I replied, "what you'll find is

that when we do what Scouts do requirements are kind of built in. When we plan what we'll be doing we want to choose what Scouts do, because then you'll have the opportunity to advance."

"Makes sense," Bob said.

"So the choice for this month is mountain climbing," I said, "anybody object?"

They all shook their heads.

"That's settled," I said, "I have a couple of other questions."

The Scouts looked at me expectantly.

"We usually set up new patrols this time of year," I began, "how would you guys like to do that?"

"What's the rule book say?" Zach asked.

"I thought you'd never ask!" I said hauling the Scoutmaster handbook out of my backpack, finding my bookmark, opening it, and handing it to Zach.

"Wow," Zach said, "that's a whole page, do I have to read all that?"

"I have a couple of other things to do for the next few minutes," I said walking away, "Look things over and see if you Scouts can figure out what to do next."

I wanted to see, while I did a lap around the building, how much they could figure out on their own.

"So?" I asked when I returned, "What's the plan Jake?"

“We know a little bit more about what the ‘rule book’ says about patrols,” he answered, “but there are no directions.”

“Sort of like basketball,” I remarked, “the rules tell you about the game, but you have to actually play the game yourself to understand it.”

The stares I received in response were a little less confused.

“Let’s attack this question a step at a time,” I began, “Who will decide who goes in what patrol?”

“I guess I could,” said Jake.

“Okay, sounds good,” I replied, “What do you need to know to make good decisions? Bob what do you think?”

“How old everyone is?” he offered.

“That would help. Anything else?” I replied.

“Maybe ranks?” Zach added.

“Good, anything else?” I prodded.

Hunter cleared his throat, and quietly added, “I don’t know about you guys but I know what patrol I’d like to be in, I’d like to be with my friends and stuff.”

“I think all the Scouts feel that way, Hunter,” I said, “how would you guys go about making that happen?”

Over the next few minutes, we discussed sorting out patrols. I suggested that they have each Scout write down the name of three other Scouts they’d like to have in their

patrol. Jake would take those lists and work out the best lineup for each patrol.

“Last question, guys, I promise,” I said, “how are you going to figure out who the patrol leaders will be?”

“Rule book please!” Zach said and held out his hand.

I smiled, “Right here at this marker,” I said handing him the Scoutmaster's handbook.

We were done a few minutes before troop meeting time. I left the picnic table and joined my assistant Scoutmasters in the back of the room.

“You and your secret meetings,” said George, “what's all this skullduggery leading to?”

“Yeah,” added Wayne, “I am feeling like you are keeping us in the dark.”

“It's all his master plan for world domination,” George said rubbing his hands together.

“C'mon guys, I told you last week,” I said, “blabbermouths like you two can't be trusted with sensitive information.”

Dave laughed at the three of us, “Alright, Mister Scoutmaster, spill the beans.”

“Okay, you got me,” I said, “am I trying your patience a little?”

“A little?” said George.

“First, I appreciate you were willing to let me meet with these guys on my own.” I started, “they are starting to think things through on their own, besides...”

“We can’t keep our mouths shut!” said George.

“Well, to put it bluntly, yes.” I said, “You know what would happen if all four of us were sitting at the table, right?”

“Yeah,” Wayne sighed, and turned to George “the new guy is right, but I still hate him.”

“Well, you’ll get over it.” I laughed, “at least I hope so.”

“So it went well?” Wayne asked seriously.

“Let’s listen in and see,” I replied.

Jake was doing his best to get everyone’s attention, and eventually the Scouts quieted down enough to hear him.

The older Scouts handed out index cards and pencils and Jake asked each Scout to list three others they’d like to have in their patrol.

A few minutes later Jake collected the cards. I asked Dave to come help Jake and me while Wayne and George led the Scouts in a game.

“Bob wants to be in the same patrol as Ian,” Jake said looking at one list.

“Does Ian’s list have Bob on it?” I asked.

Jake looked through the cards, “Yes, he has Bob, Brian and Drew.”

“So that’s a good match,” Dave replied, “who do Brain and Drew want?”

We laid the cards out on the picnic table, matching Scouts into three patrols so each had at least one of their choices.

“Anybody left?” I asked.

“Nobody had Jason on their list.” Jake replied.

“Can you put him with a least one of his choices?” Dave asked.

“If I do,” Jake replied, “the numbers will be uneven.”

“Is it important to have even numbers?” I asked.

“I thought they had to be even,” said Jake.

“I guess it’s all nice and neat of they are, but what’s more important to you,” I asked, “even patrols or the Scout’s choices?”

Jake did a little rearranging and incorporated Jason into a patrol with one of the Scouts he listed.

“Before you go tell everyone who is in what Patrol.” I said looking at Jake, “I want to point out that you’ll end up knowing a few things as senior patrol leader that you’ll want to keep confidential.”

“Like what?” Jake asked.

“Well, nobody chose Jason for their patrol,” I replied, “How do you think he’d feel if he knew that?”

“I suppose not so great,” Jake replied.

“Yeah,” Dave said, “let’s keep that between the three of us.”

“Knowing this,” I said to Jake, “means that you can look out for Jason, and see what you can do to help him find some friends too.”

As Jake went in to announce the new patrol lineup, I huddled with my Assistant Scoutmasters.

“More secrets?” George said.

“Not for long,” I replied.

“It made sense for you and Dave to do that since your sons have moved on,” Wayne said, “I hope Hunter is happy with the new setup. Who did you pick for patrol leaders?”

“Each patrol will elect one before we leave tonight.” I said.

“You and your ‘democracy’,” George said, “you'd think we were teaching Scouts about citizenship or something!”

“Well,” I laughed, “glad you are catching on!”

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