The Baden-Powell Story

(Based on a campfire presentation by Angela Nyman)

Good evening. I wonder if I might join you for a few moments. Tonight from a very great distance, I heard the sounds of your singing and your laughter. As I drew nearer, I saw the campfire and felt the warm glow of a Scout fellowship, and I find myself feeling very much at home here. If you don't mind, I'd like to stay for a while.

My full name is Lord Robert Stevenson Smyth Baden-Powell of Gilwell. That seems a very long name, especially for a fellow who has looked at life in a simple, uncomplicated way. When I'm with Scouts like you, I'm happy to be called B-P.

I was born February 22, 1857, in London, England, the sixth of seven children. I attended Charter House, a boarding school for boys, but schoolwork didn't interest me very much. I was much more interested in spending time in the out-of-doors. During the summers, my brothers and I often went camping. We even canoed all the way across England, portaging our canoe from river to river, sleeping in barns and haystacks along the way, catching fish and rabbits for food and cooking our meals over an open fire.

When I graduated from Charter House, I took the test to get into Oxford University. My older brothers had all gotten scholarships there, but I'm afraid I failed the entrance exam miserably. My mother was aghast when she heard
the news.
A few days later, I saw a newspaper announcement that examinations were to be given by the British army. Those with the highest scores would be invited to become army officers.

I decided to take the test. I had only a few months to prepare, but I studied as I never had studied before. I worked day and night in subjects such as math, English, science, geography, and foreign languages. When it came time for the exam, I was also tested in freehand drawing, a skill I had always enjoyed. As soon as the results were posted, I scanned the list and found that out of more than 700 people who had taken the test, I had finished fifth for infantry and second for cavalry. I felt I had redeemed myself.

Choosing the cavalry for my career, I soon received a letter addressed to "Sublieutenant R.S.S.B. Powell"—my first orders. Because of my high scores, I was able to go directly into the field without the usual two years of training at military college. I was to serve in the 13th Hussars, one of the most famous regiments in the British army. In the autumn of 1876, I boarded a ship and sailed to India to join the regiment.

My time in India proved to be a great adventure for so young a man. I learned much about human nature and about how to lead men and inspire them to do their best. I practiced map-making and surveying, skills I would use a few years later when I was sent to the Balkans in

eastern Europe. My orders instructed me to gather information on the movements and fortifications of Austrian troops in the region.

It was a dangerous mission, but I had a plan. I carried a butterfly net and a sketch pad and pretended to be a somewhat confused Englishman studying butterflies. When I caught a butterfly, I would carefully sketch it in my notebook. I was often seen by police and soldiers, but they only shook their heads and laughed over this crazy man chasing butterflies. The thing they didn't know was that I only hunted butterflies in places where I could study the Austrian forts. I drew maps of the forts, including details of gun placements and other information of military importance, but disguised them by making the maps resemble sketches of butterflies.

In ways like this, I continued to mix my love of the outdoors, my delight in problem-solving, and my skills as a leader to serve my country. As I rose through the ranks of the army, I also gave plenty of thought to the best ways to train soldiers. I believed it was important for them to be able to think for themselves and to be able to act as scouts. I put down my ideas in a small book called *Aids to Scouting.* For those who passed the training outlined in the book, I designed a badge shaped like the north point of an old compass, a *fleur-de-lis.* I wanted to symbolize the fact that a scout should always be able to point the way, both on the land and in his life.

In 1899 I was sent to South Africa where the British army was in conflict with the Boers, settlers of Dutch descent in the South African Republic and the Orange Free State. I soon found myself in charge of defending a small town called Mafeking. I had some twelve hundred men under my command, but many thousands of Boer soldiers surrounded Mafeking and laid siege to the town. They demanded that we surrender.

We were not about to give in. Instead, we did all we could to convince the Boers that they were up against a much stronger force. Knowing that Boer lookouts could see us, I had my men bury boxes of sand all around the perimeter of the town. They put dynamite in one of the boxes and blew it up in hopes that the Boers would assume all of the boxes were packed with dynamite and could be detonated as land mines.

We had no barbed wire, but my men drove fence posts into the ground anyway. They pretended to string rolls of barbed wire on the posts, and they pretended to climb back and forth over the wire whenever they moved about the edges of Mafeking. The Boers were far enough away that they couldn't have seen the wire even if there had been any. And so we defended Mafeking with tricks like these, even though the Boers could easily have captured the town if they had simply attacked with all their forces.

The siege of Mafeking lasted 218 days before elements of the British army arrived and broke the grip of the Boers. When I returned to England I was startled to discover that I was being regarded as the hero of Mafeking. I was also surprised to see many boys cheering for me and holding up copies of *Aids to Scouting.* I'd had no idea my book would have such a profound effect on young boys. They seemed hungry for the kind of information I had written, and I wondered if this was a call to me to figure out a way to share more of the scouting life.

To test my ideas about scouting for youngsters, I took a group of boys camping on Brownsea Island just off the coast of England. I chose them carefully so that they came from all walks of life. I supplied the tents, but the boys had to put them up. The air was filled with excited yells and shouts as tents went up and fell down and went up again. I was everywhere giving advice, but I made sure the boys did most of the work. The camp at Brownsea Island convinced me of the value of scouting for boys. I was sure that scouting could teach boys greater self-reliance. It would guide them to grow into better men, and that would help my country become a better nation.

After Brownsea Island, I rewrote my book to make it more appropriate for youth. This time I called it *Scouting for Boys.* I had thought that the book could be used by existing groups for young people, but boys made it clear that they wanted to be Boy Scouts. They were forming their own patrols and setting out on their own camping adventures, but many of them had no adult leaders and no clear plan of action. Realizing something would have to be done, I retired from the army so that I could give all of my time to organizing the Boy Scouts. I carefully worked out plans for the new organization. It was to be a characterbuilding program, both indoors and out, in the cities, in small towns, and in rural areas. It needed to be challenging and satisfying for the boys who joined, and it needed to be fun. I put out a call for adult leaders and was gratified when men all over England volunteered.

I designed a uniform much like that worn by the young men of the South African Constabulary who had served with me at Mafeking. Simple, inexpensive, and comfortable, it consisted of khaki shorts and shirt, a neckerchief, wide-brimmed hat, long stockings, and a wooden staff.

In Canada, Australia, and many other nations of the British Empire, boys began to form Scout troops. By 1910, troops were also springing up in the United States. In fact, I met my future wife, Olave Soames, on a ship as I was going to the United States to meet with officials of the Boy Scouts of America. Over the years she and I enjoyed a very happy home life with our three children. She also shared many of my interests in providing programs for young people, and we supported one another in our work. She did much to promote the Girl Guides, a Scouting organization for girls that was established in 1910 by my sister Agnes.

As Scouting succeeded everywhere, I saw the need to expand the program to include boys under the age of 11. I organized the Wolf Cubs in Great Britain in 1916. Here in the United States, that became the Cub Scouts, a thriving program of the Boy Scouts of America.

In 1920, Scouts from many countries came together for the first international jamboree. It was held in a huge building in London. Scouts from each nation staged shows, shared skills, and made friends from around the world. Blowing on a kudu horn I'd had since my days in Africa, I called all the Scouts together so that I could address them, but before I could speak, a voice from the back cried, "We, the Scouts of the world, salute you, Baden-Powell, Chief Scout of the World!" Thousands of boys cheered until the building shook. That was the greatest honor I have ever received—to have so many boys find value in Scouting. I knew that the Scouting

movement had taken on a life of its own and that others would see to it that the program would continue to grow and touch even greater numbers of boys.

My major work in helping launch Scouting was done, though in the years that followed I had many wonderful experiences with Scouts around the world. To recognize the importance of Scouting, the King of England granted me the title of Lord Baden-Powell of Gilwell, an honor I accepted in the name of Scouts everywhere.

I have had the luck to lead two distinct and intensely happy lives, the first as a military leader and the second as a leader of boys. I have had the great good fortune to leave a legacy in the form of the Scouting movement, and for that I am most grateful.

Since my time, the leadership of Scouting has passed through a number of generations of dedicated Scouters, and now that responsibility has passed on to you. It is your turn to provide opportunities for young people to grow in body and mind and spirit. It is your turn to give shape to the possibilities of the Scouting movement. It is your turn to build your own legacy of service and leadership.

Near the end of my days, I wanted to leave Scouts and Scouters a message that would share the most important lessons I had discovered in my long and varied life. I would like to close now by sharing that message with you and by wishing you all well during this Wood Badge course and throughout your service to youth. This evening, my most earnest message to you is this: The real way to get happiness is by giving out happiness to other people. Try and leave this world a little better than you find it and when your turn comes to die, you can die happy in feeling that at any rate, you have not wasted your time, but done your best."

Thank you for allowing me to step into your circle tonight, to warm myself beside your fire and in the glow of your fellowship. If anyone asks where to find me, you can give them the same message you will find on my tombstone—