

THE CASE FOR CAMPFIRES



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“It was a dark and stormy night,” begins a classic Scouting tale, “and the boys were all sitting around the campfire when one of them rose and said, ‘Bill, tell us a story.’”

Stories told in the glow of a blaze – and the campfires, themselves – have been an inviting part of Scouting since its earliest days. But are they relevant in the age of the internet, cell phones, and Leave No Trace? Let’s take a look.



TINDER FOR THE FIRE

Robert Baden-Powell, Scouting’s founder, recognized the power of campfires long before the formation of the Boy Scouts of America. At Scouting’s first campout, held at Brownsea Island off the coast of England in 1907, Baden-Powell hosted a campfire each evening. With the light of the flames dancing in his eyes, he shared stories sparkling with excitement and meaning.

“Baden-Powell used to tell us about his adventures in Africa and India,” said one of the Scouts who had been there. “And on a nice summer night, with him standing in the center of the ring and telling these tales...that was the highlight of the camp.”



Scout Association

Robert Baden-Powell shares campfire stories with English Scouts

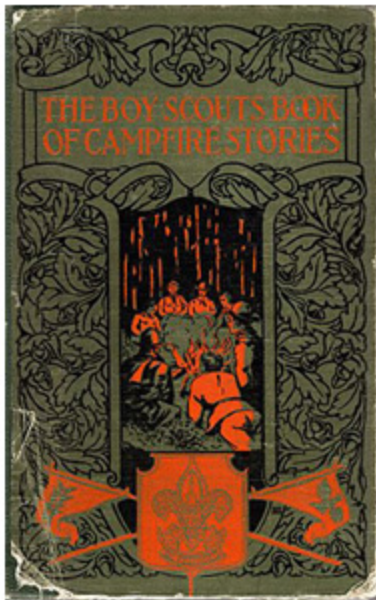
Early supporters of Scouting in America had a similarly positive view of campfire experiences and what the lack of them would mean to the outdoor experience. The 1910 "original edition" of the BSA's *Official Handbook* had a section entitled *The Magic of the Camp-fire*.

"What is a camp without a camp-fire?" the book asked. "No camp at all, but a chilly place in a landscape, where some people happen to have some things."



Official Handbook - 1910

A decade later, the BSA published *The Boy Scouts Book of Campfire Stories*. "The campfire for ages has been the place of council and friendship and story-telling," wrote Chief Scout Librarian Franklin Mathews. "The mystic glow of the fire quickens the mind, warms the heart, and awakens memories of happy, glowing tales that fairly leap to the lips."



THE BOY SCOUTS BOOK OF CAMPFIRE STORIES

EDITED
WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

BY

FRANKLIN K. MATHIEWS

CHIEF SCOUT LIBRARIAN,
BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA

PUBLISHED FOR
THE BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA

Mathiews goes on to explain that "The Boy Scouts of America has incorporated the 'campfire' in its program for council and friendship and story-telling."



Boy Scout Handbook, 1978

Fun around a Boy Scout campfire



KINDLING THE BLAZE

The principles of Leave No Trace discourage campfires except where they will cause no harm to the environment. That eliminates them from many backcountry settings. A frontcountry site such as a BSA council camp that has fire rings providing the ideal settings for evening campfires that fit Leave No Trace guidelines.



Baden-Powell, *Scouting for Boys*, 1908

Baden-Powell's sketch of Scouts enjoying a campfire

A campfire can be a quiet affair with just a few people, or a big event with a program planned for dozens of Scouts or more.

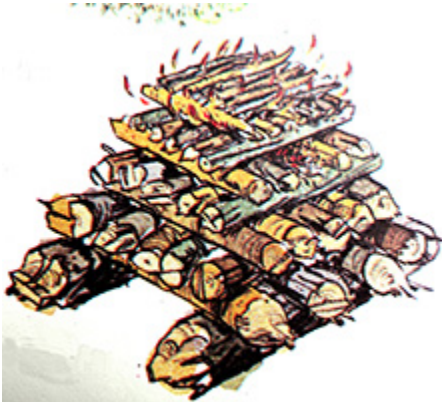


Boy Scouts of America

Patrol members building campfire memories

A lodge firelay is often the choice for an evening campfire. It looks good before it is lit, a consideration for programs when Scouts will arrive before a match has touched the tinder. Those building the firelay should use plenty of tinder

and kindling so there's no doubt the fire will burn. Additional fuel wood nearby can be used to adjust the level of the flames through the evening.



Log-cabin style firelay



FUELING THE FLAME

A small group might be satisfied visiting as they watch a campfire turn to coals. A more formal program could include stunts, skits, songs, and stories presented by some or all of the Scouts present.



Boy Scout Handbook, 1959

Leading songs and telling stories

Big campfires are opportunities for youth leaders to practice planning a program, organizing presenters, and performing in front of an audience. Plenty of preparation insures that stories, skits, and songs aren't too long and

that they hold the interest of everyone. Many campfires end with a Scoutmaster's Minute – a story from the troop's top adult leader that inspires listeners with a memorable message.



Boy Scout Encyclopedia, 1956

Scoutmaster's Minute

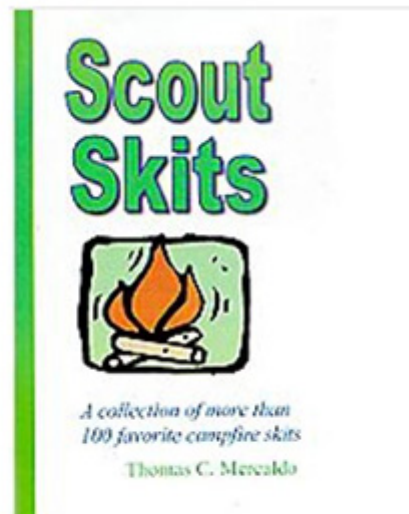
These books from scoutstuff.org offer ideas for preparing exciting campfire programs:



Superior Campfires



Campfire Tales



Scout Skits



Campfire Magic



More....Scout Skits



CHIPS OF RESPONSIBILITY

Scouting has always taught Scouts to make good decisions about building campfires and using knives, axes, and saws. It is a quest that goes back as far as Robert Baden-Powell and his sketch of Tommy the Tenderfoot. Baden-Powell writes that:

Poor Tommy's forgotten to sharpen his axe, So the tree only suffers a series of whacks.



Scouting for Boys - 1908

Baden-Powell's Tommy Tenderfoot

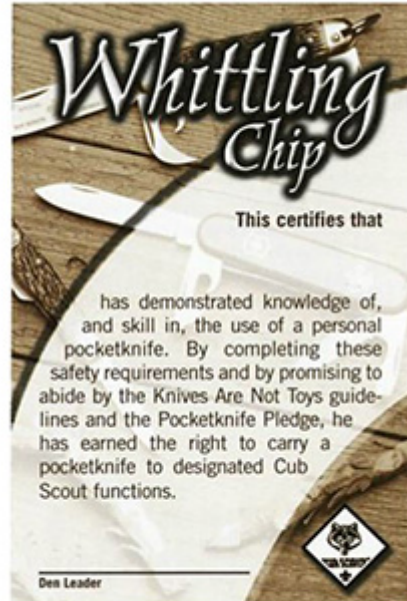
Today, the BSA recognizes those who learn and practice proper use of woods tools and of open fires. The oldest award is the Totin' Chip, devised by John Page, a Scouter who would one day become the director of the Editorial Division of the BSA's National Office.



Totin' Chip

Mr. Page was dismayed that trees at Yawgoog Scout Reservation in Rhode Island were being hacked by Scouts wielding hatchets. He proposed the Totin' Chip as a way for Scouts to earn the right to use woods tools. In 1951, BSA's National Council adopted the Totin' Chip for all Boy Scouts.

The Whitlin' Chip followed, offering Cub Scouts a patch and card for learning responsible use of a pocketknife.



Whitlin' Chip patch and card

There is also a Firem'n Chit to heighten awareness of whether to light a campfire and then how to care for it.



Firem'n Chit

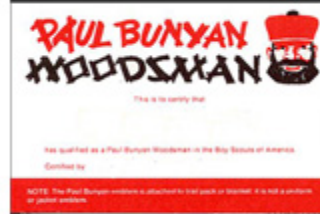
A recognition for Scouts who have already earned the Totin' Chip is the Paul Bunyan Woodsman award. Requirements include helping others earn the Totin' Chip; using woods tools to clear trails or fire lanes; trimming, cutting up, and stacking a downed tree; and helping complete a planned conservation project.



Paul Bunyan Woodsman Award



Paul Bunyan Award card



Vintage Paul Bunyan card

The Paul Bunyan Woodsman patch is a BSA designated *equipment decoration*. (Other equipment decorations include the 50-Miler Award and BSA Mile Swim.) While it cannot be worn on a BSA uniform like a temporary patch, an equipment decoration can be stitched to a blanket, tent, or vest, or attached to a piece of gear.



The Paul Bunyan Award on a patch vest

From Cub Scouts pocketing their first knives to Scout trail maintenance crews using crosscut saws, Scouting's emphasis on wise tool use is long and rich.



Robert Birkby photo

A Forest Service professional and a maintenance volunteer open a blocked trail



CYBERCHIPS

Not all chips granted by the BSA are about axes, knives, fires, and saws. The Cyber Chip encourages Scouts to explore appropriate ways to navigate the internet. Patches and certificates show that Scouts have thought about their online activities and strive to make the most of opportunities for safe, productive internet use.



Cyber Chip Patches



Cyber Chip Card

What hasn't changed in this age of computers and cell phones is the joy of a good campfire, built in the right place and managed in the right way. With warmth and light, it can be a high point of many Scout outings today, just as it has been through the decades.



Robert Birkby photo

The Be Prepared Newsletter author (wearing cap) enjoying a long-ago campfire with his Scout troop

(This edition of the *Be Prepared Newsletter* was developed and written by Robert Birkby, author of the current editions of the *Boy Scout Handbook*, *Fieldbook*, *Scout Stuff*, *The Conservation Handbook*, and *Eagle Scouts: A Centennial History*.)