Ancestral Outdoorsmen and Historical Hikes

Benjamin Jordan

Summary

This article challenges the historiographical interpretation that most American hiking and wilderness enthusiasts in the early twentieth century embraced a Romantic, virgin image of nature devoid of other human labor and history. These four Boy Scout sketches and photographs highlight the pervasive presence of human evolution and history in popular nature and hiking ideology as well as practices. Early Scouts believed that nature was filled with the spirits of scout ancestors and their labors, and thus offered boys a vital arena for developing into responsible adults and involved citizens.

Jordan, Benjamin. "Ancestral Outdoorsmen and Historical Hikes." Environment & Society Portal, *Arcadia* (Spring 2019), no. 6. Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society. doi.org/10.5282/rcc/8473.
Print date: 26 November 2026 07:15:19

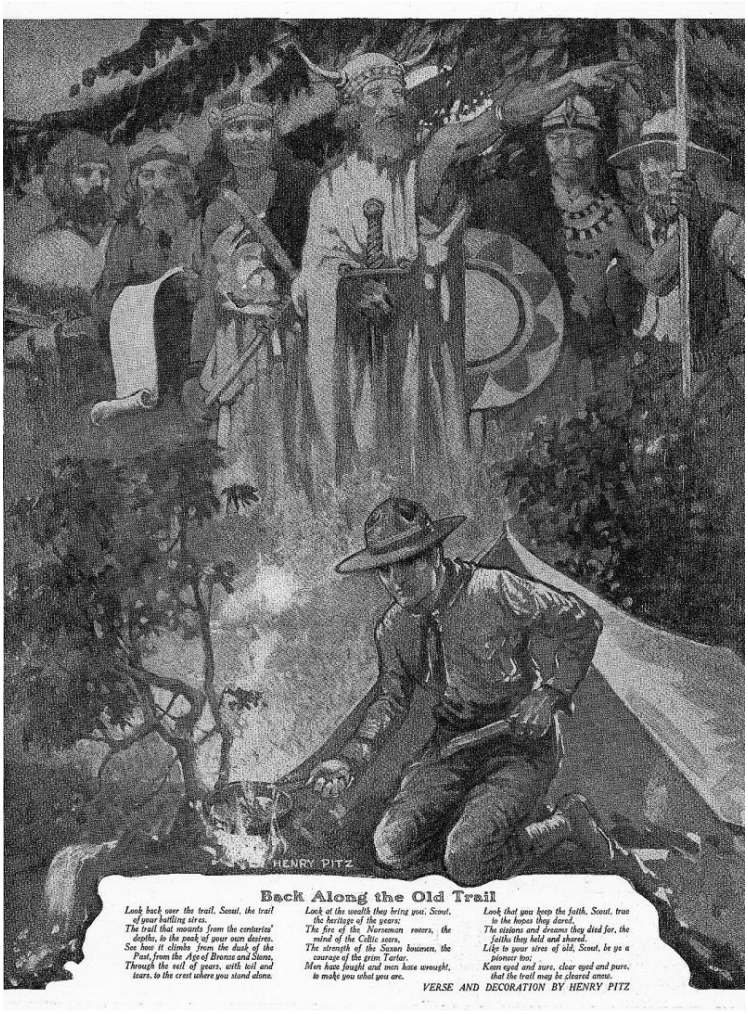


Fig. 1. The scout ancestors and their virtues point the way for Boy Scout outdoorsmen.

Illustration and poem by Henry Pitz.

Pitz, Henry. "Back Along the Old Trail." *Boys' Life* (February 1921): 4.

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Historians have frequently characterized the surging number of American hikers and wilderness enthusiasts in the 1910s and 1920s as embracing a Romantic, "virgin" nature largely devoid of other human habitation or history, but my research and these four Boy Scouts of America (BSA) images suggest otherwise. Boy Scouting was at the forefront of the era's growing range of organizations and camps designed to teach adult ideas and practices relating to nature to a broad swath of youth. For early Scouts and the many government, school, church, business, civic, and environmental groups that sponsored and managed the tens of thousands of BSA troops, hiking and camping in nature were rich with the evolution of human and American history and thus offered a prime training ground for maturing boys in a rapidly urbanizing and industrializing society. This linkage between nature and human history took the form of metaphorical imagery as well as the actual "patriotic pilgrimages" and "historical hikes" undertaken by young Scouts, that spanned the country's diverse geographical regions, cultures, and landscapes.

Figure 1 shows a 1921 sketch and poem by the prominent illustrator Henry Pitz titled, "Back Along the Old

Trail." This exemplified the BSA's belief that its members were the true heirs to a lineage of male "scout" heroes whose spirits resided in nature. The image celebrated nature because it embodied the labor and hopes of previous generations of men. Pitz prompted Scouts to look back in time over the hiking "trail of your battling sires" to find "the heritage of the years": the character attributes passed on from fierce Norseman rovers, strong Saxon bowmen, wise Celtic seers, and even courageous Tartars. Scouting promised that nature and the passage of time, though, acted as a selective filter, enabling boys to inherit only useful attributes from their ancestral outdoorsmen, such as wise leadership and brave self-reliance, while discarding their martial aggressiveness and unthinking consumption of nature. Key BSA national leaders insisted that females join the Camp Fire Girls organization and emulate its idealized Native American role models, associated with nature and domesticity; but some local BSA leaders and boy members cooperated with the feminist Girl Scouts on joint hikes, shared camps, and historical pageants that highlighted a common heritage of pioneering and civic leadership.



Fig. 2. Uncle Sam guides a Boy Scout on Washington's and Lincoln's trail to national honor for the BSA's anniversary week.

Illustration by Frank Rigney.

Originally published in *Scouting* (9 January 1919): 8.

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The hiking allegory in Figure 2 integrated notions of adolescent growth, the essences of historical men

permeating nature, and the maturation of the BSA movement itself. The sketch encouraged Scouts to take a patriotic hike in honor of the February anniversary of the BSA's founding. The years since the organization's establishment in 1910 formed the mountain's stone trail steps, which also represented the boy hiker growing into young manhood. Neither the hiking guide Uncle Sam nor the mountaintop spirits of Washington or Lincoln, however, could guarantee the country's continued honor. The responsibility of memorializing Washington's and Lincoln's contributions to the nation while keeping America's trail to glory clear of obstacles belonged to the Boy Scout, an outdoor civic duty taken up by members with great gusto. Many BSA supporters, council leaders, and newspapers proudly highlighted how frequent historical hikes, council-wide camps, and other outdoor Scout programs in the 1910s and 1920s brought boys and men of different ethnicities, religions, and classes (and in some councils, white and non-white Scouts) together. Despite the nationalistic tone of such events, they were significant departures from the virulent discrimination that permeated society in the form of the Ku Klux Klan, racial violence, eugenics, and immigration restriction leagues.


Boy Scouts Make Pilgrimage to Grave of Roosevelt

Boy Scouts Passing Though Oyster Bay with an Insert Showing the Scouts at the Grave.

Several thousand Boy Scouts recently made their first pilgrimage to the grave of their former leader, the late Theodore Roosevelt, who is buried in Young's cemetery, Oyster Bay, L. I. Each boy placed a small bunch of flowers on the grave of the former honorary president of the Scout organization. Many famous men accompanied the Scouts to the grave.

Fig. 3. Boy Scouts undertake patriotic pilgrimage to Theodore Roosevelt's grave to honor the BSA's Chief Scout Citizen

Photographer unknown.

"Boy Scouts Make Pilgrimage to Grave of Roosevelt," Binghamton Press, 3 December 1920.

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As early as 1912, a growing number of "patriotic pilgrimages" and "historical hikes," also covering a growing geographical range, provided Scouts with opportunities to experience and share with the broader public the organization's powerful vision that nature was infused with human labor and history. These ritual journeys often required boy members to research, design, clear, and regularly maintain new hiking trails. Patriotic pilgrimages involved a large, organized ritual Scout hike through nearby forests, fields, and town paths to a birthplace, home, or gravesite of a prominent American (typically male). Figure 3 highlights a December 1920 hike by over 1,500 boys to Theodore Roosevelt's grave in Oyster Bay, New York. Scouts across the country hosted their own parallel Roosevelt pilgrimage hikes and tree-planting ceremonies to honor the BSA's Chief Scout Citizen. Along with a 32-mile hike designed by Scouts to Lincoln's tomb in Illinois, this became the most prestigious of the many pilgrimages. By 1924, troops in every region and throughout the calendar year were hiking a growing list of elaborate patriotic pilgrimages to sites related to other presidents, military leaders, inventors, naturalists, explorers, authors, and scientists.

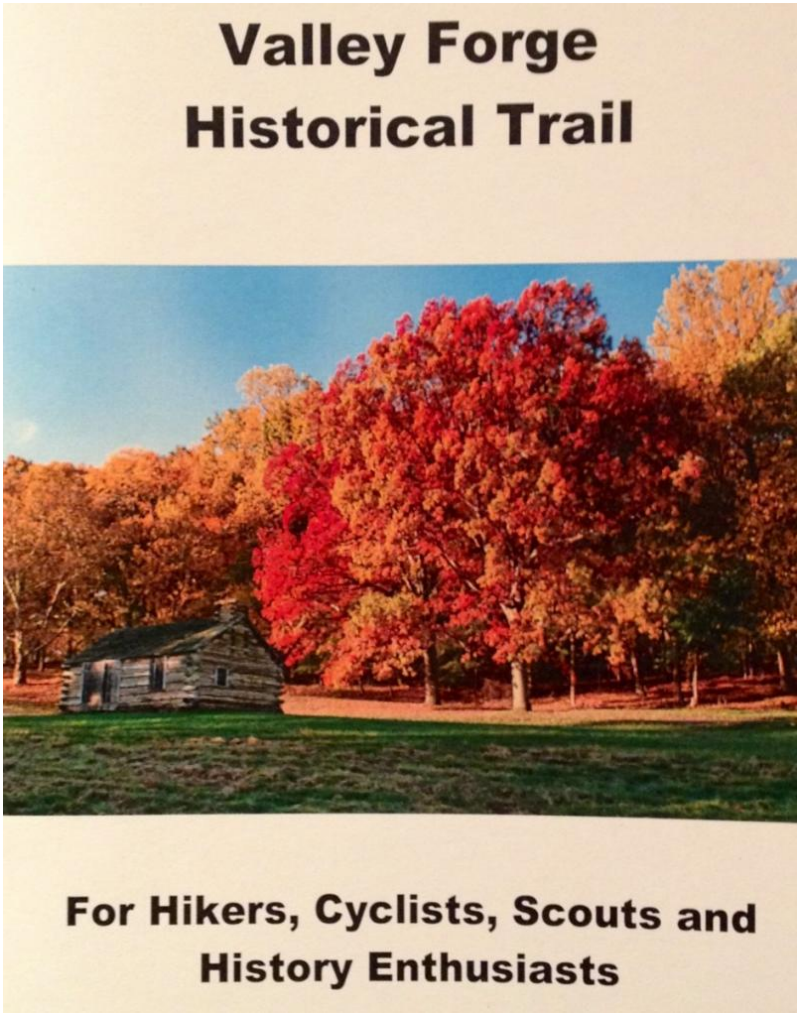


Fig. 4. Cover for informational pamphlet for Scouts and other hikers on Valley Forge Historical Trail.

National Park Service pamphlet, circa 2013. Accessed online 12 September 2018, click here to view National Park Service source.

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Early Boy Scouts across the nation also created and undertook "historical hikes" which commemorated

significant military battles or journeys on America's historical trails. The Scouts' keystone historical hike and parallel encampment at Valley Forge attracted nine thousand Scouts and ten thousand non-BSA participants from multiple states in 1932. As Figure 4's current-day pamphlet illuminates, Scouts and other American pilgrims continue to hike, bike, and study the Valley Forge Historical Trail laid out by Scouts. The historical trails and Scout pilgrimages underscored the need to transform the site from a state park to a National Historical Park, which now hosts over one million visitors annually. Large numbers of Scouts and their leaders have continued doing many of these historical hikes and patriotic pilgrimages annually up to the present day; these routes form the backbone of a system of nearly three hundred BSA National Historic Trails maintained by local councils throughout the country and enjoyed by Scouts and the public alike.

Further readings:

- Chamberlin, Silas. *On the Trail: A History of American Hiking*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016.
- Cronon, William. "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (1996): 7–28. doi:10.2307/3985059
- Jordan, Benjamin. *Modern Manhood and the Boy Scouts of America: Citizenship, Race, and the Environment, 1910–1930*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016.
- Macleod, David. *Building Character in the American Boy: The Boy Scouts, YMCA, and Their Forerunners, 1870–1920*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004.
- Mechling, Jay. *On My Honor: Boy Scouts and the Making of American Youth*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.
- Nash, Roderick. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014.
- Schrepfer, Susan. *Nature's Altars: Mountains, Gender, and American Environmentalism*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005.

Related links:

- Boy Scouts of America: BSA National Historical Trails
  http://bsatap.org/historic-trails/
- Boy Scouts of America: Outdoor Ethics
  http://www.scouting.org/Home/OutdoorProgram/OutdoorEthics.aspx
- Boy Scouts of America: Outdoor Programs
  http://www.scouting.org/Home/OutdoorProgram.aspx
- Jordan, Benjamin. "How Summer Camps and Scout Groups Turn Children into Citizens." *Aeon*
  https://aeon.co/ideas/how-summer-camp-and-scout-groups-turn-children-into-citizens
- Lincoln Pilgrimage
  http://www.alincolnbsa.org/lincolnpilgrimage/
- Merit Badge Requirements You Can Complete at Valley Forge National Historical Park
  https://www.nps.gov/vafo/planyourvisit/upload/BSA-MB-Requirements-at-Valley-Forge_Final.pdf
- National Park Service: Mount Rushmore
  https://www.nps.gov/moru/index.htm
- Pilgrimage and Encampment

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http://colbsa.org/activities-2/pilgrimage-and-encampment/

- Scouting at Valley Forge
  https://www.nps.gov/vafo/learn/kidsyouth/scouting.htm

How to cite:

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ISSN 2199-3408
Environment & Society Portal, Arcadia

Websites linked in image captions:

- https://www.nps.gov/vafo/planyourvisit/upload/BSA-MB-Requirements-at-Valley-Forge_Final.pdf

About the author:

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Dr. Benjamin Jordan is Associate Professor of History at Christian Brothers University. There he directs the Sustainability Studies program and the university's five Living Learning Communities. He has published an essay for the *Environmental History* journal, titled "'Conversation of Boyhood': Boy Scouting's Modest Manliness and Natural Resource Conservation," as well as encyclopedia articles and online editorials on citizenship, youth character training, and environmentalism. Dr. Jordan has recently published a widely-reviewed book with the University of North Carolina Press, *Modern Manhood and the Boy Scouts of America: Citizenship, Race, and the Environment, 1910-1930*.