

America's Oldest Boy Scout Camps

By David L. Eby

Which camp is the oldest? It appears the title belongs to Camp Owasippe in Michigan. The date a camp was established depends on the criteria you choose to use. It should be simple but it really is not; especially when bragging rights are involved and you have some extremely loyal scouters for almost every camp. Do you determine the year the camp was established by the year the land was purchased (even if it stayed vacant for a year or more)? Do you go by the year they built the camp (even if they didn't use it that year as a camp)? Do you go by the year they held their first summer camp operation there (even if they didn't have ownership of the land yet)? I can say that the criteria used to determine the date of establishment of the twelve camps in this article varies, depending on what the particular council chose to use. Some used the date they bought it or took ownership of the land; some used the year they built the camp and some used the date they held their first summer camp operation at the camp or a combination of the three factors. I don't believe that using a purchase date by itself is a correct thing to do. If you had 40 acres of woodlands that no one camps on for a year or two, that is not a camp. It is a piece of vacant land, even if it is owned by a scout council. If you built a camp and /or had a council summer camp operation going on a parcel of land then you had a camp (my opinion anyway). I don't think if some troop happened to have a camp-out on some land that eventually became a camp would that qualify as an establishment date; only a true summer camp operation run by a council would.

If you visit the Treasure Island Scout Reservation website it says Treasure Island is "America's oldest continuous Scout Camp". Then if you visit Chicago's Camp Owasippe's website it says Owasippe is "America's oldest continuous Scout Camp" and that it started in 1911. They can't both be the oldest since they have two different starting dates. The oldest (known) camp by whatever definition you choose; the year they bought it (1910), built it (1911) or held their first camp there (1912) appears to be Camp Owasippe.

After having sent out calls for help on Scouts-L, asking for assistance in ASTAR and visiting dozens of camp and council websites it appears that there are twelve scout camps (and maybe more) in the country that were created between 1910 and 1919 that are still in existence. Let me caution that just because someone enters information in a website does not mean that the information was fully researched before doing so. (More so the unofficial sites) This became evident when I found three different camps on the web all claiming that they were the oldest scout camp west of the Mississippi yet their dates of establishment were 1919, 1920 and 1924. The oldest camps that have been located and verified by way of official websites and /or written documentation such as old camp manuals are as follows:

Camp Owasippe - located near Whitehall, Michigan - Chicago Area Council - since 1911

The first 40 acres that became Camp Owasippe was purchased in 1910 near Whitehall, Michigan. In 1911 a small group of scouts and workmen dug a well and built the basics of a camp. In 1912 they held their first summer camp operation there. The camp was originally at Crystal Lake and was called Camp White in 1912. In 1913 the name was changed to Camp Owasippe. Since vacant land is not really a camp, 1910 would not seem to be the start date for Owasippe. They took a steamship to get there for camp in 1912 so it isn't likely troops were hiking in from Chicago for weekend camping in 1911. The 1919 camp manual gave the original name of Camp White and actually said the camp was established in 1912 (when they held their first camp). The Chicago Council was using the 1912 date in 1972 as the Owasippe patch that year says it was the camp's 60th anniversary. In 1961 they used a patch that said 1911 was the start date (their 50th anniversary patch). In 1996 they put on their camp patch that it was Owasippe's 85th anniversary (using the 1911 date). They seem to have been undecided as to which of the two years to use. I suppose you could take your pick (and many will) of 1910, 1911 or 1912 but I would have gone with the year 1912 since it wasn't used as a camp until then. Even though it started out with 40 acres it eventually grew to about 14,000 acres in size. Some of it was sold off in recent years including the original 40 acres so that the camp currently contains about 5,000 acres. This is NOT to say there were two different Owasippes in two different locations as there was not. They didn't buy a second site, move to it and sell off the first. The original and current acreage was all included in one massive reservation. It is still a very large camp with a tremendous history. Their camp manual, which is online, has an extremely interesting story in it about Chief Owasippe and his two sons.

Camp Teetonkah - located near Jackson, Michigan - Great Sauk Trail Council - since 1913

Camp Teetonkah is located on Wolf Lake and has been since 1913. It originally contained about 50 acres. Their 1930 camp brochure states it will be Teetonkah's eighteenth season. It would seem that if you subtract 18 from 1930 you would come up with 1912 but that is incorrect. If 1930 was the 18th year and you count them backwards, their first year was 1913. Upon digging a little deeper, Teetonkah has operated on the same land since 1913 but the land was owned

privately until the Jackson Council took official title in late 1916 or early 1917. Many early camps were not always owned or owned right away. Some councils rented or leased the land or simply had free use of it from the owners until they had the finances to buy it. The Jackson Council held their first summer camp operation there (at Teetonkah) in 1913 and continued to do so for the next eighty something years. It is now just a weekend camp as is Camps Belzer, Miakonda and Glen Gray. A number of local deceased scouters have had their ashes scattered at Camp Teetonkah to be part of the camp for eternity. (Perhaps the ultimate form of camp loyalty.) I don't know if this is something unique to Teetonkah or if it has occurred at other camps as well. The list of those who will forever be part of the camp includes a former council president as well as a council executive. According to a 1921 news clipping the name "Tee-Tonk-Ah" means "Big Lodge" They had camp award patches there at least as far back as 1921.

Treasure Island Scout Camp - located near Philadelphia - Cradle of Liberty Council -since 1913

Treasure Island has a rather interesting history. It was originally privately owned by a scoutmaster named Oscar G. Worman who used it for his troop. Philadelphia Council leased the island from him for six years starting in 1913 and also held their first summer camp there in 1913. The council bought the island at the end of the lease in 1919. It was originally called Ridges Island. A council committee was inspecting the 50 acre island in 1913 when one member remarked that the scenic island truly was a "Treasure" and his comment was seized upon immediately as the name for the new camp. Treasure Island Scout Reservation is made up of two separate islands with the other being Marshall Island. What is interesting about this is that Treasure Island is part of New Jersey and Marshall Island is part of Pennsylvania. When they put up a suspension bridge to connect the two islands it was deemed an interstate bridge and required special permission. While their website says Treasure Island is the oldest continuous scout camp in the country, it isn't older than Owasippe which dates back to 1911 (or 1912, take your pick) and with a 1913 established date Treasure Island is tied with Camp Teetonkah as the nation's second oldest camp. Unless you want to disqualify Owasippe since they no longer own the original acreage they started on which after talking to a Philadelphia Scouter is apparently the reasoning behind the claim on the Philadelphia website. Even if you subscribe to that line of thought Treasure Island would still be tied with Teetonkah as the oldest two. I will let others debate and say that the three of them as a group are the three oldest known Scout camps in the nation. My vote would still go to Owasippe even though I would love to vote for Teetonkah which my council owns. Treasure Island had felt patches going back into the teens.

Camp Delmont - located in Delaware County, Pennsylvania - Cradle of Liberty Council - since 1916

Camp Delmont was named after the two counties that made up the original Valley Forge Council, DELaware and MONTgomery. It is now one of the two camps that make up the 1400+ acre Musser Scout Reservation in Pennsylvania. The original 35 acres was purchased for \$500.00 and included a stone house. Summer Camp was first held there in 1916. The name "Camp Delmont" was used at other locations for summer camp previous to 1916. The first camp of the Valley Forge Council was Camp Pequea, located along the Susquehanna River 15 miles Southwest of Lancaster, this camp was owned by a trolley company and was offered to all scouts from Eastern Penna. In 1913, the Council obtained the rights to use White's Island in the Delaware below Scudder's Falls and this camp was known as Camp Delmont. This camp was used in 1913 and 1914. In 1915, they moved to an island in the Schulykill known as Pioneer Island. It was used during 1915 and 1916. In 1916, the first section of what is now Delmont Scout Reservation was purchased and used that year as a summer camp.

Yawgoog Scout Reservation - located near Rockville, Rhode Island - Narragansett Council - since 1916

Camp Yawgoog is named after an Narragansett Indian Chief and was a 150 acre parcel that was leased for one year then purchased by the Rhode Island Boy Scouts (RIBS) and includes two ponds named Yawgoog and Wincheck (another Indian Chief). They held their first summer camp operation there in 1916.

Camp Glen Gray - located in Bergen County, New Jersey - Northern New Jersey Council - since 1917

Glen Gray is named after Frank Gray, a well known early professional scouter of that area, and was originally 150 acres and is located in a valley in the Ramapo Mountains in New Jersey. Mr. Gray was one of America's earliest scoutmasters, having started a troop in Montclair, N.J. in March, 1909. He also created an honor program that was used in New Jersey and in the Brooklyn Council called "Senior Division".

Camp Glen Gray was sold and is no longer in service.

Indian Mound Scout Reservation - near Oconomowoc, Wisconsin - Milwaukee County Council - since 1917

Indian Mound is named after a 1,000 year old Indian mound that is shaped somewhat like a lizard or turtle and is a 291 acre scout reservation with two camps on it.

Camp Miakonda - located in Sylvania, Ohio - Erie Shores Council - since 1917

Miakonda means "Crescent Moon" and literally is inside the city of Sylvania, Ohio and was originally a 78 acre camp. A history of this legendary camp was published in the December 1999 issue of ASTAR. The half circle patches from Miakonda came in two sets, the three tree (1950's) and the four tree (1960's). Most councils were doing very well if they owned even one camp in those early years. Toledo Council had finances and had two camps in the teens. Because the Vineyard Lake camp in Michigan was where they held their summer camp from 1915-1923, Miakonda didn't host a summer camp operation until 1924 but was built and used as a camp in 1917.

Camp Belzer - located near Indianapolis, Indiana - Crossroads of America Council - since 1918

Camp Belzer is named after the creator of the Firecrafters organization, Francis O. Belzer, who was the longtime professional in Indianapolis. It was originally called Camp Chank-Tun-Un-Gi (which meant "loud, happy place") and is a 130 acre camp next to Fall Creek. It was renamed Camp Belzer in 1948 after the death of their "Chief".

Scouthaven - located near Arcade, New York - Greater Niagara Frontier Council - since 1918

Scouthaven was purchased in 1918 but was first called Camp Crystal as it was located on Crystal Lake; it was not called Scouthaven until 1923. It is a 400 acre camp and in the early years Scouts got to it by riding a "milk" train which went by the camp. It was originally owned by the Buffalo Council which was located inside the Erie County Council until the two merged in 1949. It is rather unique as it was a turn of the century amusement park that was converted into a Scout camp. The dining hall is the former dance hall from the park and the Camp Rangers office is the railroad depot that was used at the park to drop off and pick up passengers.

Camp Wakenah - Since 1918

Camp Wakenah (pronounced wauk-in-naw) is near Salem, Connecticut. The camp occupies 90 acres and has a pond/lake (50 or more acres) for swimming, boating, canoeing, and sailing. It offers tent campsites, winter cabins and family camping for overnight groups, an activity field for athletics and camporees, boats and canoes for overnight groups and a Cub Scout Day Camp Program. The camp is also up for sale, but has not been sold as of this writing (7/19/01).

Camp Agawam - Located near Lake Orion, Michigan - Since 1918

In 1918 the Pontiac Boy Scout Council in Michigan purchased 115 acres of land on W. Clarkston Road on Tommy's Lake for \$30,000. It was named Camp Pontiac.

In 1920 Camp Pontiac offered a summer camping program for the first time. In 1925 the camp expanded with construction of 26 buildings for \$26,000. The buildings included a dining hall, administration cottage, cabins and latrines. They were of wood construction and served for many years but proper maintenance became impossible during the Great Depression years of the 1930's. In 1928 Pontiac Council expanded to become the Oakland (Michigan) Area Council. In 1933 Camp Pontiac was renamed Camp Agawam reflecting the council's expansion outside of Pontiac. Today Camp Agawam is owned by the Clinton Valley Council and continues to be a Boy Scout camp.

It will celebrate its 90th anniversary in 2008.

Camp Friedlander - located in Cincinnati, Ohio - Dan Beard Council - Since 1919

Summer camp was held there in 1919 and they dedicated it on August 23, 1919. The camp is currently undergoing a multi-million dollar renovation. The original 41 acres was donated by Edgar Friedlander in 1919 and he donated 35 more acres in 1923. The current Dan Beard Scout Reservation which includes Camp Friedlander is 500 acres.

Camp Parsons - located on the Hood Canal in the state of Washington - Chief Seattle Council - since 1919

Camp Parsons was a 165 acre logging camp and was purchased by Reginald Parsons, the Seattle Council's first president who donated it to the scouts. The camp was named in his honor. They held their first summer camp operation

there in 1919 and continue to do so today. The camp is the oldest continuous Boy Scout camp west of the Mississippi and is the only camp in the west to make the list of "America's Oldest Scout Camps".

I thought it interesting that each of the twelve camps had some type of honor society/program attached to it's early history. Owasippe had the "Tribe of Owasippe" in 1916. Teetonkah had the "Tribe of Keokuk" in the 1930s and for decades after. Treasure Island has had "Wimachtendienks W.W." (the OA) since 1915. Delmont had the "Order of the Tipi". Glen Gray has had the "Old Guard of Glen Gray" since it's early days. Indian Mound had the "Tribe of Ku-ni-eh". Yawgoog had the "Knights of Yawgoog Honor Society" starting in 1920 as well as the "Wincheck Indians Honor Society" which was converted to the Wincheck OA Lodge in 1958. Miakonda was used by the "Tribe of Gimogash". Belzer was the birthplace of "Firecrafters" and Scouthaven had the "Tribe of Wokanda" from about 1923-1949. Camp Friedlander was the birthplace of the Tribe of Ku-ni-eh. Camp Parsons had the "Order of the Silver Marmot" as a honor society in the 1920's and beyond.

Some information that is on the websites can be quite interesting such as who is the biggest council owned camp in the country to who is the newest camp in the country or at least that is the claim that was made. One camp had moved it's location four times this century. If there are other camps out there that were established between 1910 and 1919, (and there probably is) I was unable to find information on them. Many websites do not give starting dates for their camp. It appears that a number of camps that would have made the list have been sold off in the last five or six years. For now this seems to be all of the nation's Boy Scout Camps that are deserving of the title "America's Oldest Scout Camps" with the criteria of being established in the 1910 to 1919 era and still being in existence. Whether the term "established" means the year it was purchased, the year it was built or the year they had their first camp operation, it will determine what the year of establishment would be as far as to a particular camp. Regardless, all the camps listed in this article have a lot of stories to be told. There are also MANY camps out there that were established in the 1920's that are still going strong. If you are going to research camps I believe the most reliable information will come from documentation from the 1920's-40's as it seems facts can change over the years and once something is published people presume it is indeed fact. It is not always the case.

Camp Conewago - Since 1919

Camp Conewago (pronounced con-a-woga) was purchased in 1919. The camp is 25 acres, bordered on two sides by creeks. It is located near New Oxford, PA. Summer Camp was last held there in 1948. The camp is unique in that it was set up at to be owned by a trust independent of the BSA. It cannot be sold by the BSA, only used by them. The York-Adams Council has control of the camp but does not technically own it. The trust contains an endowment to provide funds for materials for maintenance. Scouts supply labor. Camp Conewago is used year-round and provides tent camping opportunities as well as cabins available for rental. Cub Day camp is also held there.

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More Information on other "Oldest Camps":

Camp Bonnie Brae - Since 1919

Camp Bonnie Brae is the oldest continuously operated Girl Scout Camp in the U.S.A. It is located at the northeast shoreline of Big Pond in East Otis, Massachusetts which is in the Berkshire Mountains about 30 miles west of Springfield. Camp Bonnie Brae is situated on over 200 acres and is owned by the Pioneer Valley Girl Scout Council.

Camp Tamaracouta - Since 1912

Canada's oldest Boy Scout Camp. Located 60 kilometers from Montreal in the Lower Laurentian Mountains, this 1000 acre site encompasses Lake Tamaracouta. It is owned by the Quebec Provincial Council of Scouts Canada. The camp has a honor campers organization called the Knights of Tamara Society. which was founded in 1933.