

Allie's Stories



Boy Scouts

One of the most fun things that I probably ever got involved in was Boy Scouts. In 1946, I was 12 years old and I was old enough to join the Saxton troop. Now the Saxton troop wasn't a very big troop of Scouts. In fact, there hadn't been Boy Scouts in Saxton for a number of years because most of the men who would serve as Scout Masters were off serving the country in the military—the Army, Navy, Air Force, or something like that. But one of the guys who came back to Saxton after the war was a man named Bob Williams.

Bob Williams was a banker, and when he returned home he got interested somehow in restarting the Saxton troop. He contacted a group of us kids and said if we wanted to have a Boy Scout troop he would work with us and we could get going and begin to have meetings up at the church and work on our advancement, get our uniforms, and maybe line up some opportunities to go camping and hiking. This turned out pretty good. Mr. Williams didn't have any sons. He was married at the time but he had no boys, so I think he sort of liked the idea of going out and working with young men. There were probably 8 or 10 or 12 of us young guys that went to the church and met with him the first couple of times and got the troop started.

Bob Williams had been in the US Army in World War II, and he had served overseas in China and Burma, and frequently we would get him to tell us about his World War II exploits, the things that he did when he was in the service, his experiences and what happened when he was overseas. This became pretty entertaining because we didn't know it at the time but he very much liked to talk about what had happened to him during the several years that he was out of the country, out of the United States. So many times we'd go to these meetings and we'd carry on a little bit of business, and then we'd get him to talk about what he had done in World War II and he would stay

1/2 hour or 45 minutes and give us his version of how World War II was conducted in the Far East. Behind his back we nicknamed him Burma, so we would refer to Burma Williams as our Scout Master.

He was a good Scout Master and he had a great love for the outdoors. Frequently he would arrange to get a couple hundred, maybe a couple thousand evergreen trees and take us out into the woods somewhere and we would plant them as part of a conservation project. I think the first time we planted trees we went up around the Saxton Reservoir where there was a lot of soil erosion and we put trees in the ground up there, and to this day those trees are huge, big trees that were planted back when Allie was 12, 13 years of age. But these were the kind of projects we did and we always found them fun to do and enjoyable.

We had a chance to go to camp one summer, and Bob Williams needed some older guys to go along to camp. He talked to Chippy, my brother, and Phil Barnett, a family friend. Those guys were more like 18, 19, 20 years old. So he appointed them to be Junior Assistant Scout Masters. When we went to summer camp over in Blue Knob, Chippy and Phil Barnett went along with us as leaders and kept us out of trouble and gave us some morale guidance, and also represented a pretty good example of how we would conduct ourselves as Boy Scouts. It's funny, but I had never had the experience of sleeping on a tick.

We were given a list of things to take along, you know, like a mess kit and a blanket, a pillow, a certain amount of clothing, a swimming suit, towel, toilet kit, toothbrush, and then on the list it said a tick. I didn't know what a tick was, and neither did anyone else, so we asked the Scout Master. He said a tick is like a huge pillow case that is going to be as big as a single bed mattress and it is going to be like a big envelope that you can put a lot of straw in because you're gonna sleep on it, and we're gonna stuff it full of straw when you get to camp. Well, that didn't make a lot of sense to

me because I didn't want to sleep on straw.

But anyhow my mother took a big sheet and she sewed it so it was like a big huge pillow case and once it was opened up it was as big as a single bed. So I took my tick to camp, along with everything else. In those days, going to Boy Scout Camp probably cost about \$15 for the full week, but boy was it a thrill. We were going to get away, we were going to get to do all this swimming, and we were going to take studies and get merit badges and advance, eat in a mess hall, hike, camp, and do all those fun things. Well, when we arrived at camp of course one of the first things they wanted us to do was get assigned to a building where we'd sleep. The buildings weren't very big.

They were probably as big as let's say your living room in Dayton, Ohio. It was a room that was built like a cabin up on sticks or up on posts out in the woods, and there would be like 6 or 8 guys would sleep in that, so there was little bunk beds in there. And, of course, when we went into the building there was nothing but bunk beds inside. There was not much floor to walk around on and we wondered it just looked awful crowded. Well as the week wore on we realized we didn't need a lot of floor in our tent or cabin area because we were outside most of the time. But anyhow, we took our ticks and went down to this huge straw pile. Then when we got down there we were told, "Fill your tick up with straw." Fill it up... fill it up...stuff it in there...stuff it until it looked like a huge great big hot dog. It wasn't too heavy, but it was monstrous!

Then when you got it all stuffed together we put some safety pins over the ends, drug them up the hill and put them in our beds and jumped up and down on them to mash them down a little bit, and that became our mattress on our bed. And then we'd throw our blankets and our pillows on the top of that, and that became the place that we slept. It was sort of stupid because the straw stuck you in the back at night and it made a funny sound when you rolled around on it and all, but that

was my experience sleeping on a tick, and we did that all week long.

One of the things that we had to do when we first got up there to camp was all the campers were to report to the waterfront. The waterfront was a place where there was a big swimming hole. It wasn't really a swimming pool. It was like someone had taken stones and built a big swimming pool type area where fresh water came down out of the cold mountain streams and poured into a hole in the ground and then we had to swim in there. And every Scout had to get into his bathing suit, jump in the water, and show or demonstrate how good he could swim and we got rated on it. If you couldn't swim you were called a non-swimmer. If you could swim a little bit you were called a beginner. If you were pretty good you were called a swimmer. And if you were very good you were considered an expert. So all of us stood there shivering on the bank and jumped in one at a time and got rated as swimmers. I felt pretty good because I was rated as a swimmer. But I was in that water maybe three minutes and I was glad to get out because it was so cold coming down off that mountain, even though it was summer time. I never went back in the water again!

After we qualified as to our capability as a swimmer, we were able to go back to our cabins and get unpacked and get settled down, and then our first meeting was gonna be after dinner down at the big dining hall. We all ate together down there. We had a lot of fun. There were probably 100 boys at camp, and then there were probably 25 counselors, including my brother Chippy and this friend of his, Phil Barnett. Incidentally, Phil Barnett's younger brother, Ronnie Barnett, was a Boy Scout with me, so I knew some of the guys who were at Scout Camp with as Scouters. It was during that week up at Scout Camp that we were told that some of the guys in another camp nearby were probably gonna come over through the woods at night time and throw rocks at our cabin or do

something to disrupt our sleep. So we thought we would be vigilant and stay awake at night and watch out for these guys. If we saw them sneaking through the woods we were going to attack them.

I don't know if it was really true they were going to come over, but after about two or three nights of watching for them we encountered the situation that I told you about earlier of the phosphorescent wood, or fox fire. It had rained the second night at camp. The rain had made the woods damp. Consequently, if someone was to come creeping through the woods at nighttime we wouldn't be able to hear them because the leaves were soft and no longer crunchy. So we took special precautions to watch the woods at nighttime, figuring guys from other towns like Altoona or Hollysburg would probably come over and try to scare us at nighttime. It was during about the third night at camp that two or three of us were sitting on the porch in the dark late at night, maybe midnight or one o'clock in the morning, and we could see something that looked like a glow in the woods and in the dark.

As we whispered and pointed down in that direction our first conclusion was it was probably some kids coming through from the other camp and maybe they had flashlights and then stretched their handkerchief over the front of the flashlight so it wouldn't be very bright so they could sneak upon us. So we sat on the porch of our little cabin and we kept watching this light. Although there were several places where the light came from, we watched to see if it moved. Sometimes it seemed to move. Sometimes it didn't seem to move. But it was always in the same direction, and we knew that direction was where other campers were staying. Well, you know, we talked about this and we tried to figure what was this glow, what was this soft light down in the woods that we could continue to see but couldn't identify. It was probably after half an hour of

guessing and wandering and imagining that a couple of my friends urged me to go down and be the guy to check it out.

Well, one thing I learned about myself pretty early in life was I didn't have a lot of fear. Now maybe that's because I wasn't very bright, but I always was willing to try something once. So I got up off the porch and I snuck down through the woods to get closer to this light while my friends stayed back on the porch and watched to see what would happen. I stayed down real low and I crawled along on the ground, and occasionally I'd get up on my feet and I would walk a little bit down and get behind a tree, and then I could move in a little closer to where this light was coming from. It was a very dark night and the woods were wet because it had rained, so there was no noise. There was just this sight of this glow in the dark. I worked closer to it. I got closer and I would stop and I would listen, and I couldn't hear any voices. It was like if anyone was going to attack us they must be very, very silent. And that wasn't the characteristic of 12 and 13 year old boys.

But anyhow I worked my way closer and closer and I got down very, very close on my hands and knees and I realized after awhile that this glowing light was coming from just a few feet in front of me. It wasn't round like a flashlight lens. In some cases it was long and skinny like a ruler or a pencil, and in some cases it was a different shape like maybe a crushed beer can or something like that, but I had to see what it was. So I worked my way up very close to it and I put my hand out to it, and I touched some of this lighted material. It felt cold and wet and very irregular to the touch, like a piece of wood bark. I pulled a piece toward me and lifted it up into my hand, and sure enough as I sat on the ground I held a piece of wood in my hand that glowed in the dark. It was the strangest thing I had ever experienced up until then.

Well, I got some more and I gathered some more of it and got a fistful of it. After I had gathered up some I slipped it into my pocket and I quietly worked my way back up to where my friends were

on the cabin porch. Of course they were excited to know who did I run into, what had happened, why was I so quiet, what did I see, who was down there, and we went inside the cabin and I told them what I found. Well, they didn't believe me at first until I reached in my pocket. Then I pulled out all the samples of the phosphorescent wood that I had in my pocket. We were all, me included, just fascinated that this wood would glow in the dark because we had no lights in the cabin, we had no way of lighting it up. We just sat in there and we talked about this stuff.

Well, we concluded that that's what the light was, that there was probably no attacker, and it was probably safe to go to bed, so we put the phosphorescent wood on a shelf that night and we all crawled into our ticks in bed and went to sleep. The next morning of course we were excited to tell Chippy and Phil Barnett about it so they could share our story of the night before. They got a big kick out of it because by daytime if you looked at the wood it looked like any other piece of rotten wood. It didn't look any different. It didn't glow in the day time. As far as they were concerned, this was just some story we were exaggerating about the night time. But we put the wood out on the porch where it stayed damp. The next evening, sure enough as it got dark, that would began to glow again. We later learned from one of the counselors at camp that fox fire is the nickname for phosphorescent wood and it's a wood that's at a certain stage of decay or rot and it has to have a certain amount of moisture content before it will behave as it did for us. It's not common. A lot of people don't get to see it. We felt very fortunate that we had encountered fox fire. We laughed about all the concern we had that it might indicate an impending attack when actually it was just a freak of nature.

As the week at Scout Camp went on, we really enjoyed the fun we had up there. As I say,

we didn't swim, but during the daytime we worked on merit badges and worked on other aspects of Scouting. We learned cooking techniques, we learned knot tying, we went on Hikes, and we really got to meet some guys from other towns and other communities that were pretty nice guys. There were two counselors from over in Altoona by the name of Hern, and they were twin brothers, Lee and Dee. I had never worked or been around identical twins before, and it was sort of fascinating to be around two young guys that were so absolutely identical in appearance that you couldn't tell them apart.

Near the end of the week the counselors wanted to have a Softball game against the campers, so the game was arranged on Friday afternoon that the Counselors—now these guys were like 18, 19, 20, and 21 years old—were going to play against the Campers, who were 12, 13, and 14. We thought we had some pretty good athletes among the campers because I was in the younger group. We got a team together and a game was arranged. Sure enough, we went down and played a seven inning softball game. There was a guy from Saxton went over to camp with us—Chippy would remember him—his name was Melvin Hall. Melvin was a big boy who lived on a farm and he had big muscles. He was extra tall and he was extra strong because he worked on a farm his whole life. Melvin's nickname was Slabs. I don't know why we called him Slabs, but he was Slabs Hall. And Slabs was not very bright, he was not a great athlete or anything like that, but one of the things we tried to do was get every player into the game.

The Counselors were winning the game near the end of the game, and I think they were winning by two runs. The score was like 7 to 5. Finally, the Boy Scouts got two guys on base. Whoever was coaching the Campers decided they would put Slabs Hall up to bat. It was

great to see him go up there because he was the only guy among the Campers that was as big as any of the Counselors. And Slabs stood at the plate, and when the ball came he took a mighty swing and he missed it, but we kept hoping.

That pitch came in again, and Slabs swung at it and he missed it. Oh, we wanted him to hit that ball so badly! And the third time the pitcher threw the ball in, Slabs Hall swung that bat and he hit the ball, and that ball just took off flying. It flew and flew way out over the center fielder's head, and the center fielder from the Counselors turned and ran after that ball, and he just kept chasing it and chasing it. I don't know if he ever caught up with the ball or not, but Slabs Hall hit a three run homer that won the game and made the Campers the champions of the camp over the Counselors. Poor old Slabs Hall, who probably had never done anything marvelous in his life before, became the hero. Everyone loved Slabs Hall! He was the guy that knocked the hide off the ball and brought in the winning runs and gave everybody that was a Camper a feeling that they had triumphed over the Counselors. It was a fun week. We really had a good time up at Camp (we called it) Wissowanick. It was up at Blue Knob where the ski resort is now. It was just one of the great summer experiences, and one I'll never forget.

Every summer the Boy Scouts seemed to get involved in some project around Saxton I think it was about the summer of 1946 or 1947 that the mountainside outside of Saxton, where I told you about the Sunday Rock story, the Boy Scouts decided it would be a nice project if there was an American flag up on top of the mountain at Sunday Rock. We talked to the Scout Master, and he said he didn't know how we'd ever get a flagpole up the mountain, but he would ask around and see if there was anybody locally in the business community that would help us with the project. Well, one of the Boy Scouts was a kid named Denny Putt, and Denny's father was a contractor,

Bill Putt. Bill was an educated man, but a flamboyant person who always was willing to try anything that would make a good name for his community or the local area.

When our Scout Master talked to Bill Putt, Bill said he didn't see any reason why we couldn't get a flagpole and get it up the mountain and put it in the Sunday Rock area and make arrangements to fly the flag over the town of Saxton. Well, this seemed like a tremendous uplift because we didn't think anyone would ever be able to do it. But Bill Putt, the contractor, arranged to have a flagpole removed from some place that was being torn down, and he brought the flag pole over to the foot of the mountain in a truck. Then a guy by the name of Howard Wiles, who was a local farmer, was paid to bring two horses over. And these two big work horses from Howard Wiles' farm were hooked up to the top knob on the flagpole, and the horses drug this great huge long silver flagpole the whole way up the mountain road to Sunday Rock.

Bill Putt, the contractor, had an old 1942 Chevrolet pick-up truck, and he and Warren Taylor drove up the mountain road behind the horses and, when they got to the top, Bill commissioned Warren Taylor to drill a hole in the flat rock on top of the mountain so that the pole would fit down in the hole. Well, all of this work went on and we Scouts would go up day by day and watch them work and see the progress on this project of getting a flagpole up on top of the mountain outside of Saxton. The hole in the rock was interesting to me because what happened was they just didn't drill a hole. They had to take a hammer and what was called a star bit, which was a long piece of metal with a hard end on it, and they had to tap it and tap it and tap it and tap it and make a big round hole in the rock so that the flagpole would slide down in the hole and stay upright.

Eventually Warren Taylor was able to make the hole in the stone and, with the use of the horses and pulleys, that flagpole was put perfectly erect—straight up and down—and then they arranged to melt

lead and pour it all around the base of the flagpole where it went into the stone, and the lead hardened and it was now in a fixed position standing straight up and down out at the edge of the big, big rock at Sunday Rock. In all the effort to get that flagpole up there was one thing that was forgotten. That was nobody thought to put a rope through the loop or the pulley at the top of the pole! Here we were up on top of the mountain with the horses and the contractor and the workers and the Boy Scouts and this great big tall silver pole sticking straight out of the rocks at the top of the mountain, and if you looked up the pole at the top there was a little pulley where the rope was supposed to go through and a big round silver knob. Now how were we ever gonna get a rope up the pole and through that pulley?

Well, everyone thought about it and they talked about and they could imagine, oh my, they had to take the pole down again. Well, we can't take the pole down again, and all the problems that we were faced with. Finally, one of the Boy Scouts stepped forward. His name was George Edwards. We called him Pee Wee because he was the shortest kid in the whole troop. Pee Wee says, "I'll climb the pole and put the rope through." Well, of course, everyone was just aghast—no, you shouldn't crawl up that pole! What if the pole snaps and you fall down over the mountain and are injured or killed! It was just crazy! But Pee Wee weighed about 85 pounds and he was insistent that he was going to get up there and put that rope through the pulley.

Well, after some due deliberation, Pee Wee was allowed to do it. And what they did was they let him slide a piece of rope through his teeth and he put some stick-um on his hands, and he started to climb up the silver pole, inch by inch. We all stood back and everyone was told to be quiet, don't say anything, be silent, and Pee Wee crawled and he pulled and he lifted and he hoisted himself, and inch by inch he went up this big, tall, silver pole with a rope between his teeth. And he pulled and he grunted and he strained and his face was red, and it was unbelievable up there on

that summer afternoon to watch him go up that pole. When he finally got to the top he just hugged the pole and he rested. And after what seemed like a long time he let one hand slowly release from the pole, took the rope from in his mouth and slid it through the pulley, got a hold of it in his hand, and he slid down the pole to the rocks below, very, very confident. Everybody cheered!

Pee Wee had gotten the rope through the pulley, and now we could raise a flag on the pole. The ceremony was dedicated with a high school band that came up on the following Sunday and played patriotic music—"God Bless America" and the "Star Spangled Banner" and all the other songs that were very popular—particularly this being a period at the end of World War II. The high school band went up, and there were about 300 or 400 people who walked up the mountain on the Sunday afternoon in which the big flag was dedicated on Sunday Rock. Of course, many stories were told about the Sunday Rock and the flagpole and Pee Wee and Howard Wiles' horses and Bill Putt and Warren Taylor and all the people that helped contribute to make this possible. But I'll never forget the day that Pee Wee got that rope through the pulley and made it possible for us to fly a flag over my home town when I was a kid.