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Girl Scouting in Tampa is 75 Years Old

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Girl Scouting began in Tampa in 1913, one year after Juliette Low organized her Girl Guides, March 12, 1912, in Savannah. The next year brought a name change to Girl Scouts. The founding of the second Girl Scout Troop in the United States in Tampa was a great event for many girls and their mothers for 75 years.

Through the vision of Mrs. Sumter L. Lowry, who was a friend of Mrs. Low’s, and Mrs. W.P. (Jessamine) Link, Tampa’s Magnolia Troop #1 came into being. Mrs. Link was the first leader, with meetings held in her home at 107 Hyde Park Place.¹

Mrs. Link’s original nine girls worked on proficiency badges, went camping and
helped others, just as they do today. Her heart, her home and her pocketbook were always open to her girls. Her field trips were a joy to everyone, for she knew every flower, tree, bird and butterfly.\(^2\)

The young women who wore the old fashioned khaki outfits and large flat sailor hats of yesteryear are the mothers and grandmothers of today's Girl Scouts, Marine Scouts and Curved Bar Scouts. Even though styles have changed, Girl Scouting has remained pretty much the same down through the years.

Tampa's Troop #2 was formed at the Rosa Valdez Settlement in West Tampa.\(^3\)
Mrs. Nannie Griffin Christian attended the first Girl Scout troop meetings, although she was too young to join.

She was nine at the time. Today she would have been a Junior Girl Scout.4

Tampa’s Girl Scouts were busy during World War I. During the influenza epidemic, they donned trousers to help Western Union deliver messages on Tampa’s streets. One irate Tampan phoned Mrs. Link to report, "Your girls are all over town, and they are wearing PANTS!"

There were citations from Woodrow Wilson, each with the names of the Girl Scouts who sold Liberty Bonds.5

In 1919, Troop #1 journeyed to Eustis, Florida, where a Girl Scout camp had been opened. "Those girls had a rugged experience," said Mrs. Marcus Alexander, "for the camp was very primitive and rough."6

The Tampa Rotary Club had a chance to see first hand the work of Girl Scouts in February 1922. The club’s paper, "The Wheel Wright" announced that members of Magnolia Troop were introduced, as well as those in charge: Mrs. W.P. Link, Mrs. A.G. Turner and Miss Mary Wright. The paper further stated, "It was here that the committee in charge demonstrated what ladies of today are doing for women of tomorrow."7
Seeing a need for a nucleus group, Mrs. Marcus Alexander, Mrs. Link and several club women organized the first Girl Scout Council in May 1924. After receiving its charter, the Council took up headquarters in the old Tampa Bay Casino. The Girl Scout office later moved to the upstairs at the Tampa Municipal Auditorium, now McKay Auditorium. Squirrels ran in and out of the open windows, from their homes in Plant Park. The Council paid the city $1 per year for use of the office.

**CHARTER COUNCIL MEMBERS**

Charter members of the council were: Mrs. Link, Mrs. Alexander, Mrs. E.J. Ritter, Mrs. J.A. Griffin, Mrs. M. Henry Cohen, Miss Kate Jackson, Mrs. A.K. Dickenson, Mrs. Alonzo Turner, Mrs. William Spencer, Mrs. John B. Sutton and Mrs. Sumter L. Lowry.

After Doris Morris came to Tampa to be the Council’s first director the ball really got started rolling. Mrs. Maude Fowler donated 25 acres to the Council for a Girl Scout campsite. Camp Fowler opened in 1925. It was located 16 miles north of Tampa, in Land of Lakes. The large central building was begun on the campsite, as well as six cabins, a dock and a boat was purchased.8

At this time, there were 450 girls and women in Scouting. Courses at Camp Fowler were given in swimming, life saving, first aid, nature craft, wood craft, needle work, house work and cooking. When a girl came home from camp, she knew how to plan, buy, prepare and serve a meal; care for the sick; bathe, feed and care for babies; to be active in all good works; and to be alert to the welfare of all people.

The Community Chest brochure, "Our Crying Need," wrote, "our purpose is to give the girls through natural, wholesome pleasure those habits of mind and body which will make them useful, responsible women - ready and willing to take a definite part in the home, civic and national affairs.

'**A GOOD TURN DAILY**’

"Service becomes second nature to a Girl Scout. The slogan, Do a Good Turn Daily develops the willingness and ability to serve. Call our Headquarters for service a Girl Scout may render, phone 87-317. Since we have had support from the Community Chest, our number of troops has grown from two to twenty four."9
THIS IS WHAT GIRL SCOUTS CALL ‘PRIMITIVE’ CAMPING!
It was in 1933 that I began my scouting in Tampa. I had previously belonged to a Girl Scout Troop in Naples, Florida, for two years. I joined the troop here that met at the with my "buddy" June Pedersen. We rode the street cars from Ballast Point to the meetings after school and back home again. The leader of this troop was Mrs. Margaret Biggar McIntosh. Her influence on my young life followed me into adult life.

We had many opportunities for service to the community, such as marching in the Gasparilla Parade, wearing our uniforms; doing errands and other things at the Florida State Fair, located at North Blvd. and North "B" Street; holding the flag for civic programs; and by being good scouts in our homes, at school (Ballast Point Junior High), in our play with friends and at church.

Boy Scouts were also serving at civic meetings, at times, but they didn’t come near us if it could be avoided. Troop #22, from the Hyde Park Methodist Church, on Platt Street, often combined duties with our troop. This was an important part of growing up and learning social graces.

**SUMMER DAY CAMPS**

In the summers, there were Day Camps, held in Plant Park. We took bag lunches, learned new games, songs and dances, as well as many camping skills, to help us when we went to overnight camp.

June Pedersen won a prize at Day Camp, for some of her activities, which was a free week at Camp Fowler. At that time, my parents could not afford to send me, but in some way that I never knew, I was awarded a scholarship, for one week, from the Sertoma Club. To this day, I am still grateful for this marvelous opportunity. June Pedersen and I attended Camp Fowler the same week, in June, 1933. She and I also attended one week in 1934.

The cabins at Camp Fowler had Indian names, like Sioux, Apache, Commanche and Seminole. Each cabin had bunk beds, with fresh, straw mattresses. We took our own towels, bedding, camp clothes and bathing suits. Each cabin had turns doing KP, sweeping and general housekeeping. There were many exciting camp activities like swimming, canoeing, crafts of many kinds, campfire songs, sometimes cooking over fires outside. Making many new crafts projects, putting on plays, plus many other projects, made this an event I still enjoy thinking about.
The outdoor toilets had wooden seats, with two holes in each shed. When it was our cabin's turn to do the johns, we scrubbed the seats with disinfectant, and swept the floor with the broom that stood in the corner. There were other camp duties that were more pleasant, like the flag ceremony.

'A REAL MERMAID'

We had a waterfront director those two years whom I remember very well. Her name was Dorothy Talbot, now Mrs. Dorothy Glover. She taught us swimming and canoeing in Lake Padgett. I thought her then, and still do, the most beautiful lady I had ever seen. Tall, stately, tanned, a real mermaid. I never forgot her. I am sure that her influence on my life those two summers, carried over into my adult life and work, first with the Tampa Recreation Department, Aquatic Director at the Academy of the Holy Names and staff at National Aquatic School. Also, waterfront director at several local camps.

My Scouting experience stopped after 1935, when I went to High School. But I continued, now in the position of leadership, when my daughter, Rachelle Dervaes, was old enough for Brownies. I retired from Scouting in 1966, with 15 years total activities. Rachelle continued her Scouting through leadership at University of Florida, as a leader and Day Camp Director with the Mile High Council in Denver. At present, she is registered with the Girl Scout Council in Raleigh, North Carolina, as an advisor. Her daughter, Sarah Deats, will soon be old enough to enter Scouting as a "Daisy" Scout, and perhaps will benefit as much from the Girl Scout Movement as her Mother and Grandmother did.

By 1937, Girl Scouts were having their annual Cookie Sales, with a goal of 7,500 cookies to be sold. The first Girl Scout cookies were baked on a gas stove in the window of a store in Clarence, NY, near Buffalo, in 1927. There was one flavor, butterscotch. Ten years later, the cookie sales had become a national fund raiser for the Girl Scouts. The local proceeds have been used to upgrade current campsites, and to go for the purchase of other camps.10

WORLD WAR II DEFENSE WORK

The first mounted Girl Scout Troop #13 was formed in 1937. Members were, Betty Barnshagen, Lula Child, Dada Andrews, Peggy Kissinger, Betty Kissinger, Marjorie Brorein, Mary Martin, Barbara Jean Thomas, Nancy Berriman and Anne Washington.

World War II saw Girl Scouts helping in defense work. A local service bureau was formed, designed to offer such things as child care.

In 1944, Tampa had 1,897 Girl Scouts and 80 registered troops. Mrs. Nannie Griffin Christian was organization chairman.

Camp Dorothy Thomas, in East Hillsborough County, near Riverview, was donated by Mr. and Mrs. Wayne Thomas, in 1944. Day Camps were held there before overnight camping was offered.

Operation Pine Tree was conducted at Camp Dorothy Thomas in 1952. The Florida Forestry Service organized the program to create an interest in conservation, and impress on the girls the need for keeping their campsite in its beautiful natural condition by making plans for its proper care. By the Fall, definite plans for a big, long range program
were made from which developed the name, Operation Pine Tree.

**PINE TREE PROJECT GROWS**

At about the same time, the National Girl Scout organization began to look into the idea of adapting such an operation to the national overall plan. At their suggestion, the Tampa Girl Scout organization began the necessary consideration of participating in a Lou Henry Hoover (Mrs. Herbert Hoover) Memorial Project. On Dec. 20, 1952, the first pine tree was planted at Camp Dorothy Thomas. The ceremony was attended by more than 200 Girl Scouts, all eager to plant a tree. More than 2,000 seedlings were planted under the supervision of the Florida Forestry Service. This was followed in the early months by additional slash pine seedlings.

By Spring of 1953, the 83rd Congress had heard that there were 4,000 baby trees at Camp Dorothy Thomas. By Winter, another 2,000 seedlings had been planted, together with an experimental planting of 100 loblolly pines. Surveys of trees, flowers, birds, mammals, reptiles and insects were made to complete the requirements for applying for a Certified Lou Henry Hoover Memorial Sanctuary.11

Jack and Mary Schiller were the caretakers at Camp Dorothy Thomas for many years. He helped hundreds of scouts doing everything from digging leaders’ cars out of the sand, to running errands and helping the girls gather wood for their campfires. Aunt Mary was famous for her collard greens and cornbread. Their warm, southern hospitality and humor made Girl Scouts and adults alike feel a close personal kinship. They retired in 1964.12

The Suncoast Girl Scout Council, a United Fund Agency (formerly The Community Chest) was formed in 1961. This new Council included Hernando, Hillsborough, Pasco and Pinellas Counties. Mrs. Stanley Milledge was its first president, and Mrs. Mildred Widgery was Executive Director.

Mrs. Widgery was never a Girl Scout. She had worked previously as a clothes buyer, a legal secretary and a volunteer at an orphanage. She moved to Tampa in 1954 and became interested in Girl Scouting through a friend. She stayed with the Council for 22 years.

In 1960 there were 4,171 girls registered with the Suncoast Council; 1,122 adults; and 245 troops.

The Girl Scout Movement, which began in 1913, with nine girls, has continued to flourish through the interest of the girls, the dedication of the adult leaders, the support of the community, and a continuously stimulating and exciting program.

**THERE ARE MANY CHANGES**

There have been many changes, such as: (1) several new campsites have been added to the Suncoast Council-Scoutcrest, at Odessa; Indian Echo in Pasco County; Plant City Troop House; Camp Wai Lani, near Ozona; additional acreage added to Camp Dorothy Thomas. Two camps have been closed: Camp Fowler, and Camp Standing Indian, near Clayton, GA; (2) The Girl Scout uniforms have been changed several times to meet the needs of more fashionable young women in Scouting. Also, the books have been changed several times, to meet the needs of more modern young women in a changing world. Both the uniforms and books had a major change in September.
(3) Many proficiency badges have been dropped, as they no longer had meanings for new programs and new interests. Many new proficiency badges have been added, reflecting the changing needs in our changing world; (4) Many new programs have been added over the years - National Jamborets; International Opportunities; exchange programs between Girl Scouts in foreign countries, as well as for adults; National Camps offer a wide range of programs for advanced Girl Scouts, national and international; (5) Local programs for the needs of girls who are handicapped, underprivileged, blind and retarded.

Today, in the Suncoast Council, there are 14,967 registered Girl Scouts, and 3,979 registered adults, for a total of 18,946 membership. There are 1003 troops. There are 26 Lifetime memberships.13

There are many more facets of the Girl Scout movement than Mrs. Juliette Low and Mrs. Jessamine Link could ever have imagined.

It is interesting to note that St. Petersburg Girl Scouts still care for the grave of Prof. Walter J. Hoxie, a well known naturalist, who was responsible for the first Girl Scout Handbook in the United States. He moved to St. Petersburg to join his daughter, Mary Russell "Cappy" Day, a teacher who started the Pinellas County’s first troop in 1924.14

FOOTNOTES

1 Tampa Tribune, 3-6-66.
2 Tampa Tribune, 12-13-70.
3 Tampa Times, 7-6-60.