

The Lakeshore Guardian, 2010 April
Thumb Habitats
The Natural History Of Scouting
by Bill Collins

2010 is the 100th anniversary of the Boy Scouts of America. From its earliest origins, Scouting was rooted in a respect for nature. Two co-founders of the BSA, Dan Beard and Ernest Thompson Seton, were both well-known outdoorsmen and naturalists. Together, with Lord Robert Baden-Powell, the founder of Scouting in Britain in 1907, they created much of the BSA program as it exists today.

Daniel Carter Beard grew up in Northern Kentucky along the Ohio River. As a boy, he explored the rivers and woods near his home. He made sketches and developed a great appreciation for nature and outdoor living. Beard became a well-known author and illustrator of books for boys. He illustrated Mark Twain's "The Prince and the Pauper" and "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court". He wrote and illustrated the "Field and Forest Handy Book" and many other books about nature and outdoor skills.



Dan Beard working at his desk. Credit: Getty Images, historical photograph.

In 1882, he published "The American Boy's Handy Book", still in print. Five years later in 1887, his sisters, Lina and Adelia Beard, published "The American Girl's Handy Book". For over 20 years before the BSA was founded, American boys and girls grew up with the Beard books, full of outdoor activities, craft ideas and nature instruction for all seasons.

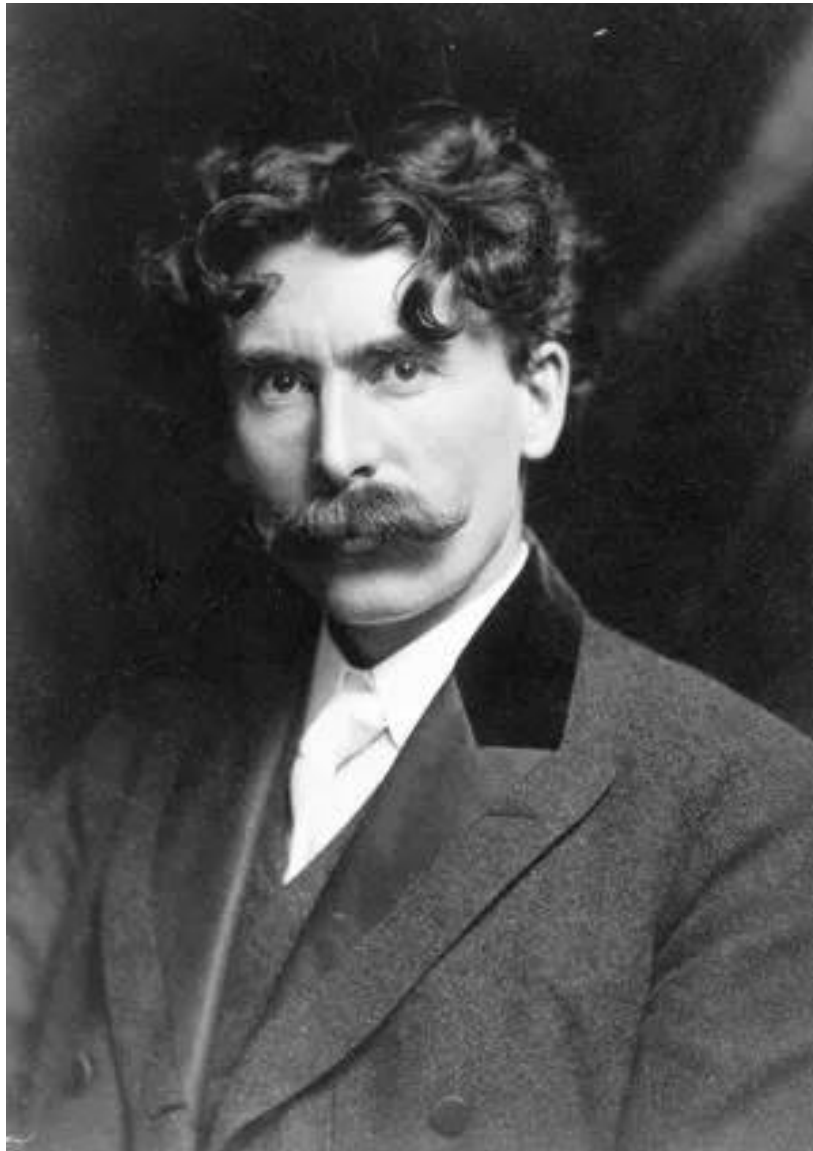
In 1905 Beard founded the Sons of Daniel Boone, which later became the Boy Pioneers of America, an outdoors organization for boys based on American frontiersmen Daniel Boone, Simon Kenton, Kit Carson and David Crockett, naturalist and painter John James Audubon, painter of American Indians George Catlin, and Appleseed Johnny. In 1910, he merged the Boy Pioneers with the BSA and began his 30-year service as a national BSA leader. Beard was fondly known as "Uncle Dan" by scouts. Later, with his sisters and others in BSA, Beard helped create the Camp Fire Girls and became president of the Camp Fire Club of America.



Dan Beard in an oak forest.

Beard is said to have defined Scouting as "*The love of outdoors in terms of conservation.*" Beard's friends included leading conservationists Gifford Pinchot and President Theodore Roosevelt, and with them he promoted national wildlife conservation efforts. For years after Roosevelt's death, Beard led an annual contingent of youth to visit his grave.

Ernest Thompson Seton was born in England. His family emigrated to Canada and eventually moved to Toronto. Like Beard, Seton spent a lot of time in the woods around his home where he studied and drew animals. At 16, Seton was apprenticed as a portrait painter. He later won a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Arts in London, England, but after only seven months, he returned to Canada and worked as a naturalist in Manitoba, where he became fascinated with wolves.



Ernest Thompson Seton circa 1901. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Encyclopedia Britannica

Seton authored many books about wildlife and nature. His most popular work was "Wild Animals I Have Known", which includes the story of the famous Mexican gray wolf "Lobo, The King of Currumpaw." In the winter of 1893-94, Seton hunted wolves in northeastern New Mexico on behalf of cattle ranchers. He pursued the wolf named Lobo for over a year and his death changed Seton from a wolf hunter into a co-founder of the American wildlife conservation movement. Seton later wrote, *"Ever since Lobo, my sincerest wish has been to impress upon people that each of our native wild creatures is in itself a precious heritage that we have no right to destroy or put beyond the reach of our children."*

Seton built an estate in Greenwich, Connecticut. Boys from a nearby school kept vandalizing his fence. After repainting it several times, he invited the boys to camp at his estate for a weekend where he told them stories about American Indians and nature. In 1902 he organized these boys into the first Tribe of what became the League of Woodcraft Indians, based on American Indian culture and lore. The Woodcraft Indians basically merged with the BSA, although offshoots continue today in California, the United Kingdom and Eastern Europe.



Ernest Thompson Seton with an early group of Woodcraft Indians, circa 1903. Courtesy of Academy for the Love of Learning, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Seton wrote a manual for the Woodcraft Indians entitled “The Birch Bark Roll of the Woodcraft Indians”. He sent a copy to Robert Baden-Powell in 1904 and then traveled to England in 1906 to meet with him and promote the Woodcraft Indians. Baden-Powell was impressed and used Seton’s ideas in his manual for British Scouts, “Scouting for Boys”.

In earlier years, Robert Baden-Powell concentrated on his career as a military scout for the British army, and does not appear to have pursued the study of nature to a great extent. But nature and the outdoors most certainly held his interest. As a boy, he skipped school to stalk and cook wild game in nearby woods. On holidays, he sometimes took canoeing expeditions with his brothers. Obviously, as a military scout, he spent a great deal of time outdoors and would have to know how to interpret nature and survive. Baden-Powell frequently traveled disguised as a butterfly collector, incorporating plans of military installations into his drawings of butterfly wings.



Major-General Robert Baden-Powell, circa 1907. Photograph by Henry Guttmann Collection/Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

In his book *Scouting for Boys*, Baden-Powell said, *"A scout is friend to animals. He should save them as far as possible from pain and should not kill any animal unnecessarily, even if it is only a fly. I have said the 'hunting' or 'going after big game is one of the best things in scouting'. I did not say shooting or killing the game was the best part; for as you get to study animals you get to like them more and more, and you will soon find that you don't want to kill them for the mere sake of killing."*



Sir Robert Baden Powell with his son Peter, highly pleased with the welcome they received from the Scouts of Cape Town, South Africa. Source: Getty Images, topical press agency.

In 1896, while serving in the British Army in South Africa during the Second Matabele War, Baden-Powell befriended the American military scout and world adventurer Frederick Russell Burnham, who was also serving in the British Army at that time. Burnham introduced Baden-Powell to the style of the American western frontier and to the concept of woodcraft, otherwise known as scoutcraft. Burnham was later involved in many ventures, including hunting and conservation. He supported the early conservation programs of his friends Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot. He was a founding member of the American Committee for International Wildlife Protection, now a committee of the World Conservation Union, and also of the Save-the-Redwoods League. Among his many other accomplishments, he lobbied for the creation of both the Cabeza Prieta and the Kofa National Wildlife Refuges in Arizona for the protection of Desert Bighorn Sheep.

Burnham remained active in Scouting for many years and a life-long friend of Baden-Powell. Although not a co-founder of the BSA, Burnham received its highest honors, not the least being nicknamed "The King of Scouts". Burnham is a great example of why it is important to never discount someone who never participated in a program. There is always an outside influence. And while Burnham influenced Baden-Powell, many others influenced Burnham.

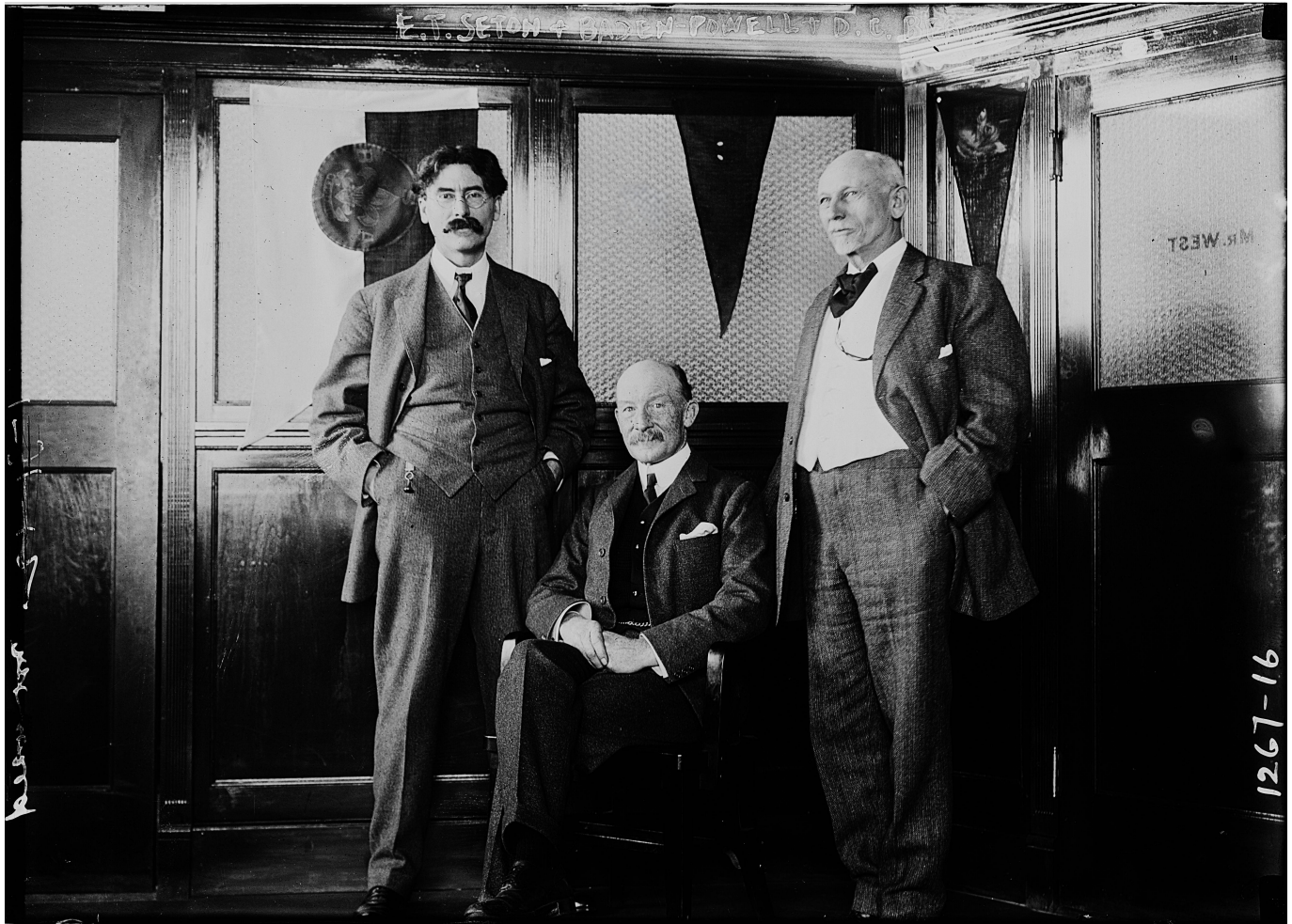


Major Frederick Russell Burnham, DSO, 1901. Elliot & Fry Photography Studio.



Frederick Russell Burnham celebrating his 80th birthday with Boy Scouts at Carlsbad Caverns National Park in New Mexico, May 11, 1941. Public domain - family photograph by Martha Burnham Burleigh.

In 1910, Dan Beard and Seton founded the BSA and Seton became the first Chief Scout and wrote the first BSA Handbook entitled, "Official Handbook, A Handbook of Woodcraft, Scouting and Life-craft". Seton incorporated much of "The Birch Bark Roll of the Woodcraft Indians" and also Baden-Powell's "Scouting for Boys".



The co-founders of the BSA. Left to right: Seton, Baden-Powell, and Beard in the office of Chief Scout Executive James E. West in New York City, circa 1911. Source: Bain News Service, Publisher: US Library of Congress.

At a banquet in New York City in 1910, Seton introduced Baden-Powell as the "*father of Scouting*," to which he replied, "*You are mistaken, Mr. Seton...I may say that you, or Dan Beard, is the father...there are many fathers. I am only one of the uncles.*". A respect for nature can be found in many influences on Scouting, but was most strongly expressed in Dan Beard, Ernest Thompson Seton, Robert Baden-Powell, and Frederick Burnham.

2026 Update: There was not enough space allotted for the original 2010 article to mention Frederick Burnham or details about Robert Baden-Powell. Both have been added to this updated version.

A good site for more information is:

The Founding of the Boy Scouts of America

<https://www.bsainsignia.com/founding-of-the-boy-scouts.html>