

Mr. M

By the time my brother turned 11, he was into everything you think of when you imagine the quintessential American boy; he fished whatever waters he could ride his bike to, hunted red squirrels with his .22, had forts all over the woods that served as our backyard, and of course, he tormented his annoying little sister. Mom and Papa decided to focus his energies and strengths where they would best be utilized. This magical place of skills and survival was the BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA. Cousin Kent, Partner-in-Crime and in the same predicament, enrolled with him.

They held meetings every Tuesday evening in St. John's Church basement. It was a packed house. And with good reason; Mr. M was the Scoutmaster. The Scout Leader. The Grand Poo-bah. If you didn't know better, you'd think Mr. M was a retired Rockstar.

Mr. M was in his early-40s when my brother joined and had been a scouting leader since 1972. He had a teaching degree but worked at the local hardboard manufacturing plant. He was an avid Pepsi drinker. He had large wire-framed bifocals and a salt-and-pepper mustache that was overgrown most of the time, but it suited his bachelor status. He had a gruff demeanor countered by his quick, hearty laugh, and took great pride in teaching these 60-some-odd boys how to be good kids and uphold the Boy Scout Oath, Law and Mission*. He even had some patience left over for the annoying little sisters of the boys he coached into fine young men.

I took the job of Annoying Little Sister pretty seriously in the years before I became more useful. Some of the reason being that I was a girl, and they were **Boy Scouts**. But for the most part, it was done out of jealousy; the boys camped out every month; rain, shine, sleet, snow... Girl Scouts was nothing like that. 4-H was nothing like that. I know; I tried both. And, God bless Mr. M, he knew it too, and let me tag along with the boys as long as my parents were helping out. Which they did. A lot. My dad had some equipment and a weekend here and there to spare, and my mom participated on review boards for scouting promotions and rank advancements. And Mr. M always did have a thing for my mom's infamous Cream Puff dessert.



Mr. M with our Mayor

It was some time around here that our troop had land donated to them. It was about 200 acres and bordered one of our rivers on the north side. It's a beautiful piece of property. And the troop had big plans for it. The idea was to have

most of the campouts there. It was about 25 miles from town, and remote enough to gain the full scouting experience as it was intended.

My dad brought out his bulldozer (a John Deere 450, or JD450) to establish a road from the east end. It was a smaller dozer, but got the job done. My dad moved dirt, rocks, and trees, and road base was hauled in and graded down by my uncle Dennie. The road curved and winded like the river that couldn't quite be seen from it. There were some natural openings, and several clearings were created as camping spots for each rank on the scouting ladder to Eagle. A large clearing was created in a central location as a gathering spot for the scouts. There was a central fire pit with tiered hills on each side like a mini amphitheater. There was a roof-only shelter (roughly 54'Lx24W'x16'H and walled-in by the firewood needed for the campfire), and an outhouse, the scoutmaster's cab-over camper, and campers of other scouting families who wanted to camp in comfort. The boys had tents... when they were lucky!

(The October campout was the Wilderness Survival Campout. The boys had to build a shelter from almost nothing and live out of it for the weekend. January brought out the snowplow to make massive snow piles for the boys to make "quinzhees," or snow caves out of.)

The end of August brought the fair, the start of school, then the Family Campout. This one was my favorite early on. My folks bought a smaller camper that Mom and I would live out of this weekend and a few more throughout the year. On Saturday, there was a potluck dinner and all of the parents and extended families lined up by the tables under the shelter for the food, and then took seats in the hillside amphitheater for the main event. The campfire roaring to keep the bugs at bay, there was an awards ceremony, broken up by the different ranks and their associated skit or song they'd come up with and rehearsed all that day. One I recall distinctly:

One boy to another, "It's so peaceful being out here with nature."

"Sure is. What a great evening to spend outdoors."

"Yep. You know, I heard once from an old trapper that if you listen really closely on a night like this, you can hear the loons calling to their mothers." The boys wait expectantly, looking up at the sky.

A voice from a short distance away: "HEY, MA!"

The boys were honored for their hard work, and Mr. M spoke a little about each boy who had advanced and his struggles and eventual achievement.

Mr. M had a "tough love" way about him, expecting and drawing greatness out of seemingly mediocre boys. I think the boys surprised even themselves sometimes. He challenged them to make the most of what they had (brains and tools), think their way through problems, and was no slouch at letting them know when he thought they could do better.

That attitude extended to one Annoying-Little-Sister turned Feisty-Young-Lady. Fortunately, I could **work** my way back into Mr. M's good graces. And I worked **hard**. One weekend a year we'd clean up the Scout Land. Fill in the potholes in

the road, move rocks, trim back trees, take out dead trees, pile up the brush and burn the piles at night. I was worth my weight at that stuff.

At one of the workdays, Mr. M paused next to me. Believing him to be in deep thought about something more important, I was shocked when he asked me if I could round up enough kids my age with interests similar to mine to form an Explorer post.

“What’s Explorers?” I asked.

“It’s a co-ed branch of the boy scouts. They do more of the stuff you like. If we were able to gather up enough kids, after you turn 14, you can help form a High Adventure post and you can raise money and go places. Like Boy Scouts but without the badges.”

“Only after I turn 14?”

“Yep. That’s the minimum age for Explorers; maximum age is 18.”

So my best friends and I formed the High Adventure Explorer Post. Our first year we raised enough money to go kayaking around the Apostle Islands in Lake Superior. It was awesome.



I don’t know what kind of strings Mr. M pulled to make that happen for me/us, but I’m grateful he did.

A few years later, the Friends of Scouting group purchased 20 acres that abutted the farthestmost western edge of the Scout Land. Papa got out the JD450 and Uncle Dennie brought out his big D8 Caterpillar to continue the road to the Friends of Scouting acreage. By that time, I had my own chainsaw, so my dad turned me loose with some gas, oil, and a chain file and a small group of us cut brush and limbed trees behind the dozers all day. I was bone-tired by the time we reached the opening the dozers had made signifying the end of the road and helped pile the last bit with the younger

kids, both scouts and scout siblings. Mr. M was taking a break from brush clearing himself when I plopped down next to him.

“You worked pretty hard today,” Mr. M looked ahead, sipping his Pepsi, but his words were directed at me. I felt a swell of pride. That was all I needed to keep going. “Gonna have to start calling you JD450!”

“Ha! I like that!” I nudged him with my elbow. “Gonna have to start calling you D8!”

My brother made Eagle Scout in 1992 with Cousin Kent. Mr. M’s mustache had a lot more salt in it by then.

Our little band of Explorers had many great and grand adventures. We traveled to Montana and hiked around Glacier National Park, whitewater rafted the Wolf River in Wisconsin, cross-country skied, rock climbed, downhill skied, sledged, tubed...



Montana

And when we couldn’t be outside because, well, because it was winter 5 months out of the year, we all became certified lifeguards, First Aid and CPR certified, and had classes in winter/wilderness survival from a local EMT. We also copied the boy scouts and made our own quinzhees one winter. We sold more brats, hot dogs, and baked goods than our little community could handle, but they bought them from us anyway just to shut us up.

My senior and final year as an Explorer we raised enough money to go to the Bahamas. We chartered a sailboat and got horrifically sunburned snorkeling the coral reefs around the Bahamian Islands.



I went off to college and then moved out west. I kept in touch with folks back home through my Christmas cards. One year my cousin Tom came out and stayed with us while he worked as a Hotshot. In my card that year I wrote how nice it was having someone around who knew what it was like "Growing Up 'Onchuck'". Mr. M wrote me back that year saying he laughed out loud when he read that, because, having met all of my family at one function or another and being engrained as he was in our small town, he fully understood that I didn't grow up like most girls. (Yes, that is indeed the reason I entitled the tab for my stories from that era "Growing Up Onchuck.") Most girls didn't enjoy wasting a perfectly good weekend getting sweaty and sticky with balsam pitch using a chainsaw to clear a road for some boy scouts that I could never join. Most girls didn't have a tractor as a mode of transportation or start driving heavy equipment at age 8. And most girls wouldn't appreciate being called a JD450 bulldozer by a gruff old Scoutmaster.

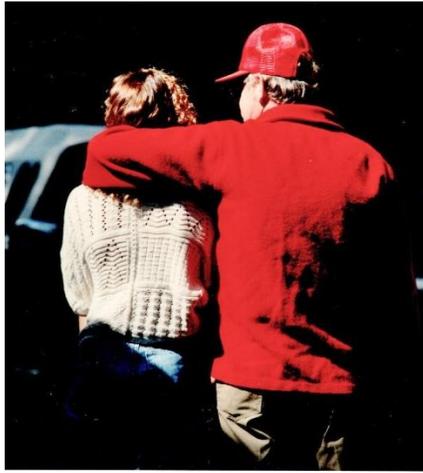
I am not most girls.

He gave Trent and me a crock pot as a wedding gift.

When I emailed friends and family asking for suggestions as we were upgrading an existing house to live in, Mr. M recommended getting good windows. He said every winter he had to put plastic sheeting over his to help insulate his cabin better, and he wished he could see out of his windows more. I made sure we had the best windows we could get.

The year my dad's planer building burned down, he emailed me. "If it's too hard to look at these, just delete," he wrote, "but I thought you'd want to see." He'd sent pictures of it burning to the ground. He understood what that building meant to me. He knew I practically grew up there. He knew, and he cared, and he sent me pictures to help me gain closure as a piece of my life smoldered.

Mr. M passed away in 2011, taking with him the Scoutmaster who became my friend. I will always be grateful that he saw past my Annoying Little Sister phase and cared more about the good things I would do and see. Fortunately, the kids (grown-up boy scouts and their annoying siblings) he encouraged into adulthood live on, and remember the lessons he taught, the memories he helped to create, the courage and encouragement he kindled, and we all pass along a bit of Mr. M into the lives of the kids we get to watch grow up.



Mr. M with the Author, 1995

My kids will learn plenty from him.

***Scout Oath:** On my honor I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country and to obey the Scout Law; to help other people at all times; to keep myself physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight.

Scout Law: A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent.

Scout Mission: The mission of the Boy Scouts of America is to prepare young people to make ethical and moral choices over their lifetimes by instilling in them the values of the Scout Oath and Scout Law.