

THE "ORDER OF THE ARROW" - SCOUTING'S HONOR SOCIETY

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by Jim Howes [76264,2124]

The Order of the Arrow is a recognized official program activity of the Boy Scouts of America, having its origin in the mind of young E. Urner Goodman in 1915. Then age 25, he had been a Scoutmaster for only a few years and had reluctantly agreed to serve that summer as camp director at Philadelphia's scout camp on idyllic Treasure Island in the Delaware River. While newspaper headlines reported a war in Europe and the loss of the Cunard liner "Lusitania" to a German U-boat's torpedoes within sight of the Irish coast, the new scouting movement was enjoying halcyon days in America, as membership grew rapidly across the nation.

Although he would eventually attain a doctorate in education and become National Program Director of the BSA, Urner's thoughts in 1915 were focused on development of methods to teach boys that skill proficiency in Scoutcraft was not enough, rather the principles embodied in the Scout Oath and Law should become realities in the lives of Scouts. As a means of accomplishing this without preaching and within a boy's interest and understanding, peer recognition and the appeal of Indian lore would be utilized. Hence, he devised a program where troops would choose, at the conclusion of camp, those boys from among their number best exemplifying these traits, who would be honored as members of an Indian "lodge". Those elected would be acknowledged as having displayed, in the eyes of their fellow scouts, a spirit of unselfish service and brotherhood.

Combining ideas from "The Last of the Mohicans" with the Delaware Indians who had inhabited Treasure Island, he developed dramatic induction ceremonies for the "Order of the Arrow", as the fledgling honor society was dubbed. Even today, these rites make a lasting impression on scouts who have been elected to the "Order of the Arrow".

By 1921, the idea had spread to a score of scout councils in the north east and the first national meeting of the Order of the Arrow was held. Initially viewed with suspicion by many scouters as a secret society if not an affront to the egalitarian ideals of scouting, support was slow in coming from national headquarters. For many years, the "OA" was considered to be an "experimental" program only. Not until 1948 was E. Urner Goodman's innovation fully integrated into the Scouting program.

Having observed its Diamond Anniversary in 1990, it is evident that the Order of the Arrow has made a significant contribution to Scouting, as we know it today in the United States. The OA's motto, "Brotherhood of Cheerful Service", is more than just an empty slogan for many Arrowmen, who constitute a valuable council resource for camp promotion, improvement projects, and summer camp staffing. The OA, at its best, continues to be a teaching tool for Scouting ideals.

Many believe that the OA helps in retaining older boys in Scouting who otherwise tend to lose interest upon reaching high school age. Notably, OA

guidelines place great importance on preserving Lodge leadership in the hands of its boy members, headed by a Chief, Vice Chief(s), and an Executive Committee, all of whom must be under age 21. These youth plan and implement Lodge activities, service projects, publications, annual budgets, and conduct troop elections upon the Scoutmaster's request. Adults are crucial to the OA program's success as advisors.

To be eligible for election to the Order of the Arrow, a Scout must:

- Be at least First Class rank;
- Have at least 15 nights of camping, including a 6-day long-term camp;
- Participate in the "Ordeal" and induction ceremony.

(Somewhat modified requirements apply to Explorers and adults).

To alleviate lingering concerns in some quarters regarding the ceremonial aspects of the Order of the Arrow, the BSA has officially stated:

"The induction is not a hazing or an initiation ceremony. The Order is not a secret Scout organization, and its ceremonies are open to any parent, Scout leader, or religious leader. There is an element of mystery in the ceremonies for the sake of its effect on the candidates. For this reason, ceremonies are not put on in public. The ceremonies...are not objectionable to any religious group."

Following 10 months as an "Ordeal" member, the Arrowman may participate in the "Brotherhood" ceremony, which signifies the sealing of his membership and an additional emphasis on OA ideals and purposes.

After an additional 2 years have elapsed, exceptional OA leaders may be recognized by conferring of the "Vigil Honor". Generally speaking, only 2% of the Lodge's membership may be selected each year for this highest of Lodge honors. A special ceremony, devised by Dr. Goodman in 1915 and closely based on ancient Indian traditions, culminates this experience.

All Order of the Arrow members are reminded that their primary duty always remains to their own troop, which elected them in the first place as a result of their cheerful service to their fellow unit members. OA Lodge activities are intended to supplement, and not replace, troop activities. Probably the single most often-heard complaint directed towards the OA program is that of Arrowmen who have forgotten this cardinal principle.

OA Lodges meet with other lodges in their sections each year and attend national conventions held at a major university every two years. Dr. E. Urner Goodman attended his last National Order of the Arrow Conference at Colorado State Univ. in 1979 where he was hailed by the 4,000 Arrowmen present with a thunderous standing ovation. As he spoke movingly of his vision in developing the Order of the Arrow as a "Thing of the Spirit" that day 64 distant years ago on the misty shores of the Delaware, those of us gathered in the shadows of the snow-capped Rockies realized that though a frail, elderly man stood before us, yet the spirit borne within was truly one of eternal youth, for as long as men value brotherhood and strive to love one another.

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