

Why Wood Badge?

By Bryan Wendell

Photographs by W. Garth Dowling

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Volunteers expect fun and fellowship at a Wood Badge course, but much more awaits. Read on about how this training session helps new-to-Scouting adults lead more successful packs, troops and crews.



NO UMBRELLA-TOPPED drinks served poolside. No quality time with your Kindle. No [seaweed body wraps](#), no room service, no hot-stone massages.

Is Wood Badge a stress-free vacation? No.



With a pull of the string, Kim Medill launches the Eagle Patrol's rocket into flight (above). The flight trajectory looks good to the Wood Badge participants standing behind her, but downrange, Senior Patrol Leader Bill Hemenway (on left) and Scoutmaster John Stone seem almost giddy when the rocket fails to hit its target. Can't really blame them, though. They're the target.

But for a vacation that tests your limits, gives meaning to your time spent in Scouting and makes your job as a leader easier, just say yes to Scouting's pre-eminent [training course](#) for adults.

Your deluxe six-day, all-inclusive Wood Badge experience comes with decades of Scouting knowledge, a skilled and helpful staff and a [guided tour](#) through the entire [Scouting program](#) from Tiger Cubs to Venturing. And the price? Less than a single night costs at that fancy resort with the pool.

Wood Badge is expertly designed to stress you out, tie you in knots and take you on the same emotional roller coaster we put our Scouts on as they advance in the program.

In other words, you might not leave Wood Badge feeling relaxed, but you're guaranteed to be recharged and ready to tackle any problem your Scouts throw your way. And it just might be the most fun you'll ever have as a Scout leader.

JOHN STONE STOPS himself just in time.

A split second before shouting something to the entire troop, the Wood Badge Scoutmaster has a [better idea](#). He walks over to Senior Patrol Leader Bill Hemenway, whispers in his ear and takes two large steps backward. Stone smiles as Hemenway clears his throat.



We'd try to explain in detail what's happening in the pictures here, but we don't want to spoil the fun for when you take Wood Badge. Suffice it to say you're in for a treat, whether singing, cheering, hiking or participating in team-development games. Staffers Bill Hemenway and [Grace Davidson](#) lead the Fox Patrol in song.

"Troop 1, let's make this a shortened break and meet back here in 10 minutes," says the senior patrol leader. "Then we'll be back on schedule."

To the uninitiated, Stone's audible looks like a wasteful extra step. Why couldn't he just say it himself? But Scouters know. The youth leaders run the program while Scoutmasters like Stone provide backup.

Wood Badge, though, necessitates a temporary and essential exception to that rule. This is an adults-only affair, so grown-ups play all the parts. That's why Hemenway, whose gray-flecked hair signals he's no longer a teenager, takes on the role of the troop's top youth leader.

At various times during Wood Badge, grown men and women impersonate Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts, Venturers, den chiefs, troop guides, assistant patrol leaders, patrol leaders, scribes, chaplain's aides, quartermasters, assistant senior patrol leaders, assistant Scoutmasters and a very hard-working senior patrol leader and Scoutmaster.

The role-playing means that rather than click-click-clicking through an online training course or paging through a two-dimensional handbook, adults who attend Wood Badge experience Scouting fundamentals by living them.

That's just what a group of 50 men and women did in August 2012 when they gave up a week's vacation and several hundred dollars to meet at Philmont Scout Ranch for the Circle Ten Council's Wood Badge course. To help keep the course accessible to as many Scouters as possible, many councils' Wood Badge courses take place at local camps. Circle Ten's annual August course at Philmont distinguished itself as the only Wood Badge offering at the New Mexico paradise — that was, until the Fort Worth, Texas-based Longhorn Council joined the fun.



The Buffalo patrol shows that team-building can happen inside or out.

Taking Wood Badge at Philmont with the rugged Sangre de Cristo Mountains as your neighbor is an extra square of chocolate in your s'mores — awesome, but not essential. In reality, where you take Wood Badge matters little. The traditions, games, classes, activities, leadership lessons and course schedule are the same whether you take it in winter in Wichita or summer in Seattle.

And the less you know going in, the better. Ken Davis, a historian who has served on 30 Wood Badge staffs, says open-minded Scouters learn the most.

“Even if you don’t know much about it,” he says, “going to Wood Badge gives you probably the best preparation — better than any other thing we do — for completely understanding Scouting.”

THE PATROL METHOD, devised by Scouting founder Robert Baden-Powell, organizes Scouts into small groups. But when’s the last time you actually worked in a patrol-like group yourself? At your day job, perhaps, or in your own troop all those years ago?

At Wood Badge, participants join patrols of complete strangers, and everyone gets a turn as patrol leader. At first, the process feels forced: You will spend 24 hours a day with these people you just met, and you will like it. But by

Day Three or Four, you realize the bonds formed with these Scouters won't end when the course does.



A lot of that camaraderie stems from the “we’re all in this together” mindset. Just like our Scouts, Wood Badge participants get too much to do and not enough instructions or time in which to do it. But at the Philmont course, Beaver Patrol member Blake Atkins says this is only fair. “It really helps you appreciate what we put our Scouts through,” he says, “when we’re given just a few minutes to accomplish a complex task.”

That’s intentional, says Dan Zaccara, a Silver Buffalo recipient who was one of the authors of modern Wood Badge. “The way the course is frontloaded for the participants,” he says, “means everything is in their laps in the first two or three days. That puts stress in the system. Stress in the system puts them through all the stages of [team development](#).”

Those stages include forming (a disorganized group coming together), storming (clashing as different ideas get shared), norming (sharing control and compromising) and performing (skill and enthusiasm at their highest).

The concept isn’t a BSA creation. It’s not even a this-century creation. The stage names debuted in 1965, and if your boss shipped you off to a team-development course in the past several decades, you’ve probably heard them.

In fact, you can find most of the leadership lessons taught at Wood Badge in the self-help section of your local bookstore. But those books lack the values of the Scout Oath and Scout Law, and they don’t include Scouting-specific connections that convert abstract leadership lessons into something you can actually use.

Oh, and unlike your office’s awkward team-building outings, everyone at Wood Badge actually wants to be there. Like Nancy Champion, an Owl Patrol member who says she’s having the week of her life at Philmont.

“I’ve worked with great groups and dysfunctional groups,” she says. “I was never able to understand why some worked and some didn’t. Wood Badge really helps me connect the dots.”

THE WOOD BADGE formula started with a master plan (or is it evil plan?) sharpened in 2000 by Zaccara and his colleagues on the Wood Badge task force. They decided to force patrols to that second stage of team development (storming) by adding pressure points. This usually results in a thunderclap of disagreements and frustration among otherwise friendly and courteous Scouters.



The Beaver Patrol uses its mealtime to enjoy Philmont's stunning views.

During the 2012 Philmont course, most of the storming happens during a critical moment on Day Two. But it could really happen anytime. Consider the ingredients. These adults are thrown into a high-pressure situation in a new location with unfamiliar people and an interrupted sleep schedule. Storming is inevitable.

It sounds sadistic, but there's a point: Without some storming, you'll never have a high-performing team. And Wood Badge is a safe environment in which to storm because staff members are trained to recognize this stage and bring in the umbrella if things get out of hand.

"They get into storming fairly quickly," Zaccara says. "But the last couple of days are purposely lighter so they can digest and really understand what they've been through and what they were experiencing. The environment that's created forces them to live the experience and challenges early."

On the final day at Philmont, participants gather for a slideshow of photos from the course. These teams, now in the performing stage, settle in at the same patrol tables where they formed, stormed and normed days earlier. As the slideshow reaches its emotional apex, some of the same Scouters hit hardest by storming are the first to reach for the box of tissues. By the final photo, there's not a dry eye in the place.

The participants have reached their emotional apex, and they'll take this passion home with them. "This is a course that you can use everywhere else in your life," Zaccara says. "It makes you a better leader and a better communicator. It's something you can bring to your church and your family. It makes you think about the things you do, how you do them and why."

After all, Zaccara says: "Leaders aren't hatched; they're trained."

WORK YOUR TICKET

The Wood Badge story has two chapters.

Chapter 1: The experiential course, which takes place over one six-day week or two three-day weekends and includes leadership classes, games, activities and plenty of meaningful conversations.

Chapter 2: The Wood Badge ticket, a series of five projects (completed after Chapter 1) that benefit a Scouter's home unit and local community. These ticket items extend the reach of Wood Badge well beyond the six-day course. Fifty participants completing five ticket items each means 250 improvements to Scouting. And that's just from one course.

WOOD BADGE HISTORY TIMELINE

1919: First Wood Badge course held at Gilwell Park in England

1936: Gilwell Camp Chief John Skinner Wilson conducts Experimental Scout and Rover Wood Badge courses at Schiff Scout Reservation, New Jersey

1948: First official BSA Wood Badge courses held, one at Schiff and one at Philmont. Scouting legend William "Green Bar Bill" Hillcourt serves as Scoutmaster at both nine-day courses

1948-1958: Mostly national courses conducted, all run with oversight of the BSA's Volunteer Training Division

1953-54: A few councils allowed to hold their own courses, including one in Cincinnati in 1953 and one in Washington, D.C., in 1954

1958-72: Two variations of the course exist: a national one for trainers and a sectional one for Scoutmasters, commissioners and other local Scouters. The courses focus exclusively on Scoutcraft skills, the patrol method and requirements a boy would need to earn First Class

1964: The BSA evaluates leadership skills offered in a junior leader-training course from the Monterey Bay Council, Calif., called White Stag

1967-72: The BSA conducts experimental courses that add leadership skills to Wood Badge

1973-2002: All Boy Scout Wood Badge courses held nationwide move to leadership development format and away from Scoutcraft

1974: First weekend courses held (previous courses take place over consecutive days)

1976: First women attend Boy Scout Wood Badge

1976-1999: Cub Trainer Wood Badge courses held nationwide

1997: Discussions begin to revise Wood Badge and offer one course for all programs

2000: Two pilot Wood Badge for the 21st Century courses held — one at the Florida Sea Base and one at Philmont

2002-today: BSA requires that all courses and councils teach the course

— *Courtesy of Ken Davis*