

The Ash Story

I first heard this story at OWL training at Camp Grice, SNJC, in October 2000. The story was told to me by Rob Taylor, a member of the OWL course staff.

In the mid 70's, Rob was soon to receive his Eagle Scout award. His elderly uncle, who was himself a Scout in the early days of the US Scouting movement, called him and asked to see him. His uncle told Rob that he had something for him. Rob had no idea what it could be, so he went to visit his uncle. His uncle shared this story with him.

Rob's uncle was a Scout in the 20's, and had the opportunity to attend the first World Scout Jamboree in England. This was a great opportunity for a young man in the 1920's, because people just didn't travel as easily then as they do now. He traveled with the other boys in his troop by ship to England, taking a week or more just to cross the Atlantic. The troop then attended the jamboree, and they had the time of their lives. The boys had the opportunity to learn new skills, to share their skills with other scouts and to meet and fellowship with Scouts from all around the world. The boys learned a lot about themselves and about Scouting, and thoroughly enjoyed their time in England.

But all good things must come to an end, and so it was with the jamboree. Sooner than they could have believed, it was the last night before the close of the jamboree. The troop was to share one final campfire before the closing ceremonies the next day. The troop gathered around their campfire, reminiscing about the great times they had, the new friends from around the world they had made, and the skills they had learned. But they were especially excited about the closing events the next day, for they had been told that the founder of Scouting, Lord Baden-Powell himself, would be addressing the Scouts. They talked excitedly about seeing the Founder (as he was known), and what a giant of a man he must be. They all knew the stories about Baden-Powell in the Boar Wars, and how he had been hailed as a hero when he returned to England. They were very excited about the thought that they would see him in person the next day, and made plans to get up early in order to get good seats at the parade field.

As they enjoyed their campfire and their fellowship, an elderly gentleman approached their camp gateway and asked permission to enter. The boys invited the slightly built and graying gentleman in, and asked if he would like to share their campfire with them. He gladly accepted, and sat with them for several hours, listening to the boys' stories, their songs and their skits. He may even have joined in the merrymaking. As the night finally got later, the man arose, thanked the boys for their hospitality, excused himself, and walked off into the darkness. The boys soon headed off to their tents to prepare for the big final day.

The last day of the jamboree dawned bright and clear, and the boys rose early to prepare for the closing ceremonies. After breakfast and clean-up, they headed quickly to the parade field where the closing ceremonies would be held in order to get a seat close to the podium. They continued to chatter excitedly about their expectations about Lord Baden-Powell, and how they were thrilled to be able to meet the founder of the world

Scouting movement. Finally the closing ceremonies began. Songs were sung, speeches were read, many expressions of goodwill and fellowship were exchanged. Then, a man approached the podium and began to speak. The boys were puzzled...it was the elderly gentleman who had shared their campfire the night before. Slowly it began to dawn on them...it was Lord Baden-Powell. The Founder of Scouting had shared their campfire, and they had no idea!

After the closing, the scoutmaster of the troop returned to the campsite. He had brought along some envelopes for the scouts to use in writing home to their families about their jamboree experiences. But, boys being boys, they had not used the envelopes. So the scoutmaster used the envelopes, and gathered a pinch of ash from the campfire into each envelope. He then gave the envelopes to the boys, telling them that they shared the true Spirit of Scouting at their final campfire, and that those ashes would serve as a reminder of the campfire they shared with Lord Baden-Powell, the founder of Scouting.

Rob's uncle then reached into a drawer, and removed a yellowed and battered envelope. It was the envelope of ashes from that campfire so long ago. "I've shared this story with many Scouts through the years, and have always placed a pinch of ashes in each campfire I attend. The next morning, I take a pinch from the ashes of the fire, and in so doing I continue the tradition and share the Spirit of Scouting. I'm now giving these ashes to you, for you to carry on the tradition as you continue onward in Scouting. I hope you can also share this story, and help to keep alive the Spirit of the Ashes."

I now place my ashes into the fire, and continue the tradition I received in hearing the story from Rob. I've shared this story at many Troop and Pack events, District Camp-o-rees, Summer Camps, and at my Wood Badge closing campfire. I hope that you will, like me, return tomorrow morning to retrieve a pinch of these ashes, mingling these ashes from down through the years with ours tonight. Included in the ashes are also a pinch of sand from the beaches of Normandy France, a pinch of soil from the council circle at Treasure Island Camp, the birthplace of the Order of the Arrow, and a pinch of soil from Ground Zero in New York City.

Continue the tradition, keep the Spirit of Scouting alive in your own units and home Councils and into the next generation of Scouts.

YIS,

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With thanks to Rob Taylor.