



Jeff Ohlfs

NPS & the National Scout Jamborees

A look back shows longtime NPS involvement in the annual event. The NPS likely has had representation at every Jamboree.

By Jeff Ohlfs, Joshua Tree

The National Scout Jamboree has been an institution since 1937 and the National Park Service appears to have played a role in every Jamboree.

The first National Scout Jamboree was scheduled for Washington, D.C., from Aug. 21-30, 1935, during the Silver Jubilee year of the Boy Scouts of America. It was expected that 34,272 Scouts and Scouters were to attend. The planning began in October 1933 with a request from the BSA to the National Capital Park and Planning Commission. It states, "President Roosevelt promised the scouts some time ago that he would do something significant for them, and he would like to see this jamboree made possible." The initial planning team included the Army General Staff (General Douglas MacArthur) and Quartermaster Corps. The initial sites suggested included five private properties in the District, two in Virginia and two in Maryland. The government properties considered included the National Mall, Anacostia, Arlington Agricultural Farm (now part of the National Cemetery) and Columbia Island, Fort Hunt, Fort Myer and the National

Training School for Boys.¹

The Jamboree was officially announced by President Roosevelt in a radio address on Feb. 10, 1934. President Roosevelt and Chief Scout Executive James E. West would agree to the final location of two tracts of land along the George Washington Memorial Parkway in Virginia, Columbia Island, part of Arlington Agricultural Farm, Abingdon (plantation birth site of Nellie Custis now the Ronald Reagan National Airport), Monument Grounds, East Potomac Park, part of Fort Myer, railroad property, and some gravel company property totaling 416 acres. In addition, the Navy was providing the *USS Olympia* and *USS Constitution* for Sea Scouts. NPS Director Arno Cammerer approved the permit on Nov. 14, 1934. Interestingly, it wasn't until July 2, 1935, that Congress gave the NPS authority to grant such a permit.

The BSA planning included a 79-page organizational manual and chart describing every position to be staffed at the Jamboree, from dessert cook and orderlies to camp chief. Attached to that were 17 forms for arrivals, medical

daily inspection and meals. The Scouts were to arrive by train from all over the country. Lord Baden-Powell committed to attending along with Scouts from 16 foreign countries. On Jan. 17, 1935, a joint resolution of Congress permitted free entry into the U.S. for foreign scouts attending the Jamboree. On April 1, 1935, an act of Congress authorized the Navy and War Departments to loan tents, cots and more to the BSA for the Jamboree.

On Aug. 8, 1935, with 95 percent of the infrastructure complete, President Roosevelt on advice from the surgeon general, canceled the Jamboree because of a spreading poliomyelitis epidemic in Virginia. The news reached Spokane as the first troop was about to board their train. The Filipinos and other foreign contingents were already in the country. Chief Scout Executive

West suggested taking advantage of Yellowstone, Glacier, Yosemite and other NPS areas as an alternative for Scouts to tour.

On the planned opening night, Aug. 21, 1935, Scouts around the country sat by their radios to hear President Roosevelt address them and express his interest in the Scouting program. The final chapter on the 1935 Jamboree was closed when the NPS was satisfied with all areas having been restored. The financial loss to the BSA of \$304,807 was recovered through their insurance company.

It didn't take long before talks began (January 1936) to reschedule the first National Scout Jamboree in Washington, D.C., from June 30 to July 9, 1937. On Feb. 25, 1937, Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes approved the locations for the Jamboree, essentially the same from 1935 except for the gravel company and Fort Myer, and the addition of West Potomac Park.

On March 15, 1937, 150 CCC and ECW workers were authorized to establish the Jamboree camps, and 250 workers to later remove and restore the park lands. The initial camp setup involved 6,736 man days for a cost \$16,840. On March 18, 1936, Congress again approved the use of military supplies to support the Jamboree and the NPS to grant a permit for the encampment. That same day, a joint resolution passed to grant free



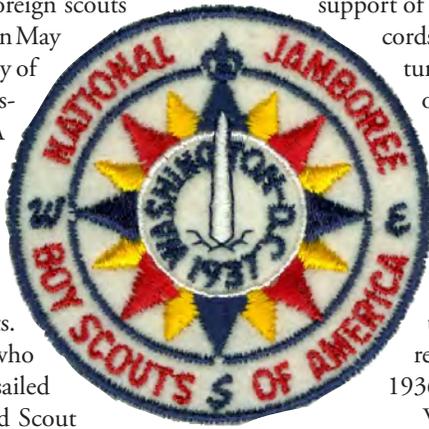
entry into the U.S. for foreign scouts attending the Jamboree. On May 18, 1937, Acting Secretary of the Interior Charles West issued the permit to the BSA to hold the Jamboree on 220 acres of NPS lands.

By all accounts, the Jamboree was a success for the Scouts. Attendance was placed at 25,000 Scouts. There were 1,050 Scouts who left this Jamboree and sailed to Holland for the World Scout Jamboree, which began on July 29.

The NPS assigned Donald McHenry², chief naturalist of National Capital Parks, to give tours of the District of Columbia to the Scouts using taxi cabs escorted by Park Police. As for nature excursions, they were “not being patronized as extensively as we had anticipated. This is explained by the fact that the boys are having such a delightful time visiting among themselves and trading souvenirs.”

I can attest 76 years later this still hasn't changed for the NPS.

The government concluded that such an encampment would never happen again in D.C. On Aug. 5, 1937, President Roosevelt wrote the Secretary of the Interior his concern over the loss of recreational activities by the D.C. residents and the cost to the government. He suggested future events look at Fort Belvoir or other large tracts of land outside the capital. In



support of these comments, NPS records indicate 50 percent of the turf was destroyed at a cost of \$94,000 to rehabilitate. They estimated 129,921 people were kept from enjoying the area. In addition, 42,071 sports players and 87,850 spectators were unable to use the various different recreational fields based on 1936 statistics.

World War II disrupted any potential second Jamboree. It was not until 1950 that the next Jamboree was held in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. (Valley Forge was not added to the National Park System until 1976.)

I talked with Dr. J.W. Shiner at the 2013 National Scout Jamboree. He initiated the first Conservation Trail at the 1973 National Scout Jamboree. He told me the NPS has been at every National Scout Jamboree on the Conservation Trail.

At the 1977 Jamboree, the NPS added the mountain men and black powder demonstration. This was discontinued at the 2010 National Scout Jamboree. We talked further about the NPS presence prior to 1973. He told me he was a Scout at the 1950 National Scout Jamboree and the NPS was there. In addition, he was at almost all the National Scout Jamborees in the 1960s and the NPS

was there. He felt safe in saying the NPS has probably had a representation at every National Scout Jamboree. For the 1960 National Scout Jamboree, the NPS produced a booklet, “Your Booklet About Our National Parks and National Monuments.” 

Jeff Ohlf, an ANPR life member, is the chief ranger at Joshua Tree. He serves as the North American representative to the International Ranger Federation.

Endnotes

1. This was a juvenile correctional facility near Fort Lincoln. A bit of trivia, Charles Manson, later arrested by a National Park Service ranger in Death Valley was sent to this school in 1951.

2. Donald Edward McHenry was the husband of the author's kindergarten teacher, Bona May (who was my Grammy Mac). Her influence was a primary reason for my NPS career. Their son, Bruce McHenry (retired NAR chief of interpretation), staffed the NPS exhibit at the 1977 and 1981 Jamborees, which I attended. This convinced me to carry on the family's connection at the 2010 and 2013 Jamborees.

Source List

Central Classified Files, 1907-1949 (Entry 149). Files of the Office of National Capital Parks, Record Group 79, Stack 150, Row 36, Compartment 5, Shelf 1, Box 65, File 1460-35-30-10 Boy Scouts Jamboree, 1933-42 (921 pages including diagrams and photos). National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service. “Your Booklet About Our National Parks and National Monuments: A Handbook for Boy Scout Jamboree Leaders, 1960 Boy Scout Jamboree,” Colorado Springs, Colorado, July 21-29, 1960. Washington, D.C. Government Printing Office, 1960.



National Jamboree in 1937. Photo courtesy of National Archives



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