

Testing Time at Valley Forge

By Robert Peterson

A February pilgrimage to the American Revolution's hallowed ground, where the Continental Army survived the bitter winter of 1777-78, is Scouting's oldest annual camporee.

- [Scouting's Oldest Annual Event](#)
- [2004 Pilgrimage Scheduled for Feb. 14](#)

Here's a trick question: Who won the Battle of Valley Forge? Answer: There was no battle at Valley Forge. Nevertheless, Valley Forge is, for many Americans, one of the best-known locations of the Revolutionary War. During the winter of 1777-78, the Continental Army camped on its 3,450 acres of rolling hills about 18 miles west-northwest of Philadelphia, Pa., the patriot capital. It was a time of testing for the Continentals.

Twelve thousand ill-fed, ill-clad soldiers straggled into the makeshift encampment, in the face of a bitter wind, on Dec. 19, 1777. The Americans were dispirited, exhausted, hungry, and cold. In earlier battles at Brandywine Creek and Germantown, Pa., they had failed to halt the veteran British Army's occupation of Philadelphia, where the Redcoats had gone into winter quarters.

A 90-YEAR TRADITION

Each year since 1913, Boy Scouts have visited Valley Forge (now a national historical park) to pay homage to the gallant soldiers under the command of Gen. George Washington.

Last Feb. 15, more than 2,300 adult leaders, Boy Scouts, Venturers, and Cub Scouts slogged through six inches of snow, with temperatures in the low 20's, to learn about the travails of Washington and his bedraggled troops 225 years ago.

Divided into groups of about 300, the visitors trekked over hill and dale to hear volunteer interpreters from the National Park Service at eight stations show and tell how the Continentals lived—and how 2,000 of them died from such diseases as typhus, dysentery, typhoid, and pneumonia.

Volunteer Bill Freilich, dressed in colonial garb, told of the trials and hardships they faced. The first was exposure to cold winds, and so within a few days of their arrival, the soldiers were building log huts.

Each hut accommodated 12 private soldiers, but, said Freilich, "If you were a brigadier general, you'd have your own hut." More than 1,000 huts were built at Valley Forge and the Scouts saw replicas of the originals.

The second-most pressing problem for soldiers was food. "When they first got to Valley Forge, the only thing they had to eat was fire cake," Freilich said. "It's made of flour and water, and you cook it on a hot rock. It looks something like a cookie, but doesn't taste like one. It's kind of yucky."

Early in January of 1778, 22 cast-iron ovens were set up at the encampment, and after that the soldiers usually got a loaf of bread and a little beef stew each day.

The stew might be flavored with dried peas, rice, or cornmeal, but sometimes, Freilich said, "It didn't have much of anything in it but bones to flavor the water. And they had plenty of bones, because beef was slaughtered in the camp."

Little attention was paid to the importance of sanitation during the Revolutionary War era. The soldiers' huts were often unclean, and the body wastes of 12,000 men were dumped into the Schuylkill River and two creeks that cut through the encampment. Since those streams were also the source of drinking water, it is no wonder that disease was rampant.

POPULAR STOPS

One of the most popular stops on the pilgrimage was at a demonstration of Revolutionary War gunnery. The Stevens Artillery unit, which is affiliated with the Oneida Indian Nation near Syracuse, N.Y., showed how to fire a three-pounder field artillery piece, a five-and-a-half-inch howitzer, and two mortars.

(Of the six nations of the Iroquois Confederacy, the Oneidas and the Tuscaroras sided with the Continentals against the British during the Revolution. Oneidas delivered 600 bushels of corn, beans, and squash to the hungry soldiers at Valley Forge.)

At another station, a team of several Oneidas and a Cree Indian were demonstrating musketry.

"The Oneida fighting style was different from that of the British and the Continental Army," explained Stuart Deane, one of the Oneidas on the demonstration team. "We used guerrilla warfare, hiding behind trees and rocks—duck and cover, then fire on your enemy. We taught that style to the Continentals. They used a lot of Oneidas as scouts."

At another station, the focus was on George Washington's life. In the style of the TV quiz show, "To Tell the Truth," questions were asked of three Scouts, each claiming to be George Washington. When the station host commanded, "Will the real George Washington please stand up," visitors found out if they had correctly guessed which was the authentic "George."

Volunteer interpreters Beth Moul-ton and Mike Pannella told the visitors how a newly arrived Prussian Army veteran, Friedrich von Steuben, helped the patriot cause. At Washington's request, the 48-year old German, who spoke no English, took over the training of the army, whose drill instruction up to then had been haphazard and poorly organized.

As spring arrived in 1778, disease was abating, and the soldiers were more comfortable, confident, and prepared.

Meanwhile, the British had spent the winter in comfort in homes of British loyalists in Philadelphia. When they left the city on June 19, 1778, to march to New York City, they were pursued by the Continentals.

"The army that left here in June was a stronger, more confident army than the one that had arrived in December," Beth Moulton explained. At Monmouth, N.J., the Americans caught up with the British column and fought what proved to be an inconclusive battle but left them in command of the field at day's end.

Five more years would pass before the British finally gave up the fight and agreed to give the 13 American colonies their independence.

LEARNING EXPERIENCE

The pilgrimage was a learning experience, even for Scouts from the town next to Valley Forge Park.

The Scouts and leaders of Troop 551, King of Prussia, Pa., were among the nearly 1,000 youth and 400 adults who camped overnight during the weekend.

"They loved it!" Troop 551 Scoutmaster Bob Mack said of his Scouts. "They want to come again next year—although a few admitted they wished the pilgrimage took place at the time of year when the soldiers finally left to pursue the British."

Contributing editor Robert Peterson lives in Ramsey, N.J.

SCOUTING'S OLDEST ANNUAL EVENT

The **Valley Forge Pilgrimage** is almost certainly the oldest annual Scouting event in the nation. It was first held on George Washington's 181st birthday, Feb. 22, 1913, when the Boy Scouts of America was barely three years old.

It has been held every year since, although sometimes on a modest, two- or three-troop scale, particularly during World War II when gasoline rationing cut down on travel.

About 300 Scouts from Philadelphia and suburban Delaware and Montgomery counties took part in the first pilgrimage. That event was the work of an Episcopal rector, the Rev. Dr. W. Herbert Burk of nearby Norristown, Pa., who had earlier been instrumental in building the Washington Memorial Chapel at Valley Forge.

Dr. Burk continued to be a key figure in the annual pilgrimage for two decades. A highlight of each one was a memorial service for Washington at the chapel.

In the early years other features were games of pushball in which two teams of Scouts vied to shove a six-foot ball over a goal line and another tussle in which the Reds and Blues battled to strip opponents of armbands. There was also sometimes a tug-of-war, horse-and-rider tag, or snowball fight.

Troops traveled to Valley Forge by foot, automobile, and train. Typical attendance ranged from 150 to 400 Scouts and leaders during the first two decades.

By far the biggest crowd was at the 1932 pilgrimage, which marked Washington's 200th birthday. An estimated 9,000 Boy Scouts from Pennsylvania and neighboring states, plus 10,000 adults and children, were on hand, according to the *Springfield (Pa.) Press*.

A big attraction was Gen. John J. Pershing, commander of U.S. forces in World War I. Another was Daniel Carter Beard, the BSA's national Scout commissioner.

Pershing praised George Washington as a military genius, noting that "during the Revolution our armies were commanded by one of the great captains of all time."

The first official overnight Valley Forge Encampment in connection with a pilgrimage was in 1948. Approximately 2,700 persons attended the pilgrimage during the day, but slightly more than 200 Scouts camped overnight.

Tom Miller, chairman of the [Cradle of Liberty Council's Pilgrimage and Encampment Committee](#), attended his first pilgrimage in 1958 as an Explorer in Post 498 of Willow Grove, Pa.

The term pilgrimage was appropriate because in those days, he said, "every unit lined up in formation with their flags and paraded to the chapel."

The pilgrimage and encampment is always held near Washington's birthday, a time when Valley Forge weather can be unpredictable.

"One year there was a blizzard and they sent everybody home Saturday afternoon," Miller recalled. "We've had minus-20 degrees, and I've seen it as high as 70."

(Editor's note: Information for this article was taken from newspapers and council and district annual reports provided by Michael G. Comfort of Pottstown, Pa., and Carl Hough of Media, Pa.)