



Girl Scouts

by Tina Gianoulis

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Girl Scouts founder
Juliette Gordon Lowe
(center) with two Scouts.

Founded in 1912, Girl Scouts is a social and service organization for girls. Led by adult women volunteers, Girl Scouts meet regularly for recreational and educational activities, to hone skills in order to earn merit badges, and to learn how to camp out.

Founded by a strong woman, scouting has always tended to foster and promote strength in girls, and so Girl Scouts has often been a welcoming place for lesbians, as both scouts and leaders. Officially the Girl Scouts do not "discriminate . . . nor . . . endorse" on the basis of sexual orientation. Unofficially, many lesbians have fond memories of the friends and crushes they had at Girl Scout camp.

During the early 1900s, a deaf, divorced, tomboyish Southern aristocrat named Juliette Gordon Low was looking for something important to do with the rest of her life. A visit to old family friends, Lord Robert and Agnes Baden-Powell, suggested the direction she should take. The Baden-Powell sister and brother had founded Britain's Boy Scouts and Girl Guides, and Low determined to bring the idea to the United States, starting with her hometown, Savannah, Georgia. She called her organization Girl Scouts, even though Baden-Powell had thought the name too manly for a girls' group. Within two years 565 girls had signed up to be Scouts.

From its beginnings, Girl Scouts was a progressive organization. Scouts made friends and had fun while learning useful skills. As early as 1928, Scout camps also gave poor urban girls an opportunity to leave bleak city environments and spend time in the country. Scouting was open to girls of all races, creeds, nationalities, and classes, and it gave girls of diverse backgrounds a chance to get to know each other. In 1930, a Native American troop was started in Pawnee, Oklahoma, and during the 1940s, scouting was opened to girls with developmental disabilities and to delinquent girls. Outreach to minority communities continues to characterize the Girl Scouts' commitment to diversity.

The details of scouting have changed with the changing roles of women. Where once girls worked to obtain badges in homemaking skills, such as Embroidery, Laundressing, and Hostessing, by the 2000s, they may earn them for career-oriented accomplishments such as Computer Fun and Aerospace.

When the women's liberation movement of the 1970s began, Girl Scouts embraced it by asking feminist leader Betty Friedan to be on their national board. Over the decades, scouting has remained relevant by providing education and support about difficult issues such as drug use and sexual abuse.

Unlike Boy Scouts, who have remained much more militaristic and intolerant in their approach to scouting, Girl Scouts has softened and modernized the "Girl Scout Promise" and made uniforms optional.

Although at various times in its history, the Girl Scouts organization and affiliated troops have expressed fears about homosexuals working with children and have conducted witch-hunts to purge lesbians from positions of leadership, the Girl Scouts of the U. S. A. has had an inclusive non-discrimination policy since 1980. This tolerance contrasts with the Boy Scouts of America, which took a case to the Supreme Court in

2000 to preserve its right to discriminate against gays.

Though many feel that the Girl Scouts' policy--which states that the organization does not discriminate or intrude into personal issues--amounts to a "don't ask, don't tell" policy about lesbians in scouting, it is still remarkably open for a young people's organization in the United States.

Right-wing organizations such as the American Family Association and Focus on the Family have launched campaigns denouncing the Girl Scouts organization as run by "radical feminists and lesbians," not dissimilar to the charges of "tomboyism" leveled at Scouts in the 1920s. However, enrollment continues to be healthy, and many psychologists believe that the comradeship and skills learned in Girl Scouts improve self-esteem among adolescent girls, a group whose members frequently suffer from feelings of low self-worth.

By the early 2000s there were over 3,500,000 Girl Scouts and Girl Guides and adult volunteers in the United States, and Girl Scout troops affiliated with the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts in 136 countries.

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Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.