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By: Sandra Bolan

Scouting is not just about camping and community service; it's a lifestyle.

In Bradford, people began living that lifestyle around 1915.

"It might have been a bit earlier, but that's as far back as we can trace it," media liaison for the 1st Bradford Beavers, Cubs, Scouts and Venturers Lloyd George said. Scouting itself is celebrating its centennial this year.

Like other local troops, it is suspected the Bradford Scouts were formed by a local soldier who, when in the field of duty, learned scouting skills and came back to town wanting to teach them to other young men, Mr. George said.

Scouting was originally created for boys aged 11 to 14, but over time, programs have been created for other age groups. These include Beavers for kids aged five to seven, Cubs for kids eight to 10, Venturers for kids 14 to 17 and Rovers for people 18 to 26.

Camping and other outdoor activities remain at the core of today's scouting, but there is more to it as well.

"We also try to teach them, while they're having fun, to be able to survive on all levels, really — whether it be in the wilderness or in town," group commissioner for 1st Bradford Scouts Earle Belfry said.

"It gives them an opportunity to build self-esteem," Mr. George said. "When they come into the pack, (some of the kids) are shy and quiet. The more they get involved, they become more of a full person."

"I was the shyest five-year-old you could find," Bradford's Andrew Jones, 18, said of the kid he was when he first joined Beavers. "It's given me a lot of independence."

Mr. Jones just completed his last year of Medical Venturers and, in September, will attend Hamilton's McMaster University to study science, with the intention of becoming a doctor.

He said he wants to continue scouting and will likely join the local Rovers troop while at McMaster.

Once kids get involved in Scouts, they're hooked, Mr. George said, adding many of the kids who come through 1st Bradford as Beavers and Scouts often become club leaders.

About two-thirds of Bradford's current leaders have lead for 10 years or more. Mr. Belfry said.

"We have families in Bradford where (the weekly meetings have) become a family function," Mr. George said. He has been a leader for the past 11 years.

"As leaders, we look at the opportunity to work with these kids as mentors," Mr. George said.

Over the past 20 years, scouting has doubled its membership to 16 million worldwide, but in Bradford, the number of kids has remained fairly consistent and hovers around 90.

Local leaders aim to change that and are initiating a local membership drive.

"There's a lot of competition for youth activities — hockey, baseball, whatever... I don't know if its good or bad, it just makes it hard on organizations like scouting and guiding to keep their numbers up," Mr. Belfry said.

Mr. Belfry, who was a Cub, returned to Bradford scouting as a member of the group committee many years later when one of his sons joined Cubs. The following year, he became a Cub leader, a position he held for eight years.

Throughout his years in scouting, Mr. Belfry has experienced a lot of changes within the organization, the most notable of which is the inclusion of girls. That started in Bradford in 1999 and became official Scouts policy in 2001.

"I didn't agree with it at first," Mr. Belfry said. He was not alone.

"We actually had (two) leaders quit because they were dead set against girls in scouting," Mr. George said.

Since then, one of those scout leaders returned.

"The (girls) are no different than the boys," Mr. George said. "The boys don't even look at them as girls; they're just another scout."

One of the original female Scouts in Bradford is Amy Jones, 16, who is now a Venturer.

"I was a little concerned they wouldn't accept me and I was shy and held back for the first few months," Ms Jones said of her early time in Scouts.

Since then, she noted, "the entire scouting community in Bradford and the surrounding towns, they've become my second family. That's how close we've become."

Another change in scouting, is the attitude the kids have toward members of other troops.

For example, Mr. George explained, when scouts would go away to events like the Canadian Jamboree, companies wouldn't socialize with each other, despite living right beside each other for days, nor would they acknowledge each other when they crossed paths outside of scouts.

"It's become more of a brotherhood," Mr. George said. "There's no more walking down the street and looking their nose down at (scouts from other companies). There's more acceptance among the youth... All they see is another scout."

Scouting, which Lord Robert Baden-Powell founded in England, is designed to compliment school and family by teaching kids about life beyond the classroom and family home.

Scouting is open to everyone, no matter their economic status, race, religion or gender.

As a young boy, Mr. Baden-Powell was a self-taught outdoorsman. In order to trap, skin and cook rabbits, he learned how to silently creep through the woods, find his way around via landmarks, notice tracks and decipher their meaning and use dead dry wood to create small, smoke-free fires so as to not give himself away to hunters or prey animals.

In 1893, Mr. Baden-Powell started to teach his skills to fellow soldiers in his outdoor survival army regiment.

"They learned reading, writing and arithmetic in school, but as a rule not much else," Mr. Baden-Powell stated in an article published in a 1937 edition of Listener magazine. "They were nice lads and made very good parade soldiers, obeyed orders, kept themselves clean and smart and all that, but they had never been taught to be men, how to look after themselves, how to take responsibility and so on."

Mr. Baden-Powell's teachings were so successful, he wrote the book Aide to Scouting for soldiers.

In 1907, Mr. Baden-Powell was asked to rewrite the book for young boys, but before doing so, he took approximately 20 boys from all walks of life on an overnight camping trip to see if the skills he taught soldiers could be applied to children.

That overnight excursion to Brownsea Island became the first Boy Scout camp.

"You can't beat scouting for life experiences because (kids) learn by doing and have fun doing it," Mr. George said.

A group from the 1st Bradford Beavers, Cubs, Scouts and Venturers is currently taking part in the Canadian Jamboree of scouting at Tamaracouta Scout Reserve in Quebec. The event runs until Wednesday.