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Scouting

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TAKING AIM WITH A HANDICAPPED FRIEND AT THE OKLAHOMA SPECIAL CAMPOREE





OKLAHOMA'S HELPING HAND CAMPOREE



Scouts from
Tulsa's Troop 26
make new friends
while hosting
the 13th annual
Special Camporee
for handicapped
youngsters.

**BY STAN
REDDING**
*Photographs by
Gene Daniels*

*"Don't walk in front of me . . .
I may not be able to follow.
Don't walk behind me . . .
I may not be able to lead.
Just walk beside me . . .
And be my friend."*

—Troop 26 motto

OKLAHOMA'S AUTUMN woodland swarmed with Scouts, some canoeing Lake Fort Gibson, while others walked arm-in-arm on leaf-carpeted trails, laughing, singing, shouting.

A typical Scout camporee?

Yes, and more.

This is the 13th Oklahoma Special Camporee, staged by 162 Scouts and leaders of Tulsa's Boy Scout Troop 26. (Troop 26's guests—155 of them—are Wednesday's children, full of woe.)

Limited in intelligence and thus learning disabled, malformed, many of them, by spina bifida, spastic paralysis, cretinism, microcephalia, and

hydrocephalus, most are social outcasts, abandoned by their families and hidden away by society in private or tax-supported institutions.

Most of us refer to them as mentally retarded, although Down's syndrome is now the preferred term for their disabilities, the tragic result of metabolic errors, genetic chemistry gone awry, brain injuries suffered at birth or some other complex congenital fault.

No matter. To the members of Troop 26, they are "Special Scouts," and they have no defects, no deformities. They are under the Scout umbrella and the Scout law of brotherhood prevails.

In return, the Special Scouts give the members of Troop 26 all they have to give—the love and devotion of a child. It's been that way for 13 years.

"Walk beside me . . . and be my friend."

The walking isn't done just one weekend of the year. The Scouts of Troop 26, singly, in pairs, or in groups, venture forth several times monthly to the

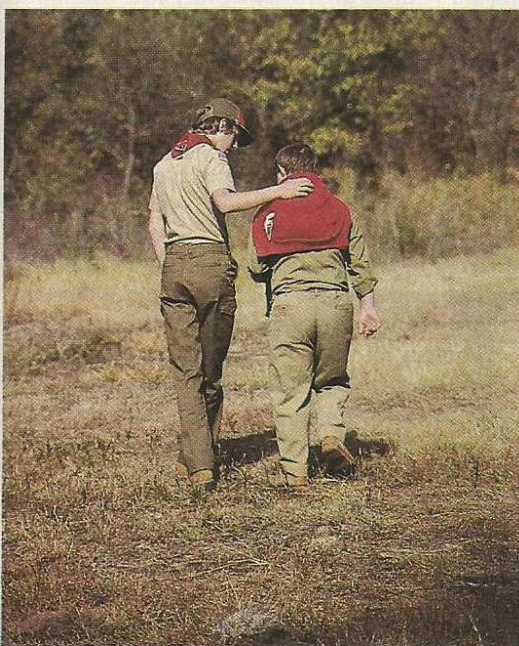
state and private institutions that are homes for the Special Scouts.

"Our kids teach them simple Scout skills, the Scout Oath, and Scout Law," said Herb Cunningham, assistant Scoutmaster of Troop 26 and an American Airlines engineer in Tulsa. "We also help organize Special Scout troops and Explorer posts," he said, "and a goodly number of their members are able to attend summer camps."

Troop 26 Scouts are the good shepherds of those Special Scouts able to attend summer camps. For the majority of the Special Scouts, however, the Oklahoma Special Camporee, a two-night, day-and-a-half festival on the banks of forest-fringed Lake Fort Gibson, is the high point of their year, their one outing from their particular care center.

From eight Oklahoma care institutions they come, these handicapped Scouts, ranging in age

(Opposite page) Special Scouts discover the fun of canoeing on Lake Fort Gibson. (Below) Derek Reiners and Ronald Hervey share a conversation during a lunch break. (Below, left) Rick Dodd and his friend, Bobby Chapman, talk about Scouting while taking a walk. (Center) Adults in charge of the Special Camporee include Troop 26 Scoutmaster Bill Shaffer and assistant Herb Cunningham. (Bottom) David Deotie and Mark Cunningham take a motorboat spin. (Bottom, right) James Rice and Mike Smith are delighted with their catch of bluegill.

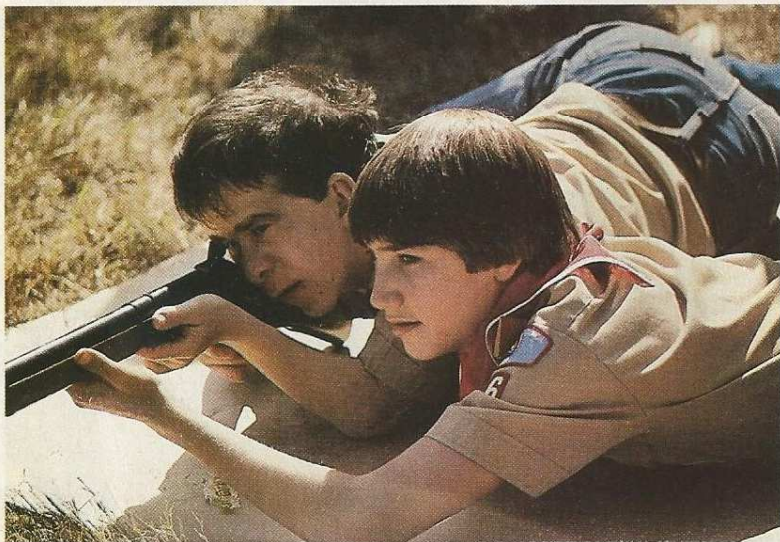


from 13 to 61, to this 13th Special Camporee. They are segmented into groups for fishing, cruising one finger of the lake in pontoon boats, another inlet of the lake in canoes, or engaged in archery, BB-gun target shooting, and other games suited to a child's capabilities.

Each is accompanied by a Troop 26 Scout or adult volunteer, and the woods ring with laughter, shouts, and bantering talk.

"We try to make it a one-on-one pairing of Scouts and Special Scouts," said Cunningham. "But sometimes there are several Special Scouts around one of our boys, and that's because they remember him from last year and look on him as

Troop 26 Scouts are the good shepherds for these Special Scouts. Together they go fishing and canoeing and try out archery and target shooting.



(Above) Mike Smith and R.C. Yarroll test their aim in marksmanship.

(Right) The night before the Special Camporee, Scoutmaster Bill Shaffer shares some inspirational thoughts with his boys about friendship and the Special Scouts.



special in their lives. But you'll note there's always an equal number of Scouts or adults standing by, just in case."

Les Trammell, manager of Woodland Park Home, a former Scout himself and a volunteer Scouter for 10 years, has brought 48 Special Scouts to the camporee, 23 boys and 25 girls, nearly half of Woodland's population of 101. "Physically, of course, they're men and women," said Trammell. "The youngest here today is 24, the oldest 56, but the average mental age is six.

"They are little children in the bodies of adults, and they love Scouting and their camporee. They start looking forward to it months in advance, counting the weeks and the days. It's the most exciting thing in their lives, and it's been a tremendous asset to our care program."

If the Oklahoma Special Camporee lacks anything these days, it's the man who started it all, Ed Herhold, now a resident of Colorado. Herhold, a former Tulsa insurance man and an assistant Scoutmaster of Troop 26 in the late 1960s, became

interested in the welfare of the mentally retarded inmates of Hissom Memorial Center, the Oklahoma State Department of Human Services institution near Sand Springs. He became an adult volunteer at the facility, helping in any way possible, but basically teaching Scout skills, skits, songs, and simple crafts.

When Herhold's activities came to the attention of executives of the Indian Nations Scout Council, they initiated a council-wide program of outdoor enrichment for the Hissom residents.

The first camporee, held in 1969, involved several Tulsa-area Scout troops, including Troop 26, chartered to the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church of Tulsa. But after that first one, Troop 26 took over as host. That is not surprising, since Troop 26 is as remarkable as its Scoutmaster.

Bill Shaffer, a quietly-dynamic man, is on the staff of Philbrook Art Center in Tulsa. Athletically-trim, he coaches youth football in addition to his duties as a Scouter. Shaffer took command of Troop 26 in 1969 when it had only 17 Scouts and four adult Scouters. Under his leadership, Troop 26 has grown to 197 members, with 40 adults involved. "We have more adult volunteers than most troops have Scouts," observed Cunningham.

The Oklahoma Special Camporee has expanded with the troop. In addition to Hissom, the Special Scout program is now active in a dozen or more centers for the mentally retarded in Eastern Oklahoma, and invitations to take part in the Special Camporee—and the Scout program itself—are sent to each such care facility each year.

In 1981 the troop's project brought it a singular honor—Troop 26 was named the nation's "Outstanding Organization of the Year" by Special Olympics, Inc., headed by Eunice Kennedy Shriver.

"Actually, our program has no connection at all with Special Olympics, for we place no emphasis at all on competitive sports," said Cunningham. "But it was a high honor for our Scout troop."

A cadre of adults, some of whom were involved in the original camporee, are Shaffer's "movers and shakers" corps. They include Cunningham, Bill Dalton, Bob Barbero, George Newman, Burt Shelby, Sadie Dennis, Trammell, and professional Scouter Jim Bare, although a dozen others could be named.

Since its inception, the camporee has hosted some 1,500 handicapped Special Scouts, and Shaffer has graduated more than 1,000 Troop 26 Scouts into the adult world. "Of course, a lot of them are repeaters, they keep coming back," said Shaffer. "Scouts, Special Scouts, and adult volun-

teers, once they've been a part of it, they want to come back."

Sixty new members of Troop 26, all 11 year olds, were assimilated into the service project this year. For such youngsters, there's an indoctrination gathering the night before the camporee kickoff, with talks and advice by Shaffer, adult volunteers, and seasoned members of Troop 26. "They've never been around any kids like these," explained Cunningham. "A lot of people, including adults, are afraid of them the first time out, although none of the Special Scouts are violent or prone to violence. This meeting is just to rest any fears anyone might have."

Shaffer's speech to the new Scouts is blunt and direct, laced with inspiration, humor, and pride. Bill Shaffer has no secrets about his stance on the camporee. In fact, no one does. Love, honor, dignity, caring, even a few tears, are manly feelings at this camporee.

"Pride's no bad thing," said Shaffer. "We all should have it. We should have it in this camporee; the pride of what we're doing, the pride in this whole set of patches over here (denoting the camporee's 13 years), the pride in the work of our volunteers. You have a chance to be part of something that's a tradition, and it's getting better because of YOU—one of you and one of those special kids."

"That's what they'll remember, you know. Not me. Not Bob Barbero's or Bill Dalton's cooking. They remember the one guy who took the time to be their friend."

"I know you try to keep up with your neighbor in school—peer pressure or whatever you call it. We had it when we were kids your age. Friendship, at this camporee, is cheap. All it costs you is a touch and a smile. You don't have to play football, you don't have to be a super jock, you don't have to make good grades, date the right girl, or wear a shirt with an alligator on it."

"All you have to do is walk beside these kids and be their friend. That's one of the things that's neat about this weekend. It turns you free. These kids love you for being here—for just being yourself."

"This weekend it's fallen to us to do the things for them that no one else will do. I think it's neat that we have that opportunity."

Shaffer's is a view reflected by the adult volunteers and Troop 26 Scouts alike. "There's nothing on my calendar that would keep me from being here this weekend," said Bill Dalton quietly.

"I go home from one of these emotionally drained," said George Newman. "I feel good, but I'm emotionally worn out. Seeing the love our kids give these handicapped people is

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really satisfying."

"This is a growing up experience for our kids," said Burt Shelby. "They're being exposed to a part of our community that most people don't ordinarily see. It's a lesson in love and compassion, an active, overt showing of affection and I enjoy seeing our kids show that."

"If I had a job, and I was told that I'd have to work this weekend or lose that job, I'd lose the job," said Scout Scott Lybarger.

Brett Vaughn, chosen as one of 1983's National Scout Youth Representatives, spoke about his troop's project.

"Scouting is at its best when it's applied to your everyday life and activities. It's hard, but this camporee is one of the things we do that makes those activities special. Not making us special, you understand, but making *them* special. You may not see them again for six months, but each one will remember you and what he or she did with you."

"It lights something inside you—gives you a feeling of thankfulness to God that you're healthy and that you're able to help others."

"Most of us tend to forget how much love means to a person. The rush-rush of everyday life? Hey, it's nothing to what these people face every day."

There is not even the hint of patronage on the part of Troop 26's Scouts. The relationship of Troop 26 Scouts to the Special Scouts is the unabashed bond between children, a bond adults can rarely establish.

"Hey, Sadie, I'm having fun! Are you having fun, Sadie?" chirps Michael Villines, of Special Troop 78, Woodland Park Nursing Home. Ms. Dennis, a medical aide, Explorer Post 134 leader and a staffer from Woodland, is having fun. "It's a treat to them just to get outdoors," she said.

"I got to do everything today, even hold the rabbit," says Harvey Staley Jr., of Special Troop 166. Tulsa Zoo volunteers Jim Ellis, Dave Olson, and Dave Gardner brought an array of docile animals for the Scouts to pet and hug.

Jerry Smith doesn't know he's 54, or where he lives (Tulsa), but he knows he loves Scouting and he's been to all 13 camporees. "I know the Scout Oath, and the Scout Law, and I have fun," he shouts. "Are you my friend? I'm your friend. I love you."

To Jerry Smith and to the other hapless and lonely inmates of Oklahoma's institutions for the mentally retarded, the boys and men of Troop 26 return that love tenfold. ■

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