

Bruce Lowan, left, and Mike Lucey watch as Buskin pauses to drink from a well along the trail.



MEMO TO: The President's Committee on Physical Fitness.

FROM: Martin Buskin, Newsday Education Editor.  
SUBJECT: How today's mania for soft living has affected the activities of the Boy Scouts.

Acting in response to various rumors, innuendoes and letters that have been trickling into the office, this investigator set out to determine whether Boy Scouts actually are becoming addicted, as some reports have it, to heated sleeping bags, luxurious weekend cabins, doing scoutmasters and nonliking hikes.

After a sacroiliac-searing weekend of research in the field, I can report, between applications of Ben-Gay, that the modern Boy Scout is:

1. Much tougher than I am.
2. Much thinner than I am.
3. Prepared.

Research was conducted on an overnight trip with 16 members of Troop 163 of Rockville Centre, led by Scoutmaster Ernest Latham, who trudged into the well-charted bush country of Camp Wauwepex in Wading River in the wilds of eastern Suffolk. The boys were glad to have Latham along because he had a lighter to start the cooking fires—and a repertoire of nerve-breaking horror stories for the nightly campfires. The boys and their scoutmaster had no idea that their every attempt at campercraft and rugged outdoor activity would be scrutinized for evidences of flab and soft living—by an expert on flab and soft living.

I was conducted to the campsite by the lone ranger in charge of Wauwepex. As we waded through dense underbrush, skirting colonies of Cub Scouts out for a day hike, the ranger informed me that my newly purchased park looked a bit uncomfortable. "It's perfectly okay, Keemosabee," I shot back, but my sarcasm was lost on him. Suddenly we stumbled on Troop 163. The troop was set up in sturdy, well-carved-up lean-tos. There wasn't a tent in sight! The first sign of soft living!

Leaning on a lean-to, I greeted the scoutmaster with, "How come your boys aren't in tents?" The lone ranger answered, "Ordinarily, we would put them in tents, but we thought lean-tos would be better today." I looked at them quizzically. Then the answer struck me. And struck me. It had been raining steadily for hours.

Latham, an attorney with six children and a wife who can't stand camping trips, invited me to bunk in his lean-to. "I have to sleep in a tent," I replied laughingly. "It's part of my investigation."

"Get the man a tent, boys," he shouted. In about three minutes, a small mob of assorted Scouts unfolded, put up and pegged down a small pup tent complete with ground cloth. Latham then had his senior patrol leader, 15-year-old Bill McDonald, line the boys up for a hike. "You don't mind hiking in the rain, do you?" he asked, in what I thought was a challenging tone. I sneered and fell into step with the Apache Patrol.

Up gentle hills and slopes we hiked, while the rain turned to fine mist and then back to rain. The hike, a tour of the 650-acre camp, included peeks into some of the more sturdily built cabins which were used for winter camping and to house staff members during the two-month summer camp operated at Wauwepex. The cabins had sleekly ancient pot-bellied stoves, luxurious

double-decker metal bunks with mattresses fully two and a half inches thick. Daylight poured in through holes in the walls. "How do you like this cabin?" Latham asked, in what he thought was a friendly tone. "I lived better in Korea," was my summation.

Latham insisted on showing me some anti-erosion projects on which the various Nassau troops were working. This invariably required hiking up an 80-degree incline to a steep ridge overlooking what appeared to be impenetrable jungle. Several times I asked, "Where is the stupid trail?" And several times, members of the Apache or the Panther Patrols would leap down the ridge, screaming "Geronimo! We make our own trails!"

Ostensibly, the hike was supposed to be a nature walk. And although we did observe some deer tracks (they looked like dog pawprints to me but Latham said they were deer tracks), my main observations concerned the nature of the modern Boy Scout. It turned out that this was really a "Famous Last Words" hike. Continually, as I tramped through the woods, taking care to let branches whip back into the face of the Scout behind me, Scouts would call out one-line gags: "Famous last words: I know this road in the dark. There's no cliff here," or "Don't worry, the boss won't be back for hours," or "That ticking noise? It's just an alarm clock." This went on for two hours. It was an awful nature hike, but this troop had great gag writers.

Finally, after 10 miles in the drizzle, Latham cooed, "How about 10 more? We can hit this wide trail around the lake and . . ." I took a rock out of my boot and sat down on it. "No, no, that's all right. The boys may get overheated. Let's go back to camp." The boys were overheated as it turned out, because most of them ran back to camp. The only thing about me in running condition was my watch.

Back in camp, the troop began to prepare supper. There were two tables set up under a huge tent fly that served as the mess hall. One patrol had a large storage cabinet that served as a pantry. With the help of Latham's lighter, Bill McDonald started a roaring blaze in a fireplace the boys built out of rocks. Bill was in charge of the cooking and concocted something he called Jamboree Stew. It was a lodipodge of meatballs, spaghetti, tomato sauce, peppers and onions. The test of Bill's success as a chef came when he shouted in a pugnacious voice, "Who wants seconds?" and was rewarded with about 10 requests. When boys cook their own meals, they seldom have trouble with their appetites. And after 10 miles in the rain, I could have eaten a potted sleeping bag.

During the preparation and cleaning up of supper, I noticed another complex trait of the modern Boy Scout. He talks in TV commercials. As one First Class Scout poured tomato sauce into the stew, he shouted at the top of his First Class voice, "But it sure doesn't taste like tomato juice!" Later, when we went out in the scoutmaster's car to hunt some heavy logs for the evening campfire, a member of the log detail turned to his fellow Apache and said, "Is this any way to go hiking? You bet it is!"

As the shadows deepened and the roaring fire bathed the camp in flickering light, the boys gathered

around the blaze with a single thought: "Thank goodness it stopped raining. Otherwise it would be a pretty messy campfire." Bill lead the boys in a desultory rendering of "If I Had a Hammer," and then they got down to some serious singing—"A World Without Love." The modern Boy Scout, it seems, is not much on songs of the outdoors, but loves those Beatles.

After a few more tender ballads—which seemed to consist of muttering followed by "Yeah, yeah, yeah"—the boys put on some skits. This is the highest form of Scout dramatic art. The theatrical zenith of the evening came when a patrol, led by Chris Serocke, put on "The Echo." With four boys stationed far out in the woods, Chris tested the "echo." He shouted, "Bologna!" and from four directions we heard an echoed "Bologna!" He shouted "Mr. Latham is a good guy" and from four directions came the echo of his compliment. Then he shouted, "Marty Buskin is a good guy" and from north, east and south came identical praise. But from the west came "Bologna!"

As a Scout poured water on the embers, the troop turned in. One brave boy, Mike Lucey, volunteered to share my pup tent. But he sneaked out during the night. He was too polite to tell me why, but I suspected that no one in his patrol snored.

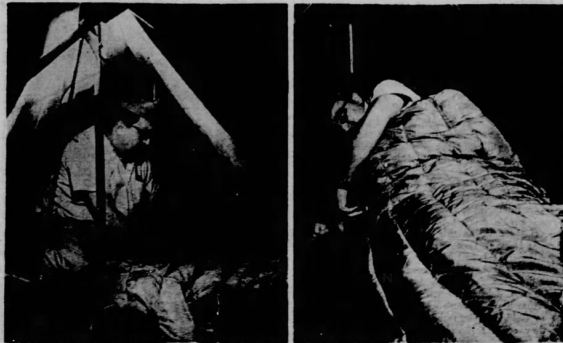
In the morning, it was out of the sleeping bag and into formation for church services at 7 AM. The lone ranger was there again, smiling. "Where is church?" I asked, rolling up my eyelids. "Just about three and a half into town and three and a half back," he replied sweetly. "Work up an appetite." So we walked to church. I have to report that we saw several carloads of Scouts being driven to church and they were given appropriately dirty looks. People in cars at 7 AM look so smug and superior when they pass 16 Scouts trailed by two adults.

After church, there was breakfast of fruit juice, cold cereal, pancakes and sausages, again cooked by Bill. I had two cold cereals, four sausages and eight pancakes. The lone ranger had been right. As the cleanup patrol finished its work and the rest of the troop played a wild version of Ringo's, I asked Latham how the troop planned to get back to Rockville Centre. "We have some fathers who will get here this afternoon with their cars to bring the boys back," he said. "We often have to drive quite a distance on our camping trips." Aha. I thought, the one track in their scouting armor. They drive everywhere.

"You see," he continued, "we do a lot of our camping upstate in the winter." "In the winter?" I said, shivering. "Camping in the winter?" Latham smiled in what I thought was a superior tone, and handed me a shoulder patch of his troop as a souvenir. It was large and red and blue and said "Troop 163 Polar Bears." "That's the time to go out," he said, "in the winter."

I shook hands and put on my pack. Some of the boys gathered around. "You're okay in my book, boys. You'll get a good report." The troop gave me the Beetle Cheer. Some hollered, "Is Marty great?" and the rest snickered and said sarcastically, "Yeah, yeah, yeah." I pushed off into the brush. It was a tough 500 yards to the parking lot and I was short of breath.

Newsday Photos by Mulvehill



Getting set for a night in the Long Island wilderness, Buskin arranges his sleeping bag, then turns in.