

Fact Sheet

The Three Baden-Powells: Robert, Agnes and Olave

This is the story, very briefly told, of three remarkable people. Robert Baden-Powell started the Boy Scouts. His sister, Agnes, helped him organize a similar movement for girls, the Girl Guides. Olave spent her life, after her marriage to Robert, promoting Guiding and Scouting.

Robert Stephenson Smyth Baden-Powell

Robert, later known affectionately as B-P, was born in London, England, on February 22, 1857. His father, the Reverend Powell, a science professor at Oxford University, spent a great deal of time with his large family of six sons and a daughter, taking them for walks in the park, teaching them at home and reading aloud to them. He died when Robert was just three, leaving his wife, Henrietta, to raise the family alone. She was a remarkable woman who excelled in music, art, languages, literature, science and mathematics. Her interests led her to establish a scheme of a high school education for girls.

The family had many friends who influenced Robert. His older brothers taught him to handle a boat, to camp and to cook. He went to a boarding school, Charterhouse, where, although he was not a good student, he made his mark in other ways through his artistic (he was ambidextrous) and dramatic talents. He was very clever at eluding the masters, going off into the nearby woods (against the rules) to catch, skin and cook rabbits, using such a tiny fire that the smoke did not betray his presence.

After leaving school Robert entered the British Army as an officer, serving in India, Afghanistan and South Africa. The Zulus called him “M'hala Panzi” (he who lies down to shoot). While among them he first heard the chant “Een gon yama” (he is a lion), well known now to Guides and Scouts. The Matabele tribe gave him the name “Impeesa” (the wolf that never sleeps).

During the Boer War, B-P, in charge of a small detachment of mounted men, was besieged in the town of Mafeking. This situation appealed to the British public and when Mafeking was relieved after 217 days, B-P was proclaimed a hero.

While in Mafeking, one of B-P's officers organized the boys in the town into a messenger service to help the soldiers called the Mafeking Cadet Corps. B-P was quick to see the possibilities in this and the idea of the Boy Scouts was born in his mind. B-P's last assignment in South Africa was to organize a local police force. Their uniform was the model for the original Boy Scout uniform. He wrote a small manual

on scouting, army style, for the police force, the first of many publications he produced.

On his return to Britain, B-P became Inspector General of Cavalry and travelled widely in the line of duty. He found that his scouting manual was being used by the Boys' Brigade. After inspecting the boys and talking with their leader, he agreed to adapt his book for them. However, because of his concern about the lack of "spirit" in British boys, particularly in those without the advantages of a good education, he decided instead to form a new organization, the Boy Scouts. He felt what was needed was a scheme of character training for boys. To promote his scheme he wrote a series of articles, of the popular serial type, for a weekly boys' magazine. He later published these as a book *Scouting for Boys*. He demonstrated his ideas by holding a boys' camp on Brownsea Island off the coast of Dorset.

The boys needed no convincing. His serial stories were read eagerly all over Britain, and boys were forming themselves into Scout patrols by the time the book was published.

B-P, now 50 years old, resigned his commission in the Army and devoted all his time to Scouting, travelling widely to organize troops and to train leaders. In 1909, all Scouts who could get there were invited to a rally at the Crystal Palace in London. The parade numbered in the thousands of boys and, to the surprise of everyone, some girls as well! They too had been reading the scouting stories. They had registered themselves as Scouts with Scout Headquarters and had obtained uniform items by using only their initials and not their first names. They demanded to be allowed to join the new organization. B-P, a bachelor with the traditional views of women's roles that were common at the time, asked his sister Agnes to help him organize a new movement, which he called Girl Guides after a famous Indian Regiment.

In January 1912, B-P set off for the West Indies starting an extended trip to promote Scouting in the USA, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. On board he met Mr. Harold Soames and his daughter Olave, who were going to spend a winter holiday in Jamaica. Olave and Robert found they had much in common, including the same birthdays, although born 32 years apart. By the time the ship reached Jamaica, they were unofficially engaged and were married later that year, on October 30th.

In 1918 B-P wrote *Girl Guiding*, a program book for girls from eight to 18.

Not long after World War I ended, the Scout organization bought a country house and adjoining woodlands near London. It was called Gilwell Park and was to be used as a training centre for Scout leaders. Much later, when B-P was honoured with a peerage, he used Gilwell as his title.

The 1920s were busy years for Scouting with international jamborees, the purchase of an international home, Kanderstag, in Switzerland, culminating in 1929 when they celebrated their 21st anniversary at another jamboree. At this event B-P was honoured by King George V and granted a peerage. He became Lord Baden-Powell of Gilwell.

Lord and Lady Baden-Powell did a great deal of travelling during these years, often taking their three

children, Peter, Heather and Betty, with them. They visited Scouts and Guides everywhere, including Canada, inspiring everyone who met them with their energy and enthusiasm.

In 1937 B-P, now an old man and in failing health, bade farewell to his beloved Scouts at a jamboree in Holland. He and Olave celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary later that year. Then in 1938 they moved to Kenya so that they could spend B-P's last years together in the warm climate and sunshine there. B-P was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1939, but no prize was given that year because of the outbreak of World War II. B-P, now very frail, died January 8, 1941. His grave in Nyeri, Kenya, bears a simple inscription: "Robert Baden-Powell, Chief Scout of the World," with the Scout and Guide emblems and the familiar woodcraft symbol "I have gone home."

His life and work were later honoured with a memorial in Westminster Abbey, just inside the great west door, flanked by the Scout and Guide World Flags. He was honoured by many countries with medals, titles and decorations, but his greatest tribute will always be the millions of boys and girls who have found happiness in the organizations he founded.

Agnes Baden-Powell

Robert's sister Agnes was born in 1858. Like her mother, she was a woman of many interests and accomplishments. She would have been considered eccentric in Victorian times, and probably even today. She had some knowledge of 11 languages, astronomy and science. She was interested in natural history and had artistic and writing talents. She was interested in crafts from needlework to metalwork. Her outside activities included cycling, swimming and skating. She even went up in a hot air balloon! She played the organ, piano and violin, had ability as a nurse, and was said to be a good cook and housekeeper. She kept birds, bees and butterflies in her home.

Being a woman of such wide interests, Agnes would almost certainly have been interested in her brother's Scouting activities. In 1908 she started a Boy Scout Troop "in hopes of finding a man to take it over." She felt strongly that girls should have the benefit of something similar, "a corps of girls trained to act in emergencies," and started a "Girls' Emergency Corps."

In 1909 when girls turned up at the Crystal Palace Rally clamouring to be allowed to join, there were already 6,000 of them registered with Boy Scout Headquarters, practising their own form of Scouting. Robert asked Agnes to help him organize the Girl Guides. Together they published *Pamphlet A* and *Pamphlet B*.

Pamphlet A, called *Baden-Powell Girl Guides, a Suggestion for Character Training for Girls*, contained information on how to start Girl Guides and a list of the efficiency badges girls could earn, 20 of which would lead to the Silver Fish Award.

These, of course, were based on Scouting ideas, but adapted to suit girls. Agnes said “girls must be partners and comrades, rather than dolls.” Readers were told that a handbook for girls was being prepared but that in the meantime Girl Guide training could be carried out in the same way as in *Scouting for Boys* (i.e., by games and competitions).

Pamphlet B contained further information on program for girls. Patrols were to be named for flowers (which annoyed those who were already members of patrols named for animals) and the more than 6,000 girls now registered as “temporary Scouts” would henceforth be called Girl Guides, “people who know the way and could show it to others.”

In 1910 Agnes and some of her friends formed a committee to organize the Guides, with Agnes as President of the Girl Guides Association. B-P loaned money to rent office space in Scout Headquarters. *Scouting for Boys* was adapted for girls in a 475-page book called *How Girls Can Help to Build Up the Empire*, and published in 1912. In 1915 a charter was granted to the Girl Guides Association.

Agnes was not apparently a very efficient organizer and for a time it looked as if the new organization would have to be taken over by the Boy Scouts. In 1920 she resigned as President in favour of Princess Mary, daughter of King George V, who was an active supporter of the Girl Guides. Agnes became Vice-President and continued in that position until her death in 1945. While Vice-President, she was always active, travelling in uniform, camping under canvas with the girls and writing articles, particularly for the Girl Guides' *Gazette*. She deserves credit for facing the prejudice of her time, against women in public life and against the very idea of an organization like Girl Guides.

Olave St. Clair Soames (Olave, Lady Baden-Powell)

The youngest child of Harold and Katharine Soames, Olave was born February 22, 1889, near Chesterfield, Derbyshire, England. Tradition has it that she was named for Olaf, King of Norway. She spent a happy childhood in the country, devoted to her horses, dogs and birds. She was never sent to school, but had a governess at home. She did not like book learning and her formal education ended when she was 12. She enjoyed outdoor activities: rowing, riding, cycling, tennis and swimming. She also enjoyed playing the violin.

When Olave was old enough, she began to accompany her father on his winter holidays. It was on the way to Jamaica with him that she met the “Scout man,” General Baden-Powell. Although there was a great difference in their ages - 32 years, they fell in love. B-P continued with his tour for Scouting and Olave returned to England with her father when the holiday was over. B-P wrote to his mother on her 88th birthday: “I have been wondering what to give you as a birthday present but I think I've got one now that will please you ... and that is a daughter-in-law for you.” Olave and her “Robin” had a quiet

wedding in Dorset, October 30, 1912. In December there was a large wedding reception for them in London, after which they left on their honeymoon, camping in the desert of North Africa.

They found a home in Sussex and here their three children were born: Peter in 1913, Heather in 1915 and Betty in 1917. Olave was, of course, interested in her husband's Scouting activities and soon became involved in Girl Guides. In 1916 she was appointed County Commissioner for Sussex and two years later became Chief Guide for Britain. In 1920 Olave helped form an International Council which grew and developed as Guiding grew, and eventually became the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts.

The Baden-Powells had by now moved into a new home, Pax Hill, in Hampshire. It was a happy place with Scouts and Guides visiting from all over the world. It was a busy place too with Robert directing the Scouts and Olave deeply involved in her Guiding. However, busy as they were, they always found time to be with their children, and when the children went off to boarding schools, they arranged their activities so as to be home for school holidays. Lady Baden-Powell usually accompanied the Chief Scout on his trips and often the three children went too as part of their education and to maintain family life. Olave visited both Scouts and Guides, endearing herself to all with her infectious enthusiasm.

By 1938 Olave had another home to make, this time in Kenya. It was called "Paxtu," which in Swahili means "complete." This was to be Robert's last home and while he enjoyed the sunshine, he wrote and painted and enjoyed the view of "his" mountain, Mount Kenya. After B-P's death in 1941, Olave was left alone, cut off by war from both England and her home there; Pax Hill had been taken over by the War Department. She was granted a "Grace and Favour" apartment in Hampton Court Palace - apartments reserved for the reigning King or Queen to give to widows whose husbands had given exceptional service to the country. At first because of the war she could not travel but found much pleasure and satisfaction in her garden, she was especially proud of her rhubarb. She was nearly always "at home" to visiting Scouts and Guides, and her apartment was easily identified by the World Flag in the window. Just a few days before the end of the war she managed to get to France where 40,000 Scouts and Guides paraded past her down the Champs Elysees.

By 1946 travel was again possible and Olave started her real work again, visiting Scouting and Guiding all over the world. During her lifetime she made many sea voyages, 648 flights, and visited many countries, 15 visits to Canada alone. She was honoured by many countries and organizations for her work for the youth of the world, work which she loved.

In 1973 Olave left Hampton Court where she had lived for 28 years to move into a nursing home. She died there on June 25, 1977, aged 88. Her ashes were buried in B-P's grave in Kenya. Later in the year, a memorial service was held in Westminster Abbey to celebrate her great life. The Abbey was filled not only with representatives of Guiding and Scouting but with government officials and representatives of other organizations. Like the Chief Scout, Olave prepared a last message for "her family" before she died:

Dear Guides, Scouts, Cubs and Brownies and all their leaders and friends:

I shall have left this world when you receive this message, which I leave to express my thanks for all the kindnesses and the affection shown to me, and to say how greatly I rejoiced over the way in which you have all carried out your share in the work of the movement that my beloved husband invented for the advancement of boys and girls of all countries, years ago.

I have firm belief in Almighty God and in the life in the world to come, when he and I will be reunited, and together we shall watch over you who have been enrolled as members of this world family, and go on caring for your progress and your well-being.

I trust that you will continue fully to use the system of work and play that our movement provides, keeping up the fun and friendships made at your meetings and camps, abiding by the Promise and upholding the Laws that you undertook to live by when you joined up.

In that way you will not only advance yourself in body, mind and spirit, but you will affect those around you, in doing what is honourable and right and wise, and in giving out kindness of thought and action, thus striving against all ills and helping to make the world a happier and better place in which to live.

I trust you will be successful in all your tasks, and may God be with you in the coming years.

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