Girl Scouts of '90s tout tomboy agenda

Doing 'boy stuff' is self-esteem key

By Julia Duin
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Today's urbanized, Information Age Girl Scout presents a radically different version of American womanhood than that described 85 years ago by Juliette Low.

Instead of learning wilderness survival techniques and how to run a large household, today's preteen Scout is more apt to be earning badges in car repair, ecology and self-esteem.

During 85th anniversary celebrations this Saturday, girls will sing several dozen Girl Scout classics along with a more modern addition, "Yes, She Can," sung to "She'll Be Coming 'Round the Mountain." A sample:

Can a woman fly an airplane?
Yes she can, yes she can.
Can a woman build a building?
Yes she can, yes she can.
Can a woman fight a fire?
Can a woman change a tire?
Can a woman lead a choir?
Yes she can, yes she can."

Mrs. Low founded the Girl Scouts in a similar frame of mind, as a way to create "a woman who can do things" in pre-World War I society, where females were often confined to the home.

Patterning her new movement after the Boy Scouts, founded by her friend Lord Baden-Powell, she wrote a handbook in 1913 that stressed moral and physical strength and a difference between the sexes.

"No one wants women to be soldiers," she wrote. "None of us like women who ape men.

"An imitation diamond is not as good as a real diamond. An imitation fur coat is not as good as real fur. Girls will do no good by trying to imitate boys. You will only be a poor imitation. It is better to be a real girl such as no boy could possibly be."

Her movement urged girls to get exercise, always sleep with their windows open, be good mothers, know some basic nursing, be patriotic and choose a career.

"The numbers of women who have taken up aviation prove that women's nerves are good enough for flying," she wrote a mere 10 years after airplanes were invented. The at-home woman was expected to do no less; among her instructions is one on "how to secure a burglar with eight inches of cord."

Especially close to her heart was her way of informing a girl's conscience through 10 Girl Scout laws, the first three of which are: "A Girl Scout's Honor is to be Trusted;" "A Girl Scout is Loyal;" and "A Girl Scout's Duty is to be Useful and Help Others."

These and other admonitions to "obey orders" and "be thrifty" have been greatly edited in the intervening decades to their current incarnation in the 1994 Girl Scout handbook for Juniors, the level for fourth-, fifth- and sixth-graders. Instead of repeating Mrs. Low's direct commands, the Scout of the 1990s says she "will do my best" to be honest, fair and "use resources wisely."

Instead of the 1920s' promise to be "clean in thought, word and deed," the modern Scout vows to "show respect for myself and others through my words and actions."

The Girl Scouts took some heat in October 1993 when they voted to make the reference to God optional in their pledge, officially known as the Girl Scout Promise.

Today's Girl Scout handbook includes details on menstruation, breast sizes and bras, boyfriends, dating, passionate kissing, teenage pregnancy, the death of a pet, gangs, sexual abuse and stress.

Instead of earning badges such as "Housekeeper," "Dairy Maid" and "Laundress," they rack up badge points for "Making Decisions," "Aerospace," "Car Care," "Healthy Relationships," "Becoming a Teen," "Computer Fun," "Math Whiz," "Ms. Fix-It" and "Video Production."

"My Self Esteem," a badge portrayed with a large No. 1, instructs girls to start a journal, list three goals, role-play three situations, think through things to be worried about, and create a "brag bag" of "as many things as you can think of that make you special."

"If there's anything we do, it's to make girls feel better about themselves and who they are," says Jan Verhage of the Girl Scout Council of the Nation's Capital.

"Girls don't just learn to be baby sitters or to sell cookies. They're working with the National Zoo to create violence-prevention programs for younger children, simulating space travel at a local museum, developing physics projects, cleaning nature trails and working on the Hill."

In case girls don't get the message that all occupations are open to them, the handbook describes a scenario of a science-minded girl who feels pressured to try gymnastics instead of entering the school science fair.

"You might still hear people saying that some jobs are only for men and other jobs only for women. Some people are very old-fashioned!" it reads.

As a badge activity, the handbook suggests researching the starting salaries for math, science or computer-related jobs. "Compare these salaries with some of the more traditional 'female' jobs," it says. "Is this fair?"

The following page shows a female computer programmer and her husband who, having had a son, decide that one of the parents will stay home. Their decision: The father stays home with the child.

"That is the most ridiculous model they could have chosen," says Heidi Brennan, an assistant Brownie troop leader in Fairfax County whose two daughters are in Brownies and Juniors. She is also public-policy director for the Fairfax group Mothers at Home.

"Talk about social engineering," she says. "They should have picked a woman who had flextime, which was so much more nurturing. They want girls to think of this as normative when they want a family.

"They are emphasizing male-oriented learning strengths and occupations, such as math and science. Those things get a favored approach instead of the more nurturing approach that follows the more female line."

A few badges do stress traditional female roles, such as "Art in the Home" on lighting, decor, furniture arranging and stenciling; "Art to Wear," one of the most popular badges, which features clothing design; "Toymaker," and "Caring for Children," which includes learning about immunizations and demonstrating how to hold, feed and dress an infant.

Other badges appear to be more agenda-driven. "Celebrating People" instructs the Scout to report on the exclusionary tactics of cliques and to "write your own declaration of young people's rights."

Another badge, "My Heritage," asks girls to guess the meanings of names such as Aisha, Layla, Yuki and Kelake, along with Sarah, Helen and Jennifer. Eighteen percent of the country's 2.5 million Scouts are members of minority groups.

Girl Scouts photo

One merit badge activity (presumably not "Economics") asks '90s Girl Scouts if lower pay for some traditionally female jobs is "fair."

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—Juliette Low