

The Kia Kima Convergence

August 12, 2010

The last week-end in June I paid brief visits to both Old Kia Kima and the relatively newer (by some 40 years) Kia Kima Scout Reservation. That weekend was the planned cook-out for Kia Kima staff by the Old Kia Kima bunch. Coincidental to that was an invitation to visit Troop 567. I had become acquainted with that unit as part of an effort by the local United Methodist Church to stabilize and enhance the Highland Heights community. I had discovered Troop 567 was a newer unit in the council and as a ScoutReach unit* had an outstanding record for its brief two year history. The able Scout Master, Denton Pearson, invited me to dine with them Friday evening and attend the camp wide campfire where several scouts were scheduled for the unit's first Call Out for Order of the Arrow. How could I go wrong? Figured I would make the visit, then truck over to old Kia Kima for a two night's stay, especially since Dave Logan's Troop 55 from Franklin TN was camped there. Logan, a former KK staff member, is The Middle Tennessee Mr. Scoutmaster of the thriving and irrepressible Troop 55.

Harboring unrepentant notions about the absolutely superior quality of our Scouting and camping experience half a century ago, it did seem wise to catch a view of this newer version of Scouting and camping. I approached with no little skepticism.

With specific and accurate directions from the Chickasaw Council website, I managed to locate KKSRR, wondering just how far back in the Ozark wilds the place was hidden. My dust covered Odyssey pulled up to the main headquarters. It was a stretch to see two women Cub Scout leaders, one whom I had met at an earlier Thunderbird Committee meeting. She was genial and pointed me to the office where I could get information about Troop 567's site. The college age staff member signed me in as guest and gave me a tale tell orange wrist band. Then he pointed me in the general direction of Camp Cherokee—the more primitive site which did their own cooking. As I made my way back to the parking lot, I saw Scouts all over the place. They were in twos or threes and each contingent seemed bent on a particular mission or project of some kind. None I saw were “just hanging out”. That same image of purposeful activity would persist the next twenty four hours. Another image was how fit and active were these boys and girls (a few Adventure Crew Scouts were there). While probably 90% had their hand held digital phones and IPODs, rarely did I see any Scouts using them.

* Units of at-risk youth which qualify for financial assistance for uniforms, camp fees etc.

KKSR is a big outfit. Cherokee, on the North edge, is located about two miles from the main camp(Osage). You drive pass the Osage swimming area which is a narrow rivulet of the South Fork. It appears about four feet deep and about 20 feet across. There is a concrete bridge to cross. Then it is about a couple of miles to the main assembly area and Cherokee HQ. It has a large venue going down to the lake (is this John Cooper Lake?) which is about ten acres all toll. The camp sites are situated in the surrounding wooded areas with outdoor latrines and cold water showers strategically located near the tent camp sites. The tents are set on wood frame bases. All very reminiscent of the tent outposts in Kia Kima mid 50s. It was a quarter mile hike from the parking area to Troop 567's site on the opposite side of the lake.

Arriving, I met two scouts from 567 who courteously welcomed me to the camp and introduced themselves and encouraged me to continue along the path. I also met the assistant Scout Master Jimmy Sanders. In no time I was at the campsite. The tents were neatly arrayed and there was good order to the campsite. Cooking gear was arranged near the cook fly and preparations for the evening meal were about to commence. I met the scout master Denton Pearson and his other assistant Doug Conrey. They introduced me to the other scouts present and explained that for the afternoon some would be swimming (one preparing for the mile swim the next morning at 6AM) and eventually there would be an election to the order of the Arrow-the unit's first inductees.

There were 22 Scouts and three leaders. It had been a good week. Several merit badges had been earned. A couple of the younger scouts who experienced home sickness managed to stick it out. Cooking assignments were made for the evening meal. About four o'clock there was a sudden thunderstorm which drenched most everything and everybody. But preparations for the meal proceeded anyway. The menu was spaghetti and garlic bread along with toss salad, corn, pork chops and baked potatoes. The meal was prepared on time using gas burning ovens and the open cook fire. Two staff members joined us for supper as is the custom for nearly all meals. One was a woman college student from UT Martin and the other a graduate (and Eagle Scout) from MTSU. Both seemed very responsible and knowledgeable about Scouting. As ranking clergy in this assemblage I was asked to return thanks before the meal.

All units assembled for camp wide (Cherokee only) skits at round 7 PM. The total compliment must have been two hundred Scouts and leaders. All units fell out around 7:30PM to make their way to the camp wide Campfire which was about two to three miles away—perhaps more than I bargained for. But I made it still standing. All units gathered in the expansive campfire arena. It is well lighted with sound

assistance. There must have been 40 units at camp that week and there were at least 450 Scouts and leaders assembled as darkness crept upon us.

The entire program was staff run. And the center piece throughout were the Scouts and their unit achievements over the week. I don't recall seeing any professional scouts on stage. The usual fare included skits and unit awards. Concluding the campfire was the Order of the Arrow Call Out which must have included forty Scouts and leaders. The ceremony was impressive and far more interpretive than in our generation. Four Scouts from 567 were called out. The concluding part of the campfire was an invitation to all former and current Kia Kima staff to come to the stage and sing the Kia Kima song. For me it was a touching moment. The words came back slowly.

We then made our way back in almost complete darkness, but without incident. Arriving at the campsite, the temperatures—which that week had hovered at the 100 mark—began to drop a bit. I bedded down in the tent with Doug. By mid-night it was comfortable. By 2 a.m. I was in my sleeping bag.

As the unit had already begun packing preparations for departure on Saturday, I told Denton I would accompany Conrado Jimenez for his mile swim at 6AM. Reveille was to be at 7AM. Already up, I was startled to hear reveille being blown—by none other than 567's Mr. Scoutmaster Denton Pearson!

There were about thirty scouts and adults making the mile swim that morning—four lengths of the lake. Each pair of swimmers was accompanied by a waterfront staff in row boat. Conrado led off and completed the swim in good time—around 45 minutes. He barely missed finishing first, inched out by a veteran swimmer with two mile swims under his belt. Troop 567 cheered on Conrado from the other side of the lake and welcomed him into the camp a conquering hero.

When most all equipment was packed in the trailer, a cold breakfast was served—cereal, Danish, juice. The unit flags were taken down and all scouts hiked back to the Cherokee headquarters to board the vans for home. However, they did have to make a decision on which kind of camp site they preferred for next year—unit cooking at Cherokee or dinning hall food at Osage. The group overwhelmingly voted to return to Cherokee. The great excitement of the group was the much anticipated stop at Cici's Pizza in Jonesboro. I let them lead me out along the winding road back to Hardy where I retraced my more familiar route to Old Kia Kima. Now by mid morning, David Logan's Troop 55 with ample assistant Scout masters were packing for their return to middle Tennessee. Logan would remain for the Kia Kima staff cook-out later in the day.

When Troop 55 left around noon a decided calm returned to the camp as OKK folk began to move in with food supplies, watermelon and such for the cook out. The cook crew included several Miramichee staffers as well as OKK staffers living on the East coast outside Atlanta. As always present in these gathering was Bob Williams a waterfront man from the late 40s and now local resident of Cherokee Village and major contractor for nearly all the Old Kia Kima reconstruction.

By 6 p.m. that afternoon staff from Kia Kima Scout Reservation began wandering in and many for the very first time to see the old site. By the time a serving line was open over 70 staff were present. They ranged in specialties and nationalities. South Africa won the distance award. Many of the staff were Eagle Scouts (for which they received a modest bonus in pay) and represented diverse backgrounds ranging from flight instructors, caving EMT specialists to Naturalists. The immense reservoir of expertise on the part of the current staff was truly amazing. Yet following the supper many were fascinated with the unplanned tours and background presentations that the OKK guys provided. I spent about 45 minutes with a group of Waterfront staff who were impressed with the current as well as older waterfront facility at OKK. Their forbearance of an old geezer reminiscing about the good old days was most commendable.

By dark the camp was once again relatively empty. David Logan who had been camp ranger that week while his troop had been there oversaw closing procedures the next morning. A crowd of about a dozen of us gathered for breakfast at the usual restaurant near Cherokee and plans commenced for a float down the South Fork later in the morning. Bob Williams would provide two canoes; Suzanne Miller from Miramichee would provide another. Seven brave souls –some of us not in canoes for over half century-- set in just off the golf course at Cherokee Village about a mile below Slick Rock. The initial plan was to canoe all the way to Hardy. But wiser heads prevailed and the trip reached only the bridge above Miramichee. The float took approximately three hours and included a simple picnic lunch somewhere mid way between old Cedar Valley Boy Scout Camp and Upper Falls (now called Star Falls).

The river and surrounding terrain were magnificently beautiful— much unspoiled by human traffic in dire contrast to tales of what has transpired on the Spring River near Hardy. The water was pristine emerald and the rapids as crystal clear and forgiving as in past generations. Periodically we would come upon cabins and residence of more imposing dimensions as we made our way down the South Fork. But still the essential naturalness of the area was in tact and as enchanting as half a century ago. As we drifted lazily down the river those of the earlier generation could hardly keep from wanting this same kind of experience for our contemporary Scouts and campers.

I appreciate the great variety and intensity of programs offered at KKSR. But it could not rival the grand vistas of the South Fork or the grandeur of the open quadrangle before the Thunderbird Nest or the stoned stairwell up from the waterfront.

My return to Memphis the succeeding days cemented my involvement in current Scouting. Initially I had been interested as a matter of community development from the church side (remember I am a retired Methodist minister) and was brought into contact with this new unit Troop and Crew 567 housed at Collegiate of Memphis School. Discovering they were losing their sponsorship and meeting place at Collegiate School I offered my assistance in whatever way possible to assure that this newly forged vessel not be lost. The current Scoutmaster persuaded me to take on the role of committeeman and to assist with swimming instructions. On both offers I readily complied and have found it to be most rewarding to come into regular contact with the vibrant Scouts, both young men and young women. They are singularly focused, but ever so much fun to be around.

It is testimony to my own Scouting experience that I could so easily come along side the seasoned leaders and be readily accepted by the young people. It did help to share that as an Eagle Scout myself I was still swimming a mile several times a week after that first mile swim at Kia Kima 57 years ago. As an old Scout Life Guard who was a lesser light then entrusted primarily with non-swimmers and beginners, the teacher mode kicked in automatically. I was teaching bobbing/breathing exercises and coaching several through the daunting first class 100 yard swim test. And along the way I have carved out a de facto role as Troop/Crew resident historian, quizzing them about issues of their own peculiar ethnic legacies; e.g., What is Juneteenth Holiday? Who was Percy Sutton, one of earliest African American Eagle Scouts? This unit should have its first of many Eagle Scouts this year. It will be among my greatest satisfactions in life to have been some small part of that signal achievement.

What I found most rewarding and deep down encouraging is the vigor and commitment of all those involved in Scouting today. I am impressed with the incredible amount of time and skill the adult leaders—volunteers and professionals, men and women--bring to the task and the formidable network of planning and safeguards put into place to assure that the experience is both safe and challenging. I have been struck by the immense energy and volunteer time of that generation of KKSR staff and campers from the late 60s and early 70s who are presently providing yeomen's work with the Old Kia Kima and its vibrant and diverse reach to all sorts and kinds of young people. Nearly all are working in local Scout units or church youth programs, continuing to serve in exemplary ways, honoring the very best of our cherished traditions at Kia Kima.

There is little doubt in my mind that I will find every bit as much satisfaction in my role as an adult leader in today's Scouting as I found in my own experience in Scouting as a youth. And in no small measure it came about because of Kia Kima—the Old and the New. The inestimable value of the South Fork, as always, has been in reaching back in the past to enable us to move forward into a more promising future.

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