

Natural Reaction: Jag Lake a beloved tradition for a Wauwatosa Boy Scout Troop

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Jacob Friede/Lakeland Times From left, 11-year-old Will Catlin, 14-year-old Nathan Foley, and 10-year-old Josh Millan, work on stabilizing their tent. The boys, part of Boy Scout Troop 21 out of Wauwatosa, were camping at Jag Lake near Boulder Junction last week.

Jacob Friede, Lakeland Times sports reporter
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Jeff Molter of Wauwatosa, first came to Jag Lake, near Boulder Junction, as a 12 year old Boy Scout in Troop 21, and being five hours away from home in a vast Northwoods wilderness was at first a bit intimidating.

"The first year I wasn't so sure I was going to come back," the assistant Scout Master said.

But he soon acclimated to the clean, crisp air, the woods, and the pristine lakes, and discovered a young boy can have a whole lot of fun in them.

"It's one of those things that's hard to explain. It gets in your blood," Molter said.

And it stays there.

Fifty-two years later, Molter and Boys Scout Troop 21 of Wauwatosa, a suburb of Milwaukee, are still coming to Jag Lake and according to Scout Master Steve Weber, its effect is as strong as ever.

"The boys in my car are a little older. As we make the corner they want to roll all the windows down so they can smell the air and the pine," Weber said. "They don't call it summer camp. They call it they're going to Jag Lake."

And once they get there, they call it something else.

"It's incredible!" said Ben Rinzel, 21, who has been coming to Jag Lake since he was 10. "We come up here and essentially create a miniaturized city of sorts with tents and I absolutely love it up here."

It's no wonder why. The 44 boys of Troop 21 spent a fun-filled week at Jag Lake swimming, canoeing, kayaking, hiking, exploring, and fishing. They also did archery, artwork, leatherwork, basketry, and worked towards advancements within the Boys Scouts program and merit badges.

Eight of the older senior scouts, along with four adult chaperones, got to go on a two day wilderness canoe trip.

"We drive them up to White Sand Lake, drop them off. They spend two days. They canoe back," Weber explained.

So it's not all leisure at Jag Lake. The scouts also learn.

"We always say we are using the woods not to train outdoors skills, but we're developing confidence, independence, and team work in these guys," Weber said.

Though there were around 30 adults also on the trip, for the most part the scouts were on their own. The boys were broken down into patrols, which were groups of six to nine boys, and they set up their own camps, did all their own cooking, and, of course, did all their own dishes.

"We don't use any paper plates, no plastic wear," Weber said. "We use all stainless steel wear, aluminum plates and they learn how difficult their life gets when they dump a whole bunch of raw eggs in a pan with no oil in it."

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In addition to responsibility and teamwork, the patrol system teaches the boys the hierarchy of leadership. Each patrol elects a patrol leader who sits on a management team called the patrol leaders council.

"They vote on where we're going. What we're going to eat this week. Decisions regarding the camp," Weber said.

Patrols were formed six months in advance and they did extensive planning for the trip. They had to prepare all of their gear and equipment and make sure they had everything needed for the week. And there was plenty of incentive to make sure they didn't forget anything because if they had to borrow from another patrol, they were thrown a dish rag.

"It's pretty standard the negotiations," Weber said. "If you go to another patrol to borrow something they want you to do their dishes. Dishes is the most unpopular thing we have in camp."

What is popular is the annual eight-mile hike into Boulder Junction. Every year Troop 21 treks to Mad Dog Jake's for ice cream, and even that is a learning experience.

"They use a map, topographical map, with a compass and take bearings along the way, so we come to an intersection they tell us which way to turn," Weber said.

Besides the ice cream at Mad Dog Jake's, Troop 21 strives to buy all their supplies and groceries from local vendors to support the economy of the area they love to visit.

"We're trying to buy as much local as possible," Weber said.

But that's not the only way Troop 21 leaves its mark. They also perform a service project for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) while at Jag Lake.

This year the boys raked, weeded, and reclaimed a 100-by-20-foot beach on Razorback Lake and they leveled off and tidied up a beach on Upper Gresham Lake as well. In past years they've also sealed picnic tables, built waterfront steps, and painted bathrooms.

"Every year we ask them (DNR) for a service project and it fulfills a requirement for a boy's camping merit badge," Weber said. "Plus we just do the service because we're here."

And their work had an immediate effect.

"A couple local residents were over at Razorback enjoying the day and they came up and thanked us and said how wonderful the beach looked now," Molter said.

But when the work was done it was time to play.

Every year on the last day of camp, the boys dress up in costume, according to a theme, for a full schedule of games. This year the theme was the Roman Empire and the Boy Scouts wore white tunics.

The favorite game at Jag Lake was called the extreme game in which all the boys sat in front of a plate of chocolate pudding and were challenged to find an Oreo cookie, which was buried in the pudding, without the use of their hands.

Needless to say it got messy, especially as the face-first feast quickly turned into a food fight.

Because boys will be boys and there's no better place to get a little wild than the wilderness, a setting that itself is a new experience for many of the scouts.


"With the frogs at night. You get the loons. You might get whippoorwills. Eagles fly over. You don't see that in Milwaukee for these guys," Weber said.

But they do at Jag Lake and that's why, if Rinzel's evaluation is any indication, Troop 21 will continue to make the five hour journey north for a long time to come.

"It's the favorite camp out of almost every single scout in the troop," he said. "By far!"

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