

# Philmont

by Mark Robertson

Virginia Outdoor Writers Association, Inc.  
2008-09 First place High School Youth Writing Contest (grades 9-12)

It's about 5:30 AM in Roanoke Regional Airport. A bunch of uniformed teenagers gather with oddly shaped camouflage patterned laundry bags and nervous looking parents on either side. Suddenly, an average-sized, geeky looking man rushes in, triumphantly holding a delectable chocolate chip cookie. The strange man raises the cookie into the air and slowly takes a large bite out of it. Was it the beginning of a two week reign of terror on the western United States? Was it a tremendous endeavor of twelve men and boys to do what had never been done before? Or was it the beginning of one of those terribly trippy science fiction novels that you just scratch your head after reading? The answer: all of the above.

Turns out that the strange man with the cookie was just Mr. Don Sipher, fearless Scoutmaster of Troop 236 of southwest Roanoke County. The uniformed boys were Boy Scouts, the most (insert preferred adjective here) of all living creatures. The camouflage packages were their backpacks; the medium with which they would carry all their worldly belongings in the next twelve days. This was the beginning of the magical

journey referred to by many as Philmont Scout Ranch.

Soon after arriving on the ranch, the boys learned many useful skills, such as how to create a packline and where to find water in base camp. They met Ranger Wesley Johnson, the man who would hold their lives in hand for the next three days until suddenly but gently passing the responsibility back to the crew as a whole. The boys endured ranger training, learning the Philmont way of camping so as to avoid any bear maulings.

Over the next few days, the boys suffered the hard life of a Philmont hiker. They endured root beer from the tap at Abreu, team-building games, ghost stories, and blinding sunrises at Urraca, and scaled near vertical rock faces at Miner's Park. At Black Mountain, they became soldiers in the American Civil War, where they learned to shoot rifles from that era.

The boys' morale was lifted at Philips Junction, where a renewed food and water supply, as well as six or eight Toblerone chocolate bars apiece, helped to replenish their darkened spirits. At Crooked Creek, they braved the frontier as homesteaders, having to make candles to light their way in the dark New Mexico night and to ward off

ferocious predators like mountain lions and bears. Only luck and prayer kept them from being mauled.

The next morning they visited Clear Creek, where they learned how to trap beaver, a skill that would come in handy the next few days, as they wouldn't see water again for 48 hours. This was the prelude to the conquest of Philmont's second highest peak at 11,771 feet above sea level, Mount Philips. From the summit, the view was breathtaking. The entire range of the southern Rockies was before their very eyes. Baldy to the north, Angel Fire to the west, it was pure beauty. Well, at least until the thunderstorm hit, hurrying the crew off of the peak. Camp that night was made on neighboring Comanche Peak where they experienced a beautiful sunset from chairs made of rocks.

Thus they began to descend. Down the ridge toward Sawmill, which held for them rifle shooting and a nice hot shower. They made their camp in Sawmill Canyon along a creek lined with tall aspens, the like of which you only hear in stories. In the morning, they made their way down the canyon and across a ridge to Ute Gulch, where they restocked on food for the last time and enjoyed

another fifteen to twenty Toblerone bars apiece. Their travels then took them through Hidden Valley and into Cimarroncito, one of the more famous camps at Philmont. Cito was the location of the group's conservation project. They were lumberjacks for the day, chopping and stacking down wood as a means of forest fire regulation.

The crew then made their way down to Hunting Lodge, where they enjoyed one of the finest evenings of scouting they would ever experience. Hunting Lodge offers cobbler

dessert to crews who entertain them, whether it be through song, skit, story, or another means. This fine crew chose all three, and so did their sister crew, which turned it into a sort of a competition. Songs, skits, and the like were all performed masterfully by the best entertainers ever to visit northeastern New Mexico. The next day, a short hike brought them to Clark's Fork, where they would spend the subsequent hours occupying themselves with a myriad of activities ranging from chess to

guitar and horseback riding to branding irons before a chuck wagon dinner.

Up and over Schaffer's Peak they went; and down the ridge to Tooth Ridge, where they set up camp for the last time on Philmont. They enjoyed the view from the camp and in the morning they visited the legendary Tooth of Time. It was a long six miles back to base camp, but they all made it, and the lives of the boys and the history of the troop had never been richer.



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For information on the VOWA High School Writing Contest (grades 9-12) contact chairman:

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