

OUR FIRST NATIONAL MEETING

by Keith Monroe

Feb 14, 1911, Proved to be a memorable date in the history of the Boy Scouts of America. It was the BSA's first birthday celebration and the day of a momentous organizational meeting.

The event could have turned into a fiasco that would have crippled the young organization. But thanks to the quick thinking of four men, potential disaster turned into triumph and Scouting in America was set on a smooth course for decades.

Following the birth of Scouting in Britain in 1908, Scouts groups in the United States sprang up in an unplanned and haphazard manner: There where no official handbooks, no places to get badges or equipment, no central offices.

In February 1910, Chicago publisher William D. Boyce had incorporated the name Boy Scouts of America. The organization began operating out of a one-room office in New Your City that was soon flooded with requests for information and help.

A larger, more structured organization was needed, and an organizing committee of 25 leaders in youth and social work was formed. Meeting periodically, they raised money, printed half a million information pamphlets, and recruited influential people to form a permanent Executive Board. A man with big dreams On Jan. 2, 1911, the organizing committee opened a two-room office at 200 Fifth Avenue under the management of a newly hired "executive secretary," James E. West.

At 34, West was a rising lawyer and well known in youth work. A man of big dreams, he knew how to make things happen.

One of the first moves was to carry out plans for a national conclave of Scouting enthusiasts from Feb. 14 to 15 Members of the first "Annual Meeting of the National Council" would elect the BSA Executive Board and national officers.

To add prestige to the event, West proposed that President William Howard Taft invite the council to meet in the White House. A few words from the President Taft, who had agreed to accept the honorary presidency of the BSA National Council, not only invited the council to the White House but also planned to deliver a welcoming speech.

Buoyed by Taft's patronage, the BSA organizers recruited 75 notable National Council members. Aware of the national publicity the President's opening speech

would generate, West put together an impressive anecdotal report of Scouting's progress for Taft to use in preparing his commendatory remarks.

On the day of the meeting, West learned from Taft's secretary, Mr. Norton, that the President had not yet read the material. If the President's remarks revealed that he did not know what Scouting was all about, many prominent supporters who had come to Washington might lose interest and not stay for the crucial two-day organizing meeting.

West quickly met with his executive committee. With Norton's approval, they hammered out an emergency plan.

Presidential protocol required that the President speak first when meeting a group in the White House. But as soon as the BSA delegation was seated in the East Room, Lee F. Hammer of the Russell Sage Foundation promptly stepped forward, thanked President Taft for his invitation, and shifted smoothly into a concise explanation and survey of Scouting.

The president, taking his cues with the ease of long practice as a public official, responded by gracefully embroidering Hammer's summary.

The crowd was charmed, and the speech was reported widely.