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Boy Scouting After 75 Years They're Still Helping Others, And It's Still Helping Them

By JOHN LACY
Courant Staff Writer

Todd Kleperis is pleased to point to the first-class rank on his Boy Scout uniform and to be the leader of a patrol of eight boys. Not bad, he figures, for a 13-year-old who "didn't know much" three years ago.

"A lot of us didn't know about hiking," he says. "Harry made it great for us."

Just then, Harry barks a command to rally the boys around him. And Todd runs to join the crowd of scouts forming ranks in front of Harry Maidment, 59-year-old scoutmaster of Manchester's Troop 25.

Eighty-five boys belong to the troop Maidment has led since 1948.

Since then — and even since the founding of the Boy Scouts of America 75 years ago this week — many traditions have prevailed. The uniforms, the campfires and the merit badges are still part of the lives of scouts.

But modern technology and heightened social awareness have made scouting far more sophisticated. Today a merit badge may be won by learning to use a computer and its terminology. Computer camps are available in the summer.

Maidment says there is more emphasis on practical conservation, as opposed to identifying 40 bird species. For an environmental science badge, a scout learns about plants and management of wildlife, forests and recreation areas.

And the phrase "To help other people at all times" from the scout oath has new meaning in a wide range of community services volunteered by troop members. In Manchester, scouts have served historical organizations, the Red Cross and athletic events by clearing grounds, doing clerical tasks and moving equipment. They help maintain property of their sponsoring church, Center Congregational, and build

hiking trails for the public along the Hockanum River.

Maidment says, "I think the basic emphasis of the scouting program has not changed — citizenship training and living out-of-doors. Five-sixths of our program is outdoors. I use a lot of the same stuff I grew up with 40 years ago."

"I like the challenge of everything," Todd says. "The way we do trips. On the Appalachian Trail, we're hiking 15 miles. Camping is really the highlight of scouting. It's rough. We make our own chairs. We make our own lunch."

In 37 years as scoutmaster, Maidment has seen 225 boys in his troop achieve the highest rank, Eagle Scout. What gives him the most satisfaction, though, is the belief that many of the boys

who belonged to Troop 25 have found their scouting days were "important in their lives."

"There are kids we've been able to do a lot for, which is a lot more important than all the badges and that kind of stuff," says Maidment, who has been a guidance counselor at Manchester High School since 1951.

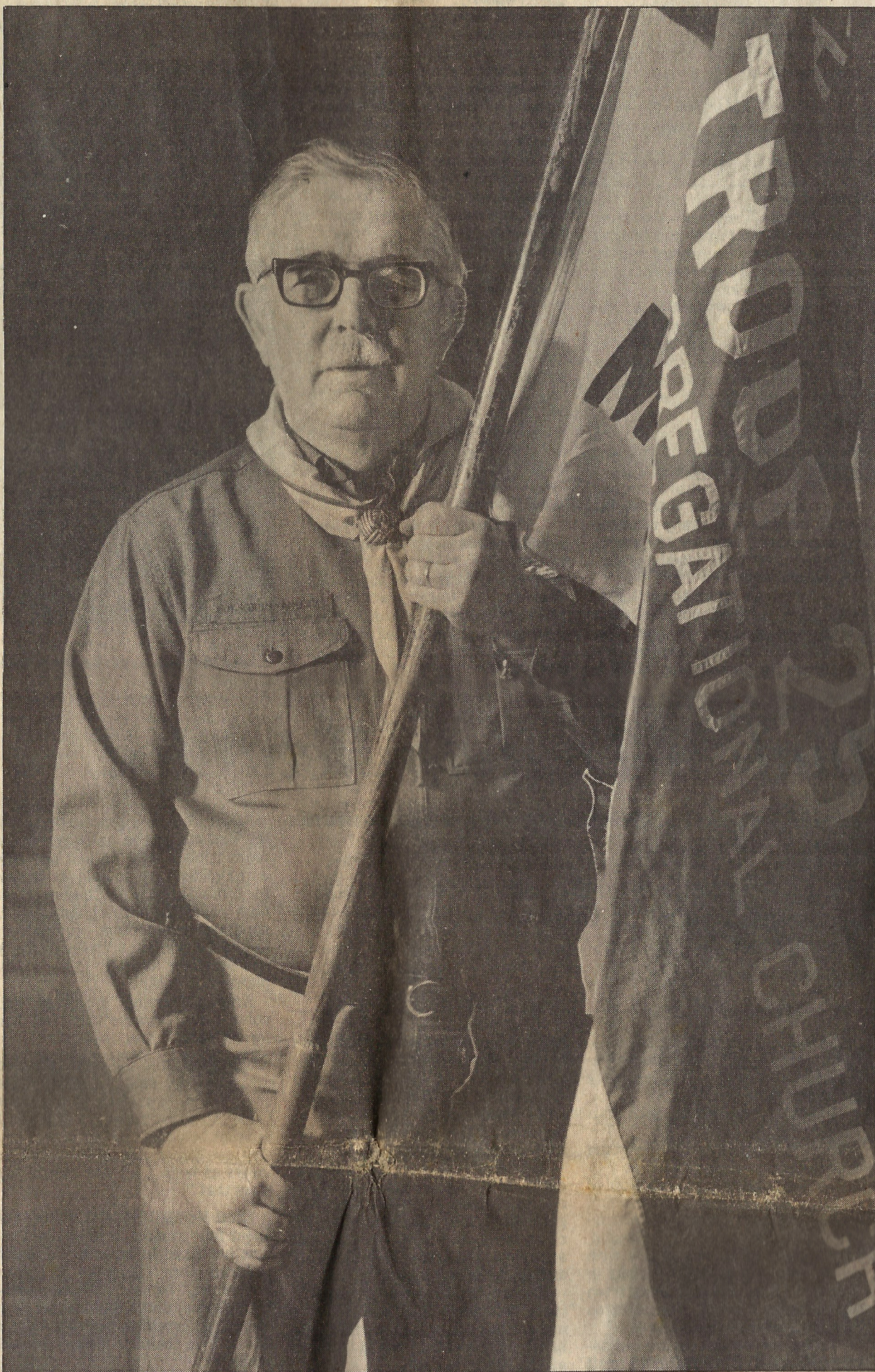
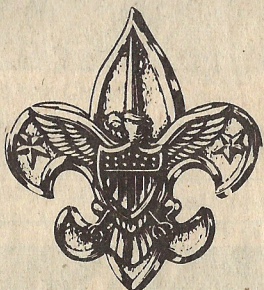
Maidment remembers "a kid who came from a broken family. They didn't have anything. Scouting was all he had. He became an exceptionally good leader in the troop. Then he joined the Air Force. He became airman of the year for the whole Air Force."

It isn't unusual in Troop 25 for a boy to take Maidment as "a father substitute. That kid sees me at my house as much as my own family. Other of our leaders have that experience, too."

Few adult volunteers are as loyal and durable as Maidment.

On scouting's 75th anniversary, many scout leaders admit that finding and keeping adult volunteers is a problem.

"The greatest strength of the Boy



Michael McAndrews / The Hartford Courant

See Scouting, Page C3 Harry Maidment, holding the flag of Boy Scout Troop 25, has been a scoutmaster for 37 years.

Scouting in Change

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Scouts," Maidment says, "is its greatest weakness — volunteer leadership."

"We have units that fail each year" because there are not enough adults to supervise scouting activities, says Richard Behrens, finance director of the Long Rivers Council, which oversees scouting for 84 Connecticut cities and towns.

"Many troops, they lose a scoutmaster, and it's 'Goodbye, troop.' It's all too frequently the case," Maidment says.

Manchester today has nine scout troops, half as many as 15 years ago, Behrens says. And in the last five years, the number of troops in the Long Rivers Council has declined from 292 to 267.

Another concern has been declining Boy Scout membership. Although total scout membership (that includes Tiger Cubs, Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts and Explorers) has increased 10 percent statewide from 18,301 in 1979 to 20,196 today, Boy Scout memberships have fallen 5 percent.

The chief explanation scout officials give is that the eligible population (boys from 7 to 16 years old) has decreased by 12 percent, and the Boy Scout age group (11 to 14) is down 18 percent from 1979.

But there are other reasons. "You've got to go out and drag 'em in off the streets today," Maidment says of the problems of recruiting new scouts. "You've got a lot more

competition for kids' time. There's Little League, this, that and the other thing."

One of Maidment's assistants volunteers his time especially for recruiting new members. And even though a boy joins the troop, the commitment of an 11-year-old to continue is not always strong, Maidment says.

Maidment says boys from single-parent homes often drop out of scouting because the parents don't have the time and energy to support the scouting interest. "We lost two kids last month, and I know that's a contributing factor."

"Scouting has had its ups and downs." Boys eagerly joined the troop during World War II, when uniforms were "big stuff" and scouts were active in home front efforts. In the 1960s the baby boomers helped swell the ranks. Then, in the anti-military mood of the '70s, the scouting uniform was less popular and membership dropped.

The dip continued until 1979, when an expanded Exploring program for young men of high school age led a scouting comeback.

The uniform today inspires pride. "On Memorial Day, in the parade, they look like the devil," Maidment says.

Still, "putting 'em in uniform doesn't change 'em overnight. I never felt that our kids marched off into one of those Norman Rockwell calendars."



Harry Maidment, scoutmaster of Troop 25 in Manchester, surrounded by his Boy Scouts.

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