Remembering Mike Robbins

1961 I had been recently trained at the National Junior Leader Training program at Philmont Scout Ranch and right after, had completed my first trans-Sierra trek to Mount Whitney, just a month before. I was therefore on the staff of the one-week scout leader training camp program which emphasized scout camping skills to troops’ leaders and the training skills to teach them to other scouts. In other words, you didn’t just learn how to start a fire in the rain, you learned how to teach a scout leader how to start that fire. You didn’t just learn that song around the campfire, you learned how teach that song with an audience of a hundred rowdy 12-year olds. This was a challenge for 14-year-old, recently appointed scout leaders.

We all knew the adults who were leading the JLT program. Most had been to Philmont with us. Two who had not been there were playing a major role in camp that last week of August 1961. One was Paul Weiss, the older, sarcastic, authoritative Ranger from Camp Josepho, the Crescent Bay Council’s base in the Santa Monica Mountains. The other was a UCLA senior Physics student, Assistant Scoutmaster from Beverly Hills, who had stayed over from the last session of the regular Camp to help wrap up the camp’s year. From his rather frequent interjections, it was obvious to the JLP staff from Philmont, that this person carried a lot more weight than his slight stature and *avoirdupois.* He did not run the camp that week, but he sure kept it from going haywire. To us he seemed so much more qualified than most of the adult leaders.

A number of us were therefore not surprised when we saw Mike on the interview board to select the staff for Wolverton the next spring. Some of us had caught the High Sierra hiking/backpacking bug for life. Some were just such high achievers that they were eagle scouts by 14, looking for another challenge at 15. Whatever the reason, we faced Mike Robbins as our Assistant Camp Director the following summer, 1962, and what an experience it was! For many of us, the defining moment that “made” Mike the undisputed leader was his ejection of two staff members from camp for beer possession. What we had not realized was that Mike was unwittingly planning the future of an average Boy Scout camp into an “A” rating Scout camp despite many financial and physical impairments.

Examples of our handicaps: First was the fact that Emerald Bay, the Catalina Island Camp was the darling of the Council professionals and Board because it made money for year-round programs. It was bigger, got investment, and cost more for scouts. Second was that Wolverton could not draw some Scout troops to camp if it didn’t offer a high National Staff “A”rating and merit badge opportunities. Face it, Wolverton had been built on the allure of hiking in the High Sierra backcountry and that is hard for a 40-year old Scoutmaster who has a full-time job and only two weeks’ vacation each year! I don’t think Mike had the long-term view of Wolverton…until his second year at camp. By 1963 Mike had organized dog-and-pony shows with staff members going to various troops in the council and showing a slide presentation that was state of the art at the time. As the lights came up, you the Scout or the adult leader could talk to an adult leader, or better, a 16-year old staff member who could boast of taking a bunch of Scouts up an 11,000-foot peak after the previous day’s 10-mile hike and burro packing.

So it was that Wolverton was sold to its audience, but in field, it was also built up for its audience, with the camp stretched to its maximum space, with water trucked in to campsites, merit badge opportunities extended, and the national rating inspectors challenged to test whether we really had a waterfront program at the 10, 000-foot lakes in the backcountry. (Would you like to follow that burro up to Pear Lake?) What we of the Staff only realized later was that Mike had built a staff fraternity whose loyalty to each other has extended 50 years. Being tested in our youth has certainly made us better as individuals. That is what Scouting is all about. What has exceeded the program is the deep friendship and trust that continues to this day.

For me, it is about 51 years of friendship and contact with a special, warm, caring person who made sure we kept the bonds alive all these decades. I last saw Mike two months ago and walked away sad that I had not been sure he was recognizing me as he had 50 years ago. I am sure for many of us old Boy Scouts, being chosen to lead on the staff of Camp Wolverton was a defining moment in our lives. It still is. It made us real leaders. It taught us what responsibility means, especially at 10,000 feet elevation 10 miles away from the trailhead and civilization.

Mike leads on.

*Lucien (Lu) Plauzoles December 2012*