

Troop 49 – The Pathfinders

Washington DC

November 6-7-8, 2009

When I was Scoutmaster, one duty was to conduct Scoutmaster Conferences where I got to know the Scouts better. I would always ask about their favorite trip destinations and places they would like to go. Adam D. mentioned about 3 years ago that he would like to go to DC and he even did some homework on such a trip. This summer, after reflecting on the wonderful gift and honor the Scouts gave me in the construction of the outdoor worship area at my church, I wanted to plan one more trip, a real memory to last them for many years. With the NJ Teacher's Convention in November, the Scouts had off from school providing an opportunity for a three day trip to DC. After Troop Committee approval, I began the planning and making of reservations. It was a lot of fun planning as I could anticipate their excitement at every turn. I got the feeling of excitement akin to a parent getting the special gift they know their child will be thrilled with. I loved doing the research as I learned a lot of history and even shed a tear or two in the process.

Washington DC , Friday, November 6, 2009

Friday dawned cool and perfectly clear with a forecast of clear skies all weekend. This was welcome as camping in the rain is not fun. We gathered into car pools and about 30 of us headed south on the NJ Turnpike. I had Tim, James, and Matt with me, all High School students and we had some animated conversations telling stories, talking history and politics and telling jokes. With one rest stop after exit 4, we arrived at the Greenbelt National Park campground in Greenbelt , Maryland at about 11:30 AM . We quickly set up tents and emptied space in the larger cars to maximize the passenger capacity and headed into DC. We parked at Union Station and met Zach and Sam and their parents who came to DC separately. Under perfectly clear skies we walked to the Supreme Court building. Well out first pass through the security checkpoints was a learning experience. After that, we got better, getting through security with speed.

In the Supreme Court, the movie I hoped the Scouts would see was out of service but we did manage to piggyback on a private tour of the court. This was thrilling for me as I had been in the building three times and never been able to get into the actual court chambers for a tour. We sat in the public gallery as the guide spoke about the court, history of the building, legal process, then about the beautiful architecture. I was disappointed I could not take photos but loved the experience.

We exited the Supreme Court quickly at 2:30 to hustle across the road to the Capital as we had a 3:00 tour. Here we passed through security again and met Patrick and Brendan and their sister and parents who were also on a family vacation. People came and went all weekend. The Capital tour was nice with stops in the crypt, rotunda, and old Representative Chamber. The guide did a nice job and gave us time to ask questions and enjoy the spaces. In the visitor's center I lead the group through the display on the history of the Capital. I had been here last December with my father and sister so I knew what to point out to keep their interests. There was a series of large models of Capital Hill representing different periods in time. I took time to explain the changes and other nearby display which I believe kept their interests.

It was 4:30 PM now and the visitors center was closing so we exited and walked up to the eastern face of the building then over to the Smithsonian Postal Museum . The cross walks have illuminated countdown timers telling you how many seconds you have left to cross the street. This was novel to the Scouts and they enjoyed the countdown process, some even trying to use up every available second. When we entered the Postal Museum at nearly 5 PM the security guard had her feet up and was very relaxed as there was only a half hour left in her day. I told her to get ready for about 40 people and she hopped up and enthusiastically said, "Lets do this!" I was happy to hear that. This being our third security checkpoint of the afternoon, the Scouts were veterans and got through quickly. I gave Scouts a quick highlights tour and left them to explore in detail on their own. The make-you-own post card kiosks were a hit but having the post office closing early was a downer as they could not buy stamps. The postal museum was a nice little diversion and something to do before supper. In hindsight, I would have just gone straight to supper to save the time.

Union Station is adjacent to the postal museum so we returned to Union Station and went down to the food court and had supper there. There was every style of food imaginable and I had an Indian dish which was nice and spicy. After supper some of us returned to the cars in the parking garage upstairs and retrieved cold weather gear and flashlights. The evening was getting cold as we set out and made our way to the western side of the Capital with the Washington and Lincoln monuments in the west. It was totally dark now as we began our walk down the Mall pausing to take photos. The Washington Monument had a restroom that was used by some. We all marveled at the Washington Monument . We had the freedom to lean up right against it and look up the clean gleaming white sides. It was an awesome experience and gave us a nice midway rest spot.

We continued our western trek to the nearby World War II Memorial and explored that for a few minutes. It's beautiful at night with the fountains and accent lighting. The views of the other monuments were spectacular from this vantage point too. Leaving the WWII memorial we walked along the reflecting pool and Scouts talked about seeing the reflecting pool in the movie Forrest Gump and other historical movies. We made our way over to the Vietnam War Memorial which was hidden in the darkness. Before the trip, I went to a web site and downloaded stories of men and women who died and who are listed on the wall. I gave the Scouts and the two girls with

us the stories along with the wall location of their person so they could find the person on the wall and read their story. Most of the stories were about men who were awarded the Medal of Honor so their story of personal sacrifice evoked emotions in me when I did the research and I hope in the Scouts who read their story. We also found Patrick Lawlor from Oakland who is on the wall. Now the Scouts know who Lawlor Drive was named for.

Our next stop was the Lincoln Memorial gleaming bright white against the black night sky. The view of Lincoln and the vistas beyond are impressive day and night. We left Lincoln and visited the Korean War Memorial and I read the story of the monument to the Scouts. The soldiers on patrol in the darkness with the up-lights make them look real ghostlike and creating a lasting impression. Along the path I found a plastic child's toy army helmet and gave it to Andrew who asked about it. He wore it for the rest of the weekend! What fun!

Well, every trip has a few challenges and the next evolution was certainly one. The plan was for the drivers to take a taxi back to the cars and then drive to pick us up. Well the taxi part worked well. The problem was with the drivers ability to navigate through the maze of DC streets in the darkness. The drivers left in cabs at 9:15 PM and we were not picked up until about 10:30 ! Some rested in the warm visitor's center while others sat on the steps. I sat on the steps trying to conserve heat, willing the phone to ring, but still enjoying the moment. Some of the cars arrived on the south side of the monument while others on the north. This caused some confusion between adults and Scouts. I got in the car driven by Jim H. and we promptly missed a few turns and ended up in heavy traffic in Georgetown . This is when his phone rang and I answered it.

Earlier in the day I gave everyone on the trip a roster with all the cell phone numbers telling the Scouts to put the list in their pockets so if they got separated, they could contact us. Well one Scout did not do that. This Scout also became the victim of a failure between two adults to communicate. When Jim's phone rang it was his wife who just got a call from a Scouts mother who said her son was all alone at the Lincoln Memorial! Oh my god; we left one behind! Well with two phone calls I told the Scout to stand by and redirected another driver to loop back for him. When I arrived in camp, the "lost" Scout was only 5 minutes behind and they were not even the last car. Everyone was remorseful about the situation and we were all grateful it was resolved quickly and with the need of police or a first aid kit. Well it was 11 PM and we were freezing cold and tired so we were quickly into our tents and asleep.

Washington DC , Saturday, November 7, 2009

With the rumble of the highway, freight trains, and occasional police sirens in the distance I knew it would be a difficult night's sleep so I took a sleeping pill and cinched my sleeping bag closed real tight as the temperature was freezing. I slept real soundly waking only occasionally to roll over but awoke well rested. I went to the bathroom which was heated to find three Scouts and an adult warming by the hot air hand dryer. I

got the hot water started and Scouts helped set up for breakfast. We feasted on hot chocolate, coffee, oatmeal, and bagels with cream cheese, jelly, and peanut butter. We bundled into the cars and headed to DC and by 9:00 AM were at the White House Visitor's Center beginning a walking tour of the parks adjacent to the White House. The plaza by the Boy Scout monument was under construction so we looked at it from a distance as I read about the monument to the Scouts. Then next stop was the view of the south lawn of the White House and I was able to spot the president's dog being walked. We paused at the William Tecumseh Sherman monument for a review of his exploits in the Civil War before heading east down Pennsylvania Avenue. As we were walking along the street, there was a small construction site with olive green sandbags arranged in a 5' x 8' rectangle. As Andrew was wearing his helmet, I told him that was his fox hole. With total spontaneity he jumped into the "fox hole" and got into a prone position. Someone found a pipe for him to hold as a gun and we all howled in laughter at the scene. Passers by were also laughing. What pure fun!

We made a brief stop at the Navy Memorial Plaza to look at the map of the world and the bronze relief castings of navy scenes before walking across the street to the National Archives. We had a 10:15 appointment and arrived 14 seconds early; perfect timing! Having group reservations, we were next in line ahead of other people and were able to watch the 10:30 movie after the security screening and toilet break. The movie told the history of the archives and how it has been used to tell the story of American history. The movie was well done as it told how average people and scholars alike have used the archives to answer questions. I used the archives a number of years ago to obtain Missing Aircrew Reports for a relative of mine, William Treich, who died in WWII. Leaving the theater in the Archives we went to the rotunda to see the articles of freedom and met Will there. Will drove down Saturday morning and his father was parked outside. All of us marveled at the Declaration of Independence, Constitution and Bill of Rights along with other documents.

Over a month ago Will asked me if I was interested in an 8 mile hike through Arlington National Cemetery and I was delighted at the prospect. So at about 11:00 in the Archives we divided into groups with Will and I and his father going to Arlington while the rest of the Scouts headed off on their own. These Scouts and adults toured the Air & Space Museum and another museum before visiting Fords Theatre. Will and I met his father and by 11:30 we were stepping off on the beginning of 5 hours of walking through the most famous cemetery in our nation. I researched a lot about the cemetery and the men and women buried here. It was full of heroes, some famous, and some lost in history. I was excited to finally get to walk the cemetery at my own pace. One of the first stops was the Iwo Jima Memorial. I was determined to find the grave of Mike Strank who was one of the flag raisers. We passed by the Netherlands Carillon (bell tower) and re-entered the cemetery. We were just in the cemetery when the noon bells chimed on the carillon followed by the anthem of each of the services being played on the bells. What a treat it was to hear this mini concert in the sacred ground. We walked through sections of the cemetery where there were no other visitors in sight. Through hundreds of graves marked "Unknown" but known to God. The trees were beautiful in fall color and the grass was deep green and in perfect shape, worthy of any golf

course. The high quality of care of the cemetery was clear to see. I got to visit the grave of President Taft and President Kennedy along with the grave of Lincoln 's son. I saw the graves of famous generals and admirals from every branch of the service. Supreme Court justices were there too. Memorials to the USS Maine, USCG, the space shuttles and Pan Am flight 103 along with other memorials to men and women who died in the service to their country. Thousands of standard grave stones stood in perfect rows while in other sections there were markers of various sizes and shapes including statues of angels, anchors, and a bronze of a soldier dead on a Civil War battlefield. One was a large boulder with a bronze replica of his Medal of Honor attached as the only identification. We saw famous people like boxer Joe Louis and actor Lee Marvin along with Medal of Honor recipients such as Admiral Byrd who explored Antarctica , James Doolittle who dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima , and Audie Murphy who was the most decorated soldier in WWII. I did find Michael Strank who raised the flag on Iwo Jima and died a few days later. I got to see the changing of the guard at the tomb of the unknowns which is always a solemn occasion. By the end of the walk my feet were hurting and I was tired but I enjoyed the visit so very much.

We had a 5:00 PM rendezvous at the visitor's center planned and as Ivan was adjacent to Lafayette Park I asked him to let me out as I had 20 minutes to go and I wanted to experience the park. Will joined me and we walked into the park and came upon a protest going on. The speaker with the microphone was championing the cause "Black is Back" and spouting some comments that made me very uncomfortable so I walked by the police officers scattered about until Will and I passed the crowd. Once away from the angry venom being spewed the park was calm in the fading evening light and we were able to enjoy the view of the north face of the White House. Passing two very civil protestors, one dressed as an angel, we found our way to the rally point where the rest of the troop was already waiting. We returned to camp just after sunset.

Supper started with crackers with cheese, pepperoni, and summer sausage that was enjoyed while the beef stew was cooking. The beef stew was served with tortillas Floodwood style for easy cleanup. Cookies and apples and marshmallows were enjoyed around the small but cheery campfire. By 9 PM many were in their tents. I retired at about 10:15 leaving a hardy few at the fire.

Baltimore , MD , Sunday, November 8, 2009

I awoke at about 5:50 AM to a cold and bright morning. It was not as cold as the night before but still in the low 40's. I started water for breakfast and headed to the bathroom for a shave and a shower. The bathroom was heated so the shower was rather comfortable for camping in November. Soon the rest of the camp started to wake and we had breakfast of instant oatmeal, granola bars, apples, raisins, hot chocolate, and coffee. A small fire warmed us as we enjoyed our breakfast. Before we left camp, we gathered up and some of us shared words of thanks and praise to the Scouts for living the Scout Oath and Scout Law this weekend. The Scouts were all well behaved in the city and in camp. There were no problems as the boy leaders lead and the chores got

done. Two car loads of Scouts were not stopping in Baltimore so we said farewell to them and then headed out of camp with Fort McHenry in Baltimore as our next stop. The drive was smooth and easy but I did not have detailed directions so I made a wrong turn after exiting I-95 but God was with me as a U-Turn was less than 500 feet away. In another minute I missed a turn and a simple query to a security guard at a factory got me back on track. We all arrived at the parking lot together and walked to the visitor's center. The Scouts were free and the adults were \$7 each; a small price to pay for the maintenance of this historic site. The friendly ranger started the movie explaining the history of the war of 1812 that lead up to the battle at Fort McHenry and Francis Scott Key witnessing the bombardment and the star spangled banner flying in the morning. The fort was very well maintained with many rooms open for touring explaining the life of the soldiers during that time. The magazine for storing gun powder was open as was the bombproof bunker, barracks, and officers quarters. From the prominent position of the fort in the harbor, we could see ships, pleasure boats, and working dredges. Across the waterway we could see the S.S. John W. Brown which is one of a few remaining WWII Liberty Ships. The visit to Fort McHenry was very educational and interesting.

Leaving Fort McHenry, we easily got on I-95 and headed north. We did a food and fuel stop in Maryland and then continued driving north. We arrived in Oakland at about 3:00 PM. The trip went very well and I firmly believe we all had a educational and fun time. We pushed ourselves on Friday night; but it's good to push now and then. I thoroughly enjoyed the trip with the walk through Arlington being an experience I will remember for a long time. I hope the Scouts have some fond memories too.

By Martin Treich November 10, 2009

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