

The Old Scout

History of Scouting in the U.S.A.

105th Anniversary: 2015

This brief history of the Scouting Movement is intended to give young scouts information about the early founders of Scouting and the rich traditions that make up the scouting program as they forge their own paths toward the rank of Eagle Scout.

History of Scouting, Part V: Early American Founders – James E. West

James Edward West (1876 – 1948) was orphaned at the age of six and grew up in an orphanage in Washington D.C. He contracted tuberculosis and developed one crippled leg. He fought hard to be able to attend public school while still managing his daily chores at the orphanage. He graduated high school in two years with honors. He worked his way through law school and sought to establish a private practice.

West was always interested in children's issues, and did work for several Washington area youth organizations, including the YMCA. When the call went out for someone to lead the fledgling Boy Scouts of America when it was formed in 1910, West agreed to try the job for six months. He ended up staying on as Chief Scout Executive for 32 years.

West did not have the exuberant personality of Ernest Thompson Seton or Dan Beard, and had little interest in outdoor activities himself. In fact, Seton and Beard had disagreements with West about the direction scouting should take. Seton even resigned from the organization in 1916 because of his arguments with West.

Nevertheless, James E. West was a strong organizer and administrator who is credited with the rapid development and expansion of scouting in the United States.