History of Commissioner Service: The First 100 Years

Taken from the Winter/Spring 2010 issue of The Commissioner , the national newsletter of the Commissioner Service

The BSA Needs a Few Good Men (1910) As communities formed more troops, it became evident that some form of leadership was needed to maintain standards, provide camping opportunities, recruit leaders, facilitate training, establish local courts of honor, and stimulate local Scouting. This person was the commissioner.

The Scout Commissioner (1911)

While originally serving as a volunteer, some areas of a community were able to raise enough funds for the Scout commissioner to become a salaried position. The areas with paid leadership, known as the Scout executive or executive secretary, became identified as First Class Councils. Meanwhile, those areas with a volunteer head called the Scout commissioner were known as Second Class Councils.

Wreath of Service (1914) Today, our society is less connected to military tradition, and the commissioned wreath insignia is thought of more as “the wreath of service” that surrounds all commissioner and professional position badges. This wreath is a symbol for the service rendered to units. It also symbolizes the continued partnership between volunteers and professionals. The wreath represents the commissioner and executive commitment to program and unit service. **National Field Commissioners (1910–20)** Volunteer national field commissioners were available as early as 1910 to help communities organize their local council and troops. There were 68 volunteer field commissioners in 1913. Many of the volunteer field commissioners worked for other agencies and traveled extensively, helping with Scouting wherever they went. Besides organizing new councils, they had to spend time correcting “false starts” and restraining those who wanted to implement their own brand of Scouting.

James West’s Influence

Chief Scout Executive James West, speaking at the first National Conference of Scout Executives in 1920, suggested that the Scout executive should be the general in the background with the Scout commissioner, as the ranking uniformed officer, giving leadership to Scoutmasters and acting as the ranking officer in public appearances. West recognized that Scout executives moved around and that the council would benefit from finding and developing a good Scout commissioner.

The District Commissioner (1931)

District commissioners were introduced in 1931 as an outgrowth of the deputy Scout commissioner position. The book, Adventures of a District Commissioner, was the first printed material from the BSA for guiding commissioners.

Howdy, Neighbor (1933)

The growth of Scouting overloaded the district commissioner and his deputy. This made it necessary to add commissioners to serve specific troops, ships, packs, and Rover crews. Scouting at that time was very community focused, so the neighborhood commissioner position was conceived to serve up to four units in his immediate local area.

Local Field Commissioners (1930s)

Field commissioners were specialized representatives of the council and served a functional responsibility such as Cubbing, Senior Scouting, Catholic Scouting, Camping, Emergency Service Corps, or Sea Scouts. He was “on call” to the district or neighborhood commissioners as a technical expert in his program. Later, Exploring posts had commissioners known as the Service Team.

The Commissioner Manual (1943)

Councils developed their own commissioner manuals. Following a four-year study, a manual was finally produced by the national office in 1943 that was meant to be used alongside the council’s version. Most manuals contained forms and reference materials that a commissioner may need.

The Commissioner Council (1950s and 1960s) The Scout commissioner at this point became the council commissioner. The position was still honorary in many councils. However, it was beginning to transition into a job with active leadership of the commissioner staff.

Unit Focus (1970–72) The neighborhood commissioner evolved into the unit commissioner, and the mission of the commissioner became clear: Help units succeed. The Commissioner Fieldbook was introduced in a handy loose-leaf design to be able to place in a binder and replace pages as needed. **Commissioners of the Roundtable (1970s)** From early on, district commissioners were expected to hold a monthly meeting of the “District Scouters Round Table.” Eventually, this became too much for the district commissioner to handle, and was delegated to a roundtable leader. Later, an ADC was designated for the task. In the 1970s, the roundtable commissioner became an official title. This also completed the district commissioner’s evolution into an administrative commissioner.

Experimentation Continues (1975)

In 1975, an alternative was offered whereby councils could have their commissioners specialize in a program area. Both organizational structures remained focused on the unit. By 1980, the optional plan disappeared from the manuals.

Female Commissioners (1973–76)

Women were allowed to become Cub Scout unit commissioners or Cub Scout roundtable commissioners in 1973. Three years later, women could hold any commissioner position and were given the khaki uniform to wear.

Commissioner College (1976)

The first
College of Commissioner Sciences
was held in Atlanta in 1976. Course topics included physical education, staging roll call and inspections, and exciting charter presentation ceremonies.

Commissioner Service is Reborn (2008)

Today, council commissioners are accountable for the unit service program in their councils. The appointment of area and regional commissioners expands the direct support to the council and demonstrates—that at all levels of the organization —the importance of commissioner service is being recognized.

Looking into the future During all these years, commissioner service was the one unifying factor that made Scouting permanent. The commissioner has remained the line of service from council to unit and chartered organization. With your help, commissioner service will continue to be the catalyst for growth and quality in the BSA for the next hundred years.