

History of Project COPE

The Invention of Project COPE

Jim Lehr, February 2, 2009

In 1977 the Pony Express Council hired Parvin Bishop as Council Executive. Mr. Bishop came to the council from Kentucky and this was his first council executive position. The Boy Scouts of America **had seen declining national membership all through the '70s**. Something had to be done to catch the interest, not only of Scout-age boys, but increase community civic support as well.

Bishop appeared to be easy going in manner and speech and reminded folks of their Southern roots. He soon made friends, went on the service club circuit, and was well received.

In 1979, the Pony Express Council elected longtime Scouting supporter Bill Strop their president.

One of the first things to come from **Bill Strop's administration was the Council's first Base Line Plan**. Each and every function of the Council was examined and studied. The final report was assembled and presented to the Council for approval. This strategic plan outlined and framed the **Council's goals and aspirations for the foreseeable future**. It was passed unanimously

The Program segment of the Base Line Plan thoroughly scoped all the program activities of the council, how they augmented each other, and how they focused toward the goals of the Boy Scouts of America. From this study came the genesis of Project COPE.

The Pony Express Council had long recognized that the honor camping society of Camp Geiger, the Tribe of Mic-O-Say, was a great program to keep Scouts coming back to camp year after year. During the rest of the year, these Scouts would work hard on Scout rank, as that was a requirement for advancement in the Tribe.

In the late 1970s, there was a popular movement toward backpacking and related activities such as wilderness no-trace ecological camping, rock climbing, and the self-sufficiency and confidence fostered by those activities. Interest in team building in an outdoor venue grew. Programs such as Outward Bound drew attention of youth and adults alike. Leaders of the Council could see a place for an extremely active challenging experience to meet this need.

The actual creation of the COPE idea came from a meeting of three key individuals of the Pony Express Council in the summer of 1979. Strop, Bishop, and Jim Lehr, Council Conservation Chairman, were meeting informally over coffee one morning, and discussing various possible activities such as **moto-cross racing, the BSA's High Adventure program, and about anything that** came to mind. Bishop had read a magazine article about a ropes course that was a modification of various military confidence courses but adapted to youth. Slowly, but surely, after many cups of coffee, Challenging Outdoor Personal Encounter or Project COPE emerged.

Leadership and team building were obvious goals when adapting COPE to BSA theory. Leading and following, two sides of the same coin, would be stressed. COPE would primarily be a daytime summer camp activity, whereas Tribe of Mic-O-Say activities were usually after hours, with continuing emphasis on year-round participation.

The first question before construction of the course was where? The area of Old Camp was unused and wooded. It was ideal for a quiet, concentrated, natural site for Project COPE. The first course used actual living trees for structural supports, but being as tree friendly as possible. Even so, laying out the first COPE events was, in itself, an outdoor challenge.

Construction started in the winter of 1979-80. Professional Scout staff and volunteers were pressed into action. With Bishop acting as chief designer, his staff of Bill Penniston and Al Vasey spent many winter days in the field. Scouting volunteers Dave Kelley, Bill Strop, and Jim Lehr provided much needed equipment such as generators and come-alongs, as well as manpower. Local lumberyards and the Wire Rope Corporation of America provided much of the materials at cut-rate prices or for free.

The course was set up according to the program details worked out by the newly formed COPE Committee. As construction proceeded, the events were tested, fine-tuned, and altered. Rappelling, belaying, rigging, zip-lines and other high skills were learned from experts, then adapted to the actual course conditions. Testing of the events usually fell to those on hand. The major consideration was to be 100% safe. However, the first belay or rappel was literally a step of faith, and the first test of a zip-line **was a test pilot's dream.**

Final Council introduction and approval came at a special Council meeting in the spring of 1980. Bob Siemens had succeeded Bill Strop as Council President, and he was given the dubious honor of being the first civilian to climb the caving ladder. He made it, albeit slowly, and then realized that he must get down via the zip line. Fortunately, he made that trip, too.

The whole experience had been so positive and exciting that the COPE Committee suggested a COPE Weekend for community leaders. This was duly organized with 24 participants, all physically able enough to participate, and a long waiting list of COPE wannabes. We realized that we needed adult COPE leaders as well as training for those older staff who would run the COPE program for summer camp. To lead these adult community leader weekends and to further develop the program along those lines, Ali Wray and Sherry Hausman were recruited. Both being community leaders themselves, they took the program to the National BSA level.

That summer, the COPE program was filled to the brim. The community leader programs started off late that summer. They were also extremely popular. The first several years of community leader COPE weekends provided great opportunities for the Council to tap into young, active people for Council leadership for decades to come.

Bishop left the Council early in 1984 for greater and grander things with the Boy Scouts of America, but before he did, he pushed the National Council to examine COPE with the intention of making it a part of the national program. Sherry Hausman and Ali Wray became COPE ambassadors for selling the program throughout the country. The local COPE builders and planners were asked to advise various councils about construction layout and placement of events. Strop, Penniston, Lehr, and others traveled to various regional councils to assist in COPE Course planning. Eventually the National Council took a hearty hold on COPE, issuing program requirements and detailed specifications and procedures.

Born and raised in the Pony Express Council, Project COPE has helped other councils nationwide to develop and pass on the qualities of leadership and Scouting values.

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