

History of Dog Scouts of America (Written in 2007)

Lonnie created the idea for a camp for dogs back in 89. There were no other dog camps at the time. How did she come up with the idea of a dog camp? “Well, when my 10-year-old Border Collie was a pup, I knew she was going to be the dog of a lifetime. One day, I just looked at her and said, ‘Karli, you’re such a cool dog, I love you so much—I need to take you to camp!’” The only camps back then were for humans to perfect their dog training skills to become better instructors or more serious obedience competitors. “Then I said, ‘Whoa, what am I saying? You don’t want to go to Mom’s obedience camp for a vacation—you want to go somewhere where they don’t make little dogs perform obedience. Dogs just want to catch frisbees, and play flyball and practice agility, and learn water sports.’ Someone should invent a camp just for the dogs, where they can go to have a fun vacation with their owners.” There were no camps of this kind at the time, so Lonnie’s next thought was “Gee, who would be qualified to teach such a camp as this?” It would have to be someone who has devoted her life to fun with her dogs—someone who knew all about flyball, frisbee, agility, herding, backpacking and other fun doggie sports. Lonnie realized that she would be the perfect person for the job.

Lonnie planned to hold her first camp in 1989 or 90, but before she could get the advertising out, another strangely coincidentally identical dog camp opened up on the East Coast. Someone else must have had the same idea at the same time. She did not move ahead with having a dog camp of her own, once someone else started a camp. “I didn’t want to be the ‘second’ person to have a dog camp—it would look like I copied the idea, instead of originating it.” So she sat on the plans she had made until the idea of forming Dog Scouts of America came to her in 1995. Meanwhile, dog camps had started cropping up around the U.S. Lonnie was keeping busy teaching activities, such as flyball, for other people’s camps in the United States, Australia, and Japan.

Ok, so she didn’t hold that original camp, back in 1989—what made her think of Dog Scouts of America in 1995? “It was Karli again.” Karli had been active in many dog sports. She had so many titles, they wouldn’t fit across one line of a type-written page. In addition, Karli had excelled in many other areas which did not offer titles. For example, she was an outstanding frisbee dog. She was the lead dog on Lonnie’s sled team, and she had starred in stage productions and television commercials, and she performed tricks and entertained people in the hospitals, schools and nursing homes with her therapy visits. This dog was like an Eagle Scout, she had done it all! Lonnie decided that there should be an organization for dogs like Karli, or dogs which wanted to be like Karli, or owners who just wanted to have more fun with their dogs.

The concept of having a SINGLE organization which gave recognition to ALL of the various activities which dogs become involved in was just too profound to ignore. She jumped on the idea and had it trademarked, before some other person had the same idea (again).

Dog Scouts of America gave Lonnie the perfect excuse to use her dog camp idea. The idea of dogs coming to camp with their owners to learn skills, for which they will get recognition in the form of merit badges, was, as Lonnie says, “The best idea I’ve come up with in my lifetime.” Everyone loves the concept. Everyone wants their dog to be a Dog Scout.

The camps have grown from an attendance of 14 the first year, to 21 the second to 80 the third year. We anticipate over 200 in the coming year. Lonnie was so discouraged by the low enrollment the first year, she had to decide whether to go ahead with the camp and take a loss, or cancel it. She chose to go with it. She said, "If I cancel it before we get started, I'll never have a Dog Scout Camp." It turned out to be a wise decision.

The Dog Scout Camp is big news. It has been covered on all of the local television stations and newspapers all over the country, as well as the cable network (CNN, Discovery Channel, and CBC), national publications (The Wall Street Journal, Chicago Tribune, Dog World, Dog Fancy, Dog Gone, Off Lead), books, and the internet. Dog Scouts have their own web page, but the camp is publicized on several other web sites, also.

Dogs of all breeds, sizes, and skill levels attend the camp. It is the aim of Dog Scouts of America to make all kinds of training and sports activities available to every dog who wants to try them. Dog Scouts of America tries to squash breed discrimination, and provides down-sized materials (like miniature carts, tiny backpacks, and smaller equipment) so that the smaller breeds can participate in everything from Water Rescue (which was developed as a Newfie activity) to backpacking, which is a sport previously "reserved" for the larger breeds.

Some of the activities which have been offered at camp for the dogs are: Backpacking, Water Rescue Training, Agility, Flyball, Search and Rescue, Carting, Herding, Frisbee Catching, Freestyle Obedience, Sledding, IMPROV Obedience, Scent Discrimination, Sporting Retriever Training, Tracking, Naked Dog Obedience and The Art of Shaping. Coming years' activities include Weight Pull, Freestyle Obedience, Flygility, Scent Hurdle Racing, Triathadog, Frisbee Freestyle, and Lure Coursing.

In addition to the merit badge activities, there are lecture classes, demonstrations and videos presented on such topics as canine massage, nutrition, conditioning your dog for athletic activities, preventing dog aggression, herbal remedies, spinning and knitting with dog hair, service dog training, starting a therapy dog group, emergency first aid for dogs, microchipping, preparing for the CGC test, grooming, Tellington Touch, the behavior of wolves and wolf-hybrids, and other informational subjects.

We also have craft-making at camp. Each camper gets a 5 x 7 portrait of himself or herself with the dog, and are given an acrylic frame to decorate in any way they choose, with found objects from the forest floor, items from camp, paint, sculpey clay, or whatever. In addition, we have other craft-making sessions available, such as origami paper folding, making a paw-print Christmas tree decoration or paperweight, dog treat baking, and dog jewelry making. This year's camp will feature an agility jump building class. We also teach the dogs to paint. This activity was developed by the staff of Dog Scouts of America and offered exclusively at Dog Scout Camp. The dogs and handlers create beautiful pictures together (the dog has to do all of the painting—the owner just holds the easel). Then, they are put into an art contest, and voted on for such things as most texture, best theme, brightest colors, proudest parent, most creative technique (not all of the dogs apply the paint with their paws), and best overall painting.

Lonnie says "My life revolves around my dogs. I try to let them learn as many new things as possible." Over the years, this has given Lonnie quite a lot of experience. She would be well

qualified to teach many of the activities offered at camp. She prefers instead to hire instructors from elsewhere, so that she can be a student instead of a teacher. She says, "I really had selfish motives for developing the camp—I wanted to learn lots of new things with my dogs and get new perspectives on the things I already do with my dogs. I am a perpetual student."

After our second year, the Dog Scout Scoop newsletter was created. Along with it came DSA memberships for the owners. "Only the dogs can become Dog Scouts," said Lonnie. The people needed some way of becoming affiliated with the organization, even if they could never make it to a Dog Scout Camp. So many people liked the whole Dog Scout concept, they wanted to become part of it, and show their support.

The third year was the first year Dog Scouts offered a scholarship to camp. We identified a dog which had a lot of physical problems and setbacks, all of which have taken their toll on the owner's bankbook. The dog was diagnosed with cancer, and the owner felt that she and her husband wanted to let him experience a vacation at Dog Scout Camp, while he could still enjoy it. The radiation therapy had robbed them of their vacation money, though. So Dog Scouts sought out funding for this dog to be able to attend camp free of charge. Each year now, we try to identify a person and dog to receive our memorial Scholarship. The scholarship fund is named in honor of a different dog each year—a Dog Scout which has passed away in the previous year.

In 1999, we started developing scout troops around the country, where members and scouts can get together and have educational programs between camps, and attend outings without travelling to Michigan. The troops promote responsible dog ownership and training using positive methods. We want to make the public more aware of the potential dogs have for enriching our lives and becoming valuable members of the community. The troops will help us reach out to communities all across America.

In 2000, we implemented our Honor Scout program and Community Service award. This is to promote public awareness and community education to create more responsible dog owners. Owners get points towards their merit badge for becoming involved in public education or community service. People whose dogs are not scouts yet can earn a certificate instead of a merit badge.

Why do campers enjoy the Dog Scout Camp so much? Well, it's the best bargain in town—at only \$650. For 6 days of fun and adventure, that includes your lodging, meals and training instruction. Merit badges, bandanas and I.D. cards are also included. The other plus for dog owners is that the dogs can have as much freedom as their good behavior warrants. A dog which responds immediately to verbal cues can pretty much have the run of the place, as long as he keeps his owner in sight and under control! A dog with an attitude wears a special "dog with an attitude" bandana, and is kept under more strict control by the owner. Dogs are allowed everywhere in the camp, and this is a big switch from the usual, "anti-dog" rules and laws which govern our dogs' existence in parks, swimming areas, and other public places.

The Dog Scouts have their own motto: Let us learn new things, that we may become more helpful. And the owners have a motto of their own: Our dogs' lives are much shorter than our own—let's help them enjoy their time with us as much as we can.

Where do campers come from? We have had campers come from Florida, California, New York, Kansas, Texas, Denmark, and Japan. Distance doesn't seem to be a problem for people who seek out a fun adventure with their dog. The abundance of enrollments are from the surrounding states of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio.

We purchased our own camp facility in 1999, and had our first camps here in 2000. We are the first dog camp to do so. We have a bunkhouse and shower rooms on our 80 acres of beautiful woods in northern Michigan. There are miles of groomed trails through the forest, and a huge pond with plenty of beach area for all of the dogs to play on. There is an agility field, a camp store, and a craft building. We're surrounded by thousands of acres of state land. It's at the end of a dead-end dirt road, so there's no traffic. It's heaven.

In 2000, DSA has also applied for 501 (c) (3) non-profit status. We have started a massive educational effort to promote responsible dog ownership and the human/companion animal bond. We have information on the website, and we have a Leadership Training program, whereby we train people to become Scout Leaders and Scoutmasters, and carry out public education in their own areas of the country.

What are the plans for the future? "More camps." Mini camps that are held in different areas of the country and dog parks. We are trying to develop a system of dog parks—places where people can go with their dogs to enjoy a romp in the grass or a swim in the lake, within a protective fence to keep out stray children, animals, motor vehicles and other hazards to dogs.

Any other comments? "This is absolutely the best idea I have ever come up with in my life—I'm 48 years old. I wish I had thought of it sooner, like in my twenties. My brain cells weren't ready for it then. They were too busy thinking about making a living. This idea came to me after I took a year off work to write my second book (another book on flyball). If I had not allowed my brain a break from the stress of day-to-day nine to five, it would have never been fertile enough to dream up something as cool as Dog Scouts of America. I'm so happy to think that I can help shape the lives of dog owners by sharing information. It is my hope that my efforts will have a ripple effect, creating more socially conscious individuals who will become involved in promoting responsible dog ownership in their home communities.