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Site of black Boy Scouts' induction into Tribe of Mic-O-Say is revisited

By BRIAN BURNES
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Call them the Camp Ernst Nine.

In 1955, nine African-American Boy Scouts, in a little-known chapter of the Kansas City civil rights story, became members of the Tribe of Mic-O-Say, an honor Scouting program unique to Kansas City and St. Joseph.

A private ceremony honoring the men is scheduled for tonight at H. Roe Bartle Scout Reservation, near Osceola, Mo., about 120 miles south of Kansas City.

On Friday, however, three of the original nine traveled to the rural Johnson County site that served briefly as a camping facility known as Camp Ernst. In 1955, Kansas City Scouting executives operated the blacks-only facility in an effort to offer a summer camping experience they considered separate but equal.

On Friday, the three returning Mic-O-Say members declared it terrific for the time.

"These are hallowed grounds," said Edward Thomas, 69, who drove from California for the reunion.

"It seemed bigger back then," said Don Holt, 68, of St. Louis.

"I loved being outside," said Henry Pearley, 68, of Independence.

All three became braves in the Tribe of Mic-O-Say on July 5, 1955. For the three, the induction represents the culmination of a Scouting experience that they said had a profound effect on their lives. For current Scouting executives, the 1955 ceremony — seen from the perspective of more than 50 years — marks the moment that Kansas City Scouting left segregation behind.

"The next year, Kansas City Scouting was integrated," said George Myers, a board member of the Heart of America Council-Boy Scouts of America, and a Mic-O-Say chieftain.

Myers today credits the integration decision to H. Roe Bartle, the longtime Scouting leader who introduced Mic-O-Say to Kansas City and St. Joseph Scouting councils in the 1920s.

Mic-O-Say is an honor camping program grounded in American Indian culture and traditions. In Mic-O-Say, Scouts can earn distinction as braves and warriors, and meet various responsibilities as "fire builders" or "runners."

In the early 1950s, Kansas City area Scouting — like much of Kansas City life — was segregated. Scouts who were black had their own leaders, who operated their own separate Scouting districts.

That changed not long after the Camp Ernst ceremony.

The ceremonies occurred in two parts in 1955, the year Bartle was elected Kansas City mayor. Bartle attended both ceremonies.

The first ritual included a “call” in which Bartle — a man famous for his girth and his thunderous voice — addressed each one chosen.

“He would walk up, look them right in the eye and say, ‘Do you understand?’ ” said Myers, who witnessed the ceremonies.

A few days later, on July 5, the nine Scouts were inducted

Not long ago, Myers resolved to track down the nine. Today, four are deceased. Two were too ill to travel to this weekend’s ceremonies.

That left the remaining three. On Friday they walked the grounds of Camp Ernst, named for a Scouting benefactor. Although it was sold by the Scout council in 1966, the camp’s buildings remain in place, used for occasional private parties.

“Scouting offered ethics as well as expectations,” Thomas said. “It gave me the incentive to get serious about things. I was trying to decide to be a crook or an honest person, and Scouting helped me be a righteous and good person.”

Thomas became an educator.

“Scouts gave me grounding,” Holt said. “Being trusty, loyal, helpful, friendly. That always made it easy to make the trustworthy choice.”

In 1995, Holt, after a long career in sales and marketing, founded a nonprofit agency called Computer Village, which helps computer literacy programs.

Pearley is retired from a career as a surgical technologist at St. Luke’s Hospital of Kansas City.

“My mother and father made sure I was in Scouting,” he said. “I had butterfly boxes. I worked with insects. I found that I loved the outdoors.”

Standing alongside the three on Friday was Byron Brooks of Blue Springs, who came to honor his father, Bill Brooks, who was one of the original nine.

“Scouting was important to my dad,” Brooks said of his father, who died in 2007. “I can’t remember a time when he was not here for me and my brother.

“This was important for me to be here for him today.”

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