

voices from the mountains

the original gay boy scouts

BY MICHAEL C. ALBERO

Great news! A New Jersey high court recently ruled that gay men should be allowed to serve in the Boy Scouts of America. While this decision was greeted with delight by gay rights organizations throughout the country, it is a wonder the case ever came to trial. After all, today's boy scouts are very similar to another all male youth group, the Young Wandervogel, which originated over one hundred years ago in a small German town near Berlin. Not only did this group serve as an educational tool and an outlet for active young men, but it also created a supportive environment where homosexuality was the norm.

First established in 1896, the Wandervogel consisted of several young men in search of friendship. In an attempt to strengthen the bonds between each individual, the group often ventured into the German wilderness. Popular activities included hiking and camping, as members learned to cook outdoors and survive on their own with only the bare necessities. Frequently, their adventures were conducted solely by foot, and the lone philosophy centered around "learning by doing."

As a result of the lack of structure, the Wandervogel quickly expanded despite the criticism of many concerned adults. They could not understand the desire of young men

for extended journeys into the uncomfortable environment of the German countryside. In addition, it was a popular belief of parents that the groups were "alienating" young men from the feminine sex. In an attempt to assuage these fears, adult supervision was finally granted, but each individual group maintained ultimate power.

One man who became involved in the youth movement was Wilhelm Jansen, who quickly gained the respect of many young men. Unlike most adult supervisors, Jansen was permitted to engage in several group activities and ascended to the role of a father figure. Jansen was openly homosexual, and there was much speculation concerning the extent of his involvement with the youth. Vicious rumors circulated among other adult sponsors.

Eventually a scandal arose, causing Jansen and his young charges to split from the Wandervogel and establish their own sect. Wanting to maintain the initial aspects of the group, Jansen and his followers, including new leader Hans Blucher, christened their organization the Young Wandervogel. Shortly after the establishment of this new faction, a novel outlining the basic principles of the group was published by Shuler entitled *The German Wandervogel Movement as Erotic Phenomenon*.

Immediately attacked by adults as 'indecent,' Shuler's work was a vivid explanation of the motives of the Young Wandervogel. Although originally created as an alternative to the German education system, the group rapidly trans-

formed into a separate lifestyle for young people. While actual sexual activity seldom occurred, the group was founded on strong homosexual sentiments. Members spent much of their time in each other's company, considering it in bad taste to spend time with women. The leader, often several years older, played a central role in arousing the interest and enthusiasm of his troop. Happiest in the company of their charges, leaders directed all of their energy toward their own sex, giving selflessly of their love. According to Shuler, "just as the leaders were attracted to their boys, so were the boys attracted to their leaders. In both cases this attraction was sexually based.... The leaders were 'active...' while the youths were the beloved, and hence 'passive....' The act of sex was not the primary importance, rather being in the company of men."

Even though America's boy scouts differ somewhat from the German Young Wandervogel, there are definite similarities. Not only do both foster friendships among fellow troop members, involve aspects of nature and "learning by doing," but they are also directly influenced by the times. Initiated at the end of the German romantic period, the Wandervogel was "firmly rooted in the exchange of love between leaders and followers." Perhaps, with a little luck, America's boy scouts will adopt a similar attitude, and look beyond the sexual orientation of members. Now, wouldn't THAT be truly great?

Thanks to *Gay Roots: Twenty Years of Gay Sunshine* edited by Winston Leyland.

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right to influence public policy decisions and need to speak out. Secular arguments will carry more weight than religious ones, they said. They discussed using public rallies and radio spots to publicize these discussion points.

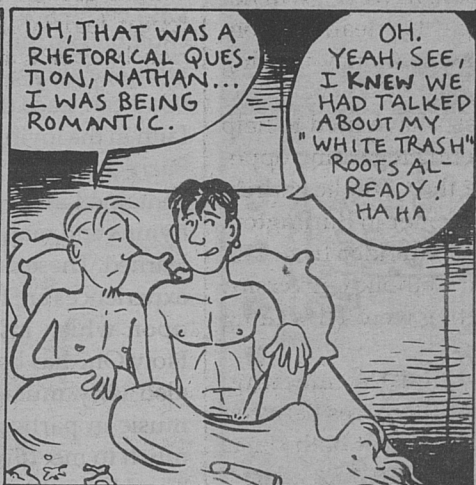
They realize that they are up against a mistrust of religion and of "outsiders" and popular media support of same-gender marriage. So, they hope to mobilize people at the grassroots level to speak to their legislators, eventually to pass a constitutional amendment stating that marriage is between one man and one woman.

Although not affiliated with TIP, an informational meeting also was held at the

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Curbside

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