Ernest Thompson Seton
1860-1946

Ernest Thompson Seton was born in South Shields, Durham, England but emigrated to Toronto, Ontario with his family at the age of 6. His original name was Ernest Seton Thompson. He was the son of a shipbuilder who, having lost a significant amount of money left for Canada to try farming. Unsuccessful at that too, his father gained employment as an accountant. Macleod records that much of Ernest Thompson Seton’s imaginative life between the ages of ten and fifteen was centered in the wooded ravines at the edge of town, 'where he built a little cabin and spent long hours in nature study and Indian fantasy'. His father was overbearing and emotionally distant - and he tried to guide Seton away from his love of nature into more conventional career paths.

He displayed a considerable talent for painting and illustration and gained a scholarship for the Royal Academy of Art in London. However, he was unable to complete the scholarship (in part through bad health). His daughter records that his first visit to the United States was in December 1883. Ernest Thompson Seton went to New York where met with many naturalists, ornithologists and writers. From then until the late 1880's he split his time between Carberry, Toronto and New York - becoming an established wildlife artist (Seton-Barber undated).

In 1902 he wrote the first of a series of articles that began the Woodcraft movement (published in the Ladies Home Journal). The first article appeared in May, 1902. On the first day of July in 1902, he founded the Woodcraft Indians, when he invited a group of boys to camp at his estate in Connecticut and experimented with woodcraft and Indian-style camping. However, he began developing his ideas around woodcraft from the 1880's on. He wrote a book, The Birchbark Rolls of the Woodcraft Indians as a guide for the program.

Seton based many of the symbols and activities of the Woodcraft Indians on the cultures of Native Americans. Woodcraft Indian "braves" could be from 8 to 15 years old. Three to 10 braves made up a band, and two or more bands were a tribe. 'Me only adult leader was called a Medicine Man. Woodcraft Indians could earn badges by learning various skills. The badges, called wampum, were bits of shell.

Seton himself sent the wampum to boys who wrote that they had done the tests. An old Woodcraft Indian once recalled: "I completed the first four tests and he mailed me four pieces of wampum .... I was very proud of the fact that these four pieces of wampum entitled me to wear four eagle feathers-turkey feathers, of course-in my Indian headdress."
The nine leading principles of woodcraft

Ernest Thompson Seton first set out what he saw as the 'cardinal principles' of woodcraft in 1910. This version was in the 1927 edition of The Birch Bark Roll.

1. This movement is essentially for recreation.

2. Camp-life. Camping is the simple life reduced to actual practice, as well as the culmination of the outdoor life.

3. Self-government with Adult Guidance. Control from without is a poor thing when you can get control from within. As far as possible, then, we make these camps self-governing. Each full member has a vote in affairs.

4. The Magic of the Campfire. What is a camp without a campfire? -- no camp at all, but a chilly place in a landscape, where some people happen to have some things... The campfire... is the focal center of all primitive brotherhood. We shall not fail to use its magic powers.

5. Woodcraft Pursuits. Realizing that manhood, not scholarship, is the first aim of education, we have sought out those pursuits which develop the finest character, the finest physique, and which may be followed out of doors, which in a word, make for manhood.

6. Honors by Standards. The competitive principle is responsible for much that is evil. We see it rampant in our colleges to-day, where every effort is made to discover and develop a champion, while the great body of students is neglected. That is, the ones who are in need of physical development do not get it, and those who do not need it are over-developed. The result is much unsoundness of many kinds. A great deal of this would be avoided if we strove to bring all the individuals up to a certain standard. In our non-competitive tests the enemies are not "the other fellows," but time and space, the forces of Nature. We try not to down the others, but to raise ourselves. Although application of this principle would end many of the evils now demoralizing college athletics. Therefore, all our honors are bestowed according to world-wide standards. (Prizes are not honors.)

7. Personal Decoration for Personal Achievements. The love of glory is the strongest motive in a savage.

   Civilized man is supposed to find in high principle his master impulse. But those who believe that the men of our race, not to mention boys, are civilized in this highest sense, would be greatly surprised if confronted with figures. Nevertheless, a human weakness may be good material to work with. I face the facts as they are. All have a chance for glory through the standards, and we blazon it forth in personal decorations that all can see, have, and desire.

8. A Heroic Ideal, The boy from ten to fifteen, like the savage, is purely physical in his ideals. I do not know that I ever met a boy that would not rather be John L. Sullivan than Darwin or Tolstoy. Therefore, I accept the fact and seek to keep in view an ideal that is physical, but also clean, manly, heroic, already familiar, and leading with certainty to higher things.

9. Picturesqueness in Everything, Very great importance should be attached to this. The effect of the picturesque is magical, and all the more subtle and irresistible because it is not on the face of it reasonable. The charm of titles and gay costumes, of the beautiful in ceremony, phrase, dance, and song, are utilized in all ways.

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The Birch Bark Roll can be found online at: http://www.inquiry.net/traditional/seton/birch/

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This book was sent to Baden-Powell in July of 1906 as a precursor to Seton's visit to England for a series of fall lectures. On October 30th, the two men met at the Savoy Hotel. Ernest Thompson Seton made a significant impression on Robert Baden-Powell - and his thinking influenced the way in which he thought about the organization and shape of Scouting. He visited Britain in 1904 and 1906 to promote his
work around woodcraft - and was later to claim that Baden-Powell had stolen 'many of Scouting's essential ideas from him' (Rosenthal 1986: 71). Seton also believed that Baden-Powell's use of 'Be Prepared' 'was transparently a prescription for war, a commitment that in his view the entire Scout organization, in its activities, rhetoric and principles of unwavering obedience to Scout officers, shared' (op. cit.). In short he believed that Baden-Powell had betrayed the spirit of woodcraft.

In 1910 Ernest Thompson Seton became chairman of the founding committee of Boy Scouts of America. As part of his involvement he wrote the first handbook - it included 50 pages from Baden-Powell and 100 pages of Seton's writings. He served as Chief Scout from 1910 until 1915.

Seton developed a plan for incorporating younger boys into Scouting in 1911. Called "The Cubs of America", it used the bear cub as its symbol. Disagreements among Scouting's founders over the value of the new program caused it to be set aside.

Seton had a falling out with James West and left the movement in 1915. As his daughter put it, 'Seton did not like the military aspects of Scouting, and Scouting did not like the Native American emphasis of Seton. With WW I, the militarists won, and Seton resigned from Scouting'. He disagreed with the military style set by Baden-Powell and West. He revived Woodcraft in 1915 as a coeducational organization - the Woodcraft League of America - as a co-educational program open to children between ages 4 and 94". His ideas also inspired splinter groups from the Scouts such as Ernest Westlake's Order of Woodcraft Chivalry (formed in 1916) and John Hargrave's Kibbo Kift Kindred (founded in 1920). The Woodcraft League of America grew to some 5000 members - but 'organizational laxness and perhaps the eccentricity of Seton's ideas barred sustained growth' (Macleod 1989: 239).

He later came back to help organize Cubbing for the younger boys.

Seton received the seventh Silver Buffalo award in 1926; the first year it was offered.

Books By Ernest Thompson Seton

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mammals Of Manitoba, 1886</td>
<td>Lobo, 1900</td>
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<td>Birds Of Manitoba, Foster, 1891</td>
<td>Ragylug, 1900</td>
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<td>How to Catch Wolves, Oneida Community, 1894</td>
<td>Wild Animals I have Known, American Printing House For The Blind, 1900 (NY point system)</td>
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<td>Wild Animals I Have Known, Scribners, 1898</td>
<td>Lives of the Hunted, Scribners, 1901</td>
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<td>The Trail of The Sandhill Stag, Scribners, 1899</td>
<td>Twelve Pictures of Wild Animals (no text) Scribners, 1901</td>
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<td>Lobo, Rag, and Vixen, Scribners, 1899</td>
<td>Krag and Johnny Bear, Scribners, 1902</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Wild Animal Play For Children (Musical), Doubleday &amp; Curtis, 1900</td>
<td>How to Play Indian, 1903</td>
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<td>The Biography of A Grizzly, Century, 1900</td>
<td>Two Little Savages, Doubleday, 1903</td>
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How to Make A Real Indian Teepee, Curtis, 1903
How Boys Can Form A Band of Indians, Curtis, 1903
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Monarch, The Big Bear of Tallac, Scribners, 1904
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Information in this article is from:

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