

## THE BOOTS AND THE COMPASS

(The Origin and Meaning of the Timberline Symbols) by Scott Hanson

Sunlight began a track across Strawberry Rat among the firs and aspens at the Beaver High Adventure Base. Leaning back on my pack, I propped my feet at the edge of the cliff. I was inspired with the sight of peaks above the timberline. Then all of a sudden, seeing my boots against the timberline made me sit up with a start. A memory as crisp and clear as this morning shot across my mind. As I sat looking at the sight, the feel of a gust of wind erased ten years of my life, leaving me a youth of fourteen looking over the edge of the Tooth of Time at Philmont with five other young men. We were waiting in the early morning chill to watch the sunrise. Several weeks before we had completed the 1976 Timberline course, the first one ever held in the Utah National Parks Council. We had been chosen to be members of the 1977 Timberline staff.

Contrary to tradition, I didn't throw my boots over the entrance gate when we left Philmont. Besides being paid for with my own money, they were a memento to me of having met the Philmont challenge. That August I hiked the red cliffs of southern Utah in those boots, and then conquered the Uintahs in them. I didn't know it then but the very next summer we would use those boots to teach me the biggest lesson I had ever learned about service, and to redirect my life.

Fred Erickson, the Scoutmaster of the 1977 course, asked John Mansfield and I to come up with a ceremony or tradition that would officially open the Timberline course. I accepted the assignment dutifully, not expecting it to change the direction of my life - as it soon did. We brainstormed for quite awhile. Wood Badge courses were opened by sinking an axe in a log. The Bridgerbadge Junior Leader Training Course in the Cache Valley Council was opened by shooting off a black powder rifle. But what about Timberline? Why was it called Timberline, anyway? It was a catchy name, rugged enough to capture the imagination. After all, when the timberline is reached during a hike, one has risen to quite an altitude and has shown a good measure of dedication. There is also very little protection from the elements.

As we considered our experience our young minds suddenly grasped the symbolism of the word "TIMBERLINE": a leader has reached the timberline when his view is clear, unblocked by selfishness or lack of skills and knowledge. Leadership above the timberline is more dangerous, because the trail is less well defined and full of more obstacles. There is very little protection from criticism because the leader is visible to all those above and below him.

We could also see that a true leader does not simply reach the timberline alone and then beckon others to follow. We each have moments of giving encouragement, and of needing encouragement; we make it together as a patrol. In just the same way, the value of a real leader's leadership is that others have ascended with him and gained some of his skills and insights along the way. Leadership above the timberline means using not only ones own skills to reach the goal, but using all the resources to keep the group moving forward.

So what did that mean? It means that timberline is not just symbolic of goals when it comes to leadership, but of the pathway to the goal as well. It takes hard work and mutual encouragement to make them happen. I rd at my boots propped up on a rock. They symbolized to me the hard work involved in hiking to the timberline, the pathway to the goal, the persistent one foot after the other in the climb.

But there is more to leadership than just hard work. We know from our training in the leadership skills that leadership also requires a vision, and often special knowledge. The skills involved in leadership give direction to the leader's hard work. The leadership skills work like a compass pointing the way, as they give the leader insight into where to direct his energies, when to direct them, toward whom, and in what way. The compass was then the natural symbol of the skills of leadership.

We liked the symbols of the boots and compass because they were more symbolic of striving for the timberline than of reaching it. No young man goes home from Timberline training and stands above the "timberline" of leadership with polished skills and a smoothly running troop. Timberline is something that is strived for and worked toward.

The Timberline opening ceremony was to have the Senior Patrol Leader hang the boots and compass on a fire - T to show how knowledge and hard work balance each other out in striving for the "timberline" (effective leadership), and this action would officially open the course.

One afternoon I looked into the worried faces of one patrol that were fearful of the duty they faced back in their home troops. I tried to counsel with them about how to feel about what they were learning and how to apply it back home, by comparing it to the boots and compass. They smiled a little wider when they realized that they didn't need to despair because their home troops didn't look and run like the Timberline troop. They were just learning the skills and attitudes that would help them and their troops attain "timberline" level effectiveness. I told them that each time they looked at their own boots to remember that leadership means working hard to attain a goal; and that each time they used a compass to let it remind them to review and use the leadership skills.

The boots became an easy way to explain and symbolize the service a young man learns in the service patrol, and the compass a way to explain how leadership skills are used to run the troop program, as learned during a patrol's day as the program patrol.

As I saw how effective and useful the boots and compass could be in explaining these things, my somewhat selfish 15 year old mind began to realize that my boots were doing more good on a fire-T than on my feet. The boots were not an end but a means to an end. I used those symbols as a reminder, and found that hard work and proper direction make a difference in any situation. Just as the compass gives the boots direction while hiking, so should every skill a young man has learned give direction to his hard work as a leader.

It took a couple of firm shoves on my shoulder to bring me back to the present. I began to feel the cold of the morning again. But a few faces were still imprinted upon my mind. One was of a young learner in one patrol who I later watched place the boots and compass on the fire-T as the Senior Patrol Leader.

It still took a minute or two to break away from the sight of the cliffs and the timberline. I looked down at my boots. I adjusted my pack and watched my boots turn back onto the familiar trail toward the timberline. But now the trail was a new one, away from my youth, toward adulthood, toward even higher adventure. I felt the pocket of my Scout pants: a small pencil, a scribbled rough draft of information, and a compass.