

PEQUANNOCK

Scouts trek New Mexico mountains for 10-day hike

Nine Boy Scouts and three adult advisors hiked down the final switchback of Tooth Ridge, leading them into base camp after 10 days of hiking at Philmont Scout Ranch near Cimarron, N.M. The group had covered more than 80 miles.

The Scouts were members of Crew 703N1, which consisted of boys from three different Boy Scout troops in three different towns. Cris VanKirk and Bryan Johnson from Troop 144 were two of the adult advisors on the trip. Pat VanKirk, Scott Johnson, Matt Cam, Brian Bald, Alex Rapp, Alex Lohn and Gerard Bifulco were the youths from Troop 144 who went to Philmont this summer, July 1-14.

The Scouts and Johnson had been hearing stories of VanKirk's trip out to Philmont several years ago, inspiring them to form their own crew and head out to the Scouting Ranch. They were joined by an adviser and Scout from Troop 17 in Denville and a Scout from Sparta's Troop 150.

Philmont lies in the Sangre de Cristo (Blood of Christ) mountain range and was founded in 1941. The camp is named after Waite Phillips, the man who, between 1938 and 1941 in two separate donations, gave one third of the land that makes up Philmont Scout Ranch. The ranch itself is 127,000 acres. Every year, nearly 20,000 Scouts from around the country hike the trails of Philmont.

The Scouts of Crew 703N1 began preparations for their trek nine months before they left for Philmont. During practice hikes they built upon teamwork, learned Leave-No-Trace principles and became good friends with one another. Several of the Scouts had never met before, but still came together to work seamlessly.

The first major test of the crew's skills came in May during Watchu Weekend, a training program headed by the High Adventure Committee of the Patriots Path Council. It serves as a review and training session for all of the crews heading to Philmont from the area. The lessons are taught by experienced adults and young men and women who are active in their

local Venture crews or have been to Philmont before.

The Patriots Path Council also coordinated with a tour operator out west to organize other activities the crews would participate in before heading out into the Philmont backcountry. The crews from the Patriots Path Council spent several days in Colorado getting used to the higher elevation while touring the west. They visited the Garden of the Gods near Colorado Springs and took a cog rail up to the top of Pike's Peak, which stands 14,110 ft above sea level. They also went whitewater rafting on the Arkansas River and visited the Air Force Academy.

The Scouts arrived at Philmont's Base Camp on July 3 and met their Philmont Ranger, who would spend the first several days with them reviewing their skills and sharing his knowledge of the backcountry. They also received tents, food, and other crew gear they would need. An important part of their briefing was going through logistics to finalize the plans for their trek, including finding out where to find water, any last minute changes to the route, and the bear situation.

Hiking more than 80 miles in 10 days isn't the only thing 703N1 accomplished while at Philmont Scout Ranch. The Scouts also participated in myriad activities such as black powder rifle shooting, archery, tomahawk throwing, rock climbing, spar pole climbing, fly fishing, branding and spending time in an Apache sweat lodge. These activities were located at various staffed camps where several Philmont staff members who are experienced in the activity would instruct the Scouts.

The crew also aided in a conservation project. Every crew that goes to Philmont is required to complete a conservation project to help preserve Philmont. The project often includes maintaining trails or building new ones to make the hikes easier for later crews coming through.

After traveling to Philmont and experiencing everything for themselves, the Scouts now have a first-

hand idea of what Van Kirk had been talking about for years at meetings. All of them really enjoyed themselves and several have even considered signing up to work at Philmont this upcoming summer. Hopefully they will tell their stories to the younger Scouts and the tradition of Scouts going to Philmont will grow.

Joe Roman, with Boy Scout Troop 144 in Pompton Plains, contributed this article.



Boy Scouts from Troop 144 in Pompton Plains, N.J., hiked more than 80 miles while hiking at Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico.



Boy Scouts from Troop 144 in Pompton Plains, N.J., as well as some Scout advisors, posed for a group photo during their 10-day trek at Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico. Pictured are (sitting, l-r) Cris Van Kirk, Alex Lohn, Gerard Bifulco, (standing, l-r) Bryan Johnson, Dan Van Kirk.