

LITTLE JIMMY

Jimmy's father died before he was born, his destitute mother became a seamstress. When Jimmy was six, she also died and he was placed in a Washington DC orphanage. Soon, he began to limp. Thinking he was a slacker and avoiding work, he was whipped. It was discovered that he had a tubercular hip and he spent two years in the hospital. He was pronounced "incurable" and was sent back to the orphanage and left on the doorstep. Not able to do work like other boys, he was put with the girls and taught to sew. A friend of his mother took pity on him and gave him a childrens book she had written and asked his opinion of it. It was the first time anyone had given him a chance to express himself or put any importance on what he thought about anything. Most children apprenticed as soon as they were old enough but no one wanted a cripple. Soon he was the oldest boy at the orphanage and he began to help the matron.

There was a library at the orphanage but it was usually locked. He asked permission to open it to the other children but the matron was afraid that they would damage the books. Jimmy organized the children to help him cover them. Then he catalogued them. Most of the children really didn't want to read so he paid them from his meager wages, one cent for each book read and got permission for them to stay up an extra hour at night to read. HE WAS NOW LEARNING HOW TO GET RESULTS AND MOTIVATE OTHERS.

He asked permission to go to public school rather than orphanage school and then to take the other children with him and be responsible for their homework. At 16, he finished eighth grade and asked permission to attend high school. Attending high school was unheard of for an orphanage cripple. He got the approval to attend for one month, then another month, and finally graduated from high school at age 19.

During this time he was the leader of the other orphanage children, editor of the school news, manager of the football team, and school librarian and still did all of his orphanage duties. Finally he was able to leave the orphanage and he applied for a job at a bicycle shop. He was told by the owner that he would not hire a cripple. Jimmy challenged the owner to hire him if he could learn to ride a bike. Battered and bruised Jimmy got the job. Next he determined that he would learn to walk without crutches. After many hours of practice, he made it.

All the time he continued to work to improve conditions at the orphanage. He organized the children to paint the whole place. He got a man, who owned weasels, to bring them in and get rid of the rat infestation. He showed the Board of Directors how too much money was being spent on staff salaries instead of food.

He got a job at the YMCA as a secretary and began to study law with an attorney. A fire at the YMCA destroyed the wing where night classes were being held. The directors said there was no money to rebuild. Jimmy asked permission to take over the task of reopening the school. He persuaded instructors, contractors, and others to donate services or accept deferred payments. The school reopened with more students than before. At 25 he passed the bar exam and secured an appointment to a government job with the Board of Pensions and later as an assistant attorney in the Department of the Interior. During the 6 years on the government payroll he also lobbied Congress for funds for schools in Washington, DC, served as General Secretary of the YMCA, started the first Children's Court in DC and got permission for children to use the public parks in Washington, DC. Impressed by Jimmy's accomplishments, President Theodore Roosevelt delegated him the leadership of the first White House Conference for the Care of Dependent Children held in 1909.

Shortly thereafter, he was asked by a group of concerned citizens to serve as the first Executive Secretary of a new citizenship organization for young men. He said he had too many other duties but he would do it for six months until a replacement could be found. Thirty-two years later, in 1943, he retired from that "temporary" job as Executive Secretary of the Boy Scouts of America. Yes. Jimmy was none other than our First Chief Scout James E. West. In the early years, to keep the young BSA organization non-sectarian and free from racial prejudice was a Herculean task. Influential religious groups wanted to take control. West said no. A southern group threatened that if Negroes were allowed to be Scouts that they would pile their Scout uniforms in the court house square and burn them. West said Scouting was open to ALL young men.

The young BSA had little money and limited staff. West worked day and night to organize the material for a Scout handbook. Managed to get funds to print 5000 copies, marked them as "proofs" and sent 4600 of them out to persons interested in youth work all around the country, asking for suggestions for improvement. A committee he chaired carefully considered every comment and redrafted the book, issuing our first official Boy Scout Handbook in August 1911, less than 18 months

after the original incorporation of the BSA. Soon, the 40 millionth copy will be printed. He aggressively pursued other similar youth organizations that tried to use the term "Scout" and successfully protected our brand name until it was chartered to us by an unprecedented act of the United States Congress in 1916.

May each of you take back what you have learned and follow the example of our First Chief Scout Executive, James E. West, who through his initiative went from being an unwanted cripple in an orphan asylum to arguably the most influential and important person in the success of the Boy Scouts of America.

Please consider becoming a James E. West Fellowship Member of the Alamo Area Council.