

A camping trip to remember

As a general rule, if scouts haven't gotten their Eagle badge before they're old enough to drive, the odds of reaching scouting's highest rank go down exponentially. Like most of their BSA peers, Justin and Jeff lost interest in scouting by the time they entered high school. But parental coercion carried the day, and they both went on to earn their Eagle. Illness prevented me from being an active adult assistant, but I did help out when I could on a few of their troop's overnight outings. The most memorable occurred in 1988 during the annual week-long summer camp at a world-class scouting facility in the north Georgia mountains known as Camp Woodruff. Barely saying two words to me all week, Justin and Jeff weren't thrilled I was there, and neither was their mother. Margene was furious at me for going, because I'd just gotten out of the hospital with an intestinal obstruction and was not in good shape. But I'd promised the scoutmaster I'd be there, and worried he'd think I was just another father with another excuse if I backed out. So, I just sucked it up and did my time. With temperatures in the 90s, the week was hard on me physically. But I wouldn't give anything for having been there, if for no other reason than I had one of those rare life experiences that are impossible to forget. On a night when the skies opened with a flood of sustained heavy rain, and with me still dealing with 24/7 diarrhea, I left my tent and made a beeline for the outdoor latrine. Located about forty yards away and sheltered by a roof, the open-air depository consisted of a 20-foot deep hole in the ground covered by a wooden box that had a fanny-sized opening cut in the top. With extreme urgency, I was making my way through the woods when I tripped on a tree root, falling flat on my face into a huge puddle of red mud. With rain pouring from the sky, every mosquito in north Georgia had taken refuge under the latrine's roof. As I was unbuckling my pants while swatting at mosquitoes, I accidentally dropped my flashlight into the abyss of the 20-foot hole. With my business finished but still seated, my hands fumbled around in the pitch-black dark searching for the toilet paper, only to find it soaked-through in rainwater that had gathered on the latrine's concrete floor. When I finally made it back to my tent, all I could do was laugh. The scoutmaster once told me that the only camping trips that are truly memorable are the ones where out-of-the-ordinary events happen. He was sure right about that.

Jeff during overnight canoe trip down the Flint River: Justin & Margene at Justin's Eagle ceremony.

