

Craig,

I'll be happy to try and answer any specific questions (feel free to give a call if you want to chat), but so far, I'm very happy with our choice. In addition to the convenient location (no small consideration for weekly meetings), the troop seems to be both very active and very well organized. There's a lot of parental involvement to keep the wheels turning behind the scenes, but I've also been impressed by how much the older boys in the troop are called upon to do. For example, the meetings are run almost completely by the boys. There seems to be a sizeable group of older scouts, indicating that troop does a good job of retaining boys through high-school age.

They try to have fun (we've done a swim night and wall-climb night), but they also have a good emphasis on advancement. There have been three Eagle court of honors since we joined, and another one coming up in June.

The first campout we did was in March and is called the Advancement Campout. It's more or less "required" attendance for all the boys in the troop if possible. It's organized somewhat like a camporee with the new scouts moving from station to station to learn about things like setting up the troop tents, knife and ax use, fire building, etc. and completes nearly all of requirements for "Scout" and "Tenderfoot" except the ones that need to be done at home. The other scouts (the ones that aren't on their first campout) run the stations, and the boys that are going for their First Class cooking requirement do the cooking for new scouts, so that they don't have to take on cooking all their meals on their first trip.

Our second campout was the "U.S. Grant Pilgrimage" in Galena last month. This is an annual event that draws several thousand scouts to the town. We camped at Mississippe Palisades State Park. We arrived about 9:00 at night and had to set up in less than ideal conditions: we drove through heavy thunderstorms to get there, and though we (fortunately) didn't have any rain there, we had to set up camp in pretty dark, windy, wet, and muddy conditions. I was pretty amazed at how little the adults did to shepherd the boys through that process - the older scouts did almost everything in terms of helping the boys find spots for their tents, helping them set them up (this was only the second time, possibly the first, that they had done that), and get the rest of the camp organized.

The third campout was this past weekend at Kankakee River State Park, but we weren't able to go due to other family commitments.

Matt was presented with his "Scout" rank at the April court of Honor and will be getting his "Tenderfoot" at the Court of Honor tonight, as will several other Pack 503 Alums. (It's at Greene Valley Forest Preserve at 7:30 - you're welcome to come if you have any interest in that!)

Matt is going to summer camp with them in July. First-year scouts do a special program called something like "Trail to Eagle" that helps them complete many of their Second Class and First Class requirements. They also are supposed to come home with several Merit Badges. (The troop tries to make it possible for scouts to complete First Class within the first year. After that the focus changes more to working on Merit Badges for Star, Life, and Eagle, and that's a little more self-directed and at their own pace)

I think that covers the highlights, but feel free to get back with any questions. I'm sure there are plenty of other good troops around too, but I don't have any regrets about our choice.

Pete