

## **History of Specialty Exploring An Orange County Invention**

Almost from the beginning, the Boy Scouts of America has been discussing the “older boy problem.” Specifically, how do we keep older Scouts interested in the program?

The original answer was Sea Scouting. In the 1930's Senior Scouting was introduced, in 1942 came Air Scouting, then Exploring (a term that had been around since the 30's) was restructured. Still, the results were less overwhelming.

In 1954, the BSA commissioned the University of Michigan to study the problem. After surveying hundreds of boys, ages 14-18, they found what they already knew, that the Scouting program wasn't sparking their interest. Over 80 percent of them said they were wondering about their future careers, and almost all of those young men said they would be interested in learning more about their career interests from adults working in those fields.

That was about as far as it went until 1956, when Orange County Scouter William H. Spurgeon III, a member of the National Exploring Committee, decided to try and meet that need through what came to be known as 'specialty' or 'vocational' Exploring. In 1957, he organized the first specialty Explorer post in the nation – Post 201 in Newport Beach, a science post sponsored by the Helipod Division of Beckman Instruments (and later Hughes Aircraft.) The experiment was a success, and nine of the members of this post went on to earn doctorates in science.

Bill Spurgeon immediately became one of the leading advocates for this new style of Exploring. Cub packs, he liked to say, were Scouting's grade school, Scout troops were its high school, and Explorer posts were the “University of Boy Scouting.”

Spurgeon had grown up in Scouting, and was a firm believer in its principles. “Scouting is a living philosophy,” he once said, “not a pastime or hobby.” The grandson and namesake of the founder of the City of Santa Ana, and the son of one of the original Orange County Council's most important supporters, Bill Spurgeon joined Scouting in 1928 and never left. During World War II he served in the Navy. “As a naval officer,” he recalled, “I could tell the men who had been Boy Scouts. It was as though they were marked on their foreheads.”

Back home, Bill Spurgeon's interest turned naturally to Sea Scouting, which led to his interest in Exploring.

The key to the new special interest program was to find adult leaders (advisors, in Exploring terminology) to share their careers with the boys. Out in the business community, Spurgeon found this was an easy task. “It's very difficult to get a banker to

go camping, unless it is his avocation,” he reported, “but it is extremely easy to get a banker to open the doors of the financial world to boys into following in his footsteps.”

Nationally, other Explorer leaders began to pick up the idea, and on January 1, 1959, Bill Spurgeon-style Specialty Exploring became the official national program.

It is not much of an exaggeration to say that over the next few years, posts were chartered to meet almost every special or vocational interest. Among the most prominent are the law enforcement posts, Orange County’s first - Post 449 - was organized in April 1959 by the Orange County Sheriff’s Department. Among the other specialties explored by Orange County were:

In 1962, the first National Explorer Conference held (appropriately enough) at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Seven OEAC Explorers attended, along with five from the Northern Orange County Council, which had adopted the new national program in 1959.

In 1963, Bill Spurgeon asked his employer – The Irvine Company – for a year’s leave of absence to tour the country promoting Specialty Exploring. They agreed, but before he was done, it had been three years.

Spurgeon was the chief salesman of this concept of industry-sponsored special-interest Exploring. He took a three-year leave of absence from his job to travel the country, making up to 14 speeches a day for the new Exploring.

“Every kid you see around here is up for grabs,” he would say, “and you had better be interested in who grabs him. That’s America’s future you’re looking at.”

In 1968, the Boy Scouts of America established a separate Exploring Division to administer the program (the Orange Empire Area Council established its own local Exploring Division in 1971.) Another important step came in 1969, when girls were first admitted into Explorer posts. By 1977, over 35 percent of all Explorers were female.

In May of 1970, Bill Spurgeon was presented with the Silver Buffalo Award, the highest honor given by the Boy Scouts of America, in recognition of his work as the “Father” of Specialty Exploring. Less than four months later he died suddenly of a heart attack at the age of 54. The Orange County edition of the Los Angeles Times noted,

“His rare blend of toughness, mellowed by the understanding and genuine affection he held for young people, enable Mr. Spurgeon to bridge the generation gap that so few elders have been able to really cross.”

Each year since 1971, the National Exploring Committee has presented the William H. Spurgeon III Award to individuals and corporations that have kept his idea alive.