

Marian Corbin Aslakson
1899 - 1991
member of the First Girl Scout troop
(White Rose Patrol)
Born and raised in Savannah, GA
long time resident of the Washington, DC area



(above receiving an appreciation plaque for 70 years of service c. 1982)

Pioneer Scout Shares Lessons

By Anndee Hochman
Washington Post Staff Writer

Marian Corbin Aslakson, one of five living members of the first Girl Scout troop in the United States, says she was just lucky.

"I happened to be . . . at the right place and the right time and going to the right school," says the McLean woman, looking straight ahead with eyes that flash beneath a fluff of gray hair.

The right place and time were Savannah and 1912, the year Juliette Low founded the Girl Scouts and stirred the town with her unconventional notions about how young girls should spend their time.

The right school was the Pape School, a private girls' academy run by Nina Pape. "Low approached Nina and said she wanted 18 girls who were accustomed to working together," Aslakson recalls.

"We had to tie twelve knots, blaze a trail, light a fire with one match, learn the Girl Scout laws and promises and be able to cook one dish—we made peppermint drops," she says, describing the tender-foot test required for the first troop members to win the title of Girl Guide.

Her carefully manicured hands lie quietly in her lap—until she needs to illustrate a point. Then they move quickly to spin her story in the air. They are remembering peppermint drops, deftly pulling threads of candy from an imaginary pan of boiling water, rolling them on an invisible marble slab.

Aslakson, who became a member of that first



By James A. Parcell—The Washington Post

Marian Aslakson has seen 72 years of scouting.

Pioneer Scout Was in 'Right Place'

SCOUT, From B1

troop at age 12, recently was named a lifetime Girl Scout by the Girl Scouts of America. At 84, her walk falters slightly, but her memory spins back without a hitch through 72 years of scouting.

She has been remembering lately for VideoEd Productions Inc. of Hyattsville, a company that produces educational videotapes and is interviewing the remaining members of the first troop.

"She is just grand," says Pauline Gearhart, a spokesman for VideoEd. "Her memory, her retention of fact, places, people and events plus her ability to verbally tell you about them, is just fantastic. She is a totally remarkable person."

Aslakson's apartment at Carl Vinson Hall in McLean is filled with the furniture of her Virginia ancestors and the mementos of several trips around the world with her husband, who was an officer in the Coast and Geodetic Survey. In her bedroom, a large wall map traces her voyages in pins and string. The web spins down toward South America, touches China and the Philippines, and fans through the United States and Europe.

"Girl Scouting has made my life rewarding because you're never among strangers," she says. "Wherever I went, when they found out I was in the first troop, they would ask me to talk to the girls. I [would] tell them how simple it was in the very beginning."

Savannah in 1912 meant dusty roads and debutante balls, finishing school and lessons in French, even if you preferred science. School ended at 2 p.m., Aslakson said, and she recalls spending afternoons in the park with a nurse, twisting clover blossoms into chains.

In this sleepy town, she said, Pape's students leaped at the idea of becoming Girl Guides. "Little girls were all enthused about anything that was new."

The Girl Guides (the name was changed to Girl Scouts several years later) dressed in the typical garb of the era: dark blue skirts, light blue middie blouses and black cotton stockings, Aslakson said.

The activities Low planned were anything but conventional. She thought girls should exercise, so they played basketball or tennis as part of each weekly meeting.

Low hired a Harvard botany professor to guide the girls on nature walks.

If Low's Girl Scouts shed some of the trappings of post-Victorian life, Aslakson cast them aside even further. In staid Savannah, where the farthest venture for most people was an annual trip to New York, "one thing the Girl Scouts did for me was to give me a terrific yen for traveling," she said.

The second time she met her future husband, "he said the magic words," she recalls with a laugh. "Not 'I love you.' Not 'Will you marry me?' He said, 'Would you like to go to the Philippines?' I said, 'I'd love to.'"

The couple traveled around the world several times, settling down long enough to have one son, Aslakson said. When they lived in South America, she organized a Scout troop in which half of the girls were Peruvian and half were American.

In the VideoEd production, due to be finished by the end of the year, a 10-year-old actress asks Aslakson, "What was it like?" To answer that, Aslakson responds, "You have to go back to Savannah." And the memories and the cameras start to roll.

DEATH NOTICES

ASLAKSON, MARIAN CORBIN

Age 92, on Saturday, October 5, 1991 at Country Village Care Center Nursing Home, Angleton, TX, formerly of Bethesda and McLean. Wife of the late Capt. Carl Aslakson for 56 years. She is survived by one son, R. Corbin Aslakson and his wife Charlotte of Lake Jackson, TX; three grandchildren, Elizabeth, Kenneth and Carla; one brother, Gawin Corbin of Savannah, GA; one sister, Tayloe Lawton of Tallahassee, FL and five nieces and nephews. A memorial service will be held 2 p.m. Wednesday, October 9 at St. Timothy's Episcopal Church, Lake Jackson, TX. Memorials contributions may be made to the Girl Scouts of American or The Washington National Cathedral. Arrangements by PALMS FUNERAL HOME, Angleton, TX.

Mrs. Aslakson was a graduate of Goucher College, Baltimore, MD.; a lifetime member of the Girl Scouts of American and a charter member of Juliette Lowe's first Girl Scout troop in Savannah, GA and the first Girl Scout troop in Columbia, South American in 1941. A lifetime Episcopalian and a volunteer guide at the Washington National Cathedral for over 20 years.

Death Notice Marian Corbin Aslakson

Born: July 13, 1899 Savannah Georgia

Died: October 5, 1991, Angleton, Texas

An Address on Girl Scouting

by

Marion Aslakson

April 7, 1973

INTRODUCTION (Mrs. Upchurch)

Mrs. Aslakson was a member of Juliette Low's first Girl Scout troop. She was born and raised in Savannah, Georgia. Later she attended college in Baltimore, Maryland. She and her husband have travelled and lived all over the world in connection with his work. Even after retirement they continue to travel a great deal. They have an excellent sea shell collection which they continue to expand on in their travels.

REMARKS

I don't know the numbers of your troops but let me tell you, it's a great pleasure being here. I will call you scouts, girls, because Mrs. Low felt from the very beginning that scouting was for all girls.

You know, her name was Juliette, but she never was called Juliette. She had a nickname, Daisy. In Savannah when I was a child, we called all our mother's friends by their first names, but we always said, "Miss". So she was known as Miss Daisy to the girls. I've never heard her called Juliette in my life.

She was born and raised in Savannah, Georgia. Her mother came from the North and her mother's father, her grandfather, was an Indian agent near Chicago. As a child she spent some time there and heard her grandfather having pow wows with the Indian chiefs.

Through her father, she had relatives and friends all over the East Coast. She went to school in Virginia and had acquaintances all over. I tell you that because I want to show you how she started the Girl Scout movement.

She married an Englishman whose father had a cotton business. In those days, Savannah was the largest cotton port in the world. She married William Low. The family always called him by a nickname; they called him Billo. He took her to England to live because his family all lived there.

Unfortunately, at their wedding she had so much rice thrown at her that she developed an abscessed ear on her honeymoon. Now that is an awful thing to happen to a girl on her honeymoon. Eventually it caused her to become very hard of hearing, and all of this has importance to what I'm going to tell you.

As Mrs. Low, she travelled all over Europe. She went as far as Egypt and India. But she had an estate in England and this estate happened to be next door to the estate of Lord Baden Powell who founded the Boy Scouts. You know, he founded the Boy Scouts first, and then the girls became very much annoyed that they had no organization. They put so much pressure on him, that several years later he founded an organization for girls which he called Girl Guides. He persuaded Miss Daisy to become leader of the Girl Guide troop. She became so interested in it, that she immediately thought it shouldn't stay just in England. Why should girls in the United States be deprived of it?

You know, she always owned the home that belonged to the Low family in Savannah. In England during the months of January, February and March the weather is very unpleasant. It's usually foggy, cold, and rainy. In Savannah, which is far enough south, the weather is nice -- it's usually mild and sunny. So, Miss Daisy came home in January 1912 and she was so enthusiastic about the Girl Guides. She thought, "Oh, I just have to start it in Savannah!"

She had a close friend, Miss Nina Payne, who had a little private school for girls. She went to Nina and said, "Oh, Nina, I have the most wonderful idea for the girls of Savannah. I want to start a Girl Guide troop, and I want to have a group of girls who are accustomed to working together." Nina said, "Allright, come over and select some of the girls from my school." She happened to select my class and a younger class to form the first two patrols -- the White Rose patrol which was a group of older girls, and the Pink Carnation patrol made up of younger girls.

Miss Daisy had a niece named Margaret Elenore Gordon, who was the daughter of her older brother. Margaret was never called by her real name; she was always called by her Aunt Daisy's nickname, so her name was Daisy Gordon. Her Aunt Daisy decided she should become the number one Girl Guide in the United States. Now, Daisy Gordon's parents owned a plantation about 30 miles from Savannah across the Akeechee River. They used to always go out there to spend January through March because it was most delightful. So, Daisy was out there when Miss Daisy went over and said, "Now Daisy, I want to make you the number one Girl Guide in the country." Do you know what Miss Daisy Gordon said? She said, "I don't want to be!" Well, Miss Daisy said, "I don't care whether or not you want to be. You're going to be the number one Guide in the United States." So she spent her time teaching the younger Daisy the requirements for Tenderfoot. There were five things she had to learn to be a Tenderfoot Guide. Then, Daisy came into the troop two months after we had been organized. She joined the Pink Carnations, my patrol.

The first Girl Guide meeting was held in the auditorium of a retirement home across the street from Miss Daisy's home. She came over to teach us. Can you guess the first thing she taught us? The Girl Guide Promise. Then she taught us the Laws. And then she taught us to tie knots. We were supposed to learn 12 different knots. The first knot she taught us was the square knot. You know, that's the most valuable thing I've learned in Scouts because to this day I know if I tie a square knot it'll stay.

I'm sure that some of you have been in Savannah and visited the birthplace. Miss Daisy's own home was about seven blocks from where she was born. The birthplace belonged to her mother, but she owned a house on Abacorn Street. If you've been in Savannah, you know how every two blocks there is a park a block square. In between these squares are streets. Miss Daisy's house faced Abacorn Street on the square.

The back of her house was on Grayton Street and there was a nice little house there. Before people had automobiles, they had horses and carriages, so that was her carriage house. By that time she had an automobile so she didn't need horses and carriages. She had the carriage house for the second meeting.

Miss Daisy set it up with an old kitchen table and some old wooden chairs. She gave us a slab of marble and a one-burner gas stove. Then, she thought that all girls should have a chance to exercise. Part of every meeting was spent taking exercises. She owned three lots across the street, two tennis courts, and a basketball court. Part of every meeting we either played basketball or tennis.

One of our requirements was to learn the 12 knots. Another thing was to cook one dish. You'll never guess what we cooked the third meeting! We made peppermint drops. That's why she gave us the marble slab and the one-burner gas stove. You boil sugar and water until it forms a thread, then you add oil of peppermint and drop it on the marble slab. When it hits that cold marble, it forms a little drop. That was the first dish we learned to cook.

Miss Daisy thought we should have some outdoor training. She owned several acres about five miles from Savannah called Bonna Bella. It had a cottage, so she decided that that should be our camp. She hired a retired botanist from Harvard, Mr. Hopsy, to keep this camp for us. We would go out there to learn about nature. We had to learn to blaze a trail because that was one of the requirements. We had to learn to light a fire with one match.

The first time we went out there we took a streetcar to the end of the line. Then we had to hike about a mile in the woods to Bonna Bella. I'll never forget the first time we arrived. Mr. Hopsy decided he'd take us through the woods to show us the flowers, leaves, trees, and how to identify them. We were walking down a path through the woods and I was standing next to Mr. Hopsy. I looked down and realized I had almost stepped on a snake. It was a small snake trying to swallow a big frog. We had to stop right there for a lesson in nature. Did you know that a snake's jaws are hinged? He takes a frog by the head first to stretch his legs out. Then the snake can unhinge his jaws to swallow a frog bigger than he is. We stood there for the longest time watching. And finally when he'd swallowed it, we could see the frog moving through the snake's body making a big bulge. Mr. Hopsy picked it up, put it in a jar of alcohol, and gave it to me as my first camping souvenir.

Miss Daisy, as I told you, was very deaf. There was one word that she could always hear, and that was "yes." But the one word you could never make her understand to save your life was the word "no."

One of her intimate friends was Miss Sally Talbot. Many years after Miss Daisy died, I ran into Miss Sally and she asked me if I remembered the first hike she took us on over by Bonna Bella. I said, yes, and she said, "You know, Daisy called me on the telephone and said, 'Sally, I want you to take the girls on a hike next Saturday afternoon at three o'clock.'" And Miss Sally said, "Oh, Daisy, I couldn't possibly do it because of another engagement I made some time ago." And Miss Daisy said, "You know, I think that's simply lovely. We'll expect you at three o'clock." Miss Sally said it was much easier to postpone her other engagement than to try to say "no" to Miss Daisy.

You know, Miss Daisy wasn't satisfied with just forming that first troop of two patrols. She started organizing other troops in Savannah and she had several there that year. Then she had relatives up around Atlanta and organized troops there. Then she came on up to Washington and began troops here. Then she went up to Boston and New England to begin Girl Guide troops there too. You see, she had friends and relatives all over.

Miss Daisy brought over a Girl Guide uniform from England to fit her niece, Daisy. So Daisy had an English Girl Guide uniform. But we didn't have any uniforms; we had to design them. We decided to have a dark blue skirt with a dark blue midi blouse, the kind that sailors wear with big collars. Our Pink Carnation patrol had a blue satin tie around the neck. We always wore long black ribbed stockings and tied our hair back with a black taffeta bow. We would play basketball in bloomers. We didn't have nice shorts like you have today. Our bloomers were pleated, very full, and they came down below our knees. We played basketball on a court with a screen around it because girls weren't supposed to wear bloomers in public. Times sure have changed!

There was no national way we could order uniforms. Our mothers had to make them or have a dressmaker to do it. When we earned badges, Miss Daisy had an intimate friend who was very good at embroidery and she made the first badges that were given to the girls. You know what the first badge was that we earned? I think you call it Child Care, but we called it Child Nurse. Elizabeth Purse was the first to earn a scout badge.

Soon, the girls in the United States got to thinking, why should they be called Girl Guides when the boys were called Boy Scouts. About three years later, we changed our name to Girl Scouts. Then World War I broke out and all the soldiers were wearing khaki, so we changed our uniforms to khaki. We made our contribution to the war effort by acting as ushers at the rallies to sell war bonds and things like that. Then, eventually the uniforms were changed to green and I think the green is much prettier.

The last time I saw Miss Daisy was in 1922. At that time, the national convention was going to be held in Savannah for the tenth anniversary. The Girl Scout organization was so small at that time that the reception for all the girls was held in Miss Daisy's own home. She had all of us girls from the first troop, all 18 of us, to stand in the receiving line with her. The national president was Mrs. Herbert Hoover. She was very prominent in the Girl Scout activities. Her husband didn't become President until several years later, but she stood in line with us to receive the delegates. Then, I was married and out of the country when Miss Daisy died in 1927.

Miss Daisy was very interested in girls all over the world. She never had any children of her own, so she would be very pleased to know that her Juliette Low World Friendship Fund is being used to bring girls together from all over the world. She felt that as girls from other countries got to know girls from the United States and vice versa, that we would be happier because girls everywhere are more or less alike.

I had an experience in Peru to illustrate this. I helped found a Girl Scout troop down there. One patrol was composed of English and American girls, and we met one day to plan for the troop. Then I had a Peruvian friend whose daughter had 13 friends who wanted to join a Girl Scout troop. We went out to a summer house in the Andes Mountains and they had a good time going swimming and making strawberry ice cream. The girls were very polite to each other. The next meeting, the Peruvian and American girls met together, and after that the American girls came up to me and said, "Mrs. Aslakson, do we have to be with those old Peruvian girls? We have nothing in common." So I told them to wait a while and see. If they still felt the same way, we could break up into two troops. And then, at that same meeting, some of the Peruvian girls said the same thing.

Well, we began working on the Tenderfoot requirements, and one of the things I was trying to do was to teach them to build a fire with one match. Lima, Peru, is a very interesting place. It never rains there, but they have the most beautiful flowers. There are irrigation ditches on every street in town, and every week they turn the water from the river into these ditches to water all the trees and flowers in Lima. But the day I was going to teach the girls to light a fire with one match was the day they turned the water into the ditches. We were in this lovely garden and couldn't find one living thing that was dry. I was really frustrated, so finally we went into the house and got some dry paper and wood. I showed them how to make an A-frame so the lesson wouldn't be a complete disaster. That was on a Thursday. The next Monday morning my phone rang and a lovely woman's voice I'd never heard said, "Are you the lady with the Girl Scout troop?" I said yes and she continued, "My daughter is in your troop. Yesterday we went into the mountains for a picnic and my ten year old girl said she would build a fire and she did it with one match. Any organization that can teach a ten year old girl to do that deserves my support. So I'm mailing you one hundred pesados to help you."

At the end of six meetings we were going to have these Tenderfeet fly up to Girl Scouts. We had a tea for their mothers and sisters. Those same girls who had complained about being with the Peruvian girls came up and said, "Mrs. Aslakson, are you going to break up our troop? We didn't know how nice the Peruvian girls were. We have so many good friends now." So I told them that the reason we had waited to make that decision was to give them time to get acquainted. They kept the troop together for that reason.

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Now, are there any questions you would like to ask?

Q How old was Juliette Low when she died?

A She was born in 1860, so she would have been 67 years old.

Q How many troops did you start?

A I had a troop at Chevy Chase Circle for a number of years. Then I started the troop in Peru. When we were living in Bogota, Columbia, they had just started a troop there and asked me to help give a training course for leaders at the teachers' college. In Colombia during the early 1940's, girls rarely went to high school. They could only have a two-year high school in the capital for girls. Some of the older girls were sent to the training course at the teachers' college to learn how to organiza new troops. One of the things we taught them was to have a friendship circle and sing taps for the closing of their meetings. We had quite a time translating Taps into Spanish. Before I left Bogota, I was invited to the school to see the troop and when I walked into the room, all the girls stood up and sang Taps to welcome me! Here, we sing it to say goodbye.

Q How old were you when you became a Scout?

A I was twelve.

Q What other work have you done for Girl Scouts?

A After I came back from South America, the Girl Scout Council asked me to be head of the Juliette Low Memorial Fund. After she died they decided that the best kind of memorial was to set up a fund to make it possible for girls to travel to the Chalet in Switzerland and get to know each other. So they set up the fund for this purpose. When I took it over in Washington, that first year we had only \$78.00 donated and that worried me very much. And then I got to thinking that girls were not interested in a memorial fund for a dead person; they would much rather have a memorial for a person whose spirit lives on. So I suggested that the fund name be changed to the World Friendship Fund and it was adopted at the next annual meeting and the contributions increased from then on.

When I was on the organization committee, I was asked to find out why girls didn't want to wear their uniforms. You see, all girls from the Brownies to Seniors wore the same uniform. The older girls had to wear badges on their sleeves, and by the time they reached junior high school, they weren't interested in wearing the same uniform as they had

in elementary school. I suggested that the Cadettes have a green skirt, white blouse and badge sash. We experimented with this for two or three years before it was adopted by National.

Q Did you know Juliette Low when you were little?

A I knew her mother better. Miss Daisy spent most of her time in England before her husband died and her mother lived in Savannah. Mrs. Gordon lived in the house which is Juliette Low's birthplace today. The very first dance I went to was given by Mrs. Gordon for her granddaughter, Daisy. I'll never forget how thrilled I was.

Q Did your troop camp out?

A No, we stayed in the cottage at Bonna Bella. It was big enough for us, and when I was young, girls didn't sleep out in tents.

Q How many of that original troop are still living?

A Out of the 18, eleven are still living.

Q Do you know what the other original girls are doing?

A I don't know for sure since we are scattered all over. Daisy Gordon Lawrence, Miss Daisy's niece, was a hostess at the birthplace for many years.

Q What are you doing now?

A For the most part, I just go around visiting troops because it is a great pleasure to see what girls are doing and to realize that 18 girls have become four and a half million girls today. [1973]