

Trail Life: An Antidote for Digital Addiction in Boys

<https://mindmatters.ai/podcast/ep297>

Announcer:

Greetings and welcome to Mind Matters News. In today's world of social media and algorithms tuned for dopamine and engagement, it's no wonder that people increasingly find themselves addicted to digital technology. In response, many find it helpful to sometimes unplug and cleanse their palette, so to speak, often by engaging with the outdoors. One such group seeking to bring about digital wellness in this manner is Trail Life USA. And today we're joined by Kent Marks to discuss the organization. Enjoy.

Robert J Marks:

Welcome to Mind Matters News. I'm your bucolic host, Robert J. Marks. There is an epidemic of digital addiction, especially for today's youth. There are prescriptions to recover from digital addiction. Some programs to achieve recovery remind me of diets. It's a list of things to do and a list of things not to do. But as one that has struggled with weight for most of my life, diets based totally on self-control really work.

There are also some specific organizational medicines available to achieve digital wellness. For youth, there are church groups like Awana's and organizations like the Boys Girls Clubs of America. It used to be that the Boy Scouts of America was a great organization. It got young boys out in nature. They camped, they built fires, they worked with their fathers and their mentors. It groomed boys to be good and honorable men. Community with nature helps youngsters forget about TikTok and other social media.

Well, at least for a while. Founded in 1910, more than 130 million Americans have participated in the Boy Scouts. Before January, 2014, the Boy Scouts prohibited quote, "Known or avowed homosexuals." They changed that policy. They also changed a policy that now allows girls to join the Boy Scouts. So they had to change their names and they're now called Scouts BSA. Nobody talks about what BSA stands for, but that's Boy Scouts of America. So it's, Scouts BSA. The BSA looks to be in an acronym with no meaning.

No matter how you feel about the Scouts' policy change, their customers didn't like it. Before this change in policy, Boy Scout membership peaked at six-and-a-half-million members. Six-and-a-half-million in 1972. As recently as 1998, the membership was 4.8 million. After adoption of the Scouts' new policies, membership has dropped like a hot potato. Here's the most recent data.

This is from the Associated Press. I saw it on the web, so it must be true. The Associated Press says there's just shy of 2 million Boy Scouts. Now, this was in 2019. In 2020, this dropped to a bit over a million. That was a 43% drop in membership. There was a further decline in 2021 to a bit over three quarters of a million members.

So their membership is really anemic, and I haven't checked the latest figures, but it doesn't look too good for the membership of Boy Scouts. And they have problems other than memberships. They lost a whopping two-and-a-half-billion-dollar sexual abuse settlement. According to Reuters, 80,000 members have claimed sexual abuse from top leaders as the result of being scouts. Let me repeat that number because it blew my mind. 80,000 members are in this lawsuit. Scouts BSA was forced into bankruptcy by this big fine, and it's a big problem.

There is even an organization of the formerly sexually abused scouts. It's called the Coalition of Abused Scouts for Justice. Coalition of Abused Scouts for Justice. And they say that the settlement will bring some "justice" to tens of thousands of survivors, men and women, many of whom have been waiting

decades for this day to arrive. So the Boy Scouts promised to be some medicine for digital addiction and to get away from some of the pitfalls that happen with social media.

But a lot of these people fell into other circumstances, which were very unfortunate. It turns out that I was a Boy Scout before their pivot to progressivism. My father was the leader of my Cub Scout pack back in Garfield Heights, Ohio. I have great memories from the Boy Scouts up through my middle teens. That's when the Boy Scouts kind of stop. And I experienced during that time no abuse, nor did I ever see a hint of such problems.

This was before the days of today's digital addiction. But I got to admit the Boy Scouts got me away from TV. I just took a little quiz online. If you can name 30 out of these 40 old television shows, you have an IQ of a million or something like that. And I got them all right except for one. So yeah, I was a TV addict. My scout troop did great things. Got me away from the television. We hiked. We learned great skills. We bonded with our fathers and our mentors. It was great. Today I have pause about Scouts BSA, giving their history. I would not recommend that my grandsons join the scouts. But if not the Boy Scouts, where do kids go today for the great digital wellness medicine of outdoors, especially city boys? Many boys today don't even have fathers. So how do these kids safely enjoy the activities I enjoyed as a kid?

One great answer is an organization called Trail Life. A friend of mine, Brian Kraus, we're working on editing a book together. He recently moved from Seattle to Tennessee for the same reason a lot of people are leaving progressive states. And he has some boys who joined Trail Life. Brian was talking to me on a Zoom call and he was enthusiastic about the organization and asked me if I had ever heard of Trail Life. I had.

It turns out that my cousin, Kent Marks was in on the founding of Trail Life, and he's our guest today. And we're delighted to have him. Kent is a ... Well, here's a little bit of background. Kent is the founder of the Marks Building Company in the Cleveland, Ohio area. He's been in business for 35 years. He's also an Eagle Scout under the Boy Scouts of America. And after that, he was a Boy Scout leader. He spent 43 years in the Boy Scouts of America, but he came disillusioned, and the scouts are now a distant memory in his rearview mirror, and he is fully invested in Trail Life. Kent, welcome.

Kent Marks:

Hey, Bob. How you doing?

Robert J Marks:

I'm doing just exactly right. Got some questions for you. I looked on Wikipedia. There's a list of Eagle Scouts. Now, you earned the rank of Eagle Scout. And you, it turns out, are among some pretty elite people. Here's some cherry-picking from guys that have been Eagle Scouts. Neil Armstrong, first man on the moon was an Eagle Scout.

This one surprised me. Steven Spielberg, Sam Walton, founder of Walmart. Supreme Court Justice Steven Breyer. Bill Gates' Father, William H. Gates was an Eagle Scout. Presidential candidates, Michael Dukakis, Ross Perot and Rick Perry were all Eagle Scouts, and current US senators Mike Lee and Rick Scott are Eagle Scouts. As well as former President Gerald Ford was an Eagle Scout. Now you went through the gauntlet to become an Eagle Scout. What does it take to be an Eagle Scout?

Kent Marks:

Well, it's not easy. It was a difficult thing to do and it's supposed to be difficult. And it really prepared a young man for the realities of life. To set goals, and challenges, and go exceed those, and weave yourself through the path of all the distractions to accomplish those goals. And I got my Eagle Scout two days

before my 18th birthday, which is the deadline. So I got my full gamut. But it was very difficult to do as a teenager. And I look back today, and that was the basis of my life is the character building and the way it took to prepare to be a man.

Robert J Marks:

So in the Boy Scouts, you can only be a member up until the age of 17. When you turn 18, you're out. Is that right?

Kent Marks:

Your 18th birthday, you're an adult. Yes, that's true.

Robert J Marks:

Okay. Now if I remember right, you had to read a bunch of merit badges, and they have some strange merit badges. What were some of them that you earned? Do you remember?

Kent Marks:

Well, yeah, I remember I had to earn 24 at the time. I was part of that 6.5 million back in the '70s. So there was a lot of us, but there was some merit badges to this day. American business, I remember that one. Citizenships. Emergency preparedness was a very difficult one. I enjoy the camping and the wilderness survival merit badges. So there was a whole selection of life skills that were required and electives to become an Eagle. Some of them were very, very, very fun. I enjoyed it.

Robert J Marks:

Well, that's great. Baylor's reputation, I teach at Baylor University, their reputation goes up and down depending on how many football games they win, believe it or not. And when the wins go up, then we have a lot of applicants. When we're doing bad, the applications kind of fall. So there is kind of an up and down according to the brand. With the recent disgrace of Scouts USA with this lawsuit, 80,000 kids, oh my gosh, that blows my mind. With the disgrace of Scouts USA and the tarnishing of the brand, do you think the status of being an Eagle Scout has also been diminished?

Kent Marks:

It has been diminished, yeah. The requirements have been created to make it easier. I was upset with it when they made it where you could be a 13-year-old and get Eagle Scout. Heck, those 13 year olds are still afraid of what's behind the door in their closet. They're not men yet. And it's been watered down. And then of course I hear that girls are in Boy Scouts now and there's Girl Eagle Scouts.

Well, that just ... I have nothing against girls. I have two granddaughters. I love them to death, but there's programs for girls and there's programs for boys. And combining the two, it made it difficult. But yeah, it's been diminished. It's been diminished, and it's still looked upon as the pinnacle, but people look at it with a question in their face.

Robert J Marks:

Yeah, I got to think that indeed is the case. And there's something called Goodhart's Law, which says that anytime you start counting beans, that the number of beans that you count becomes an ineffective measure for what you're trying to do. I would imagine, I don't know this, but I would imagine Scouts would say, "We have 200,000 Eagle Scouts," and that was a big brag. And of course they would want to

make that number bigger. And so they would diminish the criteria it would take to become an Eagle Scout. And that's what you're saying. That's very interesting. Can you think of a specific way that they reduce the requirements to become an Eagle Scout?

Kent Marks:

Well, of course, drop the merit badge count. I'm not sure what it was, but when I left, it was 21. When I was there, it was 24. The service projects, which is really, it's a life skill where you plan, implement, take leadership on projects that's approved by mentors. I know those have been watered down quite a bit. It's so that number can stay higher because there's less that are buy-in for veteran Boy Scouts, there's less that are buy-in for Eagle because there's less candidates.

So they're trying to make it as more attainable. But it's watered down with most of the requirements. It used to be when we did service Eagle board reviews, we would ask, "What is your stance with God?" And now that question's not asked. So it's just part of the scout oath and the law that's been watered out as well. That's part of becoming an Eagle Scout. More can attain it without having the Christian principles that were founded by the founder of Boy Scouts is Robert Baden-Powell. So that's been changed over the last 100 years.

Robert J Marks:

Now you were a Boy Scout leader and you were associated with the Scout for I think 43 years. Is that right?

Kent Marks:

I count the 43 years since when I was a Cub scout. My father, which is your uncle, and your uncle were both Cub Scout leaders. And I was quite happy to hear that my Uncle Jack was a scout leader. But yeah, 43 years. I was a scoutmaster for 27 of those years and then of course gotten district level, and helped out with multiple troops.

But yeah, I've seen a lot of changes. In the last 15 years when I was in Scouts, I could see changes coming from the professional end of Boy Scouts where the district executives used to be trained to support the volunteers, and then gradually it changed where those district executives were trained and taught to lead and tell the volunteers what to do. And that's one of the downfalls of the scouts, in my opinion, is the dynamics changed. The volunteer base was told what to do instead of having support to exceed in what they were ... The successful path of Boy Scouts was.

Robert J Marks:

Yeah, that reminds me, by the ... Yeah, Eisenhower, after World War II, before he became president, I think in 1950. Was it '50? It has to be divisible by four, so it must have been 52. He was the president of Columbia University. And he came to the university as the president because he was very prestigious and all that stuff. And he said, "It's great to be here among all the employees of Columbia University." A professor interrupted him and he said, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, President Eisenhower," president of Columbia. He says, "We are not employees of the university. We are the university."

It sounds, and certainly that's changed in the university. No more are the professors in charge of the university. It is run like a business. And that sounds kind of like that's what happened with Boy Scouts or scouts, if you will. That it became administrative heavy and that it began to dictate all of the possibilities to the low citizens, the serfs, if you will.

Kent Marks:

Well, we could see that the Friends of Scouting, the financial campaign used to be a two-month campaign, and then all of a sudden it changed to be a year long. Everything was about paying the salaries, and the highest salaries. But I got to tell you, Bob, I'm with Trail Life now, and I look at the Boy Scouts of my time, and I believe that the Lord prepared me and many others in the scout program to be ready for this new program. So I have a hard time saying bad things about the BSA during my time.

Robert J Marks:

Yeah, exactly. I think when you and I were in it, it was probably a lot more like Trail Life is today.

Kent Marks:

Yeah.

Robert J Marks:

It was really, really cool. So let's talk about that. When you were the Boy Scout leader, and you took your boys out. We want to talk about digital wellness, getting them away from the things of just the routine of life, and out into the wilderness and such. What sort of things did you do with them?

Kent Marks:

We did that. We went out, on purpose. We did camp outs every month. We planned big adventure trips. We took the boys to Canada every couple of years to portage canoes four or five miles to inland lakes and to live off the land, the blueberry. I never thought I'd get tired of blueberries and fish. But after a while you get tired of blueberries and fish. But we made men out of boys when we took them out in the wilderness, and out to see God's creation. We made it on purpose to go to a place called Philmont every couple years, and that's a 10-day backpacker in the Rocky Mountains in Northern New Mexico. And by the way, Bob, it's a great weight loss program. I lost 24 pounds in 10 days.

Every couple of days I'm putting another notch in my belt so my belt could tighten up a little bit more. But it was a great, great opportunity to get these young men out. And it's the video game of life. These boys sit in front of these screens, and they want to play these video games. But you get these young men out and it's a real video game. You've got to go from point A to point B, and there's no start over button.

And you've got obstacles, you've got rivers, you got creeks, you got mountains, you got valleys, you've got wildlife. You've got bear tracks, you've got bobcat tracks. You've got all kinds of things. And that you've got to navigate through that video game of your real trip. And it gives the boys a different perspective of, "Wow, this is a real life video game." And it's men making, for sure.

Robert J Marks:

And it's a lot more fun than playing a video game too, isn't it?

Kent Marks:

It is. It is. You can't mimic the reality compared to what you see on the screen. It's just, you can't mimic the smells, the sounds, the beauty, the roughness, the challenge ahead of you. The mental aspect of being out in the wilderness. The mental aspect of knowing you have a hundred miles ahead of you and backpack. Or you've got class three rapids up ahead of you, and you can't get out, you have to go

through that and overcome the obstacle in front of you. And again, that's something you can't do unless you get these young men out there in the wilderness, outdoors. Not even wilderness, just the outdoors.

Robert J Marks:

Great. You mentioned that you became disillusioned with the Boy Scouts, now Scouts BSA. One of the things you mentioned was that the administration became a little top-heavy and started to dictate everything that was going on. Just like universities do today. Where professors no longer are the university, it's the administration and a bunch of people that think they know how to run a university. So the same thing happened with the Boy Scouts. I think, if I remember right, your disillusion with the Boy Scouts became gradual. It wasn't a single event, but there were a number of events. Is that right? Or was it singular events?

Kent Marks:

I can look back at a few moments that I would step back and think, "That is something that I can't support." The changes with the moral values, the scout oath, "All my honor, I'll do my best to do my duty to God and my country. To obey the Scout law, to help other people at all times. Keep myself physically strong, mentally awake and morally straight." I saw the definition of the word morally straight changing ever so subtly, where you really didn't notice it unless you really paid attention. I saw the God aspect disappearing. I remember a time when we were at a Klondike, four or 500 boys and their leaders on a winter camp out weekend. And I was in charge of this event. And I was getting a little pushback on saying prayers. I could care less what people think about ... If I want to say a prayer, I'm going to say a prayer.

We always had these placards, and the placards is like the Philmont grace. "For food, for raiment, for opportunity, for friendship. We thank the old Lord." That was all that said, and everybody just read it. And it was like robots reading words and had no meaning or definition of what they were saying. So I said a real prayer, and the pushback I got after saying that prayer was one of those moments when I stood back and said, "Something different is going to happen someday, and I hope I'm part of it because I cannot be part of this too much longer."

Robert J Marks:

So who gave you that pushback? Was it somebody in ... A leader?

Kent Marks:

Other leader, parents that were at that event. I remember a father coming up saying, how dare you say a prayer, and saying the word Jesus. And I said, "Well, how dare you come tell me what I can and can't say because Jesus is everything to me, and I just want to make sure that we keep the word reverent in Boy Scouts." Of course, he was picking on the wrong person, because I do stand my ground when it comes to Christ.

But it was one of those defining moments. It wasn't just him. It was other people, even weeks and months later that said, "Hey, boy, that was pretty brave to say that prayer." Why would it be brave to say a prayer? And I was just seeing some subtle changes and actually was starting to push back on some of them.

Robert J Marks:

Were you involved in the scouts when they did the policy switch to allow gays to become involved?

Kent Marks:

Well, I was ... No, what happened was I was a district chairman.

Robert J Marks:

What's a district chairman do in Boy Scouts? What'd you do there?

Kent Marks:

A district chairman is a volunteer. I'm in charge of about 70, 80 troops and they're volunteers and leaders. I'm the volunteer leader that chairs that district of three counties. And I remember in February of 2013, the national office of the BSA sent out a statement, a news statement stating that the vote coming in May, the national conference was going to vote whether they allow gays into the Scouts or not. And I made it a point to tell my committee that if that vote changes, the dynamics BSA then I'm out. Well, when May came along, May 25th, 2013, the BSA had their national convention and they voted, and 70% of the votes were in favor of the change. And that's the day I turned my resignation.

Robert J Marks:

Really? Okay.

Kent Marks:

Yeah, it was amazing to see that it was 60, 70, somewhere in there. It was not close. However, the person we sent out, our delegate from our council, which was 400 and some councils, our delegate we sent out, said that he was going to vote against it. And when he went there, he voted for it.

So things happened, we're not sure what happened. But reminds me of recent elections actually. But that's, I digress. Anyway, I remember coming home that day and my wife saying, "I just heard the news that the BSA voted to allow gays," and Bob, it was like a family member died.

You're in this for 43 years. And the awful grief of knowing that I can't be part of that anymore. It's been all my life. But my wife looked at me, I remember this to this day, she looked at me with that face and my wife never ... She's not one of these to speak up. She goes, "What are you going to do about it?" I remember those words to this day, "What are you are going to do about it?"

Robert J Marks:

Okay.

Kent Marks:

Anyway.

Robert J Marks:

And Trail Life was the answer. We're going to talk about this on the next installment of that. Welcome to Mind Matters News. I'm your bucolic host, Robert J. Marks. Kent, do you know what bucolic means? I didn't before yesterday.

Kent Marks:

No. I'm wondering. I'm afraid that.

Robert J Marks:

It means enjoying the outdoors. Enjoying the country life. If you're bucolic, you enjoy the outdoors, you enjoy the country life, rural setting, kind of a slow life sort of person. So that's what bucolic means. I'd like to learn a new word every day. Tell us about Trail Life. Tell us about the founding of it. We went last time through the Boy Scouts and you're disillusioned with the Boy Scouts. Renamed Scouts BSA, and your wife asked you, "What are you going to do about it?" And the answer was Trail life. So tell us about the founding of Trail Life here.

Kent Marks:

Sure. So anyway, in 2013 after the BSA had their vote, many volunteer leaders in the Boy Scouts, and one Boy Scout executive turned their resignations in, and we were all part of a thing called LinkedIn. And we were on LinkedIn talking about what are we going to do if that vote changes, if that happens? And it happened.

Robert J Marks:

This was the vote, by the way, to let in gays in Boy Scouts.

Kent Marks:

In the Boy ... Yeah,

Robert J Marks:

Professing gays. Okay.

Kent Marks:

Right. So when that happened, we were on LinkedIn. It was just probably a couple hundred of us, and we started talking about different things that we could do. And there was this one man, his name is John Steinberger. John works for the Florida Family Council in Florida. Orlando, Florida. And the place he worked for gave him a year ... I don't know if I have this correct, but a year to go do something different to make a difference.

John was one of the folks that was protesting at the vote, the BSA, in Irvine, Texas. And John also was instrumental in putting these men together and creating a new organization. And we did a lot of things in three months. From May of 2013, we started planning and talking about this new organization, a Christians organization. We didn't have a name yet. We actually put some surveys out to folks that were interested.

And the name Trail Life was unveiled at a national convention, inaugural convention in Nashville, Tennessee, September 6th, 2013. Over 1400 men and some women wise, like my wife, came. We're at that convention and we unveiled the name Trail Life and prepared for a 2014 January 1st launch. And a lot of work took place during that time. A lot of preparation, a lot of planning, a lot of general direction, guidance procedures just to ... Basically starting a new organization.

But we had the ability to glean on what we knew worked at the Boy Scouts and what did not work. And we implemented those things that worked and brought in a Christian worldview, and a Christian outdoor adventure program is what we've created. It teaches biblical moral values. And that was the basis. And the basis was to bring Christ into this organization. We're not overly churchy or religious. But focusing on outdoor adventure, and character, and developing leaders, and raising godly young men.

And that was really the purpose. And it's launched on January 1st, 2014 with over 500 troops. And 90% of those-

Robert J Marks:

Wow!

Kent Marks:

Boy Scout troops that were doing Trail Life type of things when they were Boy Scouts. Including my troop. My troop folded, but my troop was like a Trail Life troop, way before Trail Life was even thought of. But there were over 500 troops, 512 I believe we started off with, and that was it. We started out strong. And I got to tell you, we created a lot of stuff and made some things up along the way to get going. But folks, volunteers, and families, and churches, and charter organizations really took a hold of this new idea. And it's just doing wonderful things today, Bob.

Robert J Marks:

So are you doing stuff with Trail Life that the Boy Scouts used to do? Last time we talked, we talked about getting outdoors, going camping, bonding with your fathers and your mentors. Doing great things outdoors, getting you away from the humdrum of life. Getting modern kids away from cell phone addictions and such. I believe that's what Trail Life does. Describe some of your activities that you do.

Kent Marks:

Well, yeah, that's exactly it. Like I said, we've learned a lot from the leaders of BSA, but it's been 10 years. Most of our leaders were not in Boy Scouts, or leaders, or came from the BSA, so we are way beyond that now. But in the early days, we used a lot of the outdoor emphasis. The backpacking, the camping, the canoeing, the shooting sports. That's the other thing. In Trail Life we emphasize shooting sports. In the BSA, you're not even allowed to use a squirt gun.

Robert J Marks:

Are you ... Really?

Kent Marks:

Yeah, it is. And even there's Nerf darts. You're not allowed to use those or anything just for fun. You're not allowed to participate in any shooting activities. But in Trail Life, we've embraced it as part of raising up a young man to become a Christian, God-fearing adult. And there's a lot of emphasis on our troops are church owned. They're not owned by Trail Life. Each church is called a chartered organization.

And they have their own bylaws that cannot water down the Trail Life rules, but they can add to it. So we have a lot of different churches out there with different denominations that are part of Trail Life. And the main focus is that to become a charter organization, you have to believe in the Trinity. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And if they align, that can be a charter troop in Trail Life. But getting these boys outdoors, it's the most important, most important thing to see his creation. And we can utilize that in so many ways to let them enjoy outdoor skills and adventure knowing that the Lord is behind everything.

Robert J Marks:

I got to ask you, Kent, during these outings, do you allow the kids to have cell phones? Just thinking that maybe you want to get them away from cell phones?

Kent Marks:

Again, that's one of those things that's the individual troop policy. Some troops don't allow it, others do. You can take the cell phone as a tool. Instead as a nuisance, you can use as a tool. Most leaders do carry their cell phones for emergency, and for that type of thing.

Robert J Marks:

Of course, yes.

Kent Marks:

But I would say most of the troops do not allow the cell phones on camp outs and outings. I'm not involved with any particular troop. I'm called a regional team leader. I'm a volunteer leader for troops in seven states. So my job is a finger on the pulse to see what's happening out there, see what works, what's not working. Are we using cell phones or not? And what's the advantage, what's the disadvantage? That's my role. So I'm hearing that most of the troops do not allow cell phones.

Robert J Marks:

Okay. You mentioned shooting sports. When you and I grew up, our grandfather, we had the same grandfather, paternal grandfather. In his house, you used to come in the front door and they used to have rifles and shotguns kind of leaned up against the wall there in the entryway.

Kent Marks:

Loaded.

Robert J Marks:

And they were loaded, they were ready to go, and it was never a big deal. I think that a lot of people that are against firearms have never experienced firearms. They come up with all these myths that don't explain about what firearms do, and how to train a kid to take care of them. I'm certain that you do in Trail Life when you emphasize a shooting sports.

Kent Marks:

Sure. It teaches character. It teaches responsibility. It matures a young man up where he knows he's got to be responsible. It's not taught as a weapon so much as a tool. It's a great bonding experience with fathers and sons. There's so many benefits to shooting sports, and it's a sport in itself. There's a lot of competition. Shooting competitions are a lot of fun. Right down to setting the targets up and fathers going against their son. See who can get closer to 50 points. There's real joy in competition, for sure. But it builds character. It builds a responsibility in these young men, which a lot of cases, they have no place in their lives where they have an opportunity to learn about responsibility.

Robert J Marks:

I remember a lot of great experiences I had with my father in terms of shooting. We had a powder gun where you had to put the ball in and you had to put powder in. And he taught me how to do that. So I was down in-

Kent Marks:

It's muzzleloader right?

Robert J Marks:

West Virginia. What's that?

Kent Marks:

Muzzleloader, wasn't it? Yeah.

Robert J Marks:

Yeah, a muzzleloader. There you go. That's the word I was looking for. And so I went in and I stuck the ball in, the cloth in, and got the powder in and everything, and got the little spark that ignites the powder. And my dad and his dad were sitting there just laughing, kind of. They were smirking under their breath like ... Well, it turns out it was already loaded. And I put a second load in it.

Kent Marks:

Oh no.

Robert J Marks:

And that thing, it went off, and it just about ripped my hand off and they just laughed. They thought that was the funniest thing in the world. But when my dad finally got to the point where he thought I was responsible enough, he gave me a 22 rifle, and he said, "Son, you always assume that it's loaded. You never point it at anything alive unless you want to kill it. Always know where the bullet's going. You don't want to shoot towards the house or anything."

Kent Marks:

Absolutely.

Robert J Marks:

And then he said, "Go have fun." I think I was about 15 at the time or something like that. And that's the way the people in rural areas are trained. And another thing, Kent, that boys want to shoot stuff. My wife went through a period where our son, Joshua, was a little boy. And she didn't want him to have guns. So he was going around the house and he was going ... and Monica, my wife, said, "Josh, you can't do that." And boys just have a propensity for shooting. And he said, "Oh, mom, don't worry. It's not a gun. It's a flamethrower." So he had gamed the whole system. And I think boys just naturally want to shoot things. So it's great that Trail Life does that and teaches the responsibility for the handling of firearms.

Kent Marks:

Well, if you remember, it was a family tradition. Every year during deer season, we'd all gather and have deer drives. And we were very responsible with our guns. And I remember my father let me take his .30-06 the first time ever, and my dad settled with something less because he wanted his son to have a man's gun. And I got to tell you, Bob, when I shot that thing, I felt it for like three days. It had some good kick.

Robert J Marks:

My son Jeremiah, when we finally trusted him with a shotgun, he went up and he shot the thing. And as he was shooting it, he came in that night and his shoulder was just black and blue. But he loved shooting it so much that next day he tied a pillow to his arm and put the shotgun up next to the pillow so he could shoot it some more. And he had just a blast doing it.

Kent Marks:

Didn't realize that a 20 gauge does not have the kick of a 12 gauge.

Robert J Marks:

Okay. I don't remember what the gauge was, but it was a shotgun and shotguns kick. And it just amazed me that the extent he went through to make sure he could still continue to shoot that gun. He just loved it so much. Okay, new topic. The Scouts BSA, formerly the Boy Scouts of America is paying a two-and-a-half-billion, two-and-a-half-billion-dollar fine to settle claims by ... Oh, this takes my breath away, 80,000 former scouts who say they were abused by their leaders. 80,000 former scouts. One of the things that Trail Life needs to do, and I know that you've done it, is make sure that Trail Life doesn't repeat the problems that Scouts BSA are using. What are you doing to assure that this doesn't repeat itself in Trail Life?

Kent Marks:

Absolutely. That's a good question, Bob. Again, we've learned a lot from the BSA. Unfortunately, our insurance reflects that claim. We have high premiums because it's youth organization, but in Trail Life, we vet our leaders. We have, first of all, our leaders have to sign a statement of faith, and they have to get a recommendation from a minister, or a pastor, or their priest.

And then they have to go through a process. They pay their own background check. They fill out all this information, including the social security number. They get a criminal background check. Then once that passes, then they have to take a online child youth protection training. It's about three-hour training process. And then you take a test. If you don't pass the test, you don't become a leader. And then, of course, we vet them out in Trail Life itself. And we actually, we do call on references. However, not everyone ... People can still get through and not be those studious citizens of our country, and we have not experienced that yet.

However, when we do have situations or issues, if there are in a troop, we have a process where the troop fills out a form and they file it immediately, and it's sent to a legal department. Legal department deals with it. And we have learned from the Boy Scouts the valuable lesson. And I will tell you, fortunately, I did not see any of that when I was a leader.

So I'm sure it was kept under key when I was a leader in Boy Scouts. But in Trail Life, that is one of my jobs is to hear of anything that goes on. And it's not happened, not happened yet, because our vetting process, we are actually vetting the best of the best Christian volunteers out there. I remind you, the Boy Scouts, they did not have to be a Christian volunteer. They just had to be a volunteer. They could have a DUI and nobody would know. In Trail Life, if you have any felony at any time of your life, they do not accept you as a leader in Trail Life.

Robert J Marks:

Wow, that's amazing.

Kent Marks:

It is actually somewhat difficult to find leaders, because there's not that many Christian men out there ready to volunteer. So in the level that our volunteers are giving. And we're so blessed with the ones that are. And they are really, really good men.

Robert J Marks:

One of the things Brian Kraus, I mentioned to you, he was a guy that brought up Trail Life to me. He's a guy that moved from Seattle area to Tennessee to get away from the progressive state of Washington. And he took this test, and he said he was kind of amazed. There's certain rules that you have to abide by. I think that one of them is you never send a mentor and a boy out alone. So there's guidelines of that sort. Could you go through a few of those? I thought that was pretty impressive.

Kent Marks:

Yeah. We really emphasized the importance of something called too deep leadership. At any time at all times, an adult leader has to be with another adult. If there's a one-on-one type of things coming up. In other words, if a trailman ... We call boys from five to 18 year olds, we call them trailmen, not trail boys. And if there's a trailman that's by himself, there's always got to be two adults. Even to the point where ... There's things you don't think about, like in a troop meeting. Say somebody needs to go to the restroom, you just go down to the church hall and you go to the men's restroom, and all of a sudden you're in there one-on-one with a trailman. That is a no-no, we highly emphasize it.

At any time, wherever you're going, you're always with another adult. And it's true with the trailmen as well. We do a three deep with boys. If they camp in a tent, there's always three in a tent, not two. And anytime when they travel, they hike, they walk, they go get something, there's always at least three. And this is highly emphasized at all levels of Trail Life. So yes, we recognize that as very important.

Robert J Marks:

Wow. Brian told me that, and I was kind of impressed. Because this is where the bad things are going to happen. If you do have a bad apple in the barrel. That's where things are going to happen. The interesting thing about the Boy Scouts is, or the BSA, I should say Scouts BSA since they've renamed themselves, is they claim to be theistic. I think last time we talked, you mentioned about the pledge, which starts, "On my honor, I will do my best to do my duty to God." So yeah, there is the profession of a God there, "And my country, and obey the scout law to keep other people ... To help other people at all times. To keep myself physically strong, mentally awake and morally straight." There's also the scout ... I forget what they call it. It's the ... Where they say the scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverend.

That still is engaged in my mind after all of these years after having required to memorize that as a Boy Scout. It's interesting. There is this idea of God in what I just read. There's this idea of reverence. And as you mentioned, the pledge ends with the idea of morally straight. Morally straight means something different than it did in 2010 when the Boy Scouts were formed. It means something different than when we were Boy Scouts. Instead of an ever-changing fluid interpretation of what character means, and that's what the Scouts BSA have done. They kind of go with the social flow. It's kind of malleable. Malleable morality. Trail Life's foundation is built on a rock. And you've kind of mentioned that rock. Could you elaborate on that a little bit?

Kent Marks:

Yeah, we have a thing called core values in Trail Life. And I think there's 14 of them. I mean, we add one, we add one here or there. I think there's ... Actually, there's 16 now. We had something called the six essential concepts of a Christian worldview. In the worldview, Christian worldview that we adhere to is truth, creation, human dignity, the importance of family, stewardship to our world, and providence, sovereign of all history. We don't ignore any of that.

But we also have a thing called the core values. And the core values is ... I'm going to read a couple of them here if we could. We're Christ-centered. We are church-owned and operated, outdoor-focused. But back to the Christ-centered. We're a Christian outdoor program that emphasizes and teaches those biblical moral values. This is the important part. It pertains to the Christian worldview is present throughout our entire program. I mentioned we are church-owned and operated. We are outdoor-focused using the outdoors as a grandness of God's creation and reflecting his creation. We impart with the safety as we talked about, the too deep.

We have a health and safety guide that we follow that cannot be changed at all. We teach our young men and our leaders to be courageous. We need our men to have spines of steel, Bob. In today's society, Christians are being attacked in all directions and we are truly, I believe, we're one of the last bastions of an opportunity for raising young men to be godly leaders and godly husbands.

And with that, we've got a lot of attacking coming from all directions. We are male-centered and adult ... Our leaderships are male. We don't have women training up these young men. Moms have a very important role in a boy's life. But to raise a young man to become a godly young man, he has had an influence of a male model and mentor.

Robert J Marks:

Yes.

Kent Marks:

The mothers have their place, absolutely. But at some point these young men need to see what a man is all about. If I may step aside for a second, we have a president, Herbert Hoover said, "There are two jobs for American boys today. One is being a boy, the other is growing up to be a man. And that's no truer. Both jobs are important. Both are packed with excitement, great undertakings and high adventure, and boldness, and independence. The courage to take these chances, these must not be suppressed, but they must be directed to constructive joy."

This is from Herbert Hoover. We need to understand that male leadership and male mentorship is the most important thing in Trail Life. These boys have to have men to raise them up. We are volunteer driven. And when I say that, I think there's maybe staff of 30 that ... Paid professionals, and there's probably 17, 18,000 volunteers in Trail Life. So the staff supports the volunteers. So there's a lot of things I can go with, but basically our core values is our guide to Trail Life.

Robert J Marks:

Well, Trail Life is unapologetically Christian. You told me a parable one time about carrot cake, and I kind of like that. Could you relate the parable about the carrot cake and how that relates to Trail Life?

Kent Marks:

Well, I'll tell you this. First of all, my first job ever at a GC Murphy restaurant, and I was a busboy and dishwasher. And it so happened that Mrs. Alderson, the owner, would make everything from scratch, and she loved her carrot cakes. And she'd had that out there, big silver tray with a big glass lid. And

when there was one carrot cake left, for some reason nobody bought it. So she would always bring that back to me. And I love carrot cake because I always got to enjoy her carrot cake.

But she wanted to put a new cake in there so she could sell it all except for the last piece. Well, carrot cake is like this in Trail Life. We want to teach our young man about Christ. We want to teach them about the Bible. We want to teach them about Bible verses and stories in the Bible, and to go deep into that.

But that's sort of like in today's world, it's sort of like, "Young man, here's a carrot," and they're just going to push it away, because it's just a carrot. However, if we can take that carrot and we can shred it up, and we can package it up in something that they will accept, we can bring those stories, we can bring those verses, we can bring those parables, we can bring those life changes from knowing Christ and knowing the difference between good and evil.

We can do that when we shred that carrot up little pieces and those boys will accept it. So for example, we could actually say, "We're going to go on a camp out and we're just going to sit, we're going to read the Bible."

Now the boys are not going to be excited about that. But we can go on a camp out, and we can teach you how to chop a tree branch, and make firewood, and cut boards, and cut logs. And you use it, and sharpen a knife, and sharpen an ax. And then we can just say, "Hey, by the way, that reminds me of a Bible verse, it's Proverbs 27:17. "As iron sharpens iron, so does one man sharpen another." And that's the carrot cake. And that's how we bring the message without them pushing off. Because they're enjoying and they see, "Oh, there's a connection here. I get it." So that's probably my easiest best example of the Proverbs 27:17.

Robert J Marks:

I think the parable about carrot cake is really kind of cool. One of the big questions that it's the bottom line. Have you seen boys' lives changed by Trail Life?

Kent Marks:

I have. I've seen many times. Actually, I've seen family's lives change because of Trail Life. When we first started Trail Life, we were like, "We got to do this for the boy. This is that for the boy. We got to raise that boy up." But we didn't realize the effect it had on moms, and dads, and brothers, and sisters that were too old or too young yet.

Robert J Marks:

Really?

Kent Marks:

We recognize that there's an impact with the family. Bob, I remember a pastor at a church here in Ohio. I was talking to him just three or four years into Trail Life. He goes, "you know, Kent, since we started Trail Life, I can count at least 22 new families in my church." Not 22 new boys, but 22 families. And that was like, "Whoa. We're having an impact on families, not just the boys," and it's a great thing. I've seen fathers and sons baptized together, Bob.

Robert J Marks:

Wow.

Kent Marks:

I've seen young men that will stand up in front of a crowd and they will do a church service because they wanted to give it a try. I've seen young men sit down with a younger boy, leading by example. He's a little mentor and taking time out to help that young man with his life troubles. I've seen so many different things.

I've seen boys that have learned the Heimlich Maneuver that have actually saved their father, or saved a person in a restaurant, or saved their younger brother from choking on a hot dog. I've seen men's lives change because they've changed other men's lives. There's so many examples. Our highest achievement at Trail Life, it's called the Freedom Arrangement. It's equivalent ... It's actually a little harder than the Eagle Scout, but it's the highest award in Trail Life. But I've seen young men that were shy and afraid to speak up, become young men that are Freedom Arrangement, and now leaders, and going out in the world and making a difference.

I've seen these guys are now leaders in the past 10 years. There's so many stories, Bob. There's so many exciting things just to witness. The Lord is having an impact on so many lives across this country. The other thing I've seen lives changed by Trail Life is men. We have a thing called a Leader's Decaf. At the end of a camp out or end of a big event, it's mentally the men come together and they sit in a circle.

They don't stand back, or they're not dictated to. They're all equal. And when men are sitting amongst the other men, they open up. Because these men are ... They're leaders of their family. They're the breadwinners. They're the ones that take on all the burdens, and all the stress, and all the trouble. And they have no one to vent to. And when they gather with other men in Trail Life at an event where it's just men, they open up, and they share their problems, and then others reach out and help them out. And it's so rewarding to see this.

Robert J Marks:

It's kind of like an accountability group.

Kent Marks:

It really is, yeah. And it wasn't planned that way. It just sort of happened. But when we have men leaders that are helping each other out, it's amazing what they do with these boys and raise these young men. A lot of lives have changed because of Trail Life, and there are boys have yet be born that are going to be changed because of some of the things these men are doing today. So it's very rewarding, Bob.

Robert J Marks:

That's exciting. So how's the program going? Give me some numbers. What are some of the numbers associated with Drill

Kent Marks:

A? Talk about fluid, these numbers, it's never the same in one day. I mean, we are the only youth organization that has growth in the country, we have ...

Robert J Marks:

Really?

Kent Marks:

For example, last year during August and September each week we had, I think it was 1500 in one week registered. They were staying about 14, 1500 each week of new people registering in Trail Life. That doesn't seem like much across the country, but we are probably about a month away of having over 50,000 members.

We have surpassed a thousand troops. We never thought we'd see that this quick. We have volunteers that are stepping up in area roles. We have over 500 area volunteers. And there's, again, we're hiring more staff. Because as we grow, Trail Life is a business as well. You've got the business end of things. But we're handling the retention officers, we've got membership people. We have more people to do vetting. There's a lot. There's a lot involved. There's a lot of growth in Trail Life. And I'm more amazed at the, we're pushing 50,000 members this quick. That's the big number for me.

Robert J Marks:

That is amazing. I also understand that you have troops in all 50 states right now.

Kent Marks:

Right, and we have in all 50 states. And not just one here or there. Alaska has like 15 troops, and that's amazing.

Robert J Marks:

You're kidding.

Kent Marks:

Yeah, Hawaii has one troop. That's the only state with one troop. But Alaska, I was amazed at 15 troops in Alaska. That's awesome. But we have people reaching in from Canada. We have people from Puerto Rico, from England, from ... Bermuda, have reached out. They want to start Trail Life and we're not there yet.

Robert J Marks:

Now, Trail Life's ... Your website is Trail Life USA, right?

Kent Marks:

Right.

Robert J Marks:

So have you branded yourself to be exclusively within the USA or do you think you ...

Kent Marks:

We started off as Trail Life USA, and actually we now call ourselves Trail Life. I don't foresee reaching out beyond other countries yet. It has a lot to do with insurance, government rules, a lot of those ... There's nuances that we have no control over. Insurance is a big thing as well.

Robert J Marks:

Of course, yes. The big wager, the big gambling hall.

Kent Marks:

We have military bases across the country, across the world that would love to have Trail Life. And we're trying to figure out those, navigate those waters because it's in a different country, but it's actually American soil where these bases are located. A lot of our leaders, a lot of our Trail Life folks are in the military. And they get transferred and moved around a lot. They're so upset when they have to leave the troop and whatnot. And so, they want to start troops in a military base. And I can foresee that coming in the near future. But it's all a progress.

Robert J Marks:

Yep, it is. The obvious question is, is there any plans to provide any sort of separate program for girls? Or are we being premature?

Kent Marks:

No, actually girls, there's a Christian Girls program was on board 20 years before Trail Life started. It's called American Heritage Girls. They also have over a thousand troops and their base is in Cincinnati, Ohio. American Heritage Girls, often we partner with Trail Life. We're great partners because brothers have sisters and sisters have brothers, and parents want to take them to the same troop meeting on the same night. And they have different programs for girls and boys in the same church. So many of our Trail Life troops also have American Heritage. It's called AHG, American Heritage Girls. So yeah, there's a vibrant program out there for girls, very similar to boys. But they do their thing. And we do our thing, because boys are created different than girls, Bob. Completely. Completely.

Robert J Marks:

Oh, that's controversial.

Kent Marks:

It doesn't work when you mix them up.

Robert J Marks:

Yeah. Yeah. That's a controversial thing to say today. But man, I agree with you. Kent, how does one find out more information about Trail Life? If you want to find a nearby troop or maybe even start one, what do you do?

Kent Marks:

We have a website called traillifeusa.com And you go to this website, it shows you ... You can read about the core values the Christian worldview. You can look at the map. It says, "Find a troop," or click on the link for, "Start a troop." We have a lot of troops started, not by the pastors. We love it when the pastors want to start a troop, by the way. But it's usually a parishioner of a church. It's a member of a church that would like to get a Trail Life troop started.

And they go to this site and they can see how it's started, see what to do. And just click on that link and fill in some information. And what we have is ... For example, if you want to start a troop in your church, you fill out the start a troop form. And we have volunteers called pointmen, and pointmen have teams in each area in the country.

We have probably over 200 areas right now where if you click on, "This is where I live," someone, some volunteer's designated for that area in the country. And they will reach out within 24 to 48 hours and

say, "Hey, I'm here to help you. If you would like to start a troop, let's talk." So there's a lot of support out there.

And if you don't want to start a troop or there's a troop nearby, you just go to the map says, "Find a troop." And if you want your boy to be in a Trail Life troop, look for the closest troop to where you live and click on that. It'll give you contact information to reach out to that troop, and that troop will get your information and reach out to you usually within a week. It's a great site to find out about Trail Life and to pull some literature information to offer to your church.

Robert J Marks:

That is really exciting stuff. The impact of social media has just been terrible. Teenage suicides are up. Depression rates are up. I think a third of all girls involved in social media have body image problems, and that's terrible. These are the symptoms of digital addiction. And digital wellness corresponds to getting these people out of TikTok, and Snapchat, and other social media, and maybe out in the woods, and talk to people. Talk to people their own age, talk to fathers and mentors. Even if somebody doesn't have a father, there's going to be mentors. And the beautiful thing about Trail Life that I like is the background checks that you guys do. So you can feel safe sending your kids there, knowing that all of these policies are in line.

Kent Marks:

Bob, we have a program we're just starting here in my area. My region's called The Nehemiah Man. If you remember Nehemiah, he was the one that helped go rebuild the wall around Jerusalem. And if you remember, they were building with one hand and fighting off the enemy with the other because folks did not want that wall built. And that's what we call Nehemiah Man, because almost 33% of boys in Trail Life troops do not have a father, or a father that's involved with them in the Trail Life.

Robert J Marks:

Really?

Kent Marks:

And in their lives. There are a lot of single moms that are bringing their sons to Trail Life because they want to be around men. They want to be that male influence. And we call these men and they step up. And I'll pat you on the back and say, "Good job," and talk to you and be a mentor. We call that a Nehemiah Man. In other words, he is building that young man up, and he's holding that sword or holding that shield and fighting off society and the evils that are attacking that young man.

And we've got quite a few of those fathers out there right now that are stepping up and say, "Yeah, I'll be that guy." It's sort of like a ... I remember the Catholic organization had a Big Brothers, Big Sisters. It's similar to that. So a man will take on, be a mentor to a young man that's fatherless.

Robert J Marks:

Oh, that's pretty exciting, Kent. I tell you, I am just pumped about Trail Life and all the work you and other people have done with Trail Life. Look, we've been talking to Kent Marks. He's the founder and president of the Marks Building Company in the Cleveland, Ohio area. And you have a website, don't you, for your building company?

Kent Marks:

Yeah, my son runs the business now, so he...

Robert J Marks:

Oh, does he?

Kent Marks:

Yeah. He's got a site called marksbuilding.com.

Robert J Marks:

[Marksbuilding.com](http://marksbuilding.com). Okay. And we're going to put links to Trail Life and other links in the podcast notes. So again, we've been talking to Kent. Kent is also an Eagle Scout, former Boy Scout leader and a founding father of an incredible organization called Trail Life. Thank you for listening. Until next time, be of good cheer.

Announcer:

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