

Grant, Gary: A Boy Scout Jamboree to Remember ^[1]

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Gary Grant: A Boy Scout Jamboree to Remember

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 4/14/2002. Copyrighted.
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I visited with Gary Grant in Tillery, a rural, African-American community in [Halifax County](#) ^[3], 100 miles northeast of Raleigh. Raised in an experimental resettlement community in Tillery in which FDR's New Deal gave hundreds of black sharecroppers the opportunity to buy their own farms, Grant has been a pioneering advocate for black farmers in America. "What comes out of owning land is an independent spirit," Grant told me, "and that's what the power brokers in America can't have, an independent spirited people."

To preserve black-owned farmland, Grant and his neighbors have done everything from standing down a sheriff who was foreclosing on Grant's own family's farm to launching a class action lawsuit that proved that federal farm programs discriminated against black farmers. Those efforts were featured on CBS's "60 Minutes." As a leader of Concerned Citizens of Tillery, Grant has also nurtured senior citizen groups, health clinics and many other community projects in Halifax County.

For all his accomplishments, I was most taken by a little story that Grant told me about a Boy Scout Jamboree 26 years ago. It reminded me that the history of the civil rights movement was not just attention-getting sit-ins and marches; it was also a thousand small gestures of courage that occurred in every corner of the South and in every field of human endeavor, including the Boy Scouts.



Gary Grant. Photo by Chris Seward, 2002. ~~This content is not to be used for further use or to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.~~

I was the first black scoutmaster to take his Boy Scout troop to the first "integrated" jamboree. This is in 1976. We went down to Little Washington, North Carolina, to Camp Bonner. I was just not the outdoors type. I don't know how to tie a square knot.

The boys would go, "Mr. Grant, if you can't tie the square knot, how do you expect us to learn?" I'd say, "This book says 'Boy Scout.' There's not one thing up here that says 'Scoutmaster.' I don't have to tie the knot -- you have to tie the knot."

We had 60 boys. I took them down to Camp Bonner on the back of my dad's farm truck that he used to haul grain to the market. There were 5,000 of us down there, and we were the only black troop. They put us as far back in the woods as they could.

We cleaned up our campsite and put up our tent. We also put our flagpole up like all the other troops. We're talking about two 10-foot poles that have been lashed together to raise your flag up high enough so folks will know where your troop was.

Well, now, enough is enough. So my boys are going, "Mr. Grant, what are we going to do?"

I say, "Well, now, I've tried to teach you respect for yourself. You know your history. What do you want to do?"

"Well, we think they ought to come down," my Scouts said.

So I said, "Patrol leaders, would you go over to main headquarters and tell them what you feel and how that flag insults you?" They went over and they came back, and said, "Mr. Grant, he says there's nothing he can do."

Now I went over with them, and the man told me that there was nothing he could do. OK, no problem. We go back to our campsite, and I send my assistant scoutmaster to town, to Little Washington, to get a piece of muslin and some red, black and blue.

That night we got the boys up with their flashlights, and we drew the biggest, blackest fist you have ever seen. We outlined it in red and then wrote under it "Black Power."

We got up the next morning. You know you have to have flag-raising ceremonies, so you raise the American flag and then you pledge allegiance to that. Then you raise the troop flag and you do your Boy Scout oath. Everybody is doing this, and we're the only black troop.

All the troops did it and everybody else was dispersing, and we called "Attention!" one more time. All the other troops looked our way. When we shouted, "Attention! Salute!", 60 black fists went up in the air and we raised this Black Power flag.

Well, I swear before we could tie it off, they were over telling me I could not fly that flag. And I'm going, "What? What do you mean I can't fly this flag? If you can fly that one, then I can fly this one."

"No, no, no!" they said.

So I said, "Tell you what. You take down those, and I will take down this one."

Fifteen minutes, they were all down. They came back and said, "Now, Mr. Grant, you have to understand that we have some patrols that are called 'Rebels' and they have this flag."

"We have no problem with that," I told them. Your patrol flag is only on a 6-foot pole, not a 20-foot pole. We got them all down. And when we got back, we wrote the Boy Scout Council and told them, so the next year there was no flying of Confederate battle flags.

That jamboree we were cited for the best campsite, best layout and best maintenance. I had six patrols, 10 boys each, and all of them brought back blue ribbons. And I still can't tie a square knot.

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