

THE LONG MARCH TO LALIBELA

(A TMS Boy Scout Odyssey: Endurance, Discovery, and Camaraderie)

Introduction

The Boy Scout movement is best described as “a global youth program fostering character development, leadership skills, and civic responsibility through a unique blend of education, adventure, and fun.” This definition perfectly captures the essence of scouting, and my own experience validates it wholeheartedly. I attribute much of my character, social skills, and sense of responsibility to my time as a member of the TMS Boy Scouts.

Throughout my scouting journey, I’ve taken part in countless adventures, programs, and events. However, one experience stands out above the rest—the unforgettable trek to Lalibela in December 1966, almost 60 years ago. Spanning two weeks and covering vast distances primarily on foot, this journey was more than just a physical challenge; it was a test of endurance, teamwork, and personal growth. At 15, going on to 16, I embarked on this expedition organized and led by our head scoutmaster Mr. Beaudry and alongside fellow scouts of various ages, troop and patrol leaders, teachers, and even former scouts who had since moved on to college or the workforce.

Preparation and Departure

With all preparations finalized, we embarked on a 700-kilometer bus journey to Woldia via Dessie. The bus trip itself proved a memorable experience. The vibrant atmosphere within the bus was punctuated only by lunch breaks and our eventual arrival. One particular exchange remains vivid: two British Peace Corps volunteers, observing our Amharic conversations, inquired, “We hear you speaking Amharic, but why do you sprinkle so many English words and phrases throughout?” Though perhaps a slight exaggeration, the observation resonated with us, and no one attempted to offer an explanation. We reached Dessie around 6:00 PM and disembarked at the esteemed Weizero Sihem School, our overnight lodging. As does our own TMS, this school holds significant historical weight having produced numerous influential figures who shaped both the Ethiopian student movement and the nation's trajectory. Berhanemeskel Reda, Walelign Mekonnen, and Isayas Afeworki are among its noteworthy alumni. The following morning, we boarded the bus for the concluding leg of our journey by bus, traveling to Woldia, the launch point for our long and ambitious journey on foot.

Setting Out and Early Days

With the few available pack animals loaded and supplies distributed among our knapsacks, we received final instructions and set off. A surge of excitement propelled us forward, our

strides brisk and confident under the bright, welcoming sun. We envisioned a leisurely trek, a mere stroll through a park. Our path initially led us through wide, gentle meadows and slopes, passing quaint villages where we drew curious glances from the inhabitants. We often camped near these villages, exchanging bread with the children and purchasing injera and wot, careful not to burden their limited resources.

Shifting Landscapes and Troubling Encounters

As we ventured deeper, the landscape began to change. Vegetation thinned, forests grew sparse, and the villages became smaller and less populated. The initial curiosity we inspired waned, and the prospect of procuring food diminished. One village in particular, left a lasting impression. Approaching it, we found it eerily deserted, a stark contrast to the lively villages we had encountered before. As we prepared lunch, a few hesitant figures emerged from the surrounding, sparse forest. Gradually, more people appeared, gathering in a tight, somber cluster. Many were visibly weak, their movements slow and labored. I can't recall the exact exchange, but I believe we shared what provisions we could spare before continuing our journey. A decade later, news of a devastating famine in the region surfaced, claiming hundreds of thousands of lives. It was then that I suspected the signs of this tragedy had been present long before it was officially recognized.

The Harshness of the Journey

The relentless sun beat down, and the terrain grew increasingly rugged and steep, transforming our trek into a grueling ordeal. To combat the escalating heat and exhaustion, we adopted a nocturnal schedule, resting during the day and traveling under the cover of darkness.

Lalibela: A Respite and a Departure

A week of relentless ascents and descents had pushed us to the brink of exhaustion when we finally reached the holy town of Lalibela on January 6, the eve of Ethiopian Christmas. Lalibela, then, was a far cry from its present state. It was a rural enclave, dotted with traditional huts – mud-plastered or woven, with thatched roofs, some even boasting two-story circular designs and internal staircases.

We were granted a much-needed respite, a place to recover from our arduous journey. That very evening, we were invited to dinner at the newly opened Seven Olives Hotel, owned by Princess Hirut Desta, granddaughter of Emperor Haile Selassie. The meal and the atmosphere were, needless to say, a welcome luxury. We spent the next couple of days exploring the world-renowned rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, touring the town, and preparing for the next, even more challenging, phase of our trek.

Our farewell to Lalibela was marked by a late afternoon departure, continuing our nocturnal journey. The initial camaraderie quickly dissolved as we faced a forbidding terrain of precipitous slopes and deep canyons, compounded by the near-total darkness of a starless night. The paths were so narrow that we were forced into single-file formation, each person's world limited to the figure directly ahead. We placed our trust in the leader, Ato Gezahegn whose flashlight offered the only semblance of guidance. Periodically, he would call out the name of the person at the rear, ensuring everyone's well-being. The responses echoed through the canyons, a fragile thread of connection in the vast darkness. I still smile when I recall the exchanges between Mr. Doug Eddie (Peace Corps Volunteer, teacher, sponsor of the school debating club) near the front, and Tefagiorgis at the rear. "Tefagiorgis, can we get a cup of coffee from Jolly Bar", Mr. Eddie would shout, to which Tefagiorgis would retort, "Sure, Mr. Eddie, we can take a shortcut by jumping down the cliff if you show me the way first!"

Despite the lighthearted banter, the journey was brutal. The temperature plummeted, a biting cold that seeped into our bones, turning the water in our canteens into ice. Eventually, we were forced to halt, seeking a sliver level ground on the mountainside. Our attempts to start a campfire were thwarted by the relentless cold. We huddled in our blankets, layered with extra trousers and socks, and burrowed into our sleeping bags, finding little relief. Only the rising sun brought a semblance of warmth.

We were now traversing a desolate landscape of steep mountains and deep valleys, devoid of any signs of human habitation. This region was known to harbor armed bandits, "shiftas," adding a layer of anxiety to our already challenging journey. The occasional distant report of gunfire amplified our fears. Our only hope for protection rested with Ato Getachew, a teacher from TMS and one of our leaders. He was the only one armed, carrying a small handgun that he brandished whenever the sound of gunfire echoed through the hills.

As the end of our adventure drew near, we pressed on, overcoming the final challenges and inconveniences with determination. Throughout it all, our sense of accomplishment and the camaraderie we shared kept our spirits high.

The Final Crest: A Journey's Reward

One uncharacteristically beautiful morning, we woke early to ascend the gentle hill where we had camped. As we reached the crest, a breathtaking sight greeted us - a lush green meadow stretched out across the valley below. The realization that we had finally completed our long trek intact, unscathed, and unbroken, filled us with immense joy. Energized by this revelation, we eagerly crossed the valley and made our way through the meadow to the small town of Nefas Mewcha where we met with a warm welcome. The town administration had arranged a celebratory event and provided accommodation for the night. Rested and grateful, we

departed the next morning, boarding a truck to travel to Gondar, our ultimate destination. Our route took us through the towns of Debre Tabor and Addis Zemen, marking the final leg of an unforgettable journey.

We arrived in the city of Gondar on the eve of Timket, also known as the Ethiopian Epiphany - a vibrant celebration commemorating the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River. While Timket is observed nationwide, Gondar is renowned for its passionate and colorful festivities.

We set up camp on the outskirts of the city, within a sprawling compound that housed the iconic Fasilides Bath—a two-story tower House surrounded by a large, square pool that plays a central role in the Timket celebration.

Once again, we were honored with an invitation to a reception hosted by the Governor of Begemder, held at the Ethiopia Hotel (which still stands today). A Joyful encounter awaited us as we entered the hotel where we unexpectedly ran into Mr. Munchower, a Peace Corps volunteer and our chemistry teacher, who was just as pleasantly astonished to see us as we were to see him.

With that memorable encounter to mark the end of our adventure, we boarded the truck the following day and began our journey back home.