



Santa Clara County Council makes the cover of the September 2006 issue of SCOUTING magazine.



Connecting Cultures Through Scouting

By William B. McMorris
Photographs by Jim Gensheimer

Eleven-year-old Timothy Hwang of Troop 408 carries the U.S. flag in the Chinese Lunar Parade in Cupertino, Calif., in March. William B. McMorris's article detailing how the Chinese-, Japanese-, and Vietnamese-American communities in the San Jose, Calif., area are using the Scouting program begins on page 24.

In California, Asian-Americans use Scouting to maintain ties to treasured traditions while helping newcomers become part of U.S. society.

Scouts are good at building bridges, whether a span connects two creek banks at summer camp or two cultures that are oceans apart.

The BSA's Santa Clara County Council, with headquarters in San Jose, Calif., presents a good example of the latter situation.

"We have many people from China, Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines, India, and Korea—as well as Caucasians, Hispanics and Native Americans," says Scout Executive Jason Stein in describing the council's diversified population.

In fact, according to U.S. Census figures, more than one in four Santa Clara County residents are of Asian descent. In particular, three groups of Americans with a heritage of Asian languages and customs—Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese—show how Scouting can help recent immigrants enter a new culture while

Chinese-American Scouting

In the council's Chinese-American community, the late Silas Jue is credited with aiding the growth of Scouting in the past decade and a half.

Jue, whose death in October 2005 was mourned throughout the council, was an Eagle Scout and member of a longtime Scouting family from Washington State. He brought his enthusiasm for Scouting to the San Jose area, organizing Troop 452 in 1990.

Jue recruited leaders and youth from what he described as "the heart of the Chinese-American social scene," the weekend



Patrol leader Kevin Chen leads his patrol as Troop 452 participates in the Chinese Lunar Parade in Cupertino, Calif.

Chinese-language schools that help young people learn about their heritage and remain fluent in Chinese.

The schools are found in most parts of the United States with large groups of Chinese immigrants. More than 100 of them meet on weekends in San Jose and nearby communities in the cluster of cities known as "Silicon Valley," a major center of high-technology development and innovation.



At a Troop 452 meeting in San Jose, patrol leaders (from left) Cedric Flamant, Michael Shyr, and Anthony Kao raise their hands with the Scout sign in the traditional signal for quiet.

Talking to parents and boys in the Chinese schools in the cities of San Jose and Cupertino, Jue was able to start Troop 452 with about 14 Scouts, chartered to the Association of Northern California Chinese Schools. As Troop 452 flourished and attracted attention in the Chinese-American community, more Scouters became involved, and the idea for a new kind of chartered organization—the Chinese American Scouting Association (CASA)—arose.

The new group would be made up of parents and Scouters. Ed Chang of Cupertino, a former president of the Chinese school association and widely respected in the community, was considered the right man with the

right contacts to help form CASA.

Quick to share the credit, however, Chang says that "CASA was the idea of a lot of Scouters. I just helped get it done."

Already an ardent supporter of Scouting, Chang was easily persuaded by Silas Jue to also become an active Scouter.

"Silas was never a Scoutmaster," Chang explains, "but he had enjoyed his Scouting experience, and he wanted others to enjoy it."

Unable to afford to be a Scout as a youth in his native Taiwan, Chang has been so impressed by the BSA program that he has remained in a leadership role long after his own son left Scouting. He has served in many volunteer positions with Troop 452 as well as being a leader of CASA.

Troop 452's current Scoutmaster is Peter Wong, who enjoys demonstrating his devotion to the concept of boy-led, adult-directed troop leadership.

At a troop meeting at San Jose's Miller Junior High School, Wong described his work as Scoutmaster: "Here is what I do," he said, thrusting both hands firmly into his pockets.

Then, with a wide grin, he added, "This is my job," nodding toward the troop's youth leaders, who were completely in charge of conducting the meeting.

Troop 452 also gets plenty of adult leadership and parental support for its busy schedule. The troop takes part in every district and council activity, attends summer camp, hikes miles of trails in the mountains around the Bay Area, and sends contingents to BSA high adventure bases. The Scouts also participate in international events, including a jamboree in Taiwan, the original home of many troop families. (Most of the Scouts speak Chinese well enough to qualify to wear the Chinese language interpreter strip above their right uniform shirt pocket.)

The troop also emphasizes advancement—50 Eagle Scouts in the last 10 years—and takes part in community cultural activities.

During the evening meeting, the Scouts were preparing to participate in the 2006 Lunar New Year Unity Parade in Cupertino, where more than 44 percent of the population is of Asian descent, with more than half tracing their origins to China.

The parade is only one example of how Troop 452 introduces its members to the larger community and at the same time observes cultural traditions.

"We follow the Boy Scouts of America philosophy [of patriotism and citizenship training] and also keep our heritage," says Chang.

"We cannot isolate ourselves," Chang adds. "We must be part of the district and council and go out from the Chinese community."

Thus Scouting builds a sturdy bridge between cultures for newcomers as well as long-time citizens in the Chinese-American community.

Japanese-American Scouting

Among Japanese-Americans in the Santa Clara County Council, Scouting has played an important role for nearly seven decades. That history includes the troubled years of World War II, when people of Japanese ancestry were viewed with suspicion by the federal government and most of those living on the West Coast, American citizens included, were interned in remote inland camps.

Scouting in the internment camps was one of many ways that Japanese-Americans expressed their unwavering loyalty to the United States.

Today the Scouts of Troop 611, chartered to the 104-year-old San Jose Buddhist Church Betsuin, carries on that tradition of citizenship and service.

Organized in 1968, the troop takes its number from the "six 11-year-olds" who were its first members. Today membership averages between 50 and 60 Scouts, with many new Scouts coming from brother Pack 611, led by Cubmaster Gary Ching.

Scoutmaster of Troop 611 since 1993 is Stan Kawamata, a native of Hawaii and a 46-year veteran of Scouting as a youth and adult.

Kawamata delights in Troop 611's outdoor program, which includes plenty of "rain or shine" hiking trips to scenic Northern California locations, such as Point Reyes National Seashore, Mission Peak, Mount Diablo, and Mount St. Helena. The Scouts also enjoy white-water rafting.

The troop has been to one BSA national high adventure base—Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico—and hopes to visit another, the Charles L. Sommers Canoe Base in Minnesota.



Scouts like Spencer Hirasawa, left, and Garrick Hirasawa help prepare and serve food during Troop 611's annual dinner.

Parents of Troop 611 Scouts are always ready to help with transportation and other needs.

"Our parents do not simply drop their kids off," explains the Rev. Gerald Sakamoto, a minister of the church, former chairman of the National Buddhist Committee on Scouting, and current member of the Santa Clara County Council Executive Board. "They know that when a boy joins the troop, the parents make a commitment, too. Parents and Scouts also take part in a family camp outing every year."

In addition to Scouting activities and advancement programs, the Boy Scouts and Cub Scouts also participate in traditional Buddhist observances, such as the springtime celebration of the birth of the Buddha and the Obon Festival, a joyous summertime recognition of the true meaning of gratitude, held at the temple in the heart of San Jose's Japantown and open to everyone. Another festive occasion strongly supported by the church and community is Troop 611's annual fund-raising dinner, with food prepared and served by Scouts.

Vietnamese-American Scouting

Perhaps the most unique blend of Scouting with Asian tradition and culture is found among Vietnamese-Americans, the newest members of the council's large Asian community.

Family-centered aspects of Scouting in Vietnam have been blended with American traditions to create a joyous, every-weekend gathering of Scout groups called a Lien Doan (*Lee-en Doh-ahn*) that includes all family members.

One of the newest of these, called Rang Dong (Sunrise), includes Troop 654, Pack 654, and Crew 654, all chartered to the Allstate Insurance Company, along with Girl Scout Troop 703.

The BSA unit numerals indicate they were formed June 5, 2004.

"We began with just 20 members," said Quynh-Giao Bui-Le, the enthusiastic committee chairwoman for the pack, crew, and Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops. "In just one and a half years, we have grown to 85 members."

On a damp, chilly Saturday morning, members of Lien Doan Rang Dong met on the grounds of Summerdale Elementary School on the eastern edge of San Jose.

Crew 654 member Ngoc Tran led the opening ceremony, speaking in English and Vietnamese. Although a relative newcomer to the United States, Ngoc moved easily between the two languages.

"Using both languages helps Scouts stay fluent in Vietnamese and maintain cultural contact," explained Scoutmaster Huu Tran.

After roll call, flag presentation, and greeting of leaders and guests, all units filed into the school's multipurpose room, where each followed its own program with its own leaders.

The room serves as gym, theater, and auditorium. In exchange for its use, the group cleans up after every meeting. In addition, Troop 654 plans Eagle Scout service projects to benefit the school.

In one corner, a cluster of Cub Scouts listened to the story of Akela (in two languages), told by a Boy Scout den chief and a Girl Scout.

Nearby, den leader Minh Nguyen led another group in fitness exercises.

Venturers set up tents in preparation for a future camping trip, as crew Advisor Van Le watched.

Troop 654 patrol leaders called their Scouts together to discuss advancement plans. Scoutmaster Tran and Cubmaster Tien Hoang observed the patrol meetings; later they complimented all those who took part in a 28-mile hike the previous weekend.

On the auditorium stage, Junior and ages 11-to-17 Girl Scouts worked on projects, with senior-girls' leader Tam Tran and Junior leader Anne Tonnu nearby to help if needed.

Several sets of parents were available to furnish transportation at the end of the meeting.

"In the Lien Doan system, leaders from different programs can help one another," Quynh-Giao said as she left a session where she had been reading from *The Jungle Book* by Rudyard Kipling to some younger Cub Scouts.

An additional benefit of all Scout units meeting together is that younger youth members can become familiar with the programs for older youth, easing their transition to the next level.

Training for Vietnamese leaders takes place without any printed material in translation. "We teach in English and Vietnamese," Quynh-Giao said, "and translate as we go along."

Members of Lien Doan Rang Dong also join in traditional Vietnamese celebrations such as Tet, the lunar new year and time of new beginnings for the earth and its people.

The flexibility of Scouting helped make it possible for the youth of all the groups to build a bridge from one culture to another.

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Newcomers and Longtime Residents

The leadership of San Jose's Troop 452 reflects the mixture in the area's **Chinese-American community** of recent arrivals and families that have been established for generations.

Scoutmaster Peter Wong is a third-generation Chinese-American, while longtime Scouter Ed Chang did not come to the United States until after he had finished college and served two years as an officer in Taiwan's marine corps.

District commissioner Flora Tzeng is also a first-generation Chinese-American and, like Ed Chang, has stayed with Scouting even after her own two Eagle Scout sons had worked their way through the program.

Dorothy Wu, Troop 452 committee chair, says she is "one and a half generation" Chinese-American because her diplomat father's work took the family on such extensive travels that she lived a good part of her early life in other parts of the world.

While the highly educated leadership of Troop 452 is completely at ease with the English language, varying lengths of time spent in the United States tend to create different levels of familiarity with English in the troop as a whole, Chang points out. Because some potential leaders can be shy about their use of English, the Chinese American Scouting Association has translated some instruction material into Chinese.

"But we insist that Scout meetings and even troop committee meetings be conducted in English," says Chang.

Chang is particularly proud of the "Chinese Emphasis" Wood Badge course and other leadership training instituted in the council that enables Chinese-American leaders to take the courses using English language materials with Chinese language support provided by experienced leaders.

—W.B.M