

## CAPE WESTERN SCOUTER

### **South Africa's First Scoutmaster**

On the 16th February 1956 George French died at the age of 100 years and 4 months. A courageous, intelligent man of many talents.

He was the epitome of a good Scout, he was a Scout, indeed he was South Africa's *first* Scoutmaster a title to which he brought honour and dignity.

George French was born in Victorian England in 1856 (four months before B-P) at the height of the British Empire's power.

A year after he was born George's father joined the Indian Army resulting in he and his family being shipped to Bombay.

In 1860, French snr. And his family, with the exception of George, were wiped out by cholera. Five-year old George was sent back to his grandparents in England.

When his grandfather died, Nine-year old George's (wicked) uncle had him placed in a workhouse where he was put to chopping wood and making up bundles for sale. At this time he was able to listen to Charles Dickens reading his unpublished stories to other street urchins.

He was later put to work as an errand boy and then in an envelope factory. His uncle removed him from here and put him in an orphanage

At the orphanage he came under the care of a kindly man named Phillip Smith who instilled in him the love of learning. He was particularly fond of Shakespearean plays.

By the age of 15 he enlisted as a drummer-boy in the First Battalion of the Kings Regiment. After some years in England he was shipped out to India again and served in many places including the notorious Khyber Pass.

An earlier appointment, at age 19, as Regimental Schoolmaster did not stop George from volunteering, in 1879, for duty in Zululand where he served as a medical orderly at the battle of Ulundi.

In 1880 he left the Army and studied for his Teachers Certificate with the Cape Education Department. From then on he served as headmaster for a number of schools. In between schooling he found time to take groups of boys camping and hiking.

In 1894 he became principal of Claremont Public School again taking groups of boys camping and hiking inland, up mountains and along the coast.

In 1908 after hearing of B-P's Scout Movement, he formed, on the 3rd March 1908, South Africa's first Scout Troop at Claremont Public School.



He established three patrols, the Owls and Wolves and another with 16 boys, Troop Leader Fred Stern and his second son Cyril as ASM.

His first weekend camp was on Boftons Farm near the bridge, Lansdowne road. His previous youth work fitted in well with Scouting.

Around this time he started the publication called: "The South African Scout" (a forerunner to the CWS ??)

In 1913 B-P conferred an honorary Silver Wolf on George French.

In 1919 his public career came to an end when he went on pension. At the same time he resigned.; from 1st Claremont Troop.

The meagre pension and the resulting off-spring from his second marriage in 1921 (his first wife died in 1920) caused him to take numerous teaching, posts around the country. Being a great naturalist he spent many week-ends exploring koppies and the veld collecting specimens with his young children. '

His 100th birthday celebration was attend by the then Chief Scout Mr Percy Fowle and the mayor and mayoress of Durban amongst other dignitaries.

He remained active mentally and physically almost to the time of his death, a much- loved family man, teacher, Scoutmaster, scholar and friend. Truly a worthy first Scoutmaster in our land.